

Celebrating Australia: A History of Australia Day

By Dr Elizabeth Kwan



australia day

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The tradition of having Australia Day as a national holiday on 26 January is a recent one. Not until 1935 did all the Australian states and territories use that name to mark that date. Not until 1994 did they begin to celebrate Australia Day consistently as a public holiday on that date.¹

What drew Australians together in this way? Did Australia Day become a day for all Australians to enjoy?

BEGINNINGS

The tradition of noticing 26 January began early in the nineteenth century with Sydney almanacs referring to First Landing Day or Foundation Day. That was the day in 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip, commander of the First Fleet of eleven convict ships from Great Britain and the

first governor of New South Wales, arrived at Sydney Cove. The raising of the Union Jack there symbolised British occupation of the eastern half of the continent claimed by Captain James Cook on 22 August in 1770.²

Some immigrants who prospered in Sydney, especially those who had been convicts or the sons of convicts, began marking the colony's beginnings with an anniversary dinner – 'an emancipist festival' to celebrate their love of the land they lived in. Governor Lachlan Macquarie, the emancipists' friend, made the thirtieth anniversary of the day in 1818 a public holiday, thirty guns counting out the years of British civilization, a tradition Macquarie's successors continued.³

In 1826 at the centre of the anniversary dinner, 'Australia' a new word for the continent, entered the list of toasts. The term, recommended in his *Voyage to Terra Australis* in 1814 by Matthew Flinders, the skilful circumnavigator of the continent in 1801–03, and proposed by Macquarie to a reluctant British government in 1817, was taken up in Australia, especially by emancipists. The most famous of them, William Charles Wentworth with a fellow barrister had established the colony's first uncensored newspaper, the *Australian*, in 1824.⁴

So strongly did some emancipists feel about being Australian that the anniversary dinner in 1837 was for only the Australian-born (figure 1). Wentworth, invited to chair the dinner, declined, disapproving of this new development. Having become a wealthy landowner and squatter, he found that he had more in common with his former enemies, the exclusives, than his supporters who pressed for wider rather than narrower voting rights in discussions about political reform. That year the celebration widened with the first Sydney Regatta, the beginning of a new tradition—one which still

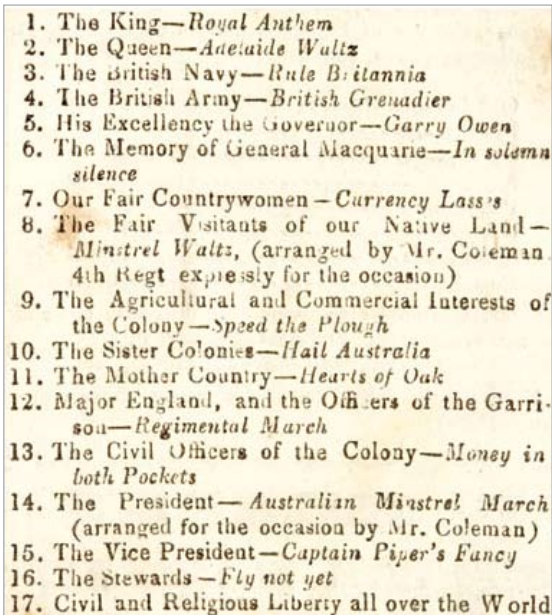
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1. The King—*Royal Anthem*
 2. The Queen—*Aeolide Waltz*
 3. The British Navy—*Rule Britannia*
 4. The British Army—*British Grenadier*
 5. His Excellency the Governor—*Garry Owen*
 6. The Memory of General Macquarie—*In solemn silence*
 7. Our Fair Countrywomen—*Currueny Lass's*
 8. The Fair Visitants of our Native Land—*Minstrel Waltz*, (arranged by Mr. Coleman 4th Regt expressly for the occasion)
 9. The Agricultural and Commercial Interests of the Colony—*Speed the Plough*
 10. The Sister Colonies—*Hail Australia*
 11. The Mother Country—*Hearts of Oak*
 12. Major England, and the Officers of the Garrison—*Regimental March*
 13. The Civil Officers of the Colony—*Money in both Pockets*
 14. The President—*Australian Minstrel March* (arranged for the occasion by Mr. Coleman)
 15. The Vice President—*Captain Piper's Fancy*
 16. The Stewards—*Fly not yet*
 17. Civil and Religious Liberty all over the World

Figure 1: List of toasts and accompanying airs, United Australians' Dinner, 26 January 1837, Sydney

Source: *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 28 January 1837, National Library of Australia

continues today. Five kinds of races, including one for whale boats, drew crowds to the shore of Sydney Harbour. 'It was', the official newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette* reported, 'a day entirely devoted to pleasure'.⁵

1838: THE JUBILEE

The Regatta became the greatest attraction of the anniversary. In 1838 the *Sydney Gazette* detailed 'numerous crowds of gaily attired people, attended by servants and porters... bearing the supplies for the day's refreshments... wending their way towards the water's edge'. People crowded the decks of three steamers, 'each decked out in their gayest colours' (figure 2). Four Australians had hired one of them, the *Australia*, to take their friends out on the harbour. The raising of its flag drew 'the most deafening and enthusiastic cheering'. It was the NSW ensign – a white British ensign with a blue cross bearing five white stars – which the *Australian* newspaper expected would become 'the emblem of an independent and a powerful empire' within fifty years (figure 3). Though not quite

in the way the paper imagined, the flag would become an important Australian symbol by the end of the nineteenth century.⁶

Among the many toasts at the anniversary dinner in 1838 was one to 'The Sister Colonies': Van Diemen's Land, Western Australia, and South Australia. The first, occupied in 1803 by officers, guards, convicts and free settlers from Sydney to pre-empt the French, became a separate colony in 1825. Three years later Britain claimed the western third of the continent, again to forestall the French, with settlers but not convicts arriving at the Swan River in Western Australia in 1829. The settlement of South Australia, again without convicts, followed in 1836.

