

# Alternatives to Australia Day on 26 January – Have you considered Wattle Day?

*By Tammy Solonec*

On 26 January 2009, Mick Dodson was named Australian of the Year. He used the opportunity to urge national debate on changing the date of Australia Day, saying that the use of January 26 alienates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The 26 January is the anniversary of when Captain Phillip first raised and saluted the British flag at Sydney Cove in 1788. This marked the commencement of the invasion by the British, and killing and deprivation of the First Peoples. The population at that time was estimated at about 750 000 people, with hundreds of language groups, clans and sophisticated societies. Within a century, as a result of murder, disease and famine, the population was reduced to just 40 000.

Because of this, and all the injustices that have happened since, it has always been insensitive and insulting to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that this day is celebrated as 'Australia Day'. It is the anniversary of colonisation, dispossession, suffering and loss. I agree with Mick Dodson that it is alienating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to celebrate the 'birth' of this nation on 26 January.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been protesting on 26 January since the 1800s. Most notably, as the Day of Mourning in 1938, the day the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was erected in 1972, the day 40 000 marched in protest in 1988, when it was dubbed 'Invasion Day', and the day in 1992 that marked the commencement of the Survival Concerts, and the naming of the day to 'Survival Day'. Since then, Survival Day concerts have spread across the country and are celebrated annually as the 'Survival Movement'.

Despite this sustained resistance, Australia continues to celebrate its nationhood on this day and there is little political appetite for changing it. Even Kevin Rudd, who as Prime Minister apologised to the Stolen Generations and signed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, was not open to the idea. When asked about Mick Dodson's statement in 2009 he said: "Let me say a simple, respectful, but straightforward no". Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull also would not enter into a conversation: "People have been arguing this for a long time. Mick Dodson is nowhere near the first that's made that case. I think Australia Day, and I'm sure most Australians agree, is very appropriate today," he said.

I disagree with Malcolm Turnbull's comments that "most Australians agree" that the date is appropriate today. As well as being persistently disrespectful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in recent years, the celebrations have also become alienating to newly arrived Australians and various minority groups. There is an uncomfortable feeling to the day, connected to its white supremacy past, evidenced by clothing and stickers with the phrases such as "like it or leave".

There is also an unpleasant association between the day and alcohol, with the earliest historical descriptions filled with drinking and merriment. In recent years a number of firework events have been marred by alcohol fuelled violence from mainly young Australians who go along in droves, with eskys full and the Australian flag proudly draped around them.

Another criticism of 26 January is that it celebrates the foundation of the Colony of New South Wales, thereby lacking national significance. The fact that it falls during the longest Australian school holidays has also been criticised, as it limits the ability of schools to engage children in the event.

As Australia grows into a multicultural country, with recognition of the First Peoples, it will no longer be appropriate to celebrate on a day that commemorates British rule, fuelled by alcohol. We do need to think seriously about an alternative date.

There are many factors to consider in choosing a day of national celebration. This includes the time of the year, whether it clashes with or complements existing public holidays, the historical significance of the day and most importantly, whether or not it can be seen as a day that represents the spirit of the nation and the unification of the people within it.

The timing of public holidays is very important to Australians and requires special consideration. In regards to the current rotation of 'national' public holidays in Australia, we have three close together in summer (Christmas, Boxing and New Years Days), closely followed by Australia Day, then three more close together in autumn with Good Friday, Easter Monday and ANZAC Day. The last national public holiday, the Queen's Birthday, is celebrated at the start of winter on the second Monday in June, except in Western Australia and Queensland.

However, there are also all the state and territory public holidays to consider. They are: WA Labour Day (5 March); ACT Canberra Day, SA Adelaide Cup, VIC Labour Day and TAS Eight Hours Day (12 March); NT May Day and QLD Labour Day (7 May); WA Foundation Day (4 June); QLD Queen's Birthday (11 June); NSW Bank Holiday and NT Picnic Day (6 August), NSW and SA Labour Day and WA Queen's Birthday (1 October), ACT Family and Community Day (8 October) and VIC Melbourne Cup Day (6 November).

When analysing these dates, it is evident that there are no public holidays in February, July or September, and no 'national' public holidays between July and November. It would therefore appear in terms of timing, that September is the most favourable month to consider.

Over the years, there have been a number of alternative dates for Australia Day suggested including 1 January (Federation), 25 April (ANZAC day), 9 May (Federal Parliament), 9 July (Constitution Day), 1 September (Wattle Day) and 3 December (Eureka Stockade).

