

## The difference a day makes

*Those who want to change the date of Australia Day — or abolish it altogether — are missing the point.*

By STAN GRANT

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January 26, 2017: my father was to be awarded a special Australia Day honour in his hometown as a respected elder of his community. My father has lived a life at times at the coalface of bigotry and brutality; there have been beatings and dark nights of lockdown in a cell. He has been judged by the colour of his skin, by those who would not see the full content of his character. Yet he has remained a man proud of who he is, and unwavering in his belief and hope that Australia is better than its worst. In his later years he has helped to revive his language, Wiradjuri, teaching it not just to indigenous people but allowing all Australians to share in his heritage. Because, to my father, it is all our heritage. If you are on this land, this belongs to you. My father has been awarded an Order of Australia medal, and a doctorate from Charles Sturt University for writing the first full dictionary of Wiradjuri language.

That evening of the Australia Day honour I spoke to my mother, and she told me how proud she was of how well my father was treated, and what an honour it was to celebrate on that day, when Australians celebrate all that we have made in this country. But my mother told me again of another Australia. As our conversation often does, it turned gently to her life as a young girl, living with her family, a black father and a white mother, on the outskirts of Coonabarabran in north-western NSW. On this Australia Day she reminded me of how her family's tin humpy was bulldozed to the ground, she told me of the constant presence and threat of welfare officers, of her brothers and sisters made wards of the state and separated from their family; she told me again of seeing her father led through the streets handcuffed and roped together with other Aboriginal men, arrested for simply drinking alcohol. This is her Australia. These are her memories, the memories of wounds. We talked about Australia Day, a day that had been one of pride. "It wouldn't hurt them to move the date," she said.

Should we move the date? There are those who would abolish Australia Day entirely. They reject the very idea of Australia. In 2017, I finally had to answer this question for myself. What did I believe? I was speaking to a group of university students, touching on issues of identity and belonging and how I had lived my life to free myself from the chains of history, to move beyond narrowly defined ideas of who or what I should be. One of the students asked me what I thought about Australia Day. It is a question I have wrestled with, torn between pride in my country and my family's legacy of suffering. I could so easily have repeated that mantra that the date is offensive, a reminder of invasion and colonisation. There are times in my life when those words would have fallen easily from my lips. But I know now, we are asking ourselves the wrong question.

Australia is more than a day, it is more than a date — whatever that date may be. Moving the date or abolishing Australia Day does not answer the question, who are we? I fear moving the date would only hand it to those who would reclaim it as a day of white pride, turning it into a bombastic day of division. There are also those indigenous people who cling to Nietzsche's "politics of resentment", whose identities are so wedded to grievance that to relinquish their anger would be to lose their sense of themselves; moving the date would not satisfy them.

On this day am I meant to be at war with myself? No. On this day I am neither black nor white, I am its synthesis: I am an Australian. That is all I can be. I am a convict in irons on a ship called Providence, a young Irishman called John Grant banished forever from his land with no home other than the one he would make here. I am a young man named Frank Foster born not 100 years after the British boats dropped anchor, huddled in the boat shed at Circular Quay with those other survivors of the disease and violence that ravaged the First People of this land. I am John Grant and I am Frank Foster. I am the view from the ship and the view from the shore.

This is my blessing and my curse; I am blessed to be born to a nation that cherishes freedom — the freedom to rail against the nation itself, to question, to protest. In our world today that is so rare. Ours is a nation that struggles with itself, with the worst we have been, and whose arc of history has delivered us to a point where we are among the most free, prosperous and cohesive nations on Earth. Yet, for all that, I am cursed to be born into the crosshairs of this nation's past; to carry that burden and see it carved into the skin and the souls of so many of my family — some of them broken by this place and others so gloriously and utterly defiant. For me, there are the words of French philosopher Albert Camus: "Let those who want to, stand aside from the world. I no longer feel sorry for myself, for now I see myself being born." There have been times when I have indeed felt sorry for myself; when the view from the shore was one of unceasing suffering and inevitable doom. No amount of what we would call success, of wealth or glory, could erase the pain that I have inherited. But I have a choice, to see myself as someone with a future, to believe that Australia holds a place for me too and that we can change it and that we have changed it.

A nation is a narrative, it is a story, it is what we imagine, it is what we choose. For me, I choose the late historian Inga Clendinnen and the long overlooked moment of Australian history when the British fleet arrived and a people of Enlightenment met a people of Dreaming. They danced briefly on that shore, a story told by Inga in her book *Dancing With Strangers*. I return again to that image so beloved of Inga — Aboriginal people and the British, dancing hand-in-hand on the beach. It was painted by Lieutenant William Bradley, an officer on the First Fleet, who would leave many such images depicting the early days of contact between two such different peoples.

