Shifting Australia Day

The big question: On what date should we celebrate Australia Day?

The date of Australia Day has long been controversial. In 1938, a group of indigenous Australians protested against the day, describing it as a celebration of brutality and invasion. Since then, the day has commonly been referred to by indigenous groups as ‘a day of mourning’ or ‘invasion day’.

While calls to shift Australia Day to an alternative date, or to scrap it completely, have been around since the 1938 protest, they gained serious momentum in 2016 when Fremantle Council made the controversial decision during the year to not run an Australia Day celebration on January 26th, 2017, but instead, two days later on January 28th. In explaining its decision, Fremantle Council said January 28th would be a much more “inclusive” date.

In the wake of Fremantle council’s decision, there have been two strongly argued, but diametrically opposed responses.

One response has been to champion Fremantle’s move, and to see it as a brave decision to shift Australia Day from an insulting date. The other response has been to describe Fremantle council as over-zealously politically correct and Australia Day as a celebration of unity and tradition that should not be changed.

Quick facts:

- Australia Day was first honoured in 1935 but was not celebrated as a national public holiday until 1995
- A social media campaign to shift Australia Day known as #changethedate has achieved a strong internet presence
- A video by youth activist group the ICEA Foundation calling for Australia Day to be shifted went viral in January 2017, being viewed by 120,000 people in less than 24 hours
- In the absence of council fireworks, The Fremantle Chamber of Commerce funded their own Australia Day fireworks this year
Arguments that...we should shift the date of Australia Day

- Australia Day “celebrates” a divisive event: the brutal white settlement of Australia. We need a neutral date that can truly celebrate Australia being united, rather than divided.
- Indigenous people report experiencing racism at alarming rates. Now more than ever we need a date that encourages inclusiveness, rather than division.
- Of all the holidays in Australia, Australia Day is probably the least popular because people don’t care about it or hate it. Let’s reboot the day on a different date so we can all get behind it.

Snap perspectives

Shifting date would harm, not help race relations

I understand why an increasing number of people passionately and earnestly call for the nation to change our day of celebration from January 26. But try as I might, I cannot join the chorus. If the date were to be changed, it would cause more harm than good for Indigenous relations. Rightly or wrongly, it would confirm in the minds of many Australians the Hanson narrative about one culture being elevated above another. Far from encouraging the nation to come to terms with its history, it will only force the most dogmatic “patriots” to dig their heels in further.

Sure, this is more a reflection on those individuals, but the political difficulty of any genuine attempt to change the date would exacerbate rather than pacify tensions in the community, and nobody wins from that.

Dale Hughes in the Sydney Morning Herald

Change needed for a positive country

It is amazing that we have welcomed people from all over the world to make this place their home. It is amazing that the weather gods have blessed us with summers that would make quitting your job every December almost worthwhile.

All of these things are worth celebrating, and there are so many other things we need to get to work on making better, too. Imagine if we all decided, tomorrow, to change the date. Just in some ideal world, came to consensus that January 26th isn’t an important or positive date for all Australians and just simply moved our day of celebration. How incredibly powerful would that be, even for someone who might have originally been against change? To be part of a decision that we have all made together in this nation, in this current day, to celebrate Australia for the diverse place it is... now that would be truly something to celebrate.

From The Indigenous Communities and Education Blog

Arguments that...we should not shift Australia Day

- Australia Day isn’t about ignoring indigenous culture or their mistreatment. Rather, it’s actually about facing these and “celebrating” the long way we have come.
- Australia Day is about more than just colonial history - it’s a day for all the diverse peoples and cultures that make up Australia. To shift it would mean we are reacting only to the interests of one group - when there are many groups which make up Australia.
- Historical dates are an essential part of celebrations. Like it or note, January 26th is an important historical occasion. To move Australia Day to another date, would be to move it to a day without history.