

OPINION

On Invasion Day, our calls for justice will not be silenced

By Meriki Onus
January 24, 2021

I am a 33-year-old Aboriginal woman, I live in Melbourne and for the past five years I have organised Indigenous rights rallies, including Invasion Day.

I'm also a university student who enjoys drinking soy lattes and eating avocado on sourdough toast with vegan feta.



Thousands marched in the streets of Melbourne to protest against Australia Day last year.

Most people at this point in the article would readily dismiss my voice as they have been told for many years now that mine is a voice that is not worth listening to. That my voice is not a 'real' Indigenous perspective.

While this may be a convenient view, it is not reality. My voice matters, as do all Indigenous voices.

For many who have been paying attention, they would know that Indigenous resistance is not new to this continent. Opposition to Australia Day, known to many as Invasion Day, or Survival Day, or a Day of Mourning, goes back almost a century.



Participants in the Aboriginal Day of Mourning on January 26, 1938.

And through this history of opposition to Australia Day, Indigenous voices have never been focused solely on 'changing the date'.

Since the first Australia Day, before it was even called that, Indigenous people were not invited to the party. The one time we were able to attend, in 1938, we were forced to participate under threat. And this is reflective of not just the history of Australia Day, but the history of Australia – we were never invited to join the nation. More than that, excluding us has long been a core theme of both the day of the celebration and the nation being celebrated.

Australia was built on our lands subsequent to the dispossession and genocide of our people, on their blood and bones, to our exclusion and detriment. It was founded as land for Whites Only.

While many of the laws and policies that laid this foundation have been repealed, Indigenous people still experience the effects of these origins today.

Indigenous people have provided countless ways forward for us as a nation to address this, but we have been and continue to be ignored and undermined by the powers that be. Adding insult to injury, our voices are not just ignored, they are wilfully misrepresented.

White Australia is told that we are 'selfish rabble', that our protests are 'riots', our slogans are 'threats', that we care only for symbolic change while ignoring serious issues, that we aren't 'real' Indigenous people anyway. They are told that our well-planned COVID-safe events, which resulted in no known community transmission, are not worth the risk.

This is the absurdity that lies behind the arguments against Invasion Day protests which claim that “Changing the date won’t fix anything”. We know that. That’s why ever since the 1938 Day of Mourning, Indigenous protesters have used the day to fight for issues about all of those things holding us back, and that holds Australia back from becoming worthy of a national day of celebration.

This is why, in recent years, Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance led a movement away from ‘Change The Date’ and instead promoted ‘Abolish Australia Day’.

Just as changing Australia Day from a ‘Whites Only’ event without changing Australia’s attitudes towards white nationalism doesn’t make it an inclusive event, so too would changing the date without changing the nation. This would not make Australia any more inclusive, or any closer to understanding the truth of our past and the injustices our mob continue to experience today.

Abolish Australia Day until we find something worth celebrating, maybe after we have had our post-colonial moment here in this country when Australia comes to terms with its violent past.

We march against what the day represents, not so much the date, but the white nationalism, racism and the ongoing colonial project that is destroying our country and killing our people. This is the reality of the Australia we live in.

This is an important point for any settler allies who plan to attend Invasion Day events. If you participate, and I hope you do, join us in our calls for justice and help amplify our voices. But don’t confuse our calls for justice for calls for symbolism or token gestures. We aren’t here for a one-word change in the anthem, a meaningless reform in the constitution, or moving a celebration of Invasion to another day.

We are here for justice. We are here for Indigenous rights. And we are still here, every day, fighting for sovereignty to protect Indigenous people and our sacred lands.

I will not be silenced, and we are not going away. No matter what happens, the land beneath my feet always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Meriki Onus is a Gunai and Gunditjmara woman from Bung Yarnda.