

Pride and shame: national day leaving many conflicted

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AAP

Sunday, 25 January 2026



First Nations leaders say the Australia Day debate will advance once wrongdoing is acknowledged. (Steven Markham/AAP PHOTOS) Credit: AAP

Hurt, loss, embarrassment, sorrow, frustration. The feelings brought up by a single day in Australia are vast and varied.

That day is January 26, known officially as Australia Day, but it has also been labelled Survival Day, Invasion Day and a day of mourning.

For Bardi Elder Aunty Munya Andrews the day doesn't just signify what happened in the past but is an annual reminder of the ongoing impacts of colonisation.

"It marks the beginning of invasion and dispossession of my peoples," she tells AAP.

"The loss of land, lives, language, culture and our sovereignty; it's a day of mourning and remembrance."

On January 26, 1788, a flag was erected in what is now known as Sydney Cove, establishing the colony of New South Wales.

In 1938, marking 150 years of colonisation, thousands of Aboriginal people marched through the streets of Sydney.

Led by the Australian Aborigines League and Aborigines Progressive Association, the occasion was designated a day of mourning for Indigenous people, and remains so.

In more recent times, co-founder and chief executive of fashion brand Clothing the Gaps, Laura Thompson, has campaigned tirelessly for a change of date for Australia Day.

Her brand began selling 'not a date to celebrate' clothing in 2020, and in 2023 started a petition asking the prime minister to acknowledge the harm caused by January 26 and to consider shifting its national celebration.

"This work we're doing isn't just ours," the Gunditjmara woman said.

"We're carrying on generations of work before that."

The still-circulating petition has attracted more than 80,000 signatures.

As part of the campaign, a long weekend falling between January 18 and 24 has been proposed as an alternative.

Ms Thompson says many people choose not to celebrate Australia Day on January 26, with employers offering flexibility around when staff can take the public holiday and numbers at rallies and marches opposing Australia Day growing.

"Thinking about what an alternative could be, whether it's a long weekend or something else, discussing options is certainly a step forward," she says.

But before the cause can advance, there are further conversations to be had, Aunty Munya says, and they need to happen without guilt, blame or shame.

"Before we argue about a new day we perhaps need to be willing to acknowledge the harms caused by this one," she says.

Carla Rogers, who runs consultancy business Evolve Communities, alongside Aunty Munya says the worst thing to do is ignore the issue.

"We're in a situation where avoidance has made this conversation louder and even more polarised," she says.

The polarisation, which has become characteristic of this debate and many others in Australia's political landscape, is a cause for frustration for Just Reinvest NSW chief executive Geoff Scott.

His aim is to reduce Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system and says the conversation around changing the date provides no solutions, just delays on issues affecting First Nations people every day.

"We don't know where we're going and changing the date will make not one scrap of difference to anything," the Wiradjuri man insists.

"We live in a country where the same debate dominates everything and the debate does nothing to change the lives of people - we're no closer to closing the gap, no closer to helping the kids we should be focused on."

Australia is experiencing an "epidemic of division", Mr Scott says, and growing hostilities have been brought out in numerous discussions, including those around the Bondi massacre in December.

Racial division was also used as a 'political football' during the 2023 voice referendum, he adds.

"Racism is inherent in our institutions in Australia and, as a people, until we admit that, we're not going to move on," Mr Scott says.

This is why respectful listening and understanding is an important step, which cannot be skipped, Aunty Munya says.

"We don't all think the same but we can at least respect each other and open our hearts and minds to each other," she says.

As a non-Indigenous person, Ms Rogers says her relationship to January 26 has changed over time as she has educated herself.

She considers this is one of the most powerful things that can be done to shift perspectives - learning and hearing the stories of First Nations people.

"It's a really sorrowful day, for me, I'm actually embarrassed about the day and conflicted," she says.

"It's very hard to reconcile pride in a country, which I feel very grateful to live in and deeply respectful of the generosity of First Nations people."

As January 26 approaches for another year, Ms Thompson takes heart in the traction her petition has garnered all over the country.

Global names are supporting the cause including cosmetics brand Lush, which is developing an 'always will be' soap product.

Ms Thompson says it's only a matter of time before something has to change.

"First Nations people love seeing that we've got global brands like Lush showing up as allies," she says.

"It also shows First Nations-led campaigns can influence business and culture."

No matter what they call the day, and the feelings it brings up, each agree that the country needs to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"We need Indigenous voices to be heard, we've been calling for it for generations," Ms Thompson says.

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