

# SHOULD WE CHANGE THE DATE OF AUSTRALIA DAY?

**Public debate about changing the date of Australia Day has intensified in recent months, as three local government councils moved to change the way they mark the occasion. *Reconciliation News* considers the arguments as to why 26 January is not an appropriate date to celebrate, if Australia Day is to be an occasion that all Australians can accept and enjoy.**

## INTRODUCTION

Each year, the Australia Day holiday raises complex questions about our country's national identity. This year has been no different.

In August, the City of Darebin Council and Yarra Council both voted within the space of a week to end the formal celebration of Australia Day on 26 January. Then in September, a third Melbourne council – Moreland – voted in favour of dropping all references to Australia Day and joined the push to change the date of our national celebration.

These moves followed the City of Fremantle's 2016 decision to cancel its Australia Day fireworks display, in favour of a more 'culturally inclusive' celebration to be held on 28 January. Likewise, Flinders Island Council has celebrated Australia Day on an alternative date for several years.

At the heart of the matter is an ongoing debate about the meaning of our national day. Like all national days, the way Australia Day is celebrated and the significance attached to it have changed considerably over time. In fact, it wasn't until 1994 that 26 January became a national public holiday. A look back at the historical facts – and what they continue to represent – helps shed light on why the date remains divisive.

## HISTORY

Arthur Phillip arrived at Sydney Cove and raised the national flag of the United Kingdom on 26 January 1788. In doing so, he founded the settler colony of NSW and, at the same time, commenced the dispossession and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The tradition of noticing 26 January began a few decades later, in the early 1800s, but only in NSW. It was referred to by various names in the following years, including First Landing Day and Foundation Day. Other colonies – namely South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania (then Van Diemen's Land) – celebrated their own colonial foundations, which took place on other dates.

It took another century before the states and territories agreed to a common name and timing of celebrations. In 1935, the occasion became known as 'Australia Day' and festivities were held on a long weekend, including the nearest Monday to 26 January. In other words, the public holiday was usually held on dates close to 26 January rather than on 26 January itself.

Opposition to the national festivities emerged within the next few years and spiked at various times in the following decades. In 1938, on the 150th anniversary of Arthur Phillip's arrival, the Aborigines Progressive Association held a Day of



**PROTEST:**  
People taking part  
in the Invasion Day  
march in Melbourne  
on January 26, 2017.

Mourning and Protest. “On this day the white people are rejoicing,” Aboriginal civil rights activist Jack Patten told attendees. “But we, as Aborigines, have no reason to rejoice on Australia’s 150th birthday.” One of the most significant protests was held in 1988 – on the bicentennial year of the arrival of the First Fleet – when 40,000 people participated in an ‘Invasion Day’ march to raise awareness that “white Australia has a black history”.

Despite ongoing contention, all states and territories in 1994 endorsed the celebration of Australia Day as a national public holiday to be held on 26 January. It has been celebrated on that day ever since, with festivities including citizenship ceremonies, outdoor concerts and fireworks.

## WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DATE?

National days the world over are generally considered as occasions of celebration. In Australia, our national day is promoted as a time to reflect on the nation’s achievements and what makes us proud to be Australian. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians wish to celebrate the values and freedoms that Australians enjoy but do not feel that 26 January is an appropriate date to do so.

The historical events of 26 January mean that many Australians – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – perceive it as date that marks the commencement of a long history of violence and trauma. As the history books indicate, 26 January festivities were initiated to mark the arrival of the first British settlers and the establishment of a British colony on

the east coast of Australia.

This history involves a period of conflict that continued up to the 1960s, as well as government policies of assimilation and separation that saw many people removed from their traditional lands and culture. For First Australians, a national celebration on 26 January is inappropriate because the history that underpins it is simply too painful.

Broader Australia has a poor understanding of the history of 26 January, which helps to explain why not everyone views the celebration of this date as problematic. Seven in 10 voters say Australia Day is important to them but a majority of the population can’t accurately name the event it commemorates, according to a poll conducted earlier this year by market research company Review Partners. When a representative sample of voters was asked to identify the historical event marked on Australia Day from a list of six possible alternatives, only 43 per cent



**A DIFFERENT DATE:**

A poster advertising Australia Day celebrations on 30 July 1915. (Credit: Australian War Memorial)



correctly named the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove in 1788. One in five said Australia Day commemorated the discovery of Australia by Captain Cook while one in six said it was the anniversary of Federation. Smaller proportions said the national day marked the date of a treaty with Indigenous people (7 per cent), the date Australia stopped being a colony of Great Britain (6 per cent) or the date of an important battle in World War I (2 per cent).

Acknowledging the varied perceptions of the date, the Australia Day Council has attempted since the early 1990s to reframe Australia Day as an occasion where we can “celebrate and mourn at the same time”. “We respect the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who consider 26 January as a day of mourning, or a day to mark the survival of their ongoing history, traditions and cultures,” says council CEO Chris Kirby. “We also aspire to an Australia Day that can increasingly recognise... the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the traditional custodians of our beautiful lands and waterways, and their centrality to the great Australian story.” The council has made efforts to ensure its programs promote a spirit of reconciliation, including the introduction of Australia Day Dawn – ‘a moment of reflection before celebration’. Despite these gestures, it remains impossible for Australia Day to serve as an inclusive national occasion as long as it is held on a date that some Australians celebrate while others grieve.

## THE NEED FOR A UNIFYING NATIONAL DAY

The reconciliation movement is about recognising and healing the past, and committing to a better future. Reconciliation Australia believes that our national day cannot be cohesive and a matter of pride for all Australians if it reminds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of invasion, dispossession and loss of culture. Reconciliation Australia co-chair Professor Tom Calma says it is important for Australia to engage in dialogue about the history of 26 January and what the date continues to signify.

“It’s not about trying to lay guilt on individuals but it’s about trying to make sure that our future, our children and Australians generally, have an understanding of the history of Australia,” Calma says.

“Australia’s history didn’t start in 1788 but it goes on well beyond that. And there’s a lot to recognise and celebrate. But also there’s a lot in our history that’s very dark, that we need to expose to ensure that these sort of atrocities never happen again.”

While Reconciliation Australia advocates the need for an alternative date for Australia’s national day of unity, Calma says it is essential that any change to Australia’s national day must be unifying and supported by the majority of Australians.

“We support any actions that will raise awareness and discussion amongst the community to look at what this day means on the 26th of January to a whole range of people,” Calma says.

“We’re particularly interested in making sure that whatever happens, this is about unification of Australia and not dividing us as a society. So having a conversation is very important at this stage.”