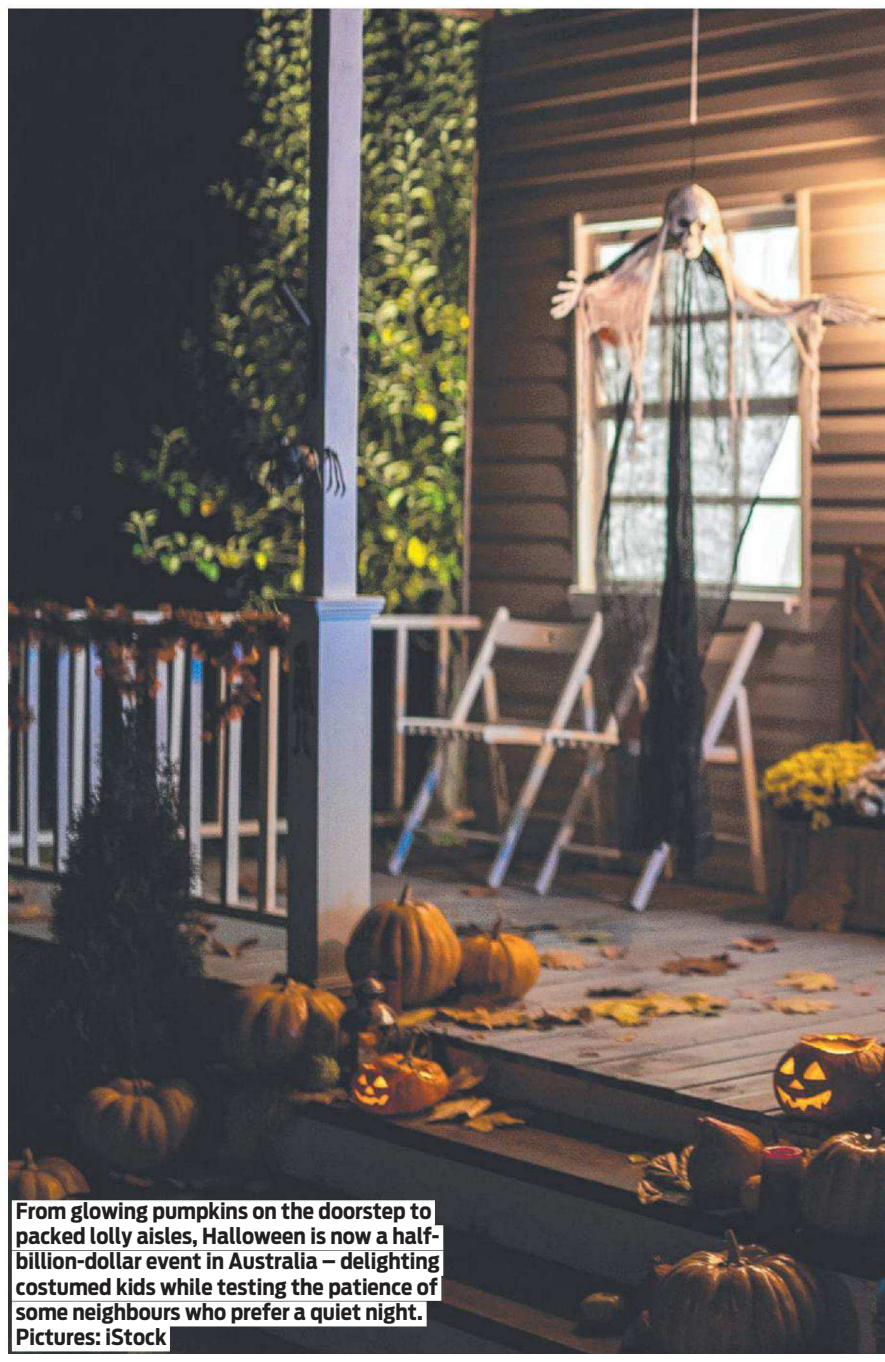
Opinion OURS & YOURS

Our Halloween tricks are not everyone's treat

It's scary how fast the American tradition is growing here, but there is no compulsion to join the monstrous throng



From glowing pumpkins on the doorstep to packed lolly aisles, Halloween is now a half-billion-dollar event in Australia – delighting costumed kids while testing the patience of some neighbours who prefer a quiet night. Pictures: iStock

There is absolutely no disguising that Halloween has been creeping into our neighbourhoods.

And with no sign of it giving up the ghost anytime soon, Halloween might well become a monster of a celebration that many Australians love and others wish would disappear.

There was a time when the scariest thing about Halloween was the thought of having to join in.

For many, it was simply another American tradition that had no business at all casting its spell over Aussie homes, streets and shopping centres.

But those days are vanishing faster than a vampire at sunrise.

