Brian Musgrove - 'Myth-speak': Politics and Cultural Symbolism in Contemporary Australia

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By Brian Musgrove

On the night of Thursday 22 June 2006, as Australian Members of Parliament packed to leave the national capital for their winter recess, the Canberra Press Gallery received a phone call from the Prime Minister's Office. Media apparatchiks were summoned to the PM's residence, The Lodge, at 5.30am the following morning to capture 'World Cup footage of the Prime Minister in front of his television set.' They dutifully appeared 'just in time to catch Howard whooping it up' over an Australian goal against Croatia and 'were gone, bundled back outside, by 5.45.'1 Subsequently, television networks carried vision of a track-suited John Howard leaping from his armchair and The Australian ran a photograph of the moment on its weekend edition front page (24-25 June 2006). It was a typical 'pseudo-event': a term that should, in its suggestiveness, replace the more anodyne 'photo-opportunity' to describe the collusion of the political classes and the media pack in peddling this sort of confection.

Howard's World Cup summons to the press was merely the latest occasion in a long public relations campaign. For a decade, Howard -" 'such a control freak' says political analyst Malcolm Mackerras2 -" has micro-managed his public persona with the general and unprecedented co-operation of Australia's mainstream news media. As one of the central symbols of that persona, the green and gold track-suit has both positioned Howard as the nation's premier sports fan and laid the implication that he is something of a sports star in his own right: a bustling, healthy, can-do Aussie bloke. Howard is ubiquitously attired in the green and gold for his morning power-walk, a daily ritual which according to Matt Price has 'morphed from national embarrassment into badge of success... the exercise regime is widely acclaimed and admired.'3 In Nick Cater's collection The Howard Factor: A Decade that Transformed the Nation, a joint publishing venture of Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd and Melbourne University Press (2006), this portrait of Howard is jubilantly endorsed: 'It's faster than a trot yet not quite a jog. Much closer to a clip than a walk... as anyone who has wheezingly struggled to tag along knows, there's nothing remotely languid about the Prime Minister's exercise regime.' Even writing about it leaves Matt Price breathless: 'practically everything you need to know about John Howard can be garnered by observing his vigorous dawn constitutional. Iron discipline. Ferocity. Concentration. Energy. Doggedness. Power.'4 According to this, where the ethos and values of sport and politics converge, Howard is indeed 'a player'.

In terms of this celebratory image of Howard the Sportsman, it is worth noting Matt Price's credentials: senior Australian columnist, member of the Canberra Press Gallery, regular guest on ABC television's Insiders political affairs programme. Price belongs to a very favoured media cohort, charged with the important task of keeping a balanced eye on politics. Thus, it is also worth noting what Price's comments so splendidly indicate: practically everything you need to know about Australian journalism's abandonment of critical practice and submission to official myth-making can be garnered from them. Price simply picks up Howard's own spin-ball and runs with it.

Howard's appeal to the national sporting mythos has been relentless; and it constitutes an attempt to fuse himself with the passions of 'the people', or to

draw 'the people' into an identification with him. The trick is summed up in the opening remarks Howard made to a press conference on 19 June 2006, in which he announced himself as the public voice of Australian sporting fanaticism. Striding to the lectern, the PM effused: 'Could I start by making a couple of comments on sport? I want to say what an extraordinary performance the Socceroos put up [against Brazil]. I, like millions of other Australians, watched the game' -" meaning that he savoured the moment with them all, as one of them. The Socceroos had 'done the country proud', he said, then continued: 'And it's been a long time since we've won a major tournament in golf in the US and congratulations to Geoff Ogilvie... I congratulate him on behalf of the sports-loving Australian public... also Lleyton Hewitt winning the Queen's tournament to complete the trilogy of sporting activities overnight. Any questions?'5 Despite the small slippage here -" a real sports connoisseur would surely use 'trifecta' instead of 'trilogy' -" the point was clear: the PM was chief steward and spokesman of a nation that was deliriously successful on the paddock, court and fairway. In one of Howard's most cherished sporting metaphors, Australia always 'punches above its weight' -" on the playing-field, the battlefield, and in the sweaty ring of world diplomacy.

