

IndigenousX

Changing the date won't change Australia's culture of violence

The offence of Australia Day cannot be reduced to the narrowness of the date

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'A change to the date of an unreflected national pageant will do nothing to shake the collective psyche from a pathological need to wave a flag dominated by the symbol of imperialism and bloody conquest.'

Lest anyone become overly concerned, the date chosen to mark Australia Day has historically been a movable feast. For instance, 15 July was once the favoured date. While many believe that the current date – 26 January – commemorates the landing of the so-called “first fleet” (which itself is historically inaccurate), I would expect that the date was moved from the gloom of a southern winter to midsummer for the sake of devotees of the barbecue and patriotic lamb advertisements.

Current debates around Australia Day are dominated by three themes. The first is a call for the day to be moved to a date that is less offensive to Indigenous people than that which marks the commencement of a history of attempted dispossession and genocide. A second position, supporting the continuation of 26 January as a day of

national celebration, is articulated by those who view Australia Day as sacred. Hence the accompanying hymn, “Aussie! Aussie! Aussie! Oi! Oi! Oi!”

The third theme, the one I support, is for want of an official logo: “Fuck the Date.” I am yet to see the T-shirt, but I’m sure it’s coming.

My criticism of the “change the date” campaign is that it suggests that the offence being caused by current Australia Day celebrations can be reduced to the narrowness of the date in question – 26 January. The logic of such an argument would suggest that if we were to return to 15 July or 29 March even (my birthday), the history of violence towards Indigenous people would become less offensive. Or forgotten perhaps?

I would assume that those campaigning to change the date would argue that such a move would be indicative of a “gesture of inclusion” or “one step towards reconciliation and healing”. Such is the rhetoric of symbolic gestures in settler-colonial societies incapable of countenancing either the relinquishment of power, or the contemplation of genuine remorse. A change to the date of an unreflected national pageant will do nothing to shake the collective psyche from a pathological need to wave a flag dominated by the symbol of imperialism and bloody conquest.

Additional questions must be raised about the morality of any proposed national celebration, whether it be held on 26 January, Don Bradman’s birthday, or at four in the afternoon on the third Friday of September.

In recent years, we have been subjected to disturbing images of violence that represent a culture of state-sanctioned violence in Australia. The 2016 photograph of the teenager, Dylan Voller, hooded and shackled to a chair in the Don Dale youth detention centre in Darwin was no aberration. The horror suffered by boys incarcerated at Don Dale was representative of an ongoing history of locking up Indigenous children at alarming rates, sometimes in adult prisons (a practice that continues, with media reports in recent days revealing that teenagers detained in Western Australia have spent over six months in solitary confinement).

A second horror show, sadly, is the manner in which, we, as a nation, have treated asylum seekers and refugees in recent years. From the Tampa crisis of 2001, when the prime minister, John Howard, attempted to starve over 300 desperate people by refusing them entry to our northern shores, to the drownings of people almost touching land, on to the domestic detention centres such as Woomera in the South Australian desert, and the offshore hellholes on Nauru and Manus Island, we have witnessed endemic levels of violence at the behest of successive governments.

During my work as a historian I have concluded that no people within Australia have suffered greater human rights abuses than Indigenous women. The issue of human rights is not one of competition, of course. Levels of sexual and domestic violence against all women in this country is shameful. We sure have nothing to celebrate until we deal with the culture of violence that underpins Australian society. That day is a long way off, and no “change the date” campaign will hasten the depth of change that is necessary. In fact, it may mask it.

On 26 January of this year I will attend the Invasion Day rally in my home city, Melbourne, along with tens of thousands of people. The rally will be led by Indigenous people, many of them members of a new generation who have learned from the political activists who came before them. Importantly, they have also found their own voice. It is suitably rowdy and at times, justifiably angry. If the young are our future, and I sincerely hope that they are, their pathway will be forged in action and a call for self-determination rather than hollow symbolism and a patronising call to display patience.