

Opinion

Australia Day set to be a key challenge of Indigenous Voices system



The Indigenous voice system will give First Nations people greater access to state and federal governments.

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The Federal government will shortly start discussions with state and local governments about creating 35 local Indigenous Voices which Prime Minister Scott Morrison hopes will “ensure that we can hear the voices of Indigenous people on the ground”.

But what happens if those Voices’ demands are at odds with the government of the day, or the majority of Australians, or both?

Although local Indigenous Voices won’t be established before this year’s public holiday, it seems inevitable they will push to scrap Australia Day on January 26.

Coalition governments have for years resisted changing the date, with Morrison saying in 2018: “We don’t have to pull Australia Day down to actually recognise the achievements of Indigenous Australia.”

The chance Indigenous Voices will agree seems remote given many indigenous Australians refer to it as Invasion Day or a Day of Mourning.

Nor is this a recent development. Indigenous opposition to Australia Day was already established in 1938, the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet.



Thousands of protesters marched through capital cities last January 26. Indigenous people are expected to call for Australia Day to be moved to another date.

Invasion Day protests are nowadays as much an established part of January 26 as Australia Day parades.

Indeed, last year the Victorian state government cancelled the Australia Day parade in Melbourne but permitted a NAIDOC Invasion Day Dawn Service and an Invasion Day rally.

The latter was attended by thousands and included speakers calling for Australia Day to be abolished or the date to be changed.

The problem is the country isn’t with them.

Successive polls have found the majority of Australians are with the coalition on this and do not support the campaign to change the date.

Last year’s Ipsos poll for *The Age* found only 28 per cent of 1222 people surveyed nationally were in favour of shifting the date, while 48 per cent were opposed. Similarly, last year’s news.com.au survey of 15,800 voters found 73 per cent believe Australia Day should be celebrated on January 26, with only 21 per cent saying the date needs to be changed and a tiny 6 per cent believing Australia Day should be scrapped entirely.

The results of an Essential poll three years ago were similar with only 26 per cent of Australians supported changing the date, and 54 per cent opposed.

The only outlier is the ABC's Australia Talks survey which last year found a majority for changing the date.

The question which secured this result was hardly neutral however with respondents asked if "Australia Day should not be celebrated on January 26, given the historical significance of that date for Indigenous people".

In contrast the Ipsos poll simply asked "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the campaign to change the date of Australia Day from January 26th".

What will a re-elected Coalition Government do if its Indigenous Voices push for a date change? It was hard to argue with Morrison when he said last year that for better and worse, January 26, 1788 was the moment where "the journey to our modern Australia began".

But his defence of the date as the day modern Australia began raises a bigger question. Do those who are pushing for the date to be changed support a celebration of modern Australia at all?

Commenting on the fire that damaged Old Parliament House last week Greens Party Senator Lidia Thorpe – who is Indigenous – tweeted (and then deleted) that the arson was a sign of the colonial order "burning down".

Thorpe is a vocal critic of Australia day celebrations with their "colonial flag-waving".

It is difficult to imagine this key speaker at Invasion Day rallies supporting any of the alternative dates that have been suggested as a replacement for Australia Day.

January 1, would require her to celebrate the date in 1901 when six British colonies united to form the Commonwealth of Australia.

Given her views about the legitimacy of the country's political institutions it's hard to see the Senator getting excited about May 9 either: the date when Australia's parliament first sat (1901), the capital was moved to Canberra (1927) and new Parliament House was opened (1988).

A Government heeding Indigenous voices against the views of the majority of Australians would be untenable but ignoring that call would threaten to delegitimise the bodies while entrenching division.

And while Australia Day is likely to be the first and most emotional issue, there will no doubt be more important fights between Indigenous Voices and government, most obviously over land rights.

Labor supports a constitutionally enshrined national Indigenous Voice.

Whether the coalition would legislate or seek to constitutionally enshrine a national voice in addition to the 35 local voices is unclear.

Perhaps rather than seeking to create an Indigenous Voice to Parliament we should be looking to increase the number of indigenous voices in Parliament.

This wouldn't need legislation nor constitutional change. We currently have six Indigenous MPs. After the next election we are likely to more – from Thorpe at one end of the spectrum to Jacinta Price at the other.

By democratically electing people to represent their constituents the views of Indigenous Australians with all their complexities can be represented.

And it doesn't pit them against the rest of the nation or the Government of the day.

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