At one level, of course, this appeal to sports-loving Australians (and the wider message it conveys) is not so different from the opportunistic and routine stunts that politicians indulge in at election time: kissing babies, drinking beer in outback pubs, riding on tanks with diggers. At another level, it is difficult to think of any previous Australian prime minister whose recourse to myth, symbol and iconography has been so premeditated and systematic. Howard raids Australian Legend and the national image-bank daily and with alacrity; and the writers in Cater's Howard Factor repeatedly praise this wily politician who can infallibly read the electorate's moods and feelings and has 'converted himself into a kind of patriotic father figure, and barely placed a foot wrong on the critical issues of cultural symbolism.'6 Indeed, most of the contributors to Cater's collection -" all journalists with the Australian newspaper -" insist on Howard's dexterity with Australian mythologies, his mastery of symbol and metaphor; and the book's very title heavily suggests something compelling and unique, a frisson, a certain 'je-ne-sais-quoi' about the man and his mysterious 'factor'. In short, he is 'Australia's most successful prime minister... who instinctively understands' the people 'like few leaders before him.'7 But there is nothing 'instinctive' about this highly contrived image; and lines like these, meant to sound like a profoundly struck chord, turn out to be little more than the muzak of political hagiography -" a debased language, in which every detail is bent to the demands of myth and the cult of personality.

Arguments about the debasement of public language should be more common and cued by George Orwell's still-valuable 'Politics and the English Language' (1946). In that essay, Orwell memorably remarked on the ventriloquism of public speech: 'When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases -" bestial atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder -" one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy', and as a result 'political speech and writing [become] largely the defence of the indefensible.'8 In Australia today, Orwell's complaint has been revived in books like Don Watson's Weasel Words: Contemporary Cliches, Cant & Management Jargon (2004) and Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language (2003). The latter argues trenchantly that public language -" 'the language of political and business leaders and civil servants... the language of power and influence' -" has been diminished (or 'downsized', as Watson ironically quips) to the extent that it functions in a precisely Orwellian

way. A decadent language, eagerly practised by political classes and the mainstream media, produces intellectual paralysis: 'As the powerful in legend turned the weak or the vanquished into stone, they turn us to stone through language', Watson writes, and they are committed 'to neutralise expression and "vanish memory".' More importantly, Watson cautions against the consequences of an easy convergence of party political and media interests; against the disaster that awaits 'when journalists ignore abuses of the public language by people of influence and power, and reproduce without comment words that are intended to deceive and manipulate. When this happens', Watson warns, 'journalism ceases to be journalism and becomes a kind of propaganda; or a reflection of what Simone Weil called "the superb indifference that the powerful have for the weak".'9

The same pertains to myth as a highly problematic form of public speech and representation, and no analysis of contemporary Australian political language can ignore the resurgent uses and abuses of myth in public discourse. Mobilised politically, myth can be an intellectual scrap thrown to a public which 'the powerful' regard with 'superb indifference' or outright contempt: 'myth-speak' is the last rhetorical refuge of the cynic. Myth displaces history's complexities with metaphysical assurances, and attempts to obliterate the fractious contradictions and pains of lived experience. In this sense, myth operates exactly as Roland Barthes theorised it fifty years ago: 'myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and of making contingency appear eternal', and this is 'exactly' the inner logic of 'bourgeois ideology' itself -" 'things lose the memory that they were once made', or confected. Barthes argued that myth-speak is favoured by the political right: it is anti-revolutionary and a stasis-through-naturalisation -" turning thought to stone and vanishing memory, as Don Watson writes of decayed public discourse. Importantly, myth effects the passage from 'reality to representation', from 'economic' being to 'mental' being, and in this process the dialectic of power-oppression disappears and the possibility of class struggle or resistance is anaesthetised.10

It is valuable to return to these critical 'first principles' in examining the political resurrection of myth-speak in contemporary Australian politics. In this regard, it is also valuable to recall Barthes' observation that in the 'vocabulary' of bourgeois ruling classes 'the universal exists... politics is already a representation, a fragment of ideology'11 -" and myth-speak is a pure expression of power re-imagined as orderly and ordinary. So much so, Barthes concluded, that words like 'bourgeois' and 'capitalism' become unutterable: all that is solid melts into air and ideology, the substance of myth, is everywhere.