These colonies celebrated their own beginnings, rather than that of New South Wales. Regatta Day in early December marked Abel Tasman's claiming of Van Diemen's Land for Holland in 1642, and the proclamation of its separation from New South Wales in 1825. Foundation Day, 1 June, in Western Australia commemorated the arrival of settlers in 1829, and Proclamation Day on 28 December the beginnings of British government in South Australia. Hobart was proud of its regatta, begun in 1838, considering it better than the one in Sydney. Certainly the winner of its whale boat race, awarded the Tasman Prize of thirty sovereigns that year, was almost three times better off than his Sydney counterpart.⁷

Van Diemen's Land had prospered with British capital and cheap convict labour. Although still primarily a gaol during the 1830s, the colony was attracting larger numbers of free settlers, who campaigned against the transportation of convicts. Not surprisingly, Regatta Day, established in 1838, commemorated not its convict beginnings but its discovery by Europeans and its emergence as a separate colony. For the two colonies of Western and South Australia, settled from Britain not Sydney, their choice of anniversary reflected pride in their free origins. This was despite Western Australia's early struggles, due in part to inadequate planning and the lack of labourers. South Australia benefited from that experience but by 1838 had barely begun.

Anniversary Day was essentially a Sydney celebration of prosperity after only fifty years. 'From a miserable neglected Colony of outcasts', observed the *Sydney*



Figure 2: Advertisement for viewing the Sydney Regatta, 1838
Source: *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 January 1838, National Library of Australia



Figure 3: NSW Ensign of 1832 bearing the stars from the Southern Cross
Source: Ralph Kelly, *Flags Australia*

Gazette, New South Wales had ‘sprung into a settlement already of some importance in the scale of nations’. The colony was now a significant producer of wool for Britain’s mills – a significant achievement. Both the *Gazette* and the *Australian*, in reflecting the attitudes of the time, drew a sharp contrast between the ‘untutored savage’ and ‘industrious and civilised man’. In fifty years, the ‘miserable gunya of the wandering Aborigine’ had given way to ‘the extensive and flourishing town’ (figure 4); his ‘tiny bark canoe’ to ‘a goodly fleet of Colonial traders beside numerous visitants from the various quarters of the world’.⁸

The British and their sheep had expanded at the expense of the Aborigines, who, in resisting the invaders, were becoming a minority in their own country. The fate of Aboriginal resistance leaders, such as Pemulwoy in the Sydney district at the turn of the nineteenth century and Yagan in the Swan River district in the early 1830s, foreshadowed the wider fate of their peoples. In Van Diemen’s Land the attempt to end the conflict with settlers in Van Diemen’s Land, by removing and ‘civilising’ Aborigines in exile on Flinders Island in Bass Strait, had failed by 1838. The government’s model village had become ‘a death camp’.⁹

Native-born children of the immigrants, both convict and free, though known as Australians or natives, retained their British sentiment. Those who had hailed



Figure 4: Advertisement for illuminating Sydney town on the evening of Anniversary Day, 1838

Source: *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 January 1838, National Library of Australia

‘The land, boys, we live in’ at their anniversary dinners, still considered themselves Britons. Their list of almost twenty toasts began with the monarch, the royal family, the British navy and army, ‘The Mother Country’, or ‘The Land of our Fathers’ and ended with ‘Civil and Religious Liberty all over the World’.¹⁰ What difference would a further fifty years make to the relative strengths of these sentiments and the celebration of Australia?

1888: THE CENTENARY

Representatives of the Australian sister colonies, now five in number, went to Sydney to celebrate with New South Wales in 1888. New Zealanders were also there. Victoria had separated from New South Wales in 1851, and Queensland in 1859. (In 1863 control of the Northern Territory passed from New South Wales to South Australia.) Only Western Australia was not self-governing by 1888, having a smaller population and developing more slowly, even after taking convicts between 1850 and 1868. Essentially transportation to New South Wales had ended in 1840. Van Diemen’s Land, with self-government by 1856, had gained a new name, Tasmania, having ended transportation a few years before.

Their attitudes towards celebrating 26 January were mixed. South Australia’s *Advertiser* took pains to point out that New South Wales, though ‘senior’, was not ‘the parent colony’ of all the others, which had their own ‘local memories and historic dates’. That day was not ‘in any sense’, it insisted, ‘the anniversary of a common birthday’ because ‘the idea of Australia’ was too closely linked to ‘the unpleasing circumstances of its early occupation’. The *Brisbane Courier* was more direct: Australia as ‘the cesspit of England’ had been infected with ‘the cancer of convictism’. Its editor acknowledged that Australia had ‘witnessed much that had best be forgotten, much that cannot be contemplated without shame, but also much of which the Anglo-Saxon race may well be signally proud’.¹¹

For Tasmania’s *Mercury* the central fact was ‘the centenary of the occupation of the country by the British people’. The editor expected all Australians to celebrate the centenary whether they were ‘natives or merely dwellers in an adopted land’. ‘Natives’ was the term now widely adopted to describe the native-born of European descent—their strongest advocate being the Australian Natives’ Association (ANA), founded in 1871

in Victoria to provide medical, sickness and funeral benefits. By the 1880s it had also become a powerful voice for the federation of the Australian colonies and the celebration of a national day.¹²

South Australians, despite their misgivings, were prepared to commemorate 26 January as ‘the first stage in Australian colonisation’. They acknowledged that while the day had ‘special interest for New South Wales’, all the colonies were joining in what was ‘really a national festival’. Australians were, after all, the *Mercury* explained, ‘in reality one family...one people’ because of the British background they shared. South Australia’s *Advertiser* agreed: the united celebrations in Sydney showed ‘the substantial oneness of what is rapidly becoming, if it has not already become, the nation of Australia’. Further west, the *West Australian* predicted that the day would come to ‘be regarded as the national holiday of Australia’. Later that year the West Australian government legislated to ‘commemorate the Foundation of Australia’ with a

public holiday. Not until 1910 did the South Australian government follow, by moving the surplus holiday on 22 January (the late King Edward’s accession) to 26 January as Australia’s ‘Foundation Day’.¹³

There had been much debate in Sydney about what kind of celebrations should mark the centenary. Sir Henry Parkes, Premier of New South Wales, planned something for everyone, or almost everyone. When questioned about what was being planned for the Aborigines, Parkes retorted, ‘And remind them that we have robbed them?’ At the centre of his plans was the unveiling of a statue of Queen Victoria, the British sovereign since 1837, the opening of Centennial Park, a park for the people, and a great banquet for leading citizens. And, of course, the Sydney Regatta. The celebrations were to last a week, making the visit worthwhile for governors, leading politicians, civil servants and others who had travelled far by train or ship. The Federal Council of Australasia, established by an intercolonial conference in 1885 to handle defence matters, was meeting in Hobart before Sydney’s celebratory week, though not all colonies had joined that body.¹⁴

