Less time for the present even as cost of giving declines

Henry Ergas

As the global economy sputters and stockmarkets sag, a mere $140,000 will buy the pick-me-up to which every family aspires: the full kit of the Twelve Days of Christmas, from the first partridge to the last drummer, with all the doves, hens, geese, swans, maids, ladies, lords and pipers in between.

That may seem a lot compared with the $950 or so Australians spend on average over the holiday season. But relative to per capita income, it is more affordable today than it was in 2010, when the Christmas Price Index for Australia first appeared on these pages.

Yes, politicians carry on endlessly about the rising cost of living; but the cost of giving, at least as measured by the CPI, has declined. And while in the 18th century, when the popular carol originally appeared in print, ordinary Britons — who earned less in a year than Australians now earn in a week — could hardly have imagined purchasing its components, the ability to give, even lavishly, has been greatly democratised.

Yet giving plays a smaller role in our lives than at any time in history.

Indeed, if Christmas appears to be an orgy of gift giving, it is precisely because gifts have become tangential to everyday existence, restricted mainly to special occasions and to the receipt of inheritances and bequests.

By contrast, the gift relation was pervasive in the pre-modern world.

That doesn't mean people were more generous; rather, more transfers were structured as voluntary and one-sided, even when it was believed

they would be reciprocated. For example, the sharing of food between families was widespread, providing a crucial form of insurance in societies in which the vast majority of the population lived at the edge of subsistence.

As Natalie Zemon Davis shows in her delightful book *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*, even in an economy with a vibrant market sector, peasants dealt with localised surpluses and shortfalls mainly through transfers in kind, avoiding the social tensions that commercial transactions, with their steeply fluctuating prices, would have caused in small, geographically isolated communities.

Christmas gift guide
Cumulative totals Australia*

	2010	2014	2018
Partridge in a pear tree	$960	$1180	$990
Two turtle doves	$440	$550	$587
Three french hens	$2400	$1875	$1200
Four calling birds (canaries)	$1440	$984	$840
Five golden rings	$10,689	$11,204	$14,754
Six geese (laying)	$4200	$4200	$5180
Seven swans	$50,400	$63,000	$63,000
Eight maids milking	$600	$675	$757
Nine ladies dancing	$28,080	$26,820	$25,249
Ten lords leaping	$23,400	$22,350	$21,041
Eleven pipers piping	$2532	$2855	$3830
Twelve drummers drumming	$1381	$1557	$2089
TOTALS	**$125,562**	**$137,250**	**$139,517**

*Total price multiplied by the number of times the gift is repeated in the song
Source: Author's estimates

The most salient gifts, however, have always been those bound up with power. That was most obviously the case with the great rituals of what a less politically correct age called "primitive" peoples.

Thus, in the potlatch ceremonies of British Columbia's Kwakiutl tribes, which anthropologist Franz Boas documented in 1895-96, rival chiefs would exchange vast gifts that had to be destroyed. The loser in the competition had to give and destroy, suffering enduring humiliation and

the loss of authority.

Nor were “primitive” societies alone in linking gift giving to power and prestige.

The rituals through which aspirants to powerful positions in ancient Rome underwrote the cost of public works may have been less ruinous than the potlatch but they were no less significant, allowing a polity with little ability to collect taxes to finance the grand temples, arenas and viaducts we still admire.

However, gifts did not flow only from the haves to the have-nots. Rather, in societies in which rewards were allocated not on the basis of merit but as favours, a present from a peasant to his lord or a noble to the king was the key to seeking a preferment or expressing gratitude for a service rendered.

Those attempts could go horribly wrong: having received the gift, the lord might ignore the peasant’s request, just as Davis details the plight of petty nobles who were scorned by the duke on whom they had bestowed immensely costly gifts. Nonetheless, the expectation was that what was given would eventually be repaid.

That expectation, sociologist Marcel Mauss shows in *The Gift* (1925), was not based solely on honour.

Rather, it reflected the belief that unlike commodities that had been sold and therefore “alienated”, gifts remained imbued with the personality of the donor, giving that donor a hold on the recipient that only a gift going the other way could balance.

That notion carried over into the spiritual sphere: much as a present allowed the powerless to secure a claim on the powerful, so one could obtain benefits through sacrifices, prayers and votive offerings that

transferred something of one's soul to the Almighty.

All that was swept aside in the transition to the modern world. Markets rather than generosity became the basis for meeting our needs, vastly increasing efficiency by allowing us to rely on the most productive sources of supply instead of being limited to those with whom we have a personal bond.

As regards power, our relationship to it became based on mandatory rules that attributed rights and allocated burdens, severing their distribution — at least in theory — from the personal reciprocity of give and take.

And even in the realm of religion, the Protestant Reformation signalled a move to an ever more impersonal God, whose decisions were based on believers' faith and merit, rather than on individualised bargaining with mere mortals.

As a result, the gift, which previously structured the public sphere, became largely confined to private life, and notably to the family, taking public form only through philanthropy and charities. The change was, no doubt, progress: after all, relying on markets for goods and services, rather than on beneficence, minimised the demands we place on altruism, the scarcest commodity of all. And removing gift giving from public life reduced the opportunities for corruption.

It is, however, easy to understand why Mauss viewed the gift's decline with concern. What, he wondered, would hold society together when the social bond of mutual recognition, based on giving and receiving, was replaced by the conviction that what we get is no more than we're due, as happens in a society based on impersonal exchange?

Would we still feel an abiding sense of gratitude for what we have, or would it give way to smug entitlement? And would the powerful, once

unburdened by reciprocal obligation, retain a vestige of noblesse oblige, or would they become even more vulgar, venal and exploitative?

Perhaps those questions merely reflect the moral hypochondria that characterises mankind: the constant fear of collapse that evolution has instilled in us to help prevent society's fragile fabric from unravelling.

What is certain is that no matter how grim the world may be, the leaping lords and dancing ladies still brighten our lives, just as they did three centuries ago.

The gift that keeps on giving, may they help each and every reader enjoy a merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and prosperous new year.