

Thousands march in Invasion Day protests across Australia

Melbourne ceremony livestreamed due to Covid and Aboriginal Tent Embassy commemorates 50th anniversary



Actor Shareena Clanton speaks during an Invasion Day protest in Melbourne.

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While thousands of people marched around the country in protest on Invasion Day and gathered in Canberra in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, a day of mourning was held in Melbourne in the way most events in the Victorian capital have been held over the past two years: over a livestream.

Organisers of the Melbourne, Hobart and Darwin Invasion Day events cancelled large in-person events this year due to high numbers of Omicron Covid cases within the Aboriginal community.

The dawn service, a ritual that began with a few hundred people at the Kings Domain Resting Place in 2019, was held online from 5.30am.

More than 3,000 people watched via the Victorian Naidoc Facebook page. The ceremony featured words from past services from Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy and the Victorian Greens senator Lidia Thorpe, a Gannai, Gunditjmara and

Djab Wurrung woman, who also held a small mourning ceremony for First Nations women on the steps of Victorian state parliament on Monday night.

Then Uncle Jack Charles read through a list of massacres that occurred in Victoria from 1834 to 1850. The massacre sites are all over Victoria: Murdering Flats, Chimney Pots, Murdering Gully, Fighting Hills, Aire River, Snowy River, Mount Eccles, Mount Napier, and many more.

The total death toll, from recorded massacres in Victoria, is 1,186. Research by the University of Newcastle has identified 311 massacre sites in Australia, dating from 1788 to 1930. The full death toll from frontier violence is unknown.

Thorpe said the need to protect vulnerable community members from Covid meant people were “grieving in their homes”.

“This is a day where we come together and mourn together ... as a community, as families and allies,” she told Guardian Australia. “The strength that you feel when you’re surrounded by people who are standing in solidarity on this day is a feeling of hope ... not having that presence and that activism out there on this day is hard. It is very hard. I just want to acknowledge all of those Blak families at home today who are feeling the pain, the loss and the trauma of what happened on this day.”

As Charles was reading down the list, television crews began converging on a statue of Captain James Cook in St Kilda, which was doused in red paint overnight.

A short time later, in Sydney, Wiradjuri woman and Sydney City councillor Yvonne Weldon addressed the WugulOra Morning Ceremony at Barangaroo.

“What took place was genocide, irreversible trauma,” she said. “Poisons, not just in our waterholes but others had in their hands, that later became placed in ours. The trauma and the introductions of new ways of living hasn’t been healthy for all ... as the world’s oldest living culture ... despite these traumas and shifts in our way of living, we are still here, still practising, still inclusive.”

Weldon said it was important to remember and acknowledge the massacres and the “cruelty and inhumane treatment to my people”.

“Not out of a guilt, but to right the wrongs of the past, not to continue to be in our present,” she said. “If we don’t, we will never truly create an all-embracing future.”

Later in Sydney, thousands of people marched down George Street towards Victoria Park carrying signs calling for justice for Aboriginal people killed in custody.

“We feel proud today, yet sad in knowing why we have to stand here. Why do we have to promote our invasion to make sure Australia sees us?” Elizabeth Jarrett, a Dunghutti Bundjalung activist, told the crowd.

More than 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody in Australia in the 30 years since the royal commission.

“We want to make sure our murders stop, the raping of our women, the stealing of our children ... and the desecration of our culture,” Jarrett said.

Gamilaraay woman Helen Russell attended the march wearing a shirt showing the pictures of her sons Stanley and Edward Russell, who both died in custody. Edward died in Long Bay Prison in 1999 when he was 25 years old, and Stanley was shot dead by police at his Seven Hills home in Sydney last year. An inquest is yet to be held.

“My two sons were killed by the system,” she told AAP. “I just cry and cry and keep on crying because we have never gotten justice. I don’t think we ever will.”

In Canberra, Aboriginal people from around Australia converged on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to mark its 50th anniversary.

Gomeroi man Duglus McGrady travelled nine hours from Moree to attend. The 79-year-old, who was recently discharged from hospital after suffering three strokes, has been attending protests at the tent embassy since its inception. He was carrying an Aboriginal flag that belonged to his best friend, who has since died.

“We are still fighting, we still have a long way to go,” he said. “I’m still here, that’s the main thing.”

Thousands more marched through the streets of Brisbane and rallied in Perth and Adelaide.

The Melbourne march was cancelled, with organisers Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance announcing last week that it would be “careless to hold an event in the height of a pandemic and a virus that has taken a hold of so many in our community”.

In Hobart the rally was moved online, with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre manager Nala Mansell telling the Mercury an in-person event carried too much risk for Aboriginal people, who are particularly vulnerable to Covid-19. The organisers of Darwin’s rally said there would be no rally on Larrakia land this year, saying “rest is resistance”.