In The Great War and Modern Memory, Paul Fussell addressed the question of why the First World War created 'a world of reinvigorated myth... That such a myth-ridden world could take shape in the midst of a war representing a triumph of modern industrialism, materialism and mechanism is an anomaly worth considering.'12 A similar question needs to be asked in Australia today: why, in a world of sophisticated technology, information richness, cultural diversity and political and economic complexity has myth-speak re-appeared so prominently in public discourse? In part, the answer lies in Howard's ambition to supplant the nation's relativities and diversities with a form of bourgeois capitalist universalism. But this is connected to a larger historical movement: the rise of fundamentalisms, which provokes the belief -" articulated in the 'with us or against us' rhetoric of the 'War on Terror' -" that this is an age in which nations and peoples must radically embrace a particular universal imaginary. As Stuart Sim persuasively writes, Jean-François Lyotard's libertarian prediction of the death of grand narratives was premature. Grand narratives are back, Sim

argues, reprocessed as fundamentalisms, and 'We live in a fundamentalist world because fundamentalists exert such a powerful influence on so many of our institutions -" religious, political, and economic.'13 As systems that promise to explain everything, fundamentalisms and the myths that sustain them lay claim to the universal, vanishing the memory of history itself as different from the present. In this climate, Howard and the powerful media interests that back him have made a choice: to propagate a constellation of myths that is aligned with a particular conception of 'America' as universal, fundamental symbol. As he declared on a visit to Washington in May 2006, no nation in world history 'has brought to bear the righteous force or generous countenance of the United States of America... With American leadership, we can build a better world - " not just for us, but for all.' And he condescended to America's critics: 'To the voices of anti-Americanism around the world, to those who shout "Yankee go home", let me offer some quiet advice: be careful what you wish for.'14 The myths of American Exceptionalism, neo-conservative 'new world order' and 'full-spectrum dominance' breathe heavily in such remarks.

Howard has worked hard to construct a cogent field of interlaced myths, and the vocabulary of myth-speak permeates his public utterances. The guiding ideology that organises this field is certainly not Burkean: it is a spiritualised ('righteous') neo-conservatism wedded to the doctrine of 'market fundamentalism' -" might, right, hyper-capitalism and America. To sell this package locally, Howard effortlessly appeals to national symbology: in 2006, justifying a $50 million handout to Ford, 'an ailing American car company... to design petrol-hungry vehicles, many of which will be made only overseas', he described the government funding as a measure to 'help secure the future of... the iconic Ford Falcon'.15 The Adelaide to Darwin railway is another case in point. The rail-link was constructed by a consortium, funded with more than 500 million taxpayer dollars: a group in which Halliburton-Kellog Brown & Root was a major investor -" US Vice President Dick Cheney was Halliburton CEO when the successful bid was won in 1997. This consortium was granted ownership and operation of the line until 2051. Howard re-cast the project as an epic of nation-building, and his opening address at the rail-link's launch in 2004 praised it as 'a great moment in Australian history' and a lesson to the world that 'there is absolutely nothing that Australians working together cannot achieve.'16 It was a Federation dream, a century in the making, and Howard habitually referred to it as his 'Snowy River' or the 'steel Snowy scheme' of the twenty-first century.17 As these examples show, Howard is ever-ready to wrap the realities of American capital in the fabric of Australian myth; to employ myth to move from economic to mental being and displace history -" and business -" from public discourse. This is one facet of his myth-speak in action.