Across Australia celebrations usually centred on sports (foot, cycle, yacht and horse races) and picnics, with extra trains and trams available, especially to the sea in the summer heat (figure 5). The Sydney and Hobart regattas continued their well-established traditions, the Hobart Regatta including skittle alleys and sideshows, games and food stalls for those on shore (figure 6). The ANA organised excursions and associated activities in Victoria, where it was strongest, but also in the other colonies, where branches had been established. In Brisbane, it hired a steamer to go down to the bay, with guests leaving the boat at Lytton for games and dancing. A novelty was a cricket match between ladies and gentlemen, the latter carrying broomsticks instead of bats. The ladies won. In Fremantle, the ANA branch held a conversazione. In Adelaide where the day was only partially observed as a public holiday, there was an inter-denominational thanksgiving service, cycling races and a Sheffield handicap foot race in the afternoon, with fireworks at night.¹⁵

South Australia’s *Advertiser* judged Sydney’s centenary celebration a success, feeling that it had ‘certainly drawn the colonies closer together’, putting them



Figure 5: The grand bicycle steeplechase, Albert Ground, Sydney, Anniversary Day 1870
Source: *Illustrated Sydney News*, February 1870, National Library of Australia



Figure 6: The flagship at Circular Quay, Sydney Regatta, Anniversary Day, 1866
Source: *Illustrated Sydney News*, February 1866, National Library of Australia

‘on somewhat better terms’. The colonies were more inclined to put aside their differences and seek to develop their mutual interests, especially after Parkes agreed to drop his legislation to re-name New South Wales as Australia. Some months later Victoria put on its international exhibition in Melbourne’s massive Exhibition Building, viewed by more than two million visitors during the nine months it was open. Victoria’s gold rush in the 1850s had fuelled the colony’s population growth and development, outstripping New South Wales and Sydney until the early 1890s (figures 7, 8, 9) ¹⁶.

By 1888 more than 60 per cent of the continent’s population was native-born, a contrast to some 20 per cent in 1838.¹⁷ The colonies beyond New South Wales acknowledged the significance of Anniversary Day in 1888 though this seemed to be due as much to their British background as to their feelings for the continent they shared. But would these colonies continue to celebrate the day beyond the centenary?

1901: FEDERATION

Celebrations surrounding the inauguration of the new Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January in Sydney and at the opening of its first Federal Parliament on 9 May in Melbourne overshadowed Anniversary Day in 1901. Federation had been a remarkable political achievement. Colonies had jostled to protect their interests: New South Wales rivalling Victoria; and the smaller states fearing the larger states’ combined political power. Led by the ANA in Victoria and the Australasian Federation League in New South Wales, the colonies chose to be self-governing within the British Empire, not independent outside it. They were Australian, but they were also British. As Parkes had reminded colonial representatives in Melbourne in 1890, ‘The crimson thread of kinship runs through us all’.¹⁸ They belonged together because they shared not only a continent but also a British background. As a



Figure 7: The Australian Natives’ Association’s harriers’ one mile foot race, Exhibition Building, Melbourne, Foundation Day 1897

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne



Figure 8: The Australian Natives’ Association’s wheel race, Exhibition Building, Melbourne, Foundation Day 1897

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne



Figure 9: The Australian Natives’ Association’s fete, including musical and elocution competitions, Exhibition Building, Melbourne, Foundation Day 1899

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne

small white population of almost four million in a large continent far from Britain, Australians depended on the Royal Navy.

Schools joined in celebrating federation by raising the Union Jack, the flag of Britain and its Empire introduced into their schoolyards for the occasion, and the focus of subsequent school ceremonies. Conservative Australian and state governments in 1905 reinforced its role by instituting Empire Day, 24 May, the birthday of the late Queen Victoria, to reassure those who feared that federation would weaken the ties of subsequent generations of Australians to Britain. But the day also served to boost their campaign against an emerging Labor Party. In Sydney Irish Catholic Church leaders reacted in 1911 by re-naming Empire Day, Australia Day, since 24 May was also the feast day of Our Lady Help of Christians, Patroness of Australia. The move prompted an indignant response from militant Protestants at a time of intense sectarianism.¹⁹

The national symbols, flags and coat of arms, representing the Commonwealth were strongly British. The two shipping ensigns (blue for government ships, red for merchant ships in the British imperial tradition) honoured the national flag, the Union Jack, with the Southern Cross in the fly and the Commonwealth Star beneath the Jack representing the states and territories (figure 10). The Australasian Federation League had thought that the flag of their campaign during the 1890s, the old New South Wales Ensign which had drawn such cheering in the Sydney Regatta in 1838, would become the flag of the Commonwealth (figure 11). But it did not fit the pattern required by the British Admiralty. The first Commonwealth coat of arms in 1908 also used the Commonwealth Star (as a crest) but the dominant feature was the red St George Cross, symbol of the English. Searching for a more Australian symbol, the government in 1912 replaced the St George Cross with the badges of the federating states.

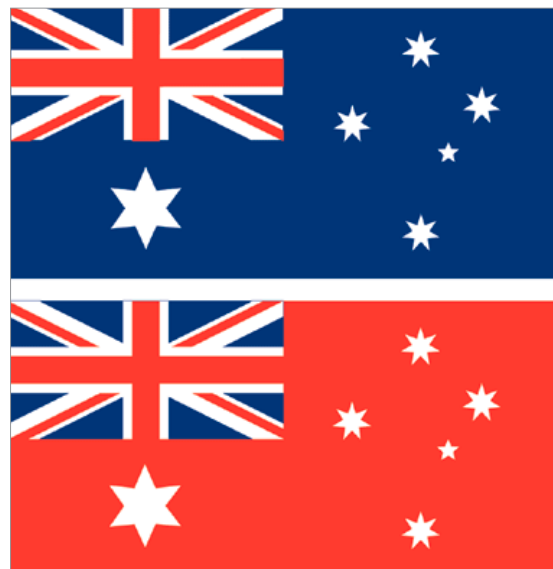


Figure 10: The two Australian shipping ensigns, modified and approved by the British Admiralty, were gazetted in 1903

Source: Ralph Kelly, Flags Australia



Figure 11: The Australasian Federation League used this Australian flag badge to promote federation in the referendum of 1898.

