

# THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN



## Our day of dilemma Australia Day is a problem that won't go away.

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**Opinion:** By Nikki Gemmell

"Australians all let us rejoice." But we don't, do we, on January 26. Not all of us. And as a nation that prides itself on a laconic sense of tolerance and inclusivity – of a fair go for all – that's a problem. Because many of the people resolutely not joining in the rejoicing are the ones who were here first. For some, our national day is a glorification of a date when the world changed irretrievably and most grievously for their people when the First Fleet of British ships arrived in 1788.

Our national day, on this particular date, is a problem that isn't going away. The conversation won't stop until we do something about it because it makes too many people uncomfortable – a minority of Australians, aware that we've not listened hard enough to our Aboriginal brothers and sisters over several centuries. Disquiet over the date is a murmur deep in our nation's psyche, a niggle that something isn't quite right here and never will be until it's changed. Why not a fixed Monday in early February? The schools would thank us. (This year we're juggling three different school-year start dates, all awkwardly sitting around the Thursday public holiday.

There's been much argy-bargy at Fremantle Council over the past six months about possibly shifting its "culturally insensitive" Australia Day fireworks to next Saturday, the 28th. Nyoongah elder Robert Egginton explains: "I haven't met an Aboriginal person who didn't support the decision and the Aboriginal elders spoke to thousands of people in their families and they didn't agree with the fireworks on Australia Day... It's a clarification of history, because celebrating the day the first gunshots ploughed our blood into the earth is horrific for Aboriginal people."

A clarification related to something deemed horrific by many of us. To me, that makes sense. Eggington believes Fremantle's predilection over the fireworks will go down in history. "This decision is 50 years ahead of its time and other councils will follow their lead." And so they've tried to create a day of celebration inclusive of all Australians because, hard as it may be to stomach, January 26 is not.

Where is the wonder? The celebration of an indigenous culture front and centre of our national being? Go to Germany, or France, and there is awe that we have on our shores the oldest continuous living race on the planet; wonder that these people are still so powerfully and richly with us. With their art, their literature, their film making, their resilience and voice. But in Australia, of course, there is guilt. A shuffling of the feet. An aversion of eyes. A distressing marginalisation; indeed, a wish, in some quarters, that the whole "problem" would just go away. And it has been ever thus, since January 26, 1788.

Taking a long, hard look at the date of our national day is necessary for the suturing of a riven national psyche. It's to do with empathy, compassion and inclusivity. I have audacious hope that we will have a government of maturity and uplift once again, one day. It feels odd but strangely inevitable to think that in 20 years we will still be in this state of hopeless despondency about what to do with the Aboriginal situation – yet I fear we will. The past 20-odd years, since the states agreed to fix January 26 as Australia Day, feel like a regression as opposed to a progression in Aboriginal affairs. Long gone are those heady days of optimism and relief over Mabo, over native title, over Keating's Redfern speech; long gone that climate of principled national compassion.

The situation now feels depressingly moribund. Surely we cannot have another 20 years of regression? There's a national lift in mood when we embrace change for the better in terms of our indigenous brethren. But it needs a leader of courageous compassion and vision. Not, I despair, our current prime minister, who increasingly seems like the loneliest man in Australia.