

Australia Day – who do we think we are?

Senator Faulkner,
Cabinet Secretary and Special Minister of State
Opening Address, Australia Day National Conference
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First, let me acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Let me also acknowledge:

- Clarence Slockee and the women who performed the Welcome to Country;
- Shelley Reys, the Deputy Chair, of the National Australia Day Council;
- Warren Pearson, CEO of the National Australia Day Council;
- Bernard Salt and Dr Mark Kristmanson, two of the Conference key speakers; and
- The members of the states and territories Australia Day network here today.

Ladies and gentlemen, this first national Australia Day conference is an opportunity to reflect on just how much has changed since the first years of the 19th century when the residents of Sydney began to mark 'First Landing Day' with celebratory drinking.

Australia Day has gone through many incarnations.

It is a day, as the National Australia Day Council reminds us, to come together to celebrate what's great about Australia and being Australian.

But, ladies and gentlemen, what it means to be Australian is a question with many different answers.

We are a young nation in an ancient country.

We prize democracy and the 'fair go' but in our history we have excluded many.

We pride ourselves on our inclusiveness but for generations Australia's first inhabitants were shunted to the margins of our civil society.

We are a nation built and shaped by migration but one where for generations the 'white Australia' policy had bipartisan political and public support.

Many of those who made the greatest contributions to the establishment of European settlement arrived in Australia in chains, yet only in recent generations has the 'convict taint' ceased to be source of shame.

We are equally proud of our ANZACs and the place they play in our national ethos, and that the military has never suborned our civil and political life.

We are equally proud to be known as sceptical pragmatists and as optimists about the future.

We are knockabout larrikins who average some of the longest working hours in the world.

We believe we are hostile to high achievers yet we take pride in the outstanding Australians whose successes mean we punch above our weight in media, science, arts, diplomacy and many other fields.

In the face of these contradictions, how do we work out just what we celebrate on Australia Day? What does 'being Australian' mean?

For more than two hundred years, attempts to find a single definitive answer to that question have drawn lines between Australians. 'Emancipists' and 'exclusives'. 'Currency lads' and immigrants. The lonely drovers immortalised in Henry Lawson's prose and the women's suffrage activists who read his mother's – *Louisa Lawson's* – feminist journal *The Dawn*. True-blue ANZACs and ten-pound Poms.

Ladies and gentlemen, in today's Australia, I believe, we have learnt that there are many different kinds of Australians and many different ways of *being* Australian.

And since there *are* so many different ways of being Australian, so many different things to celebrate about Australia, and so many different ways to do so, then Australia Day can, paradoxically, only be a national celebration if it is also a local one. Your communities celebrate Australia Day in their own way. In doing so, they celebrate the values that strengthen our nation, and the diversity which enriches it.

The research report prepared for the National Australia Day Council *The Meaning and Impact of Australia Day* shows that there are many, many ways to celebrate Australia day – organised and casual, with family, with friends. Wave a flag or swim between the flags. Throw a snag or a tofu kebab on the barbie. Attend a citizenship ceremony, a survival day concert, a beach cricket match, the Darwin Ute run, the Coolum Kite Festival, or listen to the Triple J hottest 100!

To me, that says a great deal about what it means to be Australian. We live in a country where our national day is not a day of prescribed, centrally determined displays of patriotism.

Nor is a day of prescribed *types* of patriotism.

There are as many reasons to celebrate Australia day as there are ways to do so. Some of the ones highlighted in *The Meaning and Impact of Australia Day* are:

- To celebrate our freedom, our independence and our democracy;
- To reflect on the history, and focus on the future, of Australia;
- To celebrate people who have made a contribution to the country;
- To celebrate our willingness to help others, our acceptance of others, our diversity, and the contribution of migrants to our nation;
- To celebrate reconciliation or the relationship between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians and to reflect on the past treatment of indigenous Australians.

Many reasons, many ways – sometimes, many views.

Ladies and gentlemen, there has been controversy, historically, over the celebration of the 26th of January as our national day. For a long time, other colonies and then as they became, other States and Territories, saw the date as a very New South Wales-centric one, rather than a day with applicability to other European settlements around the country.

And the event the 26th of January marks – the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove – has always been one with more than one meaning.

As early as 1888, when Sir Henry Parkes, then Premier of New South Wales, was asked what centenary celebrations were being planned for Indigenous Australians, he responded “And remind them that we have robbed them?”

