
Australia Day ban no cause to celebrate

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Northern Territory News
28 August 2016

THE decision by the folks at the City of Fremantle to ban the celebration of Australia Day is a divisive and draconian step that is likely to set back the cause of reconciliation.

It looks like an undergraduate display of gesture politics that will invite ridicule. I say that as someone who holds little affection for Australia Day, and regards it as a pretty shallow event where we spend too much time worrying about what's on the barbie and whether there's enough beer and little time thinking about what it means to be an Australian, and what our history fully entails.

It should be a chance to celebrate and think. The two should not be mutually exclusive. Fireworks, barbies and beers should be part of it all, for sure. Nothing beats a public holiday with family and friends. The issue with Australia Day is that we do all of the celebrating and none of the thinking. We take our own citizenship for granted.

We have every right to celebrate the fact Australia is a genuinely lucky country with a largely peaceful history. But we should also be big enough to acknowledge that, for our indigenous mates, Australia Day is a jarring reminder of the nasty surprise they all got when they woke up on the morning of January 26, 1788.

That's not an argument for junking it, though. Nor for turning it into an annual shaming exercise. To my mind, terms like Invasion Day are overblown and counter-productive, succeeding only in putting a modern generation of Aussies off-side by making them feel ashamed for something that happened 200-plus years ago.

But, equally, white folks should be able to reflect on the fact that, unless someone can produce the written invitation Governor Arthur Phillip received from the Aborigines asking him to hoist the Union Jack over their land, the events of that day would be regarded by indigenous Australians as akin to an invasion. For all that, Fremantle Council's decision to replace its annual fireworks display with an orgy of self-loathing will succeed at just one thing: getting the average person immediately off-side.

It's a Stalinist act by this Greens-dominated council, where you simply cancel the party because you don't like the guests. And it is typical of the hyper-charged political environment in this country, where tedious ideologues on the extreme Left and extreme Right seem to spend more time shouting each other down over issues of race than experimenting with a productive and mutually respectful conversation.

There are other countries that do a much better job of dealing maturely with the realities of their past. One of the most impressive is Mexico, a country that witnessed the extraordinary violence of the Spanish conquests against several indigenous nations.

There is an amazing place in Mexico City called The Plaza of the Three Cultures, where a large public square has been built on the half-buried remains of an Aztec pyramid, next to a 17th century Spanish cathedral, and in front of a large modern faculty building from one of the city's universities, symbolising the emergence of a modern nation from its indigenous and colonial past.

The plaza is located in the suburb of Tlatelolco, where the leader of the Aztec resistance, a warrior by the name of Cuauhtemoc, finally succumbed to the Spanish conquistadors led by Hernan Cortes, and it carries a plaque bearing this brief inscription: "On August 13, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtemoc, Tlatelolco fell to Hernan Cortes. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat, but the painful birth of the mixed nation that is the Mexico of today." These are simple and sensible words. No blame is apportioned. Instead, the message is what's done is done. We should remember it, but we should also move on.

Instead of cancelling Australia Day, we should stop celebrating it as some banal exercise in how many chops you can eat and how many tinnies you can sink.

We should encourage everyone to head along to their local park or council chambers to watch the latest batch of Aussies being sworn in as citizens, and to hear a few words from a member of our indigenous community about how Australia Day is also a celebration of the survival of their culture. It doesn't sound that onerous, it doesn't sound like a guilt trip, it sounds kind of illuminating and uplifting, and we could get on the squirt afterwards and enjoy the fireworks.