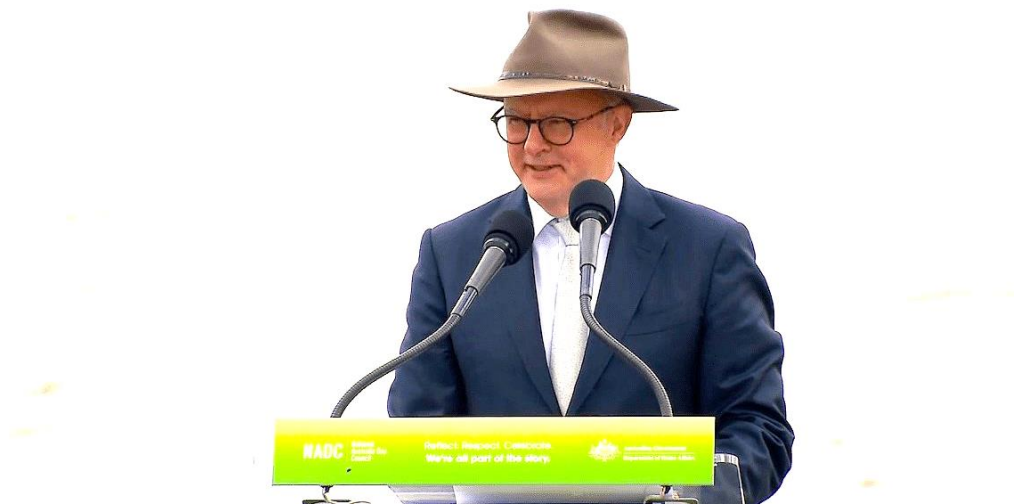


# Bigger and better than Australia Day, let's make it the Australia Long Weekend

It is for the Australian people, individually and collectively, to make the decision when and how we want to celebrate our nation, write **Elizabeth Elliott, Geoff Cousins** and **Phil Jenkyn** – SMH Opinion 29 July 2024



*Anthony Albanese has told an Australia Day ceremony the country is at its best when united*

Why don't we do something uniquely Australian and celebrate all that is good about Australians and our nation over a long weekend in January? It needs to be at a time and on a date that can bring the nation together and that everyone can support.

Currently, Australia Day is celebrated on January 26, a date which marks the beginning of British settlement and the dispossession of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

There is an increasing number of Australians who for various reasons feel that this date is no longer appropriate and are seeking a time and a date that can get wide support.

Once a year, we all want to celebrate being Australian, what we value and how we can do better. It is a time to acknowledge the contributions of others, a time to relax with family and friends, and a time to reflect.

Australians enjoy a long weekend, especially taken in January. It's summer time, the kids are on school holidays, and nature and the beach are beckoning.

In choosing a long weekend finishing on a Monday evening that is always in January, it can't be the last long weekend in the month because on occasions that will fall on Monday, January 31 or just before, clashing with schools reopening and people getting back to work.

Looking at the calendar over time, the Monday of the second-last long weekend in January will always fall between January 18 and 24, about two-thirds of the way through the month. This fits in really well with holidays, school and work, and predates January 26.

This long weekend could be called the Australia Long Weekend, and feature Australian honours and awards, citizenship ceremonies, events and much more spread over three days.

While January 26 was relevant to settlers in NSW as the foundation day of white settlement, it was not so in other states where settlers fixed upon dates more pertinent to their particular colonisation.

The Commonwealth and state governments agreed to unify all differing state-based celebrations to January 26 in 1946. However, the public holiday was taken on the closest Monday.

In 1994, it was decided that Australia Day should be officially celebrated as a public holiday on the actual date January 26 for all states and territories.

Since then, when that day falls on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, there is in fact no long weekend at all.

To continue to celebrate our nation on January 26 makes little sense to those who live in states outside NSW. And it makes little sense to those who live in NSW who want a time to celebrate that is all-inclusive.

By choosing a time we enjoy that is not controversial, we can all celebrate being Australian and respect our diversity, and reflect on the whole Australian story: our First Peoples' history and culture, our British traditions and institutions, and our multicultural society.

We propose that we move the celebration of our nation from January 26 to a special Australia Long Weekend, to take place every year over the second-last long weekend in January. The Saturday could include official ceremonies and major events, and possibly be called Australia Day. The Monday would be declared a public holiday.

Let us paint the picture for the future.

Every year Australians celebrating over three days, always a Saturday/Sunday/ Monday at the best time of the year two-thirds of the way through January. Your choice of what to do. Go away for the long weekend. Watch the Australian of the Year ceremonies in Canberra on the Friday night including the Welcome to Country. Attend local Citizenship Ceremonies on Saturday morning followed by an Aussie Sausage Sizzle. Various cultural events in the afternoon followed by a Concert.

For sports fans, what about the Cricket Test Match or the Australian Open Tennis on the Sunday and Monday? Or catching up with friends? Going to the beach or for a hike in one of the many national parks. Time for a bit of reflection about our true history and how we can do better? Perhaps a time to be respectful to all our citizens? Or simply do none of this and just relax.

And for those in entertainment and hospitality, there is work and certainty.

What great choices for such a wonderful country to have!

And what is best about it? It is that we can celebrate knowing that all our fellow citizens are willing to do so too.

It is for the Australian people, individually and collectively, to make the decision when and how we want to celebrate our nation.

This proposal is respectfully placed before the wider community for discussion and consideration, and to seek your support.

It is up to us to create our own history and help unite the nation.

**Phil Jenkyn** is a retired barrister. He played a leading role in the successful battle to save Sydney Harbour's headlands. He has received an OAM for his service to the environment and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Trust.

**Geoff Cousins** is a business and community leader and environmentalist. He was previously president of the Australian Conservation Foundation and a consultant to then prime minister John Howard. He was awarded an AM for his service to the community.

**Elizabeth Elliott** is a paediatrician and a professor at Sydney University. Her clinical work and research is focused on improving the health and well-being of disadvantaged children. She was awarded an AM for her services to paediatrics and child health.

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