Source: MS 47, National Library of Australia

With the creation of the Royal Australian Navy in 1911, the blue ensign flew at the jackstaff at the bow of its warships but, at Britain's insistence, the British white ensign – the flag of Britain's Royal Navy – at the more important stern.²⁰

Against this background, how was Anniversary Day faring as a national symbol? The introduction of the Britain-centred Empire Day and its impact in schools intensified ANA discussion about finding an appropriate national day for Australia. Its NSW branch, feeling that 26 January was the 'day which gave us a bad start', proposed replacing Anniversary Day with Foundation Day on 29 April, the day Captain Cook first landed on the east coast at Botany Bay in 1770. But the ANA's interstate conference preferred to retain 26 January.²¹

During World War I, 30 July 1915 became Australia Day: a way of raising funds for the war by drawing on Australians' pride in their soldiers' achievements at Gallipoli and on their growing confidence in being Australian (figures 12 and 13). Australian ensigns became more popular, though there was confusion about which one citizens were allowed to use: the blue (in British tradition the flag for government, not people) or the red? After the war the use of Australian ensigns continued to be controversial, unless they were accompanied by the national flag, the Union Jack. Australians' bitter division over conscription for overseas service during the war had made debate about their dual nationality and its symbols controversial.²²

Nevertheless, the ANA in Victoria persisted in its campaign to promote 26 January, which in that state was known as Foundation Day. Its Foundation Day lunch, a feature from the early twentieth century to the 1920s celebrating the anniversary of the Commonwealth and of 'Australian Colonisation',



Figure 12: A gum (eucalyptus) leaf as a memento of 30 July 1915, designated Australia Day to raise funds for Australian troops

Source: J. Paul Robinson



Figure 13: For the Australian Natives' Association active in London during the war 26 January was no longer Foundation Day but Australia Day by 1918.

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne

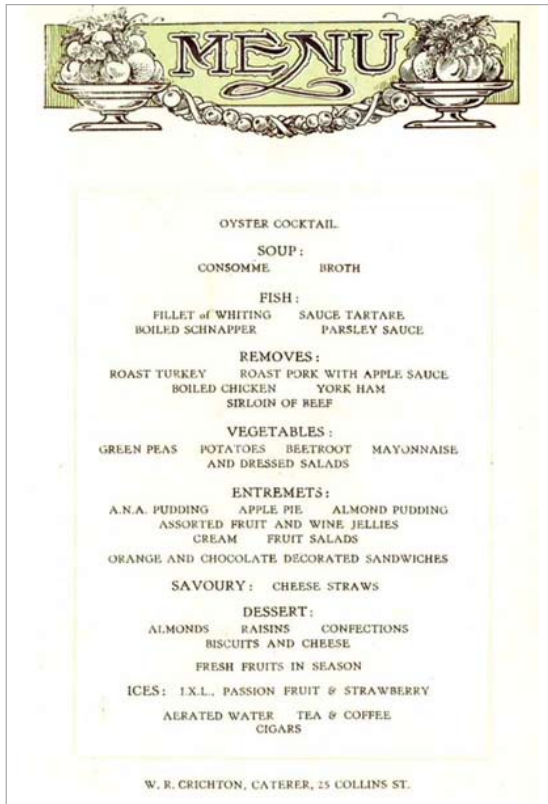


Figure 14a: Menu for the Australian Natives' Association's Foundation Day luncheon in Melbourne in 1924; note the ANA Pudding

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne

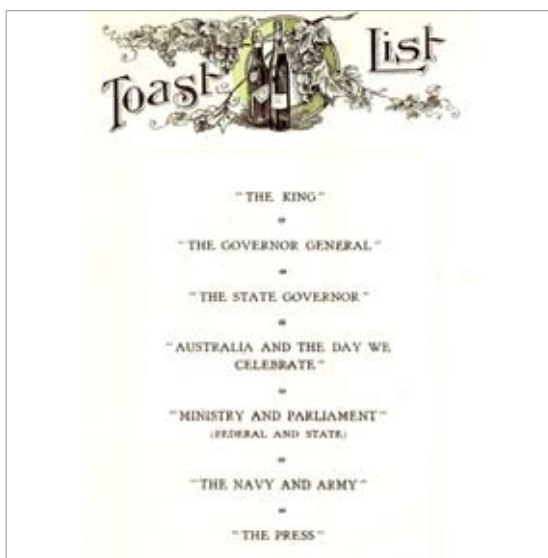


Figure 14b: The list of toasts at the Australian Natives' Association's Foundation Day luncheon in 1924 was much shorter than that of the United Australians' dinner in 1837 (see figure 1).

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne



Figure 15: By 1931, in contrast to 1924, the Australian Natives' Association in Melbourne was promoting 26 January as Australia Day, using the Australian red ensign, the most commonly used Australian flag on land.

Source: Australian Unity Limited Archives Melbourne

became a dinner in the late twenties, and then a 'smoke social' (figures 14a and b). The decision of the ANA annual conference in Victoria in March 1930 to name 26 January Australia Day was the beginning of its campaign to persuade Victorian and other Australian governments to observe that day as Australia Day 'with the prominent display of the Australian flag' (figure 15). But further, the ANA wanted Australia Day to be celebrated on the same day, that is, on the Monday following the 26th, unless the 26th was a Monday. Success followed in Victoria in 1931, while some states persisted with 'Foundation Day' and New South Wales retained 'Anniversary Day'. But in 1935 the ANA president in Victoria was pleased to report that, with the support of the prime minister and the other ANA state boards of directors, for the first time the name of the day and the timing of the celebration were uniform throughout the country.²³

1938: THE SESQUICENTENARY AND THE DAY OF MOURNING

By 1938 Australians, still 98 per cent British in background, had, after almost one hundred years, found agreement on the name, timing and nature of the day's celebration they had come to share. All six state premiers were in Sydney, again very much the focus of the Australia Day celebrations. But Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* warned against seeing those celebrations as 'merely of local interest': 'Sydney has the pageantry,

but the event it recalls and reconstructs is significant to all Australians. A nation was founded when Governor Phillip landed at Port Jackson. To that nation we all belong'. The heading for the editorial was 'A dream that came true'.²⁴ That nation now had its own capital, Canberra (in the Australian Capital Territory, cut out of New South Wales in 1908) and a provisional Parliament House. (The Northern Territory, controlled by the federal government from 1911, was to gain self-government in 1978.)

