

'People are starting to understand': huge Invasion Day protest stuns Melbourne

Activist Gary Foley tells a crowd of up to 60,000 that 'if we keep mobilising these numbers, governments cannot ignore us'

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Melbourne's Invasion Day rally begins on the steps of Parliament House on Spring Street, 500 metres from where the city council has blocked off the route of the official Australia Day parade.

The events start at the same time, and until a few years ago only one was accommodated. Before 2015, the Invasion Day rally was seen as just a group of hardcore activists; they didn't register in the minds of the flag-waving crowd that turned out to watch the official proceedings.

That was then. On Friday, when the Invasion Day march reached the barricades that had been pushed aside after the parade moved on, it significantly outnumbered the Australia Day event.

Crowd estimates were between 40,000 and 60,000 people. It stretched the length of four city blocks, picking up stragglers and people who were on the street only because they had watched the official parade.

Spectators for one event stayed to watch the next, filming a rally themed on the abolition of Australia Day while still holding plastic flags that had been waved joyfully minutes before, as if observing the second act of an annual national performance: the pageant, then the protest.

Organisers armed with megaphones called out to the crowd: "Why are you waving Australian flags at us? Why are you celebrating our genocide?"

A police officer, one of the dozens flanking the marchers, gave a speculative look down the street when asked to guess the size of the crowd, which had disappeared around a bend.

"More than was expected, that's for sure," he says.

Given their surprise at the turnout, the police presence seems excessive. There are about a dozen mounted police ahead of the march, and more police

on foot stationed at regular intervals. There is nothing for them to do except watch.



As the march moves down Swanston Street towards Flinders Street station, where it will stop for speeches from grassroots political leaders Gary Foley and Jenny Munroe, an Aboriginal police liaison officer leans on the barrier to have a chat to a young Koori man who split off from the crowd to shake his hand.

It's sweaty and friendly and polite. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are here to talk. Non-Indigenous people are here to listen.

Before leaving Spring Street, Bill Nicholson, a Wurundjeri man who gave the welcome to country, says the size of the crowd, and the mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous protesters, gives him hope.

“People are starting to connect, people are starting to understand, and I’m just blown away seeing all you people out here supporting us,” he says.

Speaking from the back of the ute that doubled as a stage, historian and writer Tony Birch says those who built Victoria’s parliament in 1856 would be shocked and dismayed to learn that Nicholson and other Wurundjeri people had survived and thrived 160 years later.

“If there is anything to celebrate today it’s the fact that Bill Nicholson and his mob are here,” Birch says.

Birch says the message is “abolish Australia Day” because Australia has not yet come together in a way worthy of celebration.

“To those who are suggesting that we change the date, for those who are suggesting we hold this event on another date, this country does not deserve a day of national celebration in any capacity,” he says.

Among the marchers are Serena Thompson and Ethan Taylor, two young Aboriginal people. The crowd represents solidarity and safety for Thompson, two things she says Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not always been sure of in Australia’s 230-year history.

“Historically it is a very violent day, so it’s actually having people and having a space where you know you’re going to be safe,” she says.

Taylor marches for survival.

“To join in the rally demonstrates that we are here, we’ve survived, that we are resisting all the injustices that have been done to us,” he says. “We as a people are strong and we are going to fight against what has happened to us.”

Candice Pears has brought her sons Hunter, seven, and Kyan, eight, to the march. Hunter is holding a bouquet of flowers to be laid on the steps of parliament, commemorating the 80th anniversary of the day of mourning protest. As an African-Australian, Pears says, she has sympathy with people who have been displaced.

When the march reaches Flinders Street station and spills over the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral and into Federation Square, Foley, once a Black Panther and now professor of history at Victoria University, climbs on to the back of the ute.

“I haven’t seen a crowd like this since the 1970s, the heyday of the Aboriginal political movement,” he says. “If we keep mobilising these sort of numbers, governments cannot ignore us.”

With a captive audience of up to 60,000 people, Foley delivers a history lesson, running through Indigenous protests from the 1938 day of mourning to the tent embassy in 1972 and opposition to the bicentennial in 1988.

“This is the stuff you don’t get taught in schools,” he says. “This is the sort of history that you need to make an effort and educate yourself about, so that you’ve got a greater understanding next year, when 100,000 people turn out here.

“Next year, you’ll be able to educate that extra 40,000 people as to the serious true meaning of what today is all about and what the history of the Aboriginal resistance has been.”