



How we can fix the Australia Day mess

Australia Day on 26 January prompts anger and disharmony. The Government says it is a day that unifies the nation, but this clearly is not the case. Grassroots calls for change, mean the date is destined no longer to be a focus of unity. Research now shows that most Australians (57%) think it doesn't matter if the date is changed. We need desperately to think our way through the problem. And there is a way. But first some facts.

A celebration on 26 January began in 1818, on the initiative of Governor Macquarie, to mark the 30th anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney harbour. The day became known as Foundation Day. It was not until 1938, the 150th anniversary, that it took on a broader focus. But it was not until 1994 that all states and territories agreed to standardise the celebration as a public holiday on the 26th January, instead of it being held on the nearest Monday.

Aboriginal people object to the celebration of the events of 26 January and many cannot celebrate a day that is the anniversary of an invasion. That was the strong message in the major Aboriginal protest marches that accompanied the 1938 and 1988 celebrations. Today very many non-Aboriginal Australians are sensitive to that message - a clear indicator of the progress the Australian community is making in our shared journey of Reconciliation.

Australia Day is not set in stone, we have adapted it as we have thought appropriate. It seems that we need think about it again. But how do we go forward from here?

Another fact is that Australia has another officially gazetted day of national celebration: National Wattle Day, that was proclaimed in 1992 as a national day across all Australian states and territories. This followed the proclamation of Golden Wattle as Australia's national floral emblem in 1988.

The fact that we already have two days focussed on celebrating Australia, the land and its people, means that there is scope to grow and evolve our national celebrations. An initial step would be for the federal government to better promote National Wattle Day to raise awareness that our celebrations of national identity and achievement are not focussed solely around 26 January.

Increased awareness and focus on National Wattle Day would enable 1 September (the first day of spring) to be more widely known as a day of national celebration and constructively diffuse some of the anger and disharmony that occurs now with celebrations on 26 January. In this way National Wattle Day would not compete with Australia Day, but rather complete Australia Day.

As a further step, we could officially bracket the two days as designated dates for celebrating our great fortune in being citizens of this land. Given the growing unease around basing national celebrations on a day that will always be a source of pain and sadness for many in the community,

government could propose that the community think about how best to create celebrations on each of the two days.

Such a process could be undertaken over a period of say three to five years, during which the Australian community would be directly involved in the shaping of those celebrations. At the end of the designated period, government could settle on arrangements for celebrating each of the days in the manner that best reflects our aspirations as a people.

As it has always done, wattle can lead us to think our way through to an Australia Day for all of us to celebrate the magnificence of this land and the achievements of all its people.

Terry Fewtrell
President
Wattle Day Association Inc.

Media Call

Terry Fewtrell will be available on Australia Day (26 January 2018) for media interviews and enquiries on the lawns at the front of Parliament House Canberra at 10.30am.

His contact details are Mobile: 0412 823 275 or email:
president@wattleday.asn.au

Further details on the Wattle Day Association and its proposed approach to Australia Day are on the Association's website:

www.wattleday.asn.au and on Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/WattleDay>