The NSW government, seeking to match Victoria's celebration of its centenary in 1934, had chosen as its centrepiece the re-enactment of Captain Phillips' arrival and flag-raising at Sydney Cove, followed by a pageant. The 120 motorised floats, stretching 1.5 miles, took one and a half hours to pass through the streets of Sydney. The pageant's theme, March to Nationhood, became the title of a film documenting the celebrations. The first float depicted traditional Aboriginal life,

followed by the pastoral and other industries. There was no mention of convicts, following a decision of the executive committee of the Celebrations Council, endorsed by the president of the Royal Australian Historical Society.²⁵

But the organisers saw Aborigines as essential to the day's proceedings. They brought twenty-six of them from Menindee, a settlement of Wiradjuri and Barkendjii people on the River Darling, and from Brewarrina east of Bourke (the Murawari people) to act out Aboriginal resistance to the British landing, and to pose on the first float in the pageant. There were also about one hundred other Aborigines in Sydney on that day who had come to present a different view of the celebrations (figure 16). Among their leaders pressing for Aboriginal rights were William Cooper, founder of the Australian Aborigines' League in Victoria in 1936, and Jack Patten, Bill Ferguson and Pearl Gibbs, who headed the Aborigines' Progressive Association, formed New South Wales in 1937. For them and those they represented, Australia Day was a 'day of mourning'.²⁶

The meeting of Aborigines at the Australian Hall on 'the 150th Anniversary of the Whitemen's seizure of our country' passed unanimously a resolution protesting at the whitemen's mistreatment of Aborigines since 1788 and appealing for new laws ensuring equality for Aborigines within the Australian community (figure 17). Also endorsed was a list of ten points, suggesting ways of achieving full citizen status, for a deputation to take to a meeting with the prime minister on 31 January. Living conditions for Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia had worsened as the economy deteriorated from the 1920s. Controlled by largely unsympathetic 'protectors', dependent on white charity, and without the right to vote, Aborigines struggled to

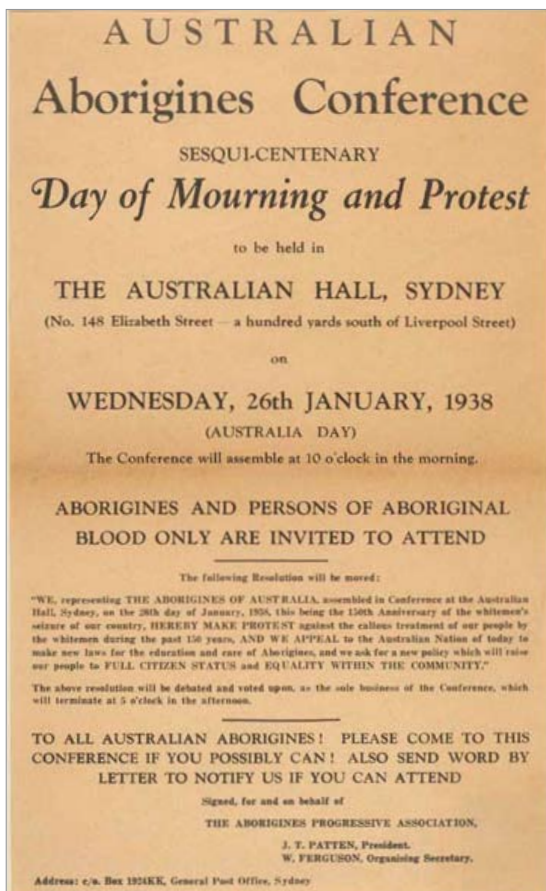


Figure 16: The flyer, with resolution, advertising Australian Aborigines' Conference and Sesquicentenary Day of Mourning and Protest, 26 January 1938

Source: Broadside 405, National Library of Australia



Figure 17: Aborigines outside the Australian Hall, Sydney, Australia Day, 1938

Source: *Man* (Syd.), March 1938, National Library of Australia

improve their situation. They were out of sight of most Australians, who, living in the capital cities, knew or understood little of their plight.²⁷

There were some, like the reporter in Hobart's *Mercury* in 1935, who acknowledged 'the white invasion' as well as the '147 years of civilisation'. But most Australians assumed that Aborigines were 'a dying race', a phrase used in the foreword to the book commemorating the Sesquicentenary, *Australians 1788-1938*. Yet statistics showed that was not so. On the evening of Australia Day 1938 state presidents of the ANA broadcast their messages on the national network of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. The organisation which had shepherded Australian natives towards a national day by 1935 could delight in their achievement.²⁸ But how could they include the Aboriginal natives of the country? What place would there be for them at the Bicentenary in 1988?

1988: THE BICENTENARY

On Australia Day 1988 Sydney Harbour, that 'chief amphitheatre of Australian life', was again the centre of attention. This time the extraordinary spectacle attracting some two million people to its shores was the arrival of Tall Ships from around the world and the First Fleet re-enactment. By contrast, the tent city of the Bicentennial Exhibition travelled the country visiting thirty-four cities and towns to involve Australians in the celebration. That year's journey and the Exhibition's scope showed how far planners of the 1988 event had come from those organising the March to Nationhood pageant in Sydney in 1938 and the three months' celebrations there. The federal government, by taking responsibility for the Bicentenary with the setting up of the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) in 1980, signalled a different approach to the NSW government's two-year preparations for the Sesquicentenary.²⁹

Even before this event, the federal government had become involved in promoting Australia Day, by taking up the mantle worn by the ANA since the 1880s, especially in Victoria. In 1946 the ANA in Melbourne had begun the transition by prompting the formation of an Australia Day Committee (later known as Australia Day Council), drawn from representatives of many

community organisations. Its purpose was to educate the public about the significance of Australia Day. In 1960 it introduced the Australian of the Year award. Similar groups formed in the other states took turns with the Victorian group in acting as the Federal Australia Day Council (FADC). In 1980 the federal government's newly-created National Australia Day Committee, based in the national capital, Canberra, took over that role with the FADC's agreement.³⁰

