

CHANGE THE DATE: SO ALL AUSTRALIANS CAN CELEBRATE

OVERVIEW

Every year, on January 26, Australians celebrate our national day with a public holiday. That date marks the arrival of Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet in 1788, at what became known as Sydney Cove.

For Aboriginal people – First Nations Australians – it marks the beginning of two centuries of dispossession, theft, slaughter, disease and death.

No reasonable person could possibly expect Aboriginal people to celebrate that, anymore than people would expect Australians to 'celebrate' Anzac Day (we commemorate it – it's a national day of remembrance and mourning).

If we're to begin healing as a nation, then our past has to be properly acknowledged. Part of that means moving the date of our national day.

BACKGROUND

Captain Cook didn't 'discover' Australia. Prior to the arrival of the British, about two million Aboriginal people already lived here, and had been for at least 60,000 years. It's often forgotten that Aboriginal culture is the oldest surviving continual culture on earth, which is definitely something worth celebrating.

Aboriginal people lived as part of more than 200 nations – in a sense, Australia was once a lot like Europe - many different nations coexisting together.

In 1788, Captain Arthur Phillip arrived with the First Fleet, planted the Union Jack, and claimed the continent for the British monarchy.

Australians are slowly coming to know the true happenings of this part of the nation's history. We've only recently acknowledged the forced removal of Aboriginal children by successive governments – the Stolen Generation – with Kevin Rudd's National Apology in 2008. This was a great moment of healing for our nation. But there are many things about our past we still don't truly recognize. On Anzac Day, we still don't acknowledge the Frontier Wars – the only war fought on this soil. Yet we do acknowledge Australia's involvement in wars fought in other countries.

We still don't widely acknowledge the massacres of Aboriginal people that took place as part of the process of colonisation. We don't widely acknowledge that Aboriginal people worked as slaves, and had their wages and savings stolen by successive governments (although in Queensland and NSW, schemes have recently been established to pay back the still living victims of these policies). Most Australians still don't know that Aboriginal people in Queensland were not paid equal wages until 1986, two years before the 200-year anniversary.

But even if we don't know our history all that well, most Australians now understand that Aboriginal people have little to celebrate on January 26.

What most Australians don't know is that there have been moves afoot to change the national day for many, many years. The simple fact is, Aboriginal people have been protesting January 26 a lot longer than we have actually been celebrating it.

The Australian Aborigines League first protested against Australia Day in 1934. By contrast, as a nation it wasn't until 1994 – 60 years later - that all states and territories began observing January 26 as a national holiday.¹

In 1938, the 150-year anniversary, the government paid for a major celebration in Sydney, and a re-enactment of the arrival of the First Fleet. Aboriginal people in Sydney refused to participate, so the government brought in mob from Menindee near Broken Hill. At the same time, Aboriginal people gathered from around the nation to stage a conference and a major protest march.² The event was called 'The Day of Mourning'.³ It's since become known as Survival Day, or Invasion Day.

One of the most recent efforts to change the date came less than a decade ago. In 2007, as part of its National Platform, the Labor Party went into the federal election promising to 'change the date' to a more appropriate day. Once elected, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd unfortunately announced the promise would not be honoured.

There's been very little debate about the issue since, until 2016. Google, an American company, released a 'Google Doodle' on January 26 (the artwork on its home page) that acknowledged the theft of Aboriginal children. The news coverage associated with this was extensive, and it marked the first time in Australia's history that a major debate about changing the date was actually held on Australia Day.

There is sufficient momentum and good will to change the date in the not-too-distant future. And it will, one day, be changed – that is inevitable. The question is, how long as a nation are we prepared to wait? When do we want to seriously begin the healing process by changing a date that still divides a nation?

Arguments against the change the date

There are no real valid or considerate arguments against changing the date. But attempted arguments include:

1. It happened a long time ago in the past. Aboriginal people need to get over it.
2. Australians have been celebrating Australia Day for hundreds of years.
3. We'll lose a national holiday.

Specific rebuttals to these arguments

1. Aboriginal people need to get over it Aboriginal people are often told to 'get over it'. It was 'in the past'. 'It's time to move on'. 'Today's generation of Australians wouldn't do the same'. The simple reality is, Aboriginal people will never 'move on'. And neither would you.

Ask yourself a couple of simple questions: If Australia was invaded today, and your family was dispossessed, when would you 'move on'? In 10 years? 20 years? 200 years? Would you ever stop fighting for your country? And would you raise your children to fight? Or would you tell them it's time to 'move on'?

Aboriginal people will never forget what occurred on January 26. Their simple request is that you don't either, and that the day not be used to mark a national holiday.

2. We've been celebrating for hundreds of years.

No, we haven't. It wasn't until 1935⁴ that all Australian states and territories adopted the name 'Australia Day' to describe January 26. That was one year after the Australian Aborigines League began publicly protesting the day. And it wasn't until 1994 that all Australian states actually marked the day as a public holiday. That's just 22 years ago. By contrast, Aboriginal people have been continuously occupying Australia – and NOT marking January 26, for at least 60,000 years. And they've been protesting against it for more than 80 years.

1 <http://www.nfsa.gov.au/digitallearning/mabo/info/theAustAbLeague.htm>

2 <http://aiatsis.gov.au/collections/collections-online/digitised-collections/day-mourning-and-protest-aborigines-conference-75th-anniversary/26th-january-1938>

3 http://indigenoustrights.net.au/organisations/pagination/australian_aborigines_league

4 <http://www.australiaday.org.au/australia-day/history/>

3. We'll lose a national holiday

This, of course, does not have to be the case. Most Aboriginal people want a national day we can collectively celebrate. A strong view in the Aboriginal community is that the date should be moved to January 27, the day after the current national holiday. This permits Aboriginal people to mourn their loss, but also to celebrate the progress our country has made in unifying all Australians. Changing the date of Australia Day requires a simple act of parliaments across the country, something that is no more difficult than the official 'sorry' acknowledgements that have occurred in all Australian Parliaments.

It's about political will, and in a strong democracy, that will must begin with the people.