
Uproar as council cancels our national day

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The historic port of Fremantle, home of the dockworkers who -inspired an AFL team and scene of one of Australia's most titanic sporting battles, has decided it no longer wishes to celebrate our -national day.

In a 10-to-one vote, Fremantle city councillors voted in favour of ditching Australia Day fireworks out of sensitivity to Aborigines who may identify January 26 as "invasion day".

Critics have gone off like firecrackers. Visitors such as Tania Smith and her family say they would miss a great day out.

Prominent indigenous West Australian, Ben Wyatt, Labor's spokesman on indigenous affairs, is also skeptical. Amid speculation the council decision is about saving money, he said: "Cancelling popular events in the name of reconciliation does not advance the cause. If it's because of cost, then call it cost.

"The relationship between Aboriginal people and Australia Day is profound. Cancelling fireworks is a facile response and likely to cause more division".

Businesses say the event brought 50,000 people to the foreshore last January 26 to watch fireworks over the Indian Ocean.

They say the only other event to draw such big crowds to the water's edge was the America's Cup in the summer of 1986-87 when Dennis Conner's Stars and Stripes thrashed Australia's Kookaburra III four races to nil. Even the Fremantle Dockers wouldn't attract that many supporters on an average weekend.

The decision to drop Australia Day came at a full council meeting on Wednesday night. The council will dispense with a \$50,000 fireworks display that mayor Brad Pettitt says is its most expensive single event and began a decade ago as a modest "Freo Cracker Night".

The council also voted "to discuss with the Chamber of Commerce and Nyoongar Elders other options for marking Australia Day".

Fremantle Chamber of Commerce chief executive Olwyn Williams said there had been "zero consultation" before the council pulled the pin.

But it is the council's broad rejection of Australia's national day in favour of "a more culturally sensitive event" that has some scratching their heads.

Ms Smith, who lives in a nearby seaside town with Jai, 7, Whitney, 5, and two-year-old Jett, is mystified why celebrating Australia Day is disapproved of by Fremantle councillors. "For me it's about the extended family coming together and having a great day out," she said. "We're from Portugal but we still consider ourselves

Australian. I'd be sad to see the fireworks go." She said she recognised sensitivities around Australia Day. "Nobody wants to discredit what Aboriginal people have been through in celebrating the day. For me, the day is not about colonisation, it's about being Australian," she said.

The councillors' vote means the end of a joint contract with adjoining Cockburn council for the fireworks display. Instead, council staff will plan new events to "potentially align with significant times on the Aboriginal Nyoongar calendar" and family events such as a laser light show.

Mr Pettitt said he started thinking about a different kind of celebration on January 26 last year, when he sensed "a shift emerging in how we understood Australia Day".

"Australia Day is not a one-dimensional day of universal celebration of this free, prosperous and peaceful place in which we are so fortunate to live," Mr Pettitt wrote on his mayoral blog.

"It is far more complex than that. For many Aboriginal people it is a day of sadness, a day which marks when their dispossession began with British settlement almost 220 years ago." Nyoongar activist Corina Abraham, who addressed the councillors on the night, said it was "a day that signifies death and anger, when our lands were stolen". "I believe we need another day that brings us together in unity, where we all feel proud," Ms Abraham said. "What day that is could be an issue for the Prime Minister." Plans to restore the spirit of Australia Day to Fremantle are already afoot. Henry Liascos, the Greek-Australian proprietor of fish and chip restaurant Cicerellos, said it might be time for business traders to bring back the Fremantle Cracker Night at the boat harbour. As for his thoughts on cultural sensitivities, "I'll leave that to the politicians," he said. "Just imagine if they tried to shift America's Independence Day from the 4th of July."