The new Committee, set up to help interested groups make future celebrations 'truly national and Australia-wide', adopted a fresh approach to Australia Day. Its forum for state representatives in 1980 agreed that 26 January 1788 'should be seen as a day of contact, not of conquest...the day which began the fusion of Australians'. The theme, 'ONE LAND, ONE PEOPLE', would best reflect 'the spirit of Australia Day'. The Committee and the federal government were struggling with what respected Committee member, Sir Asher Joel, termed 'the crisis of identity...of establishing an Australian identity which will unite each and every one of us, surmounting all the borders, imaginary or real, of race, creed or class status'. Another member, Graham Allan, chairman of the National Youth Advisory Group, argued that the challenge was convincing the young that Australia Day had meaning, especially when 'we are not precisely sure, ourselves what meaning ought to be attributed to it'.³¹

At the 1981 forum with the theme, 'ONE NATION – ONE FUTURE', speakers looked for ways Australians could find unity in diversity. The composition of Australia's population had changed dramatically since the end of World War II with fewer British people wanting to migrate and increasing numbers of immigrants coming from Europe and later other parts of the world. For a country which had taken pride in being British and white, the change was remarkable. Between 1970 and 1990 the percentage of immigrants in Australia born in the British Isles dropped from 47.3 to 19.4. At the same time Aborigines were pressing ahead in their campaign for citizens' rights, encouraged by the passing of the referendum in 1967 which gave the federal government power to legislate on Aboriginal matters. Radical Aborigines, angered by the federal government's rejection of their land rights, set up a tent embassy in front of Parliament House on the evening of Australia

Day 1972 to protest against being treated as outcasts in their own country. The Aboriginal flag designed by Harold Thomas the previous year became a powerful symbol, not just for the embassy but other Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal people generally.³²

National symbols were preoccupying the Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. He acknowledged at the 1981 forum that 'we cannot expect new symbols of our national awareness to take a grip overnight'. His government was wrestling with the transition in national anthems from Britain's, *God Save the Queen*, to *Australia's Advance Australia Fair* (as a national tune, not an anthem), a transition not completed until Bob Hawke's Labor government had it proclaimed as the national anthem in 1984. Even then *God Save the Queen* was retained as the Royal Anthem for particular occasions. Many Australians (32 per cent) also wanted a new flag, 26 per cent of them, one without the Union Jack. Ausflag, established in 1981, led the search for such a flag. The Australian National Flag Association, set up by the RSL in 1983, opposed that search.³³

RL Harry, former ambassador to the UN, had acknowledged at the 1981 forum that some delegates thought that 'gratitude for, and loyalty to, British origins and institutions' should be part of Australia Day celebrations. But the challenge he posed was to find a 'balance between national unity and cultural diversity' which would allow Aborigines to turn Australia Day from a day of mourning into one of rejoicing. Promoting love of country through Australia Day was to pave the way for Australians' involvement in the bicentennial year, with the Committee, and its state or territory—and where appropriate regional—counterparts working alongside the ABA structure. The work continued after the Committee became a Commonwealth funded Council in 1984 with state, territory and Commonwealth nominees. The Council moved its base to Sydney (where the ABA was established) and encouraged links with the corporate sector through project sponsorship.

For the Authority, finding a theme acceptable to the federal government for 1988 proved difficult: 'Living Together', which acknowledged the diversity of Australian society, became, at the insistence of the Fraser Coalition government, 'the Australian achievement'. The change to the Hawke Labor

government in 1983, allowed the ABA to return to its original theme. With criticism of this theme from conservatives, changes in the Authority's leadership, and the adoption of the theme 'Celebration of a Nation' for the hard sell by advertising agencies, the Authority seemed to lose interest in encouraging Australians to reflect on their history. It presided instead over 'the greatest one-day spectacle Australia has ever seen — a specifically Sydney spectacle'. The Bicentennial Exhibition, which had the potential to prompt critical reflection, seems to have puzzled rather than stimulated its viewers.³⁴ But there were many other projects (figure 18), including ones intended to last well beyond 1988, such as the new Parliament House in Canberra. Another was *Australians: a Historical Library*, a ten-volume set, the result of a remarkable collaboration of historians, economists, archaeologists, geographers and others over ten years.³⁵

Aborigines declared their opposition to the celebrations of 26 January 1988 with land rights flags at Lady Macquarie's Point on Sydney Harbour, the Bondi Pavilion protest concert, and the gathering of Aboriginal marchers and white supporters at Belmore Park. Posters summarised their protest: 'WHITE AUSTRALIA HAS A BLACK HISTORY—DON'T CELEBRATE 1988'; 'AUSTRALIA DAY = INVASION DAY 1988'. Some of the rights sought by Aboriginal protesters in 1938 had been achieved, but there was still great inequality between Aborigines and other Australians. Building on the protest of 1938, the events on 26 January in 1988 developed new



Figure 18: View of the crowd at new Parliament House, Canberra for the Canberra leg of the Caltex Bicentennial Bike Ride, ca 1988 – a contrast to the Australian Natives' Association's wheel race in 1897

Source: nla.pic-an24526897, National Library of Australia

traditions, especially the Survival Day Concert, which from 1992 took place each year at La Perouse, later moving to Waverley Oval near Bondi. By that time the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody had revealed just how devastating the effect of white colonisation on Aboriginal people had been. Responding to the findings, the federal government established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (Australia) in an attempt to bring Australians together in addressing the problems of the past and finding a way forward for the future.³⁶

AUSTRALIA DAY, 26 JANUARY: A DAY FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS?

