

Why I don't support changing the date of Amnesia Day

Celeste Liddle | 22 January 2017

I don't know many activists within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community who don't experience a feeling of dread each January. We go through the excitement that is the birth of the New Year only to run head-first into the wall of stress and emotional labour that is dealing with another 'Australia Day'.



And yes, I choose to put quotation marks around 'Australia Day' because within the Indigenous community I am much more likely to hear it referred to as 'Invasion Day' and 'Survival Day'.

This is not news to a lot of Australians, who then get offended and so we tend to get into these exhausting and repetitive conversations every single year. And they are repetitive.

I am also a fan of the term 'Amnesia Day', because not only is there a deeply embedded amnesia in this country which forgets injustices such as 'terra nullius', massacres, the Stolen Generations and so forth, but the conversations we have on these things each year seem to be forgotten by the next year and the 'proud Australians' again expect Indigenous people to happily assimilate into the festivities.

It's therefore been an interesting few weeks. It started with the release of the annual Meat and Livestock Association ad promoting the eating of lamb around Australia Day.

Given the Association's ads in previous years, which seemed to promote jingoism, racism and sexism more than they did meat products — not to mention the fact that a couple of months ago, a leaked script showed it being considered so offensive that

they couldn't find any Aboriginal people willing to be in the cast — my hopes were not high.

Thankfully, they did alter the script somewhat but the result remained divisive. While many applauded its positive attempt to show diversity as well as completely omit any reference to 'Australia Day', I echo the thoughts of other Aboriginal commentators such as Nakkiah Lui and Luke Pearson that the outright erasure of Invasion and Frontier violence was on the nose.

The ad completely omitted why it is that we protest in the first place. I was relived and amused therefore when the artists from Cope ST Collective released what they felt was a more accurate telling of the story, while also promoting their views that the date of celebration needed to be changed.

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For what it's worth, I find I no longer support changing the date, although I admire the fact that Fremantle City Council has done exactly this after consulting widely with their local Indigenous community. For many years I felt that if the government considered alternatives to the present 'Australia Day' — such as the anniversary of the 1967 referendum, or Mabo Day, or even during NAIDOC Week — we could come to a more inclusive agreement which celebrates all of the heritage this country should be proud of. However the past few years of Indigenous activism have left me cynical.

Let's be honest: while in the early 1990s people in this country may have been able to tell me what the significance of the Mabo ruling was and why it was so important, nowadays a good portion have either forgotten or are too young and too post-Howard's history wars to have a clue what I am talking about. What's more, any gains which were made both within Indigenous land rights and self-determination following this ruling have been largely dismantled by successive governments.

In recent years, Indigenous activists have had to hit the streets because the WA government is closing down homelands communities and forcing people into larger regional centres. We've protested the Northern Territory Intervention which required communities to sign their lands over to the government in lease agreements and, not coincidentally, seemed to lead to an explosion in proposals for 'developments' on Aboriginal lands such as fracking operations and nuclear waste dumps.

These examples, plus many more, show regressions rather than advances in this country when it comes to the recognition of Indigenous land rights.

Similarly, I feel that the legacy of the 1967 Referendum has been misappropriated in a bid to push the contentious agenda of Constitutional Recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This was flagged initially by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott who, for some strange reason, felt that having the recognition referendum during the year of the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum was desirable. After all, nothing highlights just how little this country has progressed more than the fact that it's taken five decades to move from being counted in the census to being 'recognised'.

The past few years have also seen Indigenous activists take to the streets to protest against Deaths in Custody — nearly 30 years after the Royal Commission recommendations were tabled. We've had to protest the removal of children from family and community at rates higher than ever before. We've protested against human rights abuses and Indigenous youth incarceration rates due to incidents such as Don Dale Detention Centre. And we're still always trying to get recognition of Frontier Wars, the massacres, the rapes and the enslavement which form this country's brutal history.

In short, the things that we were fighting for decades ago — indeed going all the way back to the 1938 Day of Mourning — seem to be very similar to the things we're still fighting for now. Australia is therefore not a country which has acknowledged and rectified its history; rather it seems content to reinforce its amnesia. I can only conclude from all this that changing the date would be little more than celebrating the invasion and genocide of Indigenous people on another day. It's therefore unlikely that I will be able to stop protesting this celebration, regardless of the day it's held upon.

Let's instead start coming to terms with our past. Let's rectify all the injustice, get real on questions of cultural respect and reparations, and create, rather than enforce, a unified country which can move forward. Let's really start working towards a day we can all celebrate.



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