
Comment: Why the term “Australian” can be an imposition on Aboriginal people



What a lot of people don't understand in this country is that the idea of being “Australian” is viewed by many Aboriginal people as an imposition. (Getty Images AsiaPac)

Terms like “First Australians” and “Aboriginal Australians” may be well intentioned, but along with concepts like “Real Australians,” they can do more harm than good for Aboriginal rights. Celeste Liddle explains.

By Celeste Liddle

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It took me until the age of 27 to go overseas for the first time. Even then, it was only to New Zealand. Before I went, several more worldly friends told me that New Zealand was very similar to Australia and that if I wanted a culture shock I needed to go a bit further. Turns out, they were wrong.

What I saw there was Maori culture everywhere. I saw ordinary business always concluded with Maori ceremony. I saw white people conversing fluently in Maori language. I even saw Maori language health warnings on alcohol bottles and cigarette packets. That Maori culture was a part of everyday life in Aotearoa unsettled me. It was a stark contrast to the situation in Australia where we can't even get people to understand that celebrating the beginning of invasion and genocide via Australia Day is wrong.

Any Kiwi worth their salt will tell you that there is a hell of a long way to go before true equality is achieved between Maori and Pakeha. Compared to here though, NZ felt progressive and advanced. A good portion of this I put down to the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document that requires the government to uphold obligations towards the Maori. This means that, unlike the treatment of Aboriginal people here, Maori cannot be imposed upon via legislation without consultation.

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Yes, it has taken continual protest by Maori to ensure their government honours these obligations, but they have a weapon to wield in a way that Aboriginal people simply don't.

What a lot of people don't understand in this country is that "Australia", and indeed the idea of being "Australian", is viewed by many Aboriginal people as an imposition. Our ancestors did not consent to being governed, there is no agreement in place for anything from land use to service provision, and there is no imperative for Australia's governing bodies to consult with First Peoples and negotiate. So, we – particularly those most vulnerable within our communities such as the poor and remote – are continually imposed upon by governments.

It's for this very reason I reject terms like "First Australians". We historically predate any notion of "Australia" by several millennia. The largest part of why Australia continues to have issues achieving true equality is because this fact is purposefully ignored by governments and non-Indigenous people who wish to maintain their colonial power.

It really isn't hard to incorporate Indigenous culture into our national identity, in an appropriate way. Myles Russell-Cook suggests a few simple ways that every Australian can weave Indigenous ways into their life.

Additionally, despite what my passport says, I am never just an "Australian" and I find being labelled as such, reiterative of this forced assimilation.

When it comes to recognising Indigenous sovereignty, there sometimes appears to be little difference between the political left and the right. I can understand why the right are not interested in engaging with Indigenous rights discussions – it doesn't serve their individualistic interests. The left though, for all its socially-progressive agendas, can be remarkably clueless when running their social justice causes.

It's infuriating, for example, to continually hear speakers at refugee rights rallies invoke the "boundless plains to share" line from the national anthem, just mere seconds after they've given an Acknowledgement of Country. As our battles for land rights rage on and we motivate gigantic turnouts at protests, such as the Melbourne

Invasion Day rally I recently co-organised, such Acknowledgements of Indigenous land come across as merely token.

Even worse is when the left attempts to promote diversity and ends up just being offensive. Take the recent Australia Day billboard campaign featuring two young Muslim girls wearing hijabs and waving Australian flags. That this image could attract such hate from right wing groups leading to it being taken down is bad enough. Yet, rather than investigate why this society caves to the demands of racists so easily, sections of the left decided to ignorantly play the “Australians are pro-multiculturalism” card by campaigning to have the billboard reinstalled, complete with Australia Day regalia despite Indigenous objections to the celebration of our genocide.

What these well-meaning people effectively did was reinforce the same historical whitewash, this time using people of colour to promote it.

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What is a “real Australian” and why is the left so fond of this rhetoric when driving agendas of inclusion? As Aboriginal Muslim writer Eugenia Flynn points out, the very same racism that has been used as justification for the invasion and oppression of Indigenous people is now being used as a template for Islamophobia in this country. The answer, therefore, lies in dismantling the structures of racism, which allowed this country to be built in the first place.

This means going all the way back to the false declaration of “Terra Nullius” (a phrase denoting that Australia was 'no man's land' and was vacant at the time the Europeans claimed they settled the country). The High Court's Mabo decision (1992) overturned this false notion but we need to work on rectifying this inaccurate belief further: not just through a one-off legal case law but in day-to-day practice and changes in social attitudes and governmental policies.

Real Australians are not Aboriginal people. The assumption that we are okay with being assimilated into this Australian narrative is colonial arrogance. If the left is serious about supporting us, it needs to start being honest about this history and its current manifestations. It needs to work at dismantling these racist colonial structures through the negotiation of a settlement.

Because at it stands, Aboriginal rights are being stagnated by the perpetuation of myths for lazy notions of inclusion.