The Bicentenary gave the National Australia Day Council (NADC) a great boost, with bicentennial community committees across the country converting to Australia Day committees where they did not already exist. In 1990 the Council became an incorporated public company. Its board, appointed from the community by the federal government, was expected to adopt ‘a more entrepreneurial approach’. The government hoped that the corporate sector’s financial contribution to Australia Day would eventually match its own.³⁷

Cooperation between the NADC and the states and territories in planning and implementing Australia Day programs proved to be a constant challenge. The



Figure 19: Mandawuy Yunupingu, Australian of the Year, and Kieren Perkins, Young Australian of the Year, Sydney, 1992

Source: National Australia Day Council

Council, after consultation with its forum, provided the national focus; the state and territory councils were the ‘arms and legs’ implementing it. But criticism that the Bicentenary had been a NSW rather than national celebration, led some to say that the Australian of the Year Award presentations should not always be in Sydney. Although an attempt in 1992 to move the ceremony to Melbourne failed, in 1994 the presentations began to alternate between Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Brisbane. The same year the states and territories made permanent their concession of 1988: a holiday on 26 January, in place of the long weekend. The NADC, after years of campaigning for the change, had reason to exclaim in its annual report: ‘One nation – one day – Australia’s Day!’³⁸

By 2000 the Council’s difficulties in retaining corporate sponsors led its national office to return to Canberra from Sydney—a significant symbolic shift. The shift was further strengthened after the federal election of November 2001 by the Council’s transfer from the Communications, Information Technology and the Arts portfolio to that of the Prime Minister and Cabinet—an initiative of the Council’s national director. Against this shifting background of sponsorship, marketing and merchandising, and increased government support, the Council widened the range of its national programs. The most important one continued to be the Australian of the Year Award, with its offshoot, the Young Australian of the Year Award in 1979 (figure 19). Added later were the Senior Australian of the Year Award (1999) and Australia’s Local Hero Award (2003). Significantly, in 2004 the Council fixed the announcement of these award winners—the focus of Australia Day—in Canberra, reaching out to all age groups through a nationally televised event in front of Parliament House on the eve of Australia Day.³⁹

Behind these changes the prime purpose of the national organisation remained substantially the same: from ‘developing national pride’ in 1980; to ‘Inspir[ing] national pride and spirit to enrich the life of the nation’ in 2005–06. However, the logo had changed dramatically during the same period, reflecting changing ways of imagining the nation and its birthday: from a map of Australia with predominantly Anglo-Saxon faces, to the merging of the map with the Australian national flag, to a hand reaching for a star (the Commonwealth Star?), to a map



Figure 20: Changing logos, changing messages: the National Australia Day Committee/Council logo from 1980 to the present

Source: National Australia Day Council; Elizabeth Kwan; National Archives of Australia: C4688, box 1



Figure 21: Camel pioneer escort, official flag raising ceremony, Australia Day 1986, Yulara, Northern Territory

Source: Australia Day Council Northern Territory

of coloured ribbons and figures, symbolising people of different races and backgrounds celebrating joyously together (figure 20). Market research surveys charted Australians' growing awareness of Australia Day (from 75.2 per cent in 1980 to 99.6 per cent in 2007), but also their limited understanding of its significance. Those who attended an organised Australia Day event were better informed, the majority of those events including local citizenship ceremonies and flag raisings.⁴⁰

Citizenship ceremonies had become increasingly public affairs since the symbolic creation of Australian citizenship in legislation in 1948, though Australians remained British subjects until 1984. With the transfer of ceremonies from the courts to local government in the early 1950s, they became central to Australia Day as local community events. The NADC encouraged citizens attending these ceremonies to welcome new



Figure 22: The National Australia Day Council's motto, introduced in 1986 in preparation for the Bicentenary, centred on the national flag

Source: National Australia Day Council, National Archives of Australia: C4688, box 1

citizens making their pledge to Australia and its people by responding with an affirmation. A moving version of such a ceremony was held in Darwin in 2007, one of nine ceremonies held across the Northern Territory. The raising or display of the national flag (figure 21), symbolising the country and nation, often accompanied such ceremonies—a reminder of the raising of the Union Jack when Captain Cook claimed New South Wales for the British king in 1770 and Governor Phillip occupied it in 1788.⁴¹

In promoting Australia Day, the ANA in Victoria had encouraged the display of the Australian flag at citizenship ceremonies from the late 1940s, a practice taken up by one of its members, Arthur Calwell, then Labor Minister for Immigration. The Menzies Liberal-Country Party government subsequently insisted that the Union Jack also be used. From 1954, after the Flags Act in effect replaced the Union Jack with the Australian blue ensign as the national flag, Australians began to use it more confidently, especially by the 1970s. The National Australia Day Forum urged the Committee in its second year 'to promote wider flying of the Australian flag'. The flag became central to the NADC's promotion of Australia Day, especially with the use of the second logo (merging map and flag), the 'Show the Flag on Australia's Day' motto of 1986 and the TV commercials using it in the lead up to 1988 (figure 22).⁴²

As the nation's chief symbol, the flag remains important to the Council. This is despite the significant division within the Australian community over the flag's symbolism, in particular the Union Jack in the place of honour—a reminder of imperial requirements at the time the new Australian Commonwealth acquired

its two shipping ensigns approved by the British Admiralty. By 1998 52 per cent of Australians wanted a new flag. However, Australians have not yet resolved their differences over the place of the Union Jack on their flag and the ties to the British head of state it represents. For Aboriginal Australians in particular the Union Jack on the national flag reminded them of the British invasion of their country and their subsequent dispossession. Sol Bellear, a respected Aboriginal spokesman who had served on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (Australia), insisted that 'Aboriginal reconciliation can never be achieved unless there is a new Australian flag without the Union Jack'. That Council also rejected Australia Day on 26th January as a national day.⁴³

From 1993 the NADC formally recognised the need to encourage reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians in Australia Day celebrations. Later the Council worked with Reconciliation Australia, the private organisation which in 2001 succeeded the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan for implementation in 2007. This initiative suggested a healing role for the Council in bringing Australians together, despite the difficulties of the date's associations and the alienating symbolism of the flag. The Council has taken several steps, including the introduction of Australia Day Dawn, 'a moment of reflection before celebration', to make Australia Day celebrations more inclusive (figure 23). The first of these dawn gatherings was in 2005 at Uluru with the Mutujulu community.⁴⁴



Figure 23: 'Peace', the work by three Yuat artists, was the basis for a huge 100 metre by 100 metre image created at New Norcia, Western Australia for Australia Day 2007.