Come October each year, skeletons hang from verandas, fake cobwebs cover front gardens and inflatable ghosts compete for attention with giant pumpkins.

And if this is not proof enough that Halloween is becoming a frighteningly big affair, just look at the supermarket shelves stacked with chocolates and lollies.

Meanwhile, discount stores seem determined to ensure no household goes without its very own plastic witch, rubber spider or glow-in-the-dark skull.

Then, on the evening of October 31, children dressed as ghosts, vampires, zombies and superheroes descend on neighbourhoods in monstrous numbers, hoping to fill their buckets with sweet treats.

Gary Martin



It is not hard to see why Halloween has cast its spell over so many Australian families.

After all, children love dressing up, collecting lollies and having an excuse to stay out a little later than usual.

Adults can get caught up in the excitement as well. Decorating their homes, hosting Halloween parties and seeing the delight on children's faces are all part of the fun.

But for many, Halloween is something that goes way beyond costumes, decorations and buckets overflowing with lollies.

It provides an opportunity for people to get off their screens and out of their homes to spend time with the neighbours.

In many communities, people barely know those living next door to them.

Halloween provides a near-perfect excuse to meet those in the neighbourhood.

And perhaps that is the most surprising thing about the whole celebration.

An occasion designed to scare the living daylights out of people might actually be breathing some life back into our neighbourhoods.

While some Australians are joining in with the celebrations, others are becoming increasingly spooked by Halloween's popularity.

One of the biggest complaints is that Halloween has become less about having fun and more about spending money.

And the figures suggest there is plenty of cash being scared out of our wallets.

According to research from the Australian Retail Council and Roy Morgan, we are expected to spend $510m on Halloween across the country this year.

It works out to an average of $117 for every person planning to celebrate, up from $103 last year.

For retailers, Halloween has become a huge opportunity to convince families to open their wallets.

What might once have involved a homemade costume and a few lollies has expanded exponentially.

It can now mean elaborate outfits, mountains of decorations, themed parties and enough chocolates to keep the neighbourhood dentist in business well into the afterlife.

And for families already struggling with the fast-rising cost of living, the pressure to spend up on Halloween might be more frightening than anything hanging from the front veranda.

Others object to what they see as another American tradition that Australia has adopted without much thought.

Yet Halloween did not originate in America.

Its roots stretch back more than 2000 years to the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain.

The festival marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter, a time when people believed spirits could return to the world of the living.

However, it was America which helped to turn Halloween into the costume-filled, trick-or-treating celebration we know today.

> **The trick is making sure Halloween remains a treat for those who enjoy it without becoming a nightmare for those who do not**

Emergency departments are becoming a social safety

Report reveals pressures put on hospitals by an ageing population, writes **Jeremy Harbottle**

The recently released State of Emergency: Australia's Ageing Population report paints a concerning picture.

Older Australians are presenting to emergency departments in growing numbers, are more likely to arrive by ambulance, are more likely to be admitted, and often wait longer for care than younger patients.

The report largely explains this pressure through a hospital lens: too few aged-care places, insufficient inpatient beds, workforce shortages and poor system integration. These are important issues, but they help explain why older people become stuck in the system, not why they enter it in the first place.

Emergency departments are increasingly becoming the social safety net when other supports fail.

From my perspective, three factors deserve attention.

The first is dementia. While often discussed as an aged-care issue, many emergency presentations arise from behavioural changes, wandering, delirium, medication mismanagement, cognitive decline or an inability to remain safely at home. When a crisis occurs, families and service providers are frequently left with no option but to call an ambulance.

The second is carer breakdown. Many older people arrive at emergency departments not because of a sudden medical emergency, but because a spouse or family member can no longer cope with escalating care needs. Exhaustion, illness, family conflict and the loss of support services can quickly turn a difficult situation into a crisis.

The third is growing risk aversion across the health and aged-care sectors. Residential aged-care facilities, GPs, community nurses and support providers often operate under workforce pressures, liability concerns and clinical uncertainty. In those circumstances, transferring a person to hospital can become the safest organisational decision, even when there is no immediate medical emergency.

The result is that emergency departments increasingly absorb risks that originate elsewhere in the system.

These pressures also intersect with Tasmania's guardianship system.

Applications for substitute decision-makers are rising, driven in part by the factors above as well as recent changes to commonwealth aged-care legislation. At the same time, amendments to the Guardianship and Administration Act 1995 strengthened the rights of individuals and reinforced the principle that people should be supported to make their own decisions wherever possible.

Those reforms reflect important values. Adults do not lose their rights

Talking Point

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But for those who dislike it, the distinction makes absolutely no difference.

There are those of us who simply do not want to participate.

They resent the expectation they should decorate their homes, stock up on treats or answer repeated knocks on their doors.

