



What do we want from a National Day?

(This article was published under the title, 'Humble wattle gives us identity' in The Canberra Times (p. 13 Opinion on Friday 3 February 2012).

By Terry Fewtrell

Another Australia Day has come and gone with a sadly familiar pattern emerging. In recent years our National Day appears to be a trigger for disharmony and conflict, for competing interests and disturbance.

For a moment let's put aside the irresponsible melee that dominated coverage of this year's event and sent unfortunate images of internal conflict around the world. It deserves separate consideration. But the story of a young Queanbeyan achiever declining to serve as an Australia Day Ambassador because he felt the day was divisive, brings other questions into stark relief.

What Australia Day seems to highlight is that, on a number of levels, we are a conflicted people. Do we really know what we are celebrating? Such thinking is not unpatriotic, rather it is stating the need of many Australians to seek far more meaning in our national identity than Australia Day seemingly can provide.

January 26 is certainly the date on which the colony of NSW was established. But in other ways that date is undeniably a marker of dispossession for indigenous Australians. Being significant in the story of modern Australia, doesn't necessarily make it the best day to celebrate the nation's good fortune and achievements, of which there are many. Indeed it may simply be unrealistic to expect that 26 January, as a date to celebrate modern Australian achievements, would not arouse strong and conflicting passions.

But the baggage of exclusion implicit in the 26 January date is not the only matter of concern. As a modern nation our national colours are gazetted as green and gold, officially derived from the palette of our national floral emblem, the wattle, and specifically the species *Acacia pycnantha*. So the green and gold of our official colours come directly from the land that has sustained and shaped us for 1000s of years, indigenous and non-indigenous. But each year Australia Day presents as a sea of imperial red, white and blue.

Perhaps it is to wattle that we might usefully look to invoke a different spirit and sense of an Australia Day. National Wattle Day (1 September) has been a gazetted national day since 1993. Its history and symbolism is rich.

The website of the Australia Day Council describes 26 January as a day of celebrations that ‘reflect contemporary Australia, our diverse society and landscapes, our remarkable achievements and our bright future. It also is an opportunity to reflect on our nation’s history and to consider how we can make Australia an even better place in future’. Few could argue with such objectives but it seems the chances of 26 January delivering them recedes with each year.

Many Australians have tired of what is seen as increasingly shallow ‘celebrations’ that offer little by way of reflection or insights on our shared story. A lack of national vision on the part of our political leaders is also a factor. On the other hand, Wattle and National Wattle Day evoke deep symbolism, with messages that resonate across all aspects of modern day Australian society. Wattle has been the silent witness of the Australian story for millions of years. It has welcomed us all, indigenous, colonials and modern day arrivals.

Its presence in our land for millions of years is a story of adaption and resilience – a learning for all, but particularly its rebirth after bushfires. Its many varieties are as diverse as the backgrounds of 21st century Australians. It has flourished because it has become but a fragment of the land itself.

The wattle blossom is a festive sign of spring and the promise of abundance. It has also been the national balm that has soothed in times of great pain and trouble. Simply wearing a sprig of wattle on National Wattle Day is symbol of commitment and identification with this land that is inclusive and welcoming.

The wonderful social history of Wattle Day has been invoked in recent years by the Wattle Day Association, in alliance with the Volunteer Bushfire Brigades of the ACT Rural Fire Service, to produce and sell Wattle Day badges. This community based initiative has raised \$14,000 for local brigades and with appropriate commercial sponsorship will expand across ACT borders to be a national campaign.

Our land with its rich, but sometimes wretched abundance, its record of sound governance and its rich tapestry of resourceful people has the opportunity to forge a wonderful future together. But as a people we need to move beyond our current conflicted state.

It seems that the nation needs to do some serious thinking about what it wants and expects from our national day. Clearly the Australia Day Council has much to do to address in resolving how to avoid these conflicts. But at their source these questions are beyond the role of the Council and perhaps even government. They are for the people to determine, calmly and pragmatically.

There is of course room for both Australia Day and National Wattle Day but wattle’s inclusiveness and deep association with the land may provide a pointer to how we might avoid on-going conflicts. We cannot afford, nor should we persist with, symbols and national days that are styled to damage our shared future.

Terry Fewtrell is President of the Wattle Day Association Inc. The Association welcomes new members. www.wattleday.asn.au