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Australians all let us rejoice, but pick another day

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We need a greater range of national holidays to gain a more fluid concept of our nation, writes Marilyn Lake.

LIVING in a foreign country offers a fresh perspective on the meaning of national holidays. They can take you by surprise, and one often wonders what they signify. Some days are more self-explanatory than others. Last Monday was Martin Luther King Jnr Day; but next month Americans observe a holiday called President's Day. Can we imagine a Prime Minister's Day?

Like national monuments and museums, national holidays alert us to the ways in which nations construe their identities and inscribe their mythologies. Their observance shapes public memory, but they also generate debate about national heritage and history. In Australia, this has largely been restricted to Australia Day and Anzac Day, and even then, the once energetic protests about rape in war are now no longer. A greater range of national holidays and the inauguration of new ones would allow a more pluralistic and fluid conception of the nation as well as greater rest and relaxation for our citizens.

For some time there has been a debate about the appropriateness of January 26 the commemoration of British settlement as Australia Day, but rather than argue about which date would better serve this purpose, let's scrap the idea of privileging just one day as the National Day. Rather than cancel Australia Day because it commemorates colonial conquest, we should retain it but rename it, calling it by its proper name Convicts' Day to honour those who had no option but to lay our national foundations.

Australia is unusual in naming one day Australia Day. There is no France or United Kingdom or America Day. The United States observes a multitude of national holidays which honour specific events and people: Martin Luther King Jnr Day (January 21), President's Day (February 18), Memorial Day (May 27), Independence Day (July 4), Labour Day (September 2) Columbus Day (October 14), Veterans' Day (November 11) and Thanksgiving (November 28). When do they get any work done?

Native Americans also seek recognition via a national holiday, choosing Thanksgiving Day to make their point. As in Australia, this commemoration of colonial conquest has given rise to fierce historical debate. The hill overlooking Plymouth, "America's hometown", is crowded with historical contestation.

There is a statue of Massasoit, Great Sachem of Wampanoags, "Protector and Preserver of Pilgrims, 1621, erected by the Improved Order of Red Men as a Grateful Tribute, 1921", a chair, erected in memory of the "Pilgrim Fathers and Mothers whose Heroic Idealism Established the Basic Principles of the Government of the Land", but also a plaque announcing a National Day of Mourning, which reads: "Many Native Americans do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims and other European Settlers. To them, Thanksgiving is a reminder of the genocide of millions

of their people, the theft of their lands and the relentless assault on their culture. Participants in the national day of mourning honour native ancestors and the struggles of native peoples to survive today."

In recent years, the First People's Pavilion, established by the Federation of Old Plymouth Indian tribes, has organised petitions and a march to the local school, where the Wampanoag host their own feast of turkey, squash, beans and cranberries.

One of their main campaigns centres on House of Representatives Bill 190 for an American Indian Holiday, which they see as a step towards "Unity and Peace in National Celebration". Less conciliatory messages also issue from the First People's Pavilion. "Now You've Seen the New World", declared a sticker on the back of a van parked outside, "Go Home".

Clearly, Australia, too, should institute national holidays to honour the achievements of indigenous Australians (for example, Oodgeroo Noonuccal) and salute their victory in the struggle for recognition as Australian citizens, in 1967. And what of other Australians whose names might be thus enshrined? Was not Faith Bandler's conception of social justice as broad as that of Martin Luther King Jnr?

Although Thanksgiving gives rise to heated debate, its significance in the US national calendar is eclipsed by Independence Day, the celebration of the colonists' revolutionary break with Britain. Australia has yet to make that break. To me, commemorating January 26 as Australia Day and observing the Queen's Birthday speak of our continuing colonial condition, with all its attendant anxieties and insecurities.

Australia's Independence Day has yet to arrive. When, finally, we prepare to embrace out freedom and declare for a republic, we will have cause to proclaim a new national holiday. Hopefully, too, we can rejoice in a new identity as confident, generous and open to the world.

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