



Australian Days

Terry Fewtrell

Spending warm January days by the beach with family and friends is a very Australian thing to do. I have had just that experience in recent weeks, made all the more significant by one friend being a very long term companion - not just of mine but of all Australia.

You see for some of the summer break I could lie on a secluded NSW south coast beach in the shade of a flowering wattle, our national floral emblem. It was a quintessentially south coast spot. A small, craggy, mysterious cove, where the forest runs into the sea, marked only by a thin verge of white grainy sand. The wattle (*Acacia implexa*) sometimes known as screw-pod wattle, was in full bloom. It was my golden companion. A witness to a distinctively Australian scene, that prompts you to reflect how fortunate we are to be the custodians of such a beautiful land, with its freedoms and wide horizons.

As the weeks of January roll on we begin to confront the looming end to summer holidays, for which Australia Day on 26 January stands as a marker point. Oh yes Australia Day, the puzzling conundrum for modern Australia. The day we want to celebrate but increasingly feel that somehow it is just not right. A national day that for many prompts an ache in our hearts, telling us that we can and should do better. It reminds us that for those Australians who were the original custodians of this land, 26 January will always be a day that began a damaging process of dispossession and a hurtful lie.

Talk of recognition of Aboriginal people in the nation's constitution is all very good, but progress seems snagged by political complexities and compromises. Given our record in passing referenda it seems it will take much longer than good sense and moral judgement may recommend. But there is something that we, the people, can do to help the country through this recurring trial. The wattle can lead us to a solution that satisfies our yearning to do better and find a day of national celebration that unites us all.

Wattle has evolved in Australia for more than 30 million years. It has been the great witness to the whole Australian story - our companion even when we didn't realise it. It is our national symbol without par. Wattle has welcomed us all, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, colonials, post war newcomers and more recent migrants from all lands. It is the source of our green and gold national colours, drawn from the palette of the leaves and blossoms of our national floral emblem (*Acacia pycnantha*), the golden wattle. Wattle is a unifying symbol and has no baggage in our national conversation.

National Wattle Day (1 September) has been an officially gazetted day since 1992, so why don't we think of both 26 January and 1 September as joint days on which we celebrate our great fortune to live peacefully in this land. Organised celebrations around the country on

Wattle Day emerged in 1910 as a way that Australians expressed their loyalty to this land and their pride in calling it 'home'. These sentiments are no less relevant today.

Wattle's great journey across our land teaches us the importance of resilience and adaptation. Over millennia it has survived and flourished by adapting to its conditions. More than ever the message of resilience and adaptation is relevant to us as a people and a modern 21st century nation. Our Prime Minister could invoke no better symbol to reinforce his message that we must welcome and adapt to change. The wattle has demonstrated that it is a great survivor, one that has adapted to changes in climate and geography. Throughout it has delivered us a great bounty with its golden blooms from more than 1000 varieties, flowering in all parts of the country and in bloom somewhere in Australia every day of the year - just like that south coast wattle.

The Australia Day Committee this year is urging us to celebrate Australia Day in the way that is meaningful to us. Perhaps they too sense we could do better and must find a way through our unfinished business as a people and a nation. The solution may not simply be to diffuse the focus of the 26 January celebrations. Rather a real solution could be to link the two days, Australia Day and National Wattle Day, so that each provides scope for its own form of national celebrations and perhaps some national reflection.

Currently National Wattle Day is celebrated widely across the country, but rather more quietly than is its January counterpart. It is rich in meaning but perhaps less endowed with celebratory fizz. Australia Day, on the other hand, seems increasingly at risk of being an empty celebration that craves an authenticity that National Wattle Day has, simply by virtue of the wattle symbol.

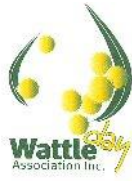
But more could be done to augment the September date, such as making it a focus for celebrating the land and the importance that we care for it and invoking the wonderfully appropriate symbolism of wattle, to welcome new settlers at Citizenship ceremonies around the country. Other possibilities could include making it the date to announce Order of Australia awards, rather than the June Queen's Birthday.

We should acknowledge and draw strength from the symbol we have had with us for 30 million years. The wattle has waited patiently to play its role in our national story. It unites all and offends no one. Let us celebrate Australia Day but let us also celebrate and rediscover the real power and symbolism that unites us all.

Wattle can be a guide to our future. Let us discover that we have another way of celebrating Australia, but one that completes rather than competes with Australia Day. Let us think of National Wattle Day as an Australia Day that takes the nation forward.

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