Clendinnen's is a romantic view: a dream of what could have been more than what was. Those people dancing with the white strangers would soon be ravaged by disease and violence. - Clendinnen was accused of glossing over "the wrongs of colonisation". Others have pointed out that the same painting reveals red-coated soldiers armed, their guns at the ready. But that is Australia; it is still those who meet with open hands and those who stare with clenched fists.

I wonder now, when I write about this Australia, what others might think; how my words may so easily be hijacked by the culture warriors on all sides of politics. On the one hand there are those defenders of the empire who would brook no criticism of colonisation, who see only the benevolence of British settlement and the unquestionable glory of all that has been created

here; on the other are those who see only invasion and misery, whose identity is tied to grievance. No doubt to them I would be a traitor, an “Uncle Tom”, a “coconut”. So be it. I am not them; I don’t stand apart from the world, I cannot condemn Australia without acknowledging too that I am an Australian: its failings are mine and to change it I must embrace it; embrace it all.

Should we move Australia Day? Perhaps someday we will. Perhaps someday we will have settled our “unfinished business”; but then, nations are forever unfinished; we write our stories in the margins. For now, January 26 is all that we are. It is all that we are not. Australia lives in that tension; when we seek to neutralise that tension, we deny ourselves. Some have said we should commemorate January 25 and 26; we should mark the before and after. It is a poignant and poetic idea, but it marks an ending and a beginning and I don’t believe in that; we see what came before and what came after. I do not exist on January 25. What happened on that day when the boats came to stay, that’s what has made me. I live with it all.

In Australia we are presented with a challenge to our nation, one that stems from history itself. The idea of indigenous recognition seeks restoration in an exercise of reconciliation. But - recognition walks a national fault line: history, race. These are things that can divide, yet cannot be ignored. Recognition itself challenges us to make good on the past, yet live free of its chains — to remember in order to forget.

Our Constitution — our founding document — must respect what came before: it must acknowledge the place of the First Peoples. Others have described it as our nation’s rule book. It is a rule book that still carries the illegitimacy and stain of race, so it surely needs amendment. This land’s First Peoples have felt the sting of exclusion and discrimination. It is the challenge of a nation to rise above its past. Can our Constitution meet the aspirations of those locked out at the nation’s birth? Will the First Peoples be given full voice to shape our destinies and complete our union with our fellow Australians?

These things need not be incompatible. The First Peoples do not have special rights, but inherent rights. It diminishes no one to acknowledge and protect that unique status, in keeping with the spirit and limits of our constitutional democracy. In this way we ensure allegiance. In this way we narrow our differences and strengthen our bonds. In this way we are all set free.

We need to write a new declaration: a Declaration of Country. It does not speak only to indigenous people, it does not speak to Britain or the homelands of those migrants who have made their way to these shores. It speaks first to this land, this place here before any human footprint, this place that is our home.

A nation is not just a set of laws. A nation is above all a story, a never-ending story of us. It is the story of a land steeped in time, awaiting people from many other lands, who in time will call themselves Australians. It begins with the first footsteps taken tens of millennia ago, and continues in the newest-born child of this land. It will live on in those still to come. A Declaration of our Country must speak to us all. It should speak to our sense of place: our home. It should be the work of poets. It should stand alone, apart from the Constitution. Its words should be carved in monuments to fall from the lips of children not yet born. A - Declaration of Country should speak to who we have been and allow for who we may become.

I imagine another Australia Day, a day some time in our future when I rise at dawn and pause to remember that moment when the people of the first sunrise on this land met the people who

came in the tall ships. I will fall silent for those whose lives were lost, as I do on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day. I will think of all of those who have put me here, their sacrifice, their struggles, their pain and their dreams. I will remember, but I will also put it aside — forget, if you like — for it is in forgetting that I can find peace. This future Australia Day will still likely be a day of protest, a day of sadness, and a day of joy and thanks. We are all of those things.

On this day I will repeat to myself words I have written for my country:

The first people touched this land as our continent was being formed.

They came in boats when humanity had yet to cross an open sea.

Here they formed a civilisation that continues to this day.

Their birthright has never been ceded.

Those people live still in their descendants.

We enter into their heritage and respect their traditions.

We honour too those who have come from other lands and carry with them their cultures and faiths.

Though our bonds may strain, we seek to live together in harmony.

Though we may disagree, we find no enemy among us.

We cherish the foundations of our nation, and our rule of law and democracy.

We abide by the will of the majority but defend the rights of the minority.

We are all equal in dignity.

Opportunity is for all.

Worth should be measured not in privilege.

By our efforts we prosper. In a land of plenty, we care for those without.

From the first footsteps to the most recent arrival, this land is our home.

Here, together, we form a new people bound not by the chains of history but committed to a future forged together.

This is my Declaration of Country, my song of this country. For that is what lasts.

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