Source: National Australia Day Council

The Council's re-ordering of priorities in its mission statement in 2004 indicated a significant change in thinking since 2002. 'Unite all Australians through celebration...' was first, not third, having swapped places with the demoted 'Promoting Australian achievement...', which became 'Promote good citizenship...'. The second priority, 'Promote the meaning of Australia Day...', included 'activity' and 'reflection' as well as 'education', 'discussion and debate'. The NADC has worked closely with federal government departments on issues relating to citizenship and education, and commissioned a range of resources: for adults as well as students. These initiatives are important in helping Australians adapt to new social realities. For example, nearly 60 per cent of some 10 000 Australian citizens surveyed in 2003 about what was necessary to be 'truly Australian' thought that being born in Australia was 'fairly important'. Nearly 40 per cent thought that 'Australian ancestry' was 'fairly important'. Such attitudes exclude more than 40 per cent of Australians who were either not born in Australia, or, though native-born, had overseas-born parents.⁴⁵

AUSTRALIA DAY TODAY

To summarise, New South Wales—Sydney especially—has long celebrated 26 January to mark the beginning of British occupation of Australia. Victoria and the other Australian states and territories, persuaded by the Australian Natives' Association, came to accept Australia Day by 1935, celebrating it together with a long weekend. Since 1979, federal government promotion of an Australia Day that was less British and more Australian gave the day a higher profile in the hope of unifying Australia's increasingly diverse population. The long weekend gave way to the day itself in 1994, and ten years later Canberra displaced Sydney as the day's focal point.

However, Aboriginal Australians have continued to feel excluded from what has long been a British pioneering settler celebration, symbolised by the raising of the Union Jack and later the Australian flag which bears the British flag. Debate over the date and nature of Australia Day continues as the National Australia Day Council seeks to meet the challenge of making 26 January a day all Australians can accept and enjoy.

AUSTRALIA DAY TIMELINE

BEFORE

1770 Aboriginal peoples had been living for more than 40 000 years on the continent we now know as Australia. At least 1600 generations of these peoples had lived and died here.

Europeans from the thirteenth century became interested in details from Asia about this land to the south. From the sixteenth century European cartographers and navigators gave the continent various names, including Terra Australis (Southern Land) and New Holland.

1770 Captain James Cook raised the Union Jack on what is now called Possession Island on 22 August to claim the eastern half of the continent as New South Wales for Great Britain.

1788 Captain Arthur Phillip, commander of the First Fleet of eleven convict ships from Great Britain, and the first Governor of New South Wales, arrived at Sydney Cove on 26 January and raised the Union Jack to signal the beginning of the colony.

1804 Early almanacs and calendars and the *Sydney Gazette* began referring to 26 January as First Landing Day or Foundation Day.

In Sydney, celebratory drinking, and later anniversary dinners became customary, especially among emancipists.

1818 Governor Macquarie acknowledged the day officially as a public holiday on the thirtieth anniversary.

The previous year he accepted the recommendation of Captain Matthew Flinders, circumnavigator of the continent, that it be called Australia.

1838 Proclamation of an annual public holiday for 26 January marked the Jubilee of the British occupation of New South Wales.

This was the second year of the anniversary's celebratory Sydney Regatta.

1871 The Australian Natives' Association, formed as a friendly society to provide medical, sickness and funeral benefits to the native-born of European descent, became a keen advocate from the 1880s of federation of the Australian colonies within the British Empire, and of a national holiday on 26 January.

1888 Representatives from Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and New Zealand joined NSW leaders in Sydney to celebrate the Centenary. What had begun as a NSW anniversary was becoming an Australian one. The day was known as Anniversary or Foundation Day.

1901 The Australian colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia.

The Union Jack continued as the national flag, taking precedence over the Australian red and blue shipping ensigns gazetted in 1903.

Melbourne was the interim federal capital. The Australian Capital Territory was created out of New South Wales in 1908, the federal capital named Canberra in 1913, and the Parliament House opened there in 1927.

- 1930** The Australian Natives' Association in Victoria began a campaign to have 26 January celebrated throughout Australia as Australia Day on a Monday, making a long weekend.
- The Victorian government agreed with the proposal in 1931, the other states and territories following by 1935.
- 1938** While state premiers celebrated the Sesquicentenary together in Sydney, Aboriginal leaders met there for a Day of Mourning to protest at their mistreatment by white Australians and to seek full citizen rights.
- 1946** The Australian Natives' Association prompted the formation in Melbourne of an Australia Day Celebrations Committee (later known as the Australia Day Council) to educate the public about the significance of Australia Day.
- Similar bodies emerged in the other states, which in rotation, acted as the Federal Australia Day Council.
- 1948** The Nationality and Citizenship Act created a symbolic Australian citizenship. Australians remained British subjects.
- 1954** The Australian blue ensign was designated the Australian national flag and given precedence over the Union Jack.
- The Australian red ensign was retained as the commercial shipping ensign.
- 1960** The first Australian of the Year was appointed: Sir Macfarlane Burnet, a medical scientist. Other annual awards followed: Young Australian of the Year, 1979; Senior Australian of the Year, 1999, and Australia's Local Hero, 2003.
- 1979** The Commonwealth government established a National Australia Day Committee in Canberra to make future celebrations 'truly national and Australia-wide'. It took over the coordinating role of the Federal Australia Day Council. In 1984 it became the National Australia Day Council, based in Sydney, with a stronger emphasis on sponsorship. Incorporation as a public company followed in 1990.
- 1984** Australians ceased to be British subjects. *Advance Australia Fair* replaced *God Save the Queen* as the national anthem.
- 1988** Sydney continued to be the centre of Australia Day spectacle and ceremony. The states and territories agreed to celebrate Australia Day in 1988 on 26 January, rather than with a long weekend.
- Aborigines renamed Australia Day, 'Invasion Day'. The Bondi Pavilion protest concert foreshadowed the Survival Day Concerts from 1992.
- 1994** Celebrating Australia Day on 26 January became established.
- The Australian of the Year Award presentations began alternating between Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Brisbane.
- 2001** Centenary of federation.
- The National Australia Day Council's national office had returned to Canberra the previous year. In 2001 the Council transferred from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts to that of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- Australians' growing familiarity with the Australia Day holiday led the Council to focus on shaping their awareness of its significance and meaning.
- 2004** The presentation of Australia Day awards—the focus of Australia Day—became fixed in Canberra.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Elizabeth Kwan has written and lectured widely on Australians' transition in identity, from British to Australian, with particular attention to national flags: the Union Jack, and since 1954, the Australian national flag. Her book, *Flag and Nation: Australians and Their National Flags since 1901* (UNSW Press, 2006), explains Australians' changing relationship to those flags and the politics of patriotism which shaped it. Formerly a senior lecturer in History and Australian Studies at the University of South Australia and a senior researcher in the Department of the Senate, Parliament House, Canberra, she currently works as a historian in Darwin.

