

## National Wattle Day – the celebration for *all* Australians

Terry Fewtrell

Australia celebrates National Wattle Day on 1 September (the first day of spring) and its significance derives from its simplicity - wattle comes from our land and is a symbol of that land. Wattle and National Wattle Day are unique celebrations of Australia, uncluttered by historical or cultural baggage.

Australia Day on 26 January, however, marks the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and in times past was called Foundation Day. It is also known as Invasion Day. While it marks the beginning of white settlement in Australia it does not serve Australians well as a national day of celebration. It is a statement of fact that it continues to offend and divide indigenous and increasingly, non-indigenous, Australians.

Centre stage on National Wattle Day is the golden-bloomed wattle. We celebrate wattle because of its ancient links to this land. Wattle has been the great witness to the whole of the Australian story. We now know that wattle has evolved in this land over the last 35 million years, following separation of the Australian landmass from Gondwana. Wattle therefore has welcomed us all, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, colonial settlers and latter day emigrants.

With 1,000 different *Acacia* species we commonly call wattle, it shows diversity under the Southern Cross. Its survival over millions of years speaks of resilience and adaption. But wattle's greatest contribution to our sense of nation is perhaps yet to come. We have been slow to formally invoke the wattle and its spirit in our national life. It was not until 1988, for example, that the Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) was proclaimed our national floral emblem and it took until 1992 for National Wattle Day to be gazetted as a national day, celebrated on 1 September, in every state and territory of Australia. Although the wattle has inspired our choice of the national colours of green and gold, we are only now beginning to recognise what the wattle and National Wattle Day can do for us as unifying symbols.

A number of notable Australians of all political persuasions over the last decade are on record suggesting that National Wattle Day is a more suitable and inclusive day to celebrate nationhood. These include former Senator and Greens leader Bob Brown in his recent memoir, *Optimism*, Nyikina woman Tammy Solonec from Western Australia, ACT MLA Chris Bourke and Canberra's own treasure Dawn Waterhouse. These endorsements recognise the growing Australia Day disconnect and suggest that National Wattle Day has much to offer us and perhaps a way to solve it.

We were reminded again recently of wattle's unifying power and balm at moments of significance for Australians when it was used to create a large wreath at the first anniversary memorial for the victims of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 disaster. But Wattle is primarily a symbol of celebration – of our land and its people and the efforts of all Australians to build a sustainable and sharing society. Wattle is a meaningful symbol that on National Wattle Day unites all Australians across all parts of the country. It has witnessed our past. It can guide our future.

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