

THE AUSTRALIAN

ALP's Christmas cheer just got dearer

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ANNUAL 12C INDEX
2013 prices



	Total price for each gift (i.e. 3 hens, 5 rings etc)		Cumulative price* Australia
	US	Australia	
Partridge in a pear tree	\$200	\$92	\$1100
Two Turtle Doves	\$125	\$58	\$633
Three French Hens	\$165	\$268	\$2683
Four Calling Birds (canaries)	\$600	\$167	\$1500
Five Golden Rings	\$750	\$1465	\$11,718
Six Geese (laying)	\$210	\$600	\$4200
Seven Swans	\$7000	\$10,500	\$63,000
Eight Maids Milking	\$58	\$131	\$655
Nine Ladies Dancing	\$7553	\$6750	\$27,000
Ten Lords Leaping	\$5243	\$10,000	\$30,000
Eleven Pipers Piping	\$2635	\$1428	\$2855
Twelve Drummers Drumming	\$2855	\$1557	\$1557
Totals	\$27,194	\$32,923	\$146,902

* Total price multiplied by the number of times the gift is repeated in the song

IT'S official: Wayne Swan was good for the birds. That's according to this year's Christmas Price Index, which measures the cost of buying the items listed in The Twelve Days of Christmas in Australia on a basis strictly comparable to a similar calculation by the PNC Financial Services Group for the US.

Our fourth annual 12C index shows Australian prices for the popular carol's partridges, doves, French hens, calling birds, geese and swans have taken off, rising 12.5 per cent over last year's levels. And you guessed it, cygnets led the flock, with a 15.4 per cent increase driving local swan prices sky high.

But Australian workers don't have much to cheer about. Milking maids, piping pipers and drumming drummers got rises so modest as to barely help pay for their heavily taxed alcopops, much less the Christmas turkey.

As for the aristos, Labor's class warfare has exacted its toll, with leaping lords and dancing ladies taking a pay cut. Forget the light on the hill; the toffs can dance in the dark - or, as Charles Dickens's Scrooge put it, "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

What a contrast to the US, where the aristocrats helped push the 12C's labour cost component up 11.5 per cent, confirming a broadly based economic recovery. But despite those increases, American true loves can still buy the full kit and caboodle for 27 per cent less than their Australian counterparts, even at present exchange rates.

With our prices remaining high by international standards, the gravitational force of yuletide economics

should be pushing the Australian dollar to about US85c.

That would certainly dent the joys of holiday jaunts to the Land of the Free (or at least of the very cheap). And the thought of the Little Aussie Battler plummeting is enough to give addicted book buyers a severe case of anhedonia: the term coined by psychologist Theodule-Armand Ribot for "the inability to secure pleasure from actions usually found enjoyable".

Of course, some may claim that for the entire Christmas experience. And no doubt our willingness to suffer congested roads and shops to obtain gifts purchased when prices are at their peak requires some explaining. That studies suggest just 2-3 per cent of the population escapes the collective mania makes the need for explanation only greater.

As American sociologist Theodore Caplow wrote 30 years ago, an ethnologist observing "this crucial ritual in an exotic culture" would "surely be tempted to make it the centrepiece of that culture's analysis". Caplow was echoing the great French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss who, in his classic study *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, described Christmas gift-giving as "an enormous potlatch", with elaborate rules of timing, content, proportion and reciprocity. The relatively recent nature of the ritual adds to its interest. Queen Victoria is generally credited with having introduced the Christmas tree into British culture, placing one on display in 1840. And as late as the 1890s, when Baroness Staffe's guide to modern manners was reprinted in Melbourne, its detailed explanations of Christmas protocols were clearly considered topics Victorian young ladies had to learn, rather than knowing from experience.

That is not to deny those traditions' ancient roots. But when it was published on December 17, 1843, Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* was portraying something almost entirely new, which the book's extraordinary popularity did much to spread. After all, the end-of-year gift-giving rituals of early modern Europe had not been linked to Christmas but to saints' days; they had involved not only rewards but punishments meted out to poorly behaving children by "familiar" such as Knecht Ruprecht in Germany and Pere Fouettard in France, who might even kidnap or kill them; and they rarely invoked a sense of compassion, within the family or outside it.

Those rituals fell victim to the northern European Reformation (with the Puritans banning not only saints' days but also the customary Christmas festivities) and in the Latin lands, to the Counter-Reformation, which sought to expunge from Catholicism any traces of magic and superstition.

Together, these changes were part of the process Max Weber called "the disenchantment of the world", which reduced the public sphere to one shaped "by reason alone", while transferring faith into a new, distinct sphere of religion that was relegated to private choice.

The development of a market economy gave that process enormous impetus, with capitalism, in the famous words of *The Communist Manifesto*, "drowning the heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour in the icy water of egotistical calculation" while leaving "no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest".

Yet faith could hardly be extinguished, any more than the human sense of wonder; indeed, religion blossomed in the 19th century. And though Marx and Engels claimed capitalism "reduced the family to a mere money relation", industrialisation helped create and strengthen the breadwinner-homemaker nuclear family, with women's and children's labour force participation rates falling as incomes rose.

Far from "tearing away the family's sentimental veil", economic growth therefore renewed its role, not just as a shelter from the storm but as the core of an economy sitting aside the market and based on

altruism, devotion and trust.

The warm-hearted Bob Cratchit and the lovable Tiny Tim consequently heralded a revolution: the celebration, in the annual Christmas gathering, of the enduring bonds of intimacy, companionship and generosity. As even Levi-Strauss, contemplating Christmas's commercialisation in the 1950s, concluded: "Others may sneer as the trinkets change hands; but on this occasion, and by these humble means, society reaffirms its very essence: our reliance on each other."

A safe and merry Christmas; and from milkmaids to pipers, drummers to lords and ladies, may 2014 bring peace, happiness and prosperity to all.