WHY JANUARY 26 DOESN'T MAKE SENSE TO ME

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I grew up in a small town about three hours away from Perth, inland. It’s on Nyaki-Nyaki Noongar country, but I didn’t know that back when I was a kid. I came to Perth for boarding school when I was 12 years old, and was so excited to have a bunch of new mates that I forgot to notice how lacking in diversity my school community was, or how little we talked or were educated about Australian history (the real history) or Australian identity.

As I’m writing this, I can’t even remember when I attended my first Australia Day celebration or party. It’s possible I stumbled across some fireworks at some point without realising what it was, but the first Australia Day I remember ‘celebrating’ was in 2012. I was 19. It was pretty low-key, a few drinks at a friend’s house by the pool, the sun scorching my skin, a brief grapple with the rules of a new drinking game, and pretending to know the song that hit Number 1 on the Triple J countdown. I had never realised before that this type of celebration was, for some people, what they perceived to be a tradition.

Of course, being 19, I wanted to be cool, have a good time and look cute in my bikinis at pool parties. So I went along to the Aussie Day party the following year. And the year after that, and the year after that. But it wasn’t until recently when I realised what a horrible date January 26 is for Indigenous peoples that I stopped and questioned what it is I’m really celebrating. What is Australian identity?

I run in what most people would probably consider to be a pretty diverse network of friends and acquaintances, and yet, I’d never seen many people (if any) of diverse cultural backgrounds at one of our Australia Day parties. Maybe if I went to particular events that targeted a more multicultural crowd I would have, but if this is the ‘tradition’, and this is what we do, then why isn’t everyone here with us? Why are there separate spaces for white Aussies and CALD Aussies when it comes to celebrating our nation? And why do banners that show Australian Muslims advocating for Australia Day create so much backlash that they require taking down? If Australia Day is really meant to be a ‘day for all of us’ like it’s avid defenders always assure me it is, then why aren’t we celebrating with everyone, together?

From what I’d seen, all people really do on Australia Day is get drunk. Sometimes they even get too drunk, and get violent (physically, verbally). How is this celebrating Australia any more than a Friday night in Northbridge is? And if this really is all that Aussie culture comes down to, then shouldn’t we want to change that, not celebrate it?

And if that’s not you - if you are just one of the parents who likes taking your kids down to have a picnic, watch the fireworks, and be grateful for how lucky we are to live in this beautiful country - I still find it hard to ignore the ease with which this could also be done on a date other than January 26.

Since I didn’t grow up sitting at the foreshore with my parents, huddling behind them when the fireworks got too loud, I was literally introduced to the Australia Day tradition as a young adult, so I’ve had to figure out what the hell it’s all about. I don’t think this would be too much of a unique story; I think there’s a lot of people out there for whom the date itself holds no real long standing meaning. I can’t imagine the date
holding some particular, patriotic significance for anyone alive today, really.

In fact, what I think Australian’s are really **starving** for, is a way to know and to celebrate who we really are. Maybe that’s why people are so defensive about any change to Australia Day; they don’t want to lose grasp of one piece of few that comprise their Australian identity pie. That I can relate to, because I too dislike how little we sometimes perceive there is to base our culture on.

So how do we figure this out, this question of what it means to be Australian? I think it’s about focusing on what makes Australia so amazing rather than finding something to pit ourselves against as we have done in the past. It is amazing that our land hosts a 60 000 year old culture, the oldest surviving and thriving in the world. It is amazing that in such a short history, we have built cosmopolitan hubs that host some of the world’s best universities and hospitals. 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.