



Australia Day – our day needs a new date

Suzette Searle

The celebration of Australia Day on 26 January is not set in stone. Surely it is not beyond us to select a different date that represents how we all want to see ourselves?

There is everything right about having a unifying national day to celebrate and reflect upon all things Australian such as the land, our values and our lifestyles. If the date of Australia Day celebrations also needs historical significance, let it have positive and meaningful associations for all Australians. Unfortunately that is not what 26 January offers, especially for indigenous Australians.

For the First Peoples, the raising of the British flag on 26 January to establish a convict colony in New South Wales marked the beginning of an invasion that led to their decimation through murder, disease and famine¹. Indigenous Australians called this same day a Day of Mourning in 1938, Invasion Day in the bicentennial year of 1988 and since 1992, Survival Day. 'Aboriginal Australians have continued to feel excluded from what has long been a British pioneering settler celebration' stated historian Elizabeth Kwan in 2007.

More inclusive alternatives to 26 January include the first day of spring - 1 September. This was officially proclaimed National Wattle day in 1992 but wattle days in August and September have been celebrated at the state and territory level for more than a century. The national version offers both a symbolic and practical alternative says Tammy Solonec, lawyer and Nyikina woman from the Kimberley WA. 'First it is nationally celebrated on the first day of spring; it is a beautiful time across Australia, connected with concepts of new life and fresh beginnings. It also falls nicely in the national public holiday deficit between July and November and being in September it does not clash with any State or Territory wide celebrations. Apart from the timing being good, however, the really poignant aspect of wattle day is its underlying ethos and rich history'.

The movement for the celebration of a national Wattle Day began in 1889 in Adelaide within the patriotic Australian Natives' Association and was revived in 1909 in Sydney. 'With a view to stimulating Australian national sentiment, and connecting it with love of our beautiful flora, we suggest the desirableness of setting apart throughout the Commonwealth a day on which the Australian national flower – the Wattle Blossom – might be worn and its display encouraged. Wattles might also be sown and planted on this day. It is suggested that a date in September would be universally suitable' (Will J. Sowden Federal President of the Australian Wattle Day League 1913). The first wattle day was held on 1 September 1910 and took place in NSW, Victoria and South Australia.

A celebration of Australia Day on 1 September would recognise our connection to the beautiful and bountiful land that sustains us. As long-time wattle day campaigner, Dawn Waterhouse says, 'Together, we could share the love we have for this magnificent country and the joy and privilege of being part of it'.

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¹ Tammy Solonec 2014 'Alternatives to Australia Day on 26 January – Have you considered Wattle Day?'