In the examples above, Howard's myth-speak works to conceal a potentially unpopular aspect of Australian-American relations. On other occasions, he readily reveals America as Australia's symbolic twin. In a recent article in The Monthly magazine, titled 'Little America', Robert Manne capably demonstrates the Prime Minister's 'romantic attachment to American civilisation' and his 'vision of Australia's future as ally of the great American Empire.' Apart from the essentially Australian 'fair go' and 'mateship', Manne lists some of the shared values which Howard believes constitute an unbreakable (and spiritual) Australian-American fraternity: 'the rule of law... the individual is more important than the state... robust but ethical capitalism... decency and hard work define a person's worth'. Both countries have 'grown from a pioneer society where adversity has been overcome and dreams pursued'; both believe in 'the family, "the greatest social welfare system the world has ever devised."'18 There is no doubt that Howard regards this kinship in

fundamentalist terms: 'We are societies that fundamentally see the value of people [in] their personal character and their commitment to the ideals and common values of their country... we are nations that are, I think, also united in our belief that an open free market... is the one that best meets the aspirations and hopes of our citizens', he told Washington's National Press Club in 2004; adding that 'when I come to Washington I feel familiar.'19

Undoubtedly, this vision has been deepened by Howard's attraction to neo-conservative politics. In a speech to the Australian American Association in Melbourne in 2003, he crowed that theories of American decline and 'books having titles such as The End of the American Century' could be seen 'well and truly off'. The proof was the 'the leadership of President Reagan, in bringing about the implosion and ultimate disappearance of the Soviet Union, and the liberation of tens of millions of people in eastern Europe from a tyranny that they never of course wanted... a remarkable triumph and a remarkable tribute to the strength and the reach of American power'.20 This myth is particularly cherished by the neo-cons who founded the Project for the New American Century, many of whom -" Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Richard Perle - " were Cold-War veterans and are now Bush Administration insiders with whom Howard has consorted. To them all, America is indeed Reagan's mystic 'Shining City on the Hill', and the myth -" or delusion -" that Reagan won the Cold War is an article of fundamentalist faith that underwrites their call for the exercise of American power, 'right and might', universally. Once again, the myth of how the 'Evil Empire' fell displaces historical complexities and attempts to humiliate America's critics into silence.

However, it is not simply the case that Howard has been seduced by the myth of American power in its present form, or by the 'special hospitality' extended to him in Washington by his 'soul mate' (Howard's actual words) George W. Bush. As a trainee Cold Warrior himself, in the 1950s, Howard's thinking tended in the same direction anyway: his myth-speak about the majesty of the USA has a genealogy of its own. Michelle Grattan writes: 'As a young man strongly interested in international relations, Howard was socialised in the Cold War era,' when the Australian-American alliance 'totally dominated Australia's foreign policy.'21 According to his brother Bob, the young Howard was fiercely anti-Communist, exceeding their conservative mother's views: 'One example was the Communist Party Dissolution Bill. John supported Menzies over that, but our mother disagreed.' Likewise, the future PM was deaf to the progressive attitudes of the Methodist Church -" an institution frequently credited with morally fashioning him -" and the opinion pages of its newspaper: 'I don't think I ever saw a copy of the Methodist in our house,' Bob Howard recalls.22 Amongst other social justice stances, the Methodist 'nervously monitored' McCarthyism in America as 'a new totalitarianism',23 though the youthful Howard was apparently unmoved. But as Marion Maddox reveals in her fine study God Under Howard (2005), there was a very crucial fashioning force on the young Howard's imagination. Bob Howard, again, remembers: 'What we read was the Reader's Digest and the Saturday Evening Post. I remember the Saturday Evening Post arriving, every second Tuesday, a smorgasbord of American consumer goods. It went on for years -" log-cabin-to-the White House, kids selling lollies on the roadside -" that sort of influence was more important than the church in shaping our family's values.'24

If Howard is beguiled by America, it is not because his proximity to the events of 11 September 2001 or his friendship with Bush are switch-points: rather, as Maddox finds, it is because a mythic America is implanted in his consciousness. He was always-already an 'Americanophile', as Robert Manne writes; and Manne

concludes that Howard can palpably discount Australia's national interest in areas like the Free Trade Agreement, his acceptance of the doctrine of pre-emption, and the military deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq -" and 'it is the military dimension of the relationship' with the US 'that goes most deep' with him. In Manne's estimation, these military adventures were 'grounded less in rational calculation and far more in sentimental dreaming.'25

