

## If Australia Day is illegitimate, so are we



- *The Australian*
- 2 February 2017
- Greg Sheridan

Australia should celebrate Australia Day on January 26 because it is right to do so. It is the day modern institutions, in our case British institutions, entered Australian life. They have brought with them the entire institutional and indeed ethical framework of modern Australia. They brought the rule of law, individual human rights, independent courts, free media, multiple centres of power in government.

Plenty of bad things have happened in our history but overwhelmingly Australia has been a force for good.

The arguments against changing the date from January 26 that were used last week — that it would be hard to achieve consensus for change, there is no obvious alternative date, changing Australia Day would imperil the cause of constitutional recognition for Aborigines, it won't create any new jobs and won't solve Aboriginal disadvantage — are all second-order arguments at best.

They are process arguments. Conservatives sometimes win a specific point at a specific moment with process arguments, but unless they make the arguments in principle, they mostly lose in the long run.

If we concede Australia Day is illegitimate, we concede to the shocking and corrosive argument that modern Australia is illegitimate. To do so would be to offer another victory in the slow, destructive march of identity politics through Western societies.

Some Aboriginal figures argue that Australia Day, which commemorates the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove in 1788, should be changed because to them it symbolises dispossession and invasion.

In 1788 Australia was not controlled by a single Aboriginal nation. It is as near as inevitable as anything in history could be that in the 18th or 19th century Australia would be colonised by one of the European powers. British colonialism was vastly more benign than the colonialism of other European powers.

Nonetheless it is absolutely clear that many bad things were done to Aborigines in the course of Australian history. The story is not all bad but there is plenty of bad to go round.

One of the many problems mixing identity politics with history and civic symbols is that absolutely nothing is pure enough to pass muster. The result is a salami slice assault on a nation's legitimacy, and debilitating symbolic battles without end.

More important, nobody alive today is either guilty of, or can expect redress for, an event that occurred 230 years ago. The whole idea would be rendered instantly fatuous were it not for the larger derangement we suffer of ideological self-hatred and the glorification of victim status, especially if you don't actually have to be a victim to claim the status.

To some extent, anyone can play this game. I am an Australian of Irish Catholic background. If anyone with close genetic connections to me was on the First Fleet, they were in chains. When the Sydney colony was first established, it was illegal to stage Catholic mass.

As it happens, as far as I know, my ancestors didn't come to Australia until the end of the 19th century. No doubt their movements were influenced by the Irish famine, the Great Hunger, in the middle of the 19th century. Given the injustice of the system the British ran in Ireland and the official indifference to the famine, it has more claim to be described as a genocide — a million died and a million emigrated — than many similar episodes in history.

So Irish Australians could, if they wanted, make a song and dance about the perfidy of British imperialism and refuse to celebrate Australia Day. What utter, ridiculous, laughable nonsense such a position would represent. And what a destructive, negative, sterile attack on the legitimacy of the nation it would constitute.

One of the greatest achievements of Western civilisation over the past 2000 years, since Christianity introduced the radical notion of every person possessing an immortal soul and free will, has been the acceptance of the doctrine that human beings are not guilty of anything by virtue of their membership of a race or any other group. Nor, logically, can they inherit special rights.

If my father and grandfather were axe murderers, I am not an axe murderer, nor am I responsible for their crimes. If my father and grandfather were saints, I may yet be a villain.

One of the greatest achievements of modern Australia is that all citizens, whether they achieved citizenship yesterday or were born here, whether their parents are

migrants or their ancestors lived in Australia for any number of generations, are absolutely equal in their civic status and before the law.

There are no exceptions. Once we make exceptions, we start to sacrifice the best, animating ideas behind our own society.

Australian institutions — the parliaments, the courts, the armed forces and all the rest — are good institutions. They have their shortcomings and we are always working to make them perform a bit better. We celebrate the birth of these modern institutions in Australia on January 26, a day that was first celebrated in Australia very early in the 19th century. In any national celebration, we understand that we are not celebrating perfection, especially not historical perfection, but rather celebrating an aspiration for the good.

The most circular and depressing argument for change is that a given date or symbol is not unifying because it does not have 100 per cent support. Logically, this gives virtually any activist group, certainly any group claiming to represent designated victims, the power to destroy symbols and institutions simply by making a noise, and preferably by producing a few violent demonstrations to showcase the “passion” of their cause.

It is offensive, but rightly not illegal, that some protesters burnt the Australian flag last week. But consider, if anyone was foolish enough to burn an Aboriginal flag, an act I would certainly find utterly offensive, they could surely be prosecuted under the ludicrous section 18C of the racial vilification laws, as they would surely have caused hurt and offence.

This sort of civic insanity produces something like the Donald Trump phenomenon. But the reason to oppose it, and to oppose changing the date of Australia Day, is not that. It is because Australia Day celebrates our nation, of which, with all its imperfections, we have, all of us, every right to be proud.