There have also been calls for a national public holiday centred around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples including National Sorry Day (26 May), the anniversary of the 1967 Referendum (27 May), Mabo Day (3 June) and National Aboriginals Day, during NAIDOC Week (either the first Monday or Friday of July). Whilst all these dates are very important anniversaries, celebrating Australia Day on any of these days may not be seen as unifying for all Australians, and would be difficult to foster popular support. However, there is a deep need for a national day which celebrates Australia's First Peoples and honours our survival of Australia's horrific past, as an additional national public holiday. In my next column I will discuss these alternatives, and the support they have garnered over the years.

With regards to the other alternatives, Wattle Day on 1 September has the most potential. But first, I will surmise why the other days are not suitable.

New Year and ANZAC days are out because we already have public holidays on those days, connected with different traditions and celebrations. Many Australians would dread celebrating Australia day on New Year's Day, and we don't need another public holiday at that time of the year. ANZAC Day has a life of its own, and is not truly representative of all Australians. It also lacks political support. When raised in 2007 it was strongly opposed by both Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley.

The anniversary of Melbourne Parliament (1901) and Federal Parliament (1927) on 9 May and Constitution Day on 9 July are also not suitable choices. The timing is poor for both (being close to other public holidays and during winter), they have little tradition of being celebrated nationally and they lack public interest or significance.

The last contender, the Eureka Stockade, has been suggested as an alternative since the 1880s. Over the years however, the idea has failed to garner public support. Downsides include that it is closely associated with Victoria, that it is associated with radical political affiliations and because it's too close to Christmas and other public holidays.

That leaves us with Wattle Day, which seems to tick all boxes. First, it is nationally celebrated on the first day of spring, which 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 about a grassroots environmental movement, struggling for recognition.

Wattle Day's long and interesting history has been described in detail by Maria Hitchcock in her book 'Wattle', and is also available in summary on the Wattle Day Association's website. According to this history, the wattle was first used as an emblem in Tasmania in 1838. Near the end of the nineteenth century, it was embraced in Adelaide, where an association designed a flag and held the Wattle Blossom Social in 1890. Although this association dissolved, the wattle re-emerged in Melbourne, after it was mentioned in an article on national symbols in 1891. The article was in part responding to Canada's choice of the maple leaf as their national emblem. That discussion led to the idea that the wattle should become the Australian emblem.

The first suggestion of a Wattle Day was made in September 1908. This idea received support at a public meeting held to form a Wattle Day League in 1909. The meeting also agreed to encourage the coordination of all states. By around 1910, consensus was nationally reached that the wattle (rather than the waratah) should be the national emblem, since it grows throughout the nation. In that year, Wattle Day was celebrated in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide on 1 September 1910. Early Wattle Day activities included the planting of wattle trees in school grounds, school lessons on botany, street decorations of wattle blossom, and wearing sprigs of wattle, often sold for charity.

Wider acceptance of a national Wattle Day was achieved at an Australian Wattle Day League Conference in 1913. Branches were formed in a number of states, with the general aim of officially proclaiming wattle as the national floral emblem and extending Wattle Day celebrations throughout the nation. About this time, the wattle was officially incorporated into the Commonwealth coat-of-arms and the first wattle blossom stamp was issued.

Public support for Wattle Day peaked at the outbreak of World War I. The wattle took on a new significance as a symbol of home. It also became a means of fundraising for organisations including the Red Cross, and beautifully designed Wattle Day badges and sprigs were sold. Wattle Day continued to be celebrated during the 1920s and 1930s closely associated with schools and tree planting.

The World War II effort did not follow on in this tradition however, and following the war, it slowly died as a national celebration. It was not really resurrected again until April 1984, when the wattle's green (leaves) and gold (blossom) were chosen as the national colours for Australia. This was followed on Wattle Day 1988 (the bicentennial year), when the Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*), was officially declared the national emblem for Australia. And in 1992, it was finally agreed that the first day of spring (1st September) each year would be Wattle Day, in every state and territory.

The ethos and history behind Wattle Day has enormous potential for public support. The Wattle Day leaders included botanists, naturalists and environmental enthusiasts. The day is about revering the natural beauty of Australia including our flora, fauna, national parks, rivers, lakes and oceans and could well include our national natural treasures like Uluru. The Australian bush is something most people who were born or raised here have a connection to and visitors are fascinated with. Popular activities like fishing, surfing, camping and bush walking all complement Wattle Day and could be seen as representative of the 'spirit' of Australia.

The day is also sensitive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because it is about Australia's natural beauty pre and post British arrival. Changing the day to Wattle Day would also be an important symbolic gesture to the First Peoples, which would aid in reconciliation and unifying the nation.

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