Some are uncomfortable with children approaching strangers' homes. Others worry about pranks, noise and the occasional trick-or-treater who refuses to take no for an answer.

And not everyone appreciates having their evening interrupted by an endless procession of little monsters.

Of course, none of this means Halloween should be buried once and for all.

There is nothing wrong with families enjoying an evening of dressing up, collecting lollies and sharing some fun with their neighbours.

But there is equally nothing wrong with choosing to give the whole thing a miss.

A decorated doorstep might signal that trick-or-treaters are welcome.

Therefore, a home without decorations should be just as clear a sign that its occupants would prefer to be left alone.

The trick is making sure Halloween remains a treat for those who enjoy it without becoming a nightmare for those who do not.

After all, the scariest thing about Halloween should be the costumes – not the pressure to join in.

So is Halloween a treat you look forward to – or a trick you could happily do without?

Professor Gary Martin is a specialist in workplace and social trends

net when other supports fail

simply because they are older or living with disability.

However, the practical challenge arises when autonomy, safety and limited service options collide.

The law now places greater emphasis on respecting a person's will and preferences and limits the circumstances in which a substitute decision-maker can override those wishes, generally to situations involving a risk of "serious harm".

The difficulty is that "serious harm" remains undefined. Combined with limited-service options and a culture of risk aversion, the result can be prolonged hospital stays while difficult decisions are made about a person's future care and living arrangements. In some cases, those decisions determine whether a person will ever return home.

None of this is an argument for winding back individual rights. On the contrary, rights matter profoundly, particularly for people who are vulnerable.

But rights cannot be considered in isolation from the systems that support them.

An older person may have the right to choose where they live, but when appropriate supports are unavailable, families, clinicians and decision-makers are often left confronting impossible choices. Hospitals then become the holding space for problems they were never designed to solve.

The report is right to draw attention to the pressures created by an ageing population. Yet growing demand on emergency departments is also a symptom of a broader challenge: how we support people to live with dignity, autonomy and safety as they age.

As Tasmania grows older, that conversation will only become more important.

Jeremy Harbottle is Tasmania's Public Guardian, an independent statutory officer established under the Guardianship and Administration Act


The Firmus Technologies site at St Leonards in Launceston – currently under construction – is the first of several AI data centres planned for Tasmania. Picture: Supplied

Benefits for state from AI growth

Government has a plan to embrace digital opportunities, writes **Madeleine Ogilvie**

Technology has always brought change. From the pen to the printer, digitisation and now artificial intelligence, each technological leap has changed how we work, communicate and live.

The growth of AI will require new digital infrastructure. Data centres are an essential part of the modern digital economy. Every day, the information we generate through banking, communications, transport, mobile phones, social media and online services is stored and transferred through this digital infrastructure.

The change is already happening and that is why our government is implementing a six-point plan to ensure Tasmanians benefit.

First, proponents must pay their own way by meeting the infrastructure and network costs associated with their development.

This underpins our second point – data centre developers must help grow our energy supply. That means supporting renewable generation and delivering additional energy capacity in Tasmania.

Tasmania has long been at the forefront of renewable energy in Australia. By harnessing the investment from digital infrastructure developments, we can continue to strengthen our position well into the future.

AI has the potential to change our future for the better and Tasmanians deserve improved communications and digital infrastructure. The AI era will bring these improvements, but we must make sure Tasmanian consumers are protected.

This speaks to our third and fourth points. AI developers must ensure that their power and water demands do not compromise local security nor drive prices up – and they must be located in industrial precincts away from urban areas.

Fifth, they will make an ongoing contribution to the Community Benefit Fund.

The fund sets out our expectation that communities that host these facilities will directly benefit. The fund will help strengthen community organisations, support local sporting groups, and meet community needs at a grassroots level. Importantly, the fund will be designed to also support innovation, training and economic development opportunities for the next generation of Tasmanians.


Madeleine Ogilvie

Finally, proponents will publicly report on their water and energy usage every quarter – transparency is key.

With these expectations in place, we can harness the future benefits of AI.

Tasmania is well placed to receive the benefits of improved digital infrastructure such as new sub-sea cable connectivity – to help us close our digital divide.

I recognise the concerns people have about the safe use of AI algorithms, and look forward to continuing this important conversation with all Tasmanians.

AI can support better medical diagnosis, remote medicine, improved education, scientific research and new opportunities in the arts and digital industries. It can also create new jobs, attract investment and open more Tasmanian businesses to international markets.

It is important to note that the digital infrastructure developers are listening and responding accordingly. There has already been a strong acknowledgment from developers currently in Tasmania that they agree.

The future will be increasingly digital. Our task is to make sure the digital era fundamentally benefits our community, generates economic development and new job opportunities for Tasmanians.

Madeleine Ogilvie is the Liberal member for Clark and the former minister for Innovation, Science and the Digital Economy