

Proposal to end Australia Day debate



Shelley Ware

Every year, as January rolls around, Australia finds itself locked in the same difficult debate, one filled with a cycle of division, anger and pain centred on January 26. For many First Nations people, this date is not a day of celebration but a reminder of invasion, loss and ongoing injustice.

A trusted voice in this ongoing January 26 debate is Gunditjmarra woman and Clothing The Gaps co-founder Laura Thompson. She is backing a solution to this debate, that just might be the answer we are looking for. She says "It's time we stop starting every new year talking about January 26. It creates so much division and racism when what we really need is reflection, respect and change."

The date will always carry the weight of violence and dispossession. Laura Thompson is direct about this reality "January 26 will always be a day of mourning and we should never celebrate on this day. Australia is the only country in the world that has its national holiday on the day it was colonised and invaded. It's disrespectful and needs to change."

While the push to "change the date" has grown in strength, there is also a recognition that large-scale change takes time and the debate about what date has seemingly gone nowhere until now.

As always, Laura Thompson reflects with true honesty. "As much as we'd love to see a national day that truly centres and celebrates First Nations people, the reality is that Australia is not ready for that level of change just yet, the failed referendum reminded us of that. But we can still take a step forward."

"One idea gaining traction is the idea of an 'Australia Long Weekend.' It's a small but meaningful shift. Instead of marking 'Australia Day' on January 26, the public holiday could move to the second-last Monday in January each



Gunditjmarra woman Laura Thompson.

year, creating a consistent long weekend that never falls on January 26."

Out of all the dates put forward in the "change the date" debate, this one is genius to me and I would love to see this long weekend happen. We have to remember that January 26 as a whole-country celebration of Australia Day, only started in 1994. Before that it was celebrated on many different dates.

This proposal doesn't attempt to erase the truth of what happened on January 26. Instead, it separates a national day of unity from a

day of trauma. It allows January 26 to remain what it is for First Nations people: a day of mourning, reflection and truth-telling.

And while a long weekend may feel like a small step, Thompson reminds us that big change often begins with small acts of courage. "Moving the date of Australia Day might seem like a small change but small shifts can create big ripples. Progress often begins with the willingness to rethink the way things are and imagine what could be better – not perfect, but better."

For this shift to occur, it

will require more than conversation, it needs movement, signatures and political will. The Australia Long Weekend campaign australiaalongweekend.com.au invites everyday Australians to sign the national petition calling for government support for the change. Petitions in Australia often serve as the first stepping stone for reform, signalling to leaders that public opinion is shifting.

People can also read, share and endorse the open letter to the Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, which outlines why the change is important, how it honours First Nations people, and why it offers a path that avoids the annual cycle of division. The letter calls on the PM to show leadership by embracing a practical step that fosters unity, truth-telling and respect.

By signing the petition, sharing the letter, and encouraging friends, workplaces and community groups to engage in the conversation, Australians can help build the momentum needed for governments to act. Change doesn't begin in Parliament; it begins with the people. When communities signal that they are ready to show respect and make space for

First Nations voices, political leaders are far more likely to follow.

A long weekend offers Australians something crucial, the ability to begin the year with reflection rather than conflict. Instead of being pulled into the same painful debate every January, the nation could use the final weekend of the month to celebrate shared values, acknowledge hard truths, and imagine a more united future.

No single change will heal the wounds of colonisation or undo centuries of harm. But shifting away from celebrating on January 26 is a step – a respectful, meaningful one.

It is a chance to say, "we have listened, we understand and we can do better".

The Australia Long Weekend proposal is not the final answer, but it is a chance to begin steering the country toward a future that is kinder, truer and more connected. And, as Laura Thompson reminds us, progress doesn't have to be perfect to be powerful, it just needs to begin.

● **Shelley Ware is a proud Yankunytatjara and Wirangu woman from Adelaide.**