

## Solving the Australia Day Puzzle

Terry Fewtrell

It is the same every year! And it seems unlikely to ever go away. Australia Day fails to be the unifying day that we might all hope for. Rather than fret and fight about it we would be better served as a community to work positively towards defining what we seek from a national day and then determine how it can best be met.

The call from Canberra MLA Chris Bourke in *The Canberra Times* (21 January 2013) was very measured and positive. He believes we can do better than the current single focus on 26 January. Not just because indigenous and other Australians will always see it as Invasion Day, commemorating an event in colonial history that is focussed on the past. It says nothing of what we have achieved or what collectively we aspire to achieve.

As Chris Bourke says, “Australians have much to celebrate”. But, given our history, 26 January will always struggle to be a day that inspires and unites. What Bourke is essentially calling for is a mature conversation. It is hard to find fault with such a proposition. As a prompt for such discussion, he invokes an indigenous elder saying: “We are what we make ourselves to be”. So let’s move on and embrace the challenge.

We might also usefully take some counsel from Nietzsche’s injunction: ‘Become who you are’. In many ways that gets to the nub of the issue for us Australians. We are not quite sure what we are or are capable of becoming. That in one sense is not surprising given that the Australia of today is different in ways that could not have been imagined, as a result of successive waves of a very successful post war migration program. We might frame our individual or group ideas on the topic in quite different ways. Neither is that surprising nor insurmountable, for as Australians what we share in common is much more significant than might be our differences.

Australia’s progression from colony to independent nation and modern nation state has been a slow, stuttering, sometimes reluctant journey of change. But change we have. It has also arguably been largely without demonstrations of great passion. Our annual quandary about Australia Day seems just the latest manifestation of this slow evolving emergence. The confusion in our national colours, between the officially gazetted green and gold, derived from our national floral emblem the golden wattle, and the largely colonial relic of our red, white and blue flag, is another sign of our current uncertainty.

In many ways the slow emergence of our sense of national identity mirrors the gradual evolution of our land from the ancient continent of Gondwana. Perhaps also it is to that land itself that we should look for guidance in discerning our own emergence as a people and modern nation. For it is the land more than any other factor, that has shaped all life, and us as a people, on the great southern continent. Not just in its ravages of fire, flood and unremitting drought, but in ways more deep and soulful.

We could take note that our national flower, the wattle, has been in our landscape for all of that 30 million plus year's journey. Its power as a unifying symbol is partly that it springs directly from that land and has been the great witness to the entire Australian story. It has welcomed us all, indigenous, colonial and modern day immigrants. In all of that time, and into the future, wattle is the great sign of resilience and adaption – key attributes of our national persona.

National Wattle Day, gazetted as 1 September, would be a candidate for an alternate day of national celebration, reflection and re-commitment. But having the conversation about such matters is what is important in the short term.

As Bourke points out our national political leaders seem incapable (perhaps scared) of leading such a discussion. They fail to see that this is about realising the potential of the nation and its people – to become who we really are. There are good reasons for it to excite rather than frighten us.

If resilience and adaption are what wattle teaches us as necessary to survive and prosper in this land, then as a people we need to better own our history, take from it what is best, recognise our inner weaknesses and strengths and then go forward to create the future.

There is indeed much to celebrate in the creation and achievements of the modern Australia nation. But let those celebrations be built on reflection and learnings from the past. January 26 will always be a day to remember the arrival of white settlement – for better and worse.

We Australians are a resourceful lot, renowned for our practicality. Let's apply those attributes to our own challenges. More than a history we have a future and we need to create that together. To do that we need to go forward as a fully reconciled people and the current date and focus of Australia Day will always be an impediment to that.

So let's have the discussion in the context of a broader narrative of our history and the future we can create. Let's have a mature and calm discussion. Let's demonstrate to our political leaders that we are open to ideas that do not hold our future hostage to the past. We are above all a practical people.

**Terry Fewtrell** is President of the Wattle Day Association Inc.

[www.wattleday.asn.au](http://www.wattleday.asn.au)