The depth of Howard's 'sentimental dreaming' is evident in the way in which he has even given Australia's key myth, Anzac, an American accent. Howard's attachment to and use of Anzac has been much commented upon; and as Anzac has an 'omnipresence', a 'resonant aura of always-everness', functioning as 'the modern Australian dreaming', it is perhaps surprising that Howard has consciously inserted an American inflection in the most 'sacred' of Australian myths. 26 'Often he refers to the Australian and American airmen who were shot down together in New Guinea', Manne notes, 'and who, because their bodies could not be separated, now share a common grave at Arlington cemetery' in Washington.27 Equally, he reminds the Australian public of its debt to American protection in the Battle of the Coral Sea -" an 'intervention' that 'stood between us and potential military conquest' by the Japanese.28 Howard stresses that Australia has stood with America 'shoulder to shoulder'29 (one of Orwell's 'dummy' catch-phrases) in every major conflict for a century -" and that 'great and noble purposes... have animated US foreign policy down the ages.'30 Howard constantly invokes the Great-War Battle of Hamel: 'when on 4 July 1918... on America's national day Australians and Americans first fought together... On subsequent occasions we have also fought in defence of our common values.' These values are 'the belief that the individual is more important than the state, that strong families are a nation's greatest asset, that competitive free enterprise is the ultimate' -" fundamentalist -" 'foundation of national wealth'.31 This traduction, or pollution, of the Anzac myth by market fundamentalist cant requires severe inspection. It supposes the historic continuation of a tradition of natural justice, militarily visited upon those 'evil' foes of 'goodness' -" and consumer capitalism -" that drives the collective dreaming of the Great Democracies.

Young John Howard's experience of the Saturday Evening Post establishes the guidelines of a particular fundamentalism. The images of kids selling roadside sweets, galaxies of consumer 'goods' and log-cabin-to White House dreams speak a powerful, interrelated set of myths: private enterprise, prosperity, class mobility and ultimate empowerment. For Howard, 'America' essentially signifies the market fundamentalist cash-power nexus, and all the other values which he claims Australia and the US have in common -" individualism, decency, family, freedom -" are contingent upon it. As a recent editorial in Rupert Murdoch's flagship broadsheet, The Australian, stunningly -" if inadvertently -" revealed, Howard's real and 'lasting' (timeless) achievement has been to acquaint the masses with a respect for money and power. Tirelessly mythologising Howard, the paper's editorialists credited him with changing 'the way Australians think about money' and the universalist ability to reach 'across class divides... to speak to all segments of society.' (As Barthes wrote, a mythic projection like this renders words like 'bourgeois' and 'capitalism' unspeakable.) The editorial proceeded: 'Working men no longer resent the bosses in big houses... working-class families say they vote for John Howard because "the only way to look after working people is to keep the rich happy"... they will never be able to get ahead in a country with a stagnant economy and a hostile business environment... Geopolitically, Mr Howard has turned Australia into a highly respected international player... much of this hinges on his close relationship with George W. Bush.'32 Australian 'egalitarianism' is supplanted by American 'enterprise':

in the minds of The Australian's editorial writers, Australia is indeed Robert Manne's 'Little America', and what Manne dubs the 'dominionisation' of Australia by American values and politico-economic power is a fait accompli.33

In this regard, Howard's American-inflected myth-speak is surely designed to 'turn us to stone through language', as Don Watson observes; to neutralise resistance, to vanish the memory of a world that was or could be different. And mainstream media re-iteration of Howard's American-oriented myth-speak - " especially strident in Murdoch's News Ltd press -" has certainly ceased to be journalism and become propaganda: a reflection of 'the superb indifference that the powerful have for the weak'. Myth is also a form of interpellation, as Barthes understood: 'it has an imperative, buttonholing character... it is I whom it has come to seek... I am subjected to its intentional force';34 so the obsessive concern with 'the people' and the people's reaction to Howard's myth-speak can be critically read as an attempt to position 'the weak' in a particular set of power relations. Howard's sure-footedness in matters of 'cultural symbolism' has made him a 'patriotic father figure', Nicolas Rothwell writes; and Paul Kelly, The Australian's 'editor at large', intones that over time 'Howard and the nation have moved closer together', and his cabinet ministers (like him) believe 'there is more wisdom at the local pub than in a university seminar.' Kelly paints his own folksy, fire-side picture of the PM, but the colours come from Rothwell's palette: 'Howard chooses not to live in Canberra. He lives in Sydney and the symbolism is unmistakeable -" he leaves Canberra to return to the nation'35 as a patriarch comes home to his extended family at the end of a long, hard yet rewarding day at the office.