The sesquicentenary in 1938 saw the Aborigines' Progressive Association hold a meeting on the ‘day of mourning’ to mark the ‘150th Anniversary of the Whitemen’s seizure of our country’.

The tent embassy in front of parliament house was set up on the evening of Australia Day 1972. The bicentenary celebrations in 1988 also saw events to mark the different meaning of January 26, 1788 for Indigenous Australians. This saw the birth of new traditions, especially the Survival Day Concert.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have no doubt that Australia Day will mean something special, and slightly different, to each of you. Perhaps it is a day to celebrate resilience and survival of Australia’s oldest cultures. Perhaps it is the day you or someone you know became one of Australia’s newest citizens at a citizenship ceremony. For all of us, it is a day on which our personal reasons for taking pride in our country and our community unite us in celebration – celebrations like the ones you co-ordinate.

Everyone involved in the planning and running of Australia Day celebrations deserves a vote of thanks – those of you here today who work so hard to make those celebrations happen, the National Australia Day Council, the volunteers, public servants and committee members around the country who make it a great day for everyone.

The majority of respondents to *The Meaning and Impact of Australia Day* survey indicated that they believed Australia Day celebrations had an overwhelmingly positive effect on the community: a positive effect on national and community pride, unity, on promoting Australian values, national identity and multiculturalism.

It is clear that Australia Day celebrations have a tremendous positive effect. It is important to enhance those positive effects, and to be aware of and act to diminish the negatives which some respondents expressed concern about.

Forty-nine percent of respondents to the ‘The Meaning and Impact of Australia Day’ survey indicated at least some concern about inappropriate, rowdy and delinquent behaviour at Australia Day celebrations, and nearly a quarter expressed concern over their potential to encourage division.

Ladies and gentlemen, being proud of Australia, and proud to be Australian, is every Australian’s right.

Celebration of our nation and our country should *never* be used as an alibi for bigotry and discrimination.

It is not the place of any of us to tell other Australians the ‘right way’ to celebrate Australia.

It is certainly not the place of government to tell Australians what being Australian means. Hijacking national identity for electoral benefit *is*, unfortunately, something some politicians have tried over the years, with varying success. Who can forget Arthur Calwell's grand, if slightly bewildering, declaration that "We are Labor because we are Australian; and we are Australian because we are Labor". He was not the first, nor the last, politician to try it, or something like it.

But ladies and gentlemen, the role of the government is not to tell people what being Australian is and means.

It's about listening to people tell us what being Australian means to them, and providing the space for them to celebrate what they love, and are proud about, in our nation.

The space for *all* Australians to celebrate what they love, and are proud about, in our nation.

All those who have a leadership role in our society – whether government, the National Australia Day Council, those of you here today who work so hard to bring Australia Day celebrations to your communities – have a responsibility to make celebrating Australia an *inclusive* rather than *exclusive* experience, to make sure that all Australians are welcome in the national conversation.

That is a conversation, and a celebration, rarely expressed in the language of lofty abstractions or grandiloquent bombast.

Perhaps this relates to our innate scepticism and irreverence, perhaps to our long history of democratic egalitarianism, perhaps to a pragmatic mindset that deals less in abstract ideals than in concrete solutions. Our Constitution was drafted not by heroic revolutionaries declaring they preferred liberty to death but by pragmatic idealists, crafting a blueprint for a new nation, combining high hopes with low compromises about the size of railway gauges.

Or perhaps it relates to the mismatch between the down-to-earth Australian idiom and the high-flown rhetoric that seem to infest so many declarations of nationalist fervour. Australians are less likely to declare their country the 'sweet land of liberty' than to say it's "Pretty bloody good".

Ladies and gentlemen, the celebration of Australia Day has gone from strength to strength since the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988 and the shift to establishing the 26th of January as the Australia Day public holiday. And you can take credit for a great deal of that.

In order to continue to thrive, Australia Day and Australia Day celebrations need to evolve with the community – as our Australian community changes – to keep the relevance and the inclusive nature which have served us all so well.

This first Australia Day National Conference is a part of that processes. I know it will provide the opportunity for you to share the ideas and inspirations that you have used as event organisers to make Australia Day a fantastic experience for your communities, as well as to hear from a range of keynote speakers keen to share their experience with you.

I am delighted to open this Conference.