Daryl McLure: Australia Day billboard showing two Muslim girls in hijabs captures the spirit of the day.

Daryl McLure, Geelong Advertiser
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LAST week I shared my feelings about the diversity of Australia and Australians. Today, with Australia Day taking place on Thursday, I want to look at what binds us: simply being Australian.

I am second-generation Australian. My grandparents were Scots whose first language was Gaelic, not English, and I have always been conscious of my Scottish heritage. I was a member of the Geelong Highland Gathering committee for decades and a founder of the National Celtic Festival. But I am Australian.

I have nieces with an Indonesian heritage, but they too are very much Australian — as are other relatives with Dutch, German and English backgrounds.

I think it important we are all proud of our historic heritages, but what we should all aspire to share our pride in is being Australian. Australia Day reminds us of that and unites us regardless of our religious, racial or national backgrounds.

I know that many within our Australian indigenous community see January 26 as “Invasion Day” and the beginning of British colonisation and oppression of Aboriginal people. I respect that viewpoint and am not averse to changing the date for the observation of Australia Day to one less hurtful to Aboriginal people. But we should continue to observe Australia Day — whatever the date — because it should be used to bring us all together, including indigenous people, to share our common Australian heritage.

I am ashamed of some Australians, I am ashamed of some Australian Government policies and I am ashamed of how indigenous people have been and are being treated by some Australians. But I have never been ashamed of being Australian.

Australia Day celebrates what it is to be Australian today, our history as a nation. That only happened with the opening of the first federal Parliament on May 9, 1901. Perhaps that’s a better date on which to commemorate Australia Day? Remember, many of the earlier, 18th and 19th century British settlers were displaced Irish and Scots — as well as convicts — forced to leave their homelands.

Many of our post-war 20th Century European immigrants were also displaced people unable to return to their homelands after World War II, as were most Vietnamese immigrants in the 1970s-1980s. This trend continues today, with refugees forced to flee persecution, terror and war in the Middle East and North Africa. A small minority of new arrivals are anti-Western and would do us harm, but the vast majority are good people who have come here for a better life for themselves.
and their children and wish to live among us and become Australians. For example, some 8000 Muslim families live in the Greater Geelong region and their Imam, Shaykh Mohammad Ramzan, encourages them to be “actively, responsibly and positively integrated into mainstream Australian society”. 

I think a billboard advertising Australia Day in Melbourne, showing two Muslim girls in hijabs, proudly holding Australian flags — it was temporarily taken down after threats were made — captures the spirit of the day.

So did the Australians who contributed more than $100,000 within hours to finance similar billboards in the nation’s major cities. Mainstream Australia now largely recognises the suffering caused by dispossession, whether indigenous or immigrant and has welcomed people forced from their original homelands by war and persecution. So let’s all share Australia Day and think of what it means to be Australian.

— DARYL McLURE