This portrait of Howard the father-figure interpellates 'the people' as his children, and it betrays the cynicism behind the 'sentimental dreaming' of myth-speak. As a debased language, myth-speak displays the sublime indifference of the powerful for weak. In Howard's political world, the 'intentional force' of myth is mobilised to realise a fundamental ideological tenet: that the fate of 'the people' is to suffer eternal contempt and to be forever patronised.

Notes:

1. Alan Ramsey, 'So much for democratic principles', Sydney Morning Herald, 24-25 June 2006, p.35.

2. Malcolm Mackerras, in David Humphries, 'Howard's power house', Sydney Morning Herald, 24-25 June 2006, p.32.

3. Matt Price, 'Getting Personal', in Nick Cater, ed. The Howard Factor: A Decade that Transformed the Nation, Melbourne UP, Melbourne, 2006, p.56.Â Â Â

4. Price, 'Getting Personal', p.55.

5. John Howard, 'Cut and Paste', The Australian, 20 June 2006, p.15.

6. Nicolas Rothwell, 'Please Explain', in Cater, ed. The Howard Factor, p.112.

7. Dennis Shanahan, 'Two Howards', in Cater, ed. The Howard Factor, p.31.

8. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in Inside the Whale and Other Essays, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1966, pp.152-3.

9. Don Watson, Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language, Knopf/Random House, Sydney, 2003, pp.1, 4-5.

10. Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in Mythologies, Paladin, Frogmore, 1973, pp.142, 138.

11. Barthes, 'Myth Today', pp.138-9.

12. Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory, Oxford UP, Oxford, 1979, p.115.

13. Stuart Sim, Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma, Icon Books, Cambridge, 2004, p.7.

14. John Howard, in Steve Lewis, 'PM backs "righteous force" of US', The Australian, 19 May 2006, p.4.

15. John Howard, in John Garnaut, 'PM gives Ford $50m to make petrol-guzzlers', Sydney Morning Herald, 6-7 May 2006, p.8.

16. John Howard, Address at the Official Opening to the Adelaide to Darwin Railway, Darwin, 17 January 2004, www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech647.

17. John Howard, in Linda Doherty and Chips Mackinolty, 'They think they can, they think they can get the train to Darwin', Sydney Morning Herald, 18 July 2001, p.5.

18. Robert Manne, 'Little America: How John Howard has changed Australia', The Monthly, March 2006, p.24.

19. John Howard, Address to the National Press Club, Washington, 2 June 2004, wwwe.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech901.

20. John Howard, Address to the Australian American Association, Melbourne, 2 September 2003, www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech471.

21. Michelle Grattan, 'John W. goes all the way with George W.', Sydney Morning Herald, 14 September 2001, p.10.

22. Bob Howard, in Marion Maddox, God Under Howard: The Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2005, pp.22, 20.

23. Maddox, God Under Howard, p.16.

24. Bob Howard, in God Under Howard, pp.20-1.

25. Manne, 'Little America', p.24.

26. Graham Seal, Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology, St Lucia, U of Queensland P, 2004, p.172.

27. Manne, 'Little America', p.24.

28. John Howard, Address to the Houses of the Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 23 October 2003, www,pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech545.

29. John Howard, in Grattan, 'John W. goes all the way with George W.'.

30. John Howard, Address to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Sydney, 18 June 2004, www,pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech921.

31. John Howard, Address to Parliament, 23 October 2003.

32. 'Will he or won't he? John Howard is in a position to secure lasting influence', editorial, The Australian, 16 May 2006, p.13.

33. Manne, 'Little America', p.32.

34. Barthes, 'Myth Today', p.124.

35. Paul Kelly, 'How Howard Governs', in Cater, ed., The Howard Factor, pp.3, 10, 12.

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