

A way out of the Australia Day blues

Terry Fewtrell

Another Australia Day, another bout of discomfort, wringing of hands and a persistent sense that something just isn't right. It seems that without some change we are destined to repeat this cycle each year, with its worrying loss of community capital and cohesion. But it doesn't have to be like this. There are alternatives.

The key difficulty that 26 January has as a national day is its inevitable association with a worldview that either rejects or devalues any human contribution prior to the 26 January 1788 arrival of the First Fleet and ignores the reality of the ownership transfer involved. A secondary but related problem is a sense of hollowness in the celebrations, arising from our intellectual and emotional recognition that we have work to do to reconcile the nation's story and peoples. That emptiness is not helped by the frenzy of red, white and blue (not Australia's official colours) and a flag that speaks of a limited past not an unbounded future.

Much has and is being achieved on the reconciliation question. There remain key thresholds to cross, such as recognition of indigenous people in the constitution and overcoming the appalling inequality of outcomes and opportunities in health and education. The Abbott government has a commendable commitment to the former and, hopefully, a response to the latter that is more effective than has been achieved by its predecessors.

But it is on the symbolic level that an inclusive and meaningful Australia Day can and must be addressed. Pre-eminent in that search needs to be a focus on symbols that unite us all and can speak of and to us. Wattle is that symbolic rallying point. Since 1988 wattle has been our official national floral emblem and for the past 22 years National Wattle Day, 1 September, has been an officially gazetted national day. Our official colours of green and gold are derived from the palette of the *Acacia pycnantha* leaf and blossom.

But the potential that wattle offers us as national symbol and a national day focus is far more profound and goes back much further in our story. Wattle is a remnant species from the ancient continent of Gondwana. It has been present in our landscape for more than 35 million years. We can think of it therefore as the great witness to the whole of the Australian story. It has waited and welcomed us all, indigenous, convict, colonial and modern day arrivals. It has been of use and sustained us all throughout our history.

In this way wattle has none of the baggage of other symbols or national days. It excludes no one. Indeed at the annual Wattle Day Citizenship Ceremony new arrivals are introduced into the Australian family with the message that we all have much to learn from the humble wattle. Its story in this land teaches us that resilience and adaption are key ingredients for survival in this place. This has been applied and demonstrated successively by indigenous peoples, colonialists, our forebears of the Federation and Depression generations and by post war migrants.

Rather than focus on a problematic date we could take a broader view of what has shaped and formed us in this land. These include indigenous culture and learning, western civilisation, British law, the energy and diversity of our post-war multicultural society, but most of all the land itself, whether reflected in the dreaming, 'droughts and flooding rains', Paterson's ballads or Nolan's paintings. Wattle has journeyed with us in kitbags, pockets and letters to places that have become synonymous with our shared story, be they Gallipoli, Kokoda or Swiss canyons.

While our society reproaches itself in a struggle for a shared and unifying national day, the wattle waits, as it has for millions of years. For all that time it has been silent. It waits for a unified and reconciled Australia to give it voice. But to do that we must grasp the future together. We must adapt and move on from the current demeaning introspection, not to put the two days in competition but so they complement each other and evolve in line with the nation's maturing persona.

As a first step we could create a greater focus around the current National Wattle Day celebrations, perhaps initially by recognising the wattle and those fellow Australians whom we wish to honour, by announcing their Order of Australia awards on the day. After all it is the wattle that forms the central motif of the OA insignia. We could also attract national sponsorship for the ACT initiated program that links National Wattle Day badges with fund raising for our modern day local heroes, the Volunteer Bushfire Brigades.

Above all we could use the day to reflect on how fortunate we are to be citizens of this wonderful land, to celebrate the contributions of all and commit ourselves to shared aspirations for the future. That would really be Australia's day.

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Terry Fewtrell is President of the Wattle Day Association Inc. and has a particular interest in national and civic symbols.