

Simple executive decision: The fix for Australia Day?



James Woods from the Australian Long Weekend Initiative proposes moving Australia Day to the second-last Monday in January. This shift promises a long weekend every year, boosts business productivity, and fosters national unity for all Australians.

The VAN Talks Podcast

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Charles Pakana: Arguably one of the most socially and politically contentious dates on the Australian calendar is, not surprisingly, 26 January. Where some Australians regard it as a day of national pride and fervour, others, particularly within first nations communities, and collaborating communities, regard it as a day of mourning, a day that marks the invasion of this country from what's commonly called the colonisers. Joining me today to talk about the 26th of January and a much heralded alternative to that is James Woods, a non-Aboriginal man. He's one of the key instigators for the recently

popularised initiative of the Australian Long Weekend. James, thanks for joining me on the program today.

James Woods: Charles, no problems.

Charles: James. Just give me a brief overview of the Australian Long Weekend initiative and then we'll deep dive into some of the key issues, especially when it comes to business support and political support.

James: Put simply, the proposal is to move Australia Day to the second last Monday in January. So rather than having it on the 26th, on a fixed date on the 26th, we move to a long weekend, an Australia Long Weekend, which finishes with Australia Day on the Monday.

Charles: So we still get the public holiday. That's the important thing.

James: Absolutely! We get the public holiday. And we get, most importantly for a lot of Australians, we get a long weekend as well every year. So this year we had a long weekend, next year we won't. Maybe we will if our proposal gets up. But on the current regime we won't have a long weekend in 2027. I say we should have a long weekend every year.

Charles: Where did this initiative start? Because there have been many calls for various dates. The 8th of May, for example, "Mate" Day, the 1st of January to mark Federation. Where did you and your colleague Phil, actually start this process and this initiative?

James: Well, it was just one of those things that has always troubled me. The thing that I'm really keen on is having a day where all Australians can celebrate together and we cannot do that on a date that gives such offence to our Aboriginal people and those people that are connected to them. We just simply can't have a national holiday on a date where half the people, on the current polling, say that it's not a suitable date to celebrate. So, we were rolling around this issue at family dinners and things like that, at the pub and we came up with this idea of moving it forward a week. If you move it, you've got to move it to the second last Monday because that's the date that keeps it closest to what we're currently doing, but a date that defiantly...

Charles: Will never fall on the 26th of January.

James: Never fall on the 26th. I got to that just through chatting with people and coming up with the idea. Simultaneously in Sydney. Phil Jenkyn, my co-convenor of the Australia Long Weekend campaign, he came to a similar conclusion in the same method, just talking about it with friends and family, put a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald and that was published. And I saw that I was well advanced with the website and domain name and other things along those lines. And, and I said, "well, we've got the same idea, we should just join forces and do it together." So that's how Phil and I got together. We

probably had 12 months working on the project without actually ever meeting physically and we only first met a couple of months ago in person.

Charles: So a lot of what you do, James, is meet up with business owners. You're located with your business here, right in the heart of Melbourne. You do meet with other business owners and business leaders to preach this particular initiative. What's the sort of response you're getting from those business owners and what response do you give to them when the naysayers may say, well, look, this is going to be too costly for business?

James: Generally, it's well supported when you have a chance to explain what it's for. And I actually just did this this morning with the guys that made the coffee for us downstairs. I said, well, I was going up to have an interview and a podcast and the guy there, "so tell me what it's about." And I explained what the current situation was and what the proposal was. And he goes, "yeah, that sounds a perfectly sensible idea. Why don't we do it?" So a lot of people perhaps who aren't so connected with the Aboriginal community don't think about it. But once it's brought up, and especially where we see the enormous amount of division around the day at the moment, everybody wants a day when we can get together as a country and say how lucky we are.

Charles: Well, how would you respond to people that say that what you're doing is you're fuelling the fires or fanning the fires of divisiveness within Australia? Because that really is a bit of a catch cry of the conservative media and so many of these initiatives.

James: The polling suggests that there's about half of the country at the moment, we say a little bit more, but let's say it's about half the country that don't support the date. So we are divided. And when you look at the problem and apply a completely neutral political approach to it, you must come back to the answer that we can't maintain it on the same day. And the cost – most importantly, the benefits of the change are heavily in favour of changing the date.

Charles: Well, you mentioned costs and I did mention before that you do have naysayers saying "this is going to be too costly to business." So how's the response to that?

James: Well, the first thing I say is a public holiday in the middle of a week is awful for business. As a business owner – we employ about 65 people in this business – you put a public holiday in the middle of the week, it just kills productivity for that week because you have people that are coming and going. People try and take holidays and when it's in the middle of the week, it doesn't work. Having a long weekend is the best thing, both for the business owner and for the staff members because you get the three day break rather than two days, you come back to work for a couple of days and then you're, you've got to take a day off.

Charles: We know what that's like, James.

James: It's no good, it's no good at all for anyone. So a long weekend, it's a great Australian tradition and we should have it every year. So there's no cost to business, business likes it. It's a much better solution for business. It's not costly to do. It doesn't require a referendum, it doesn't require any sort of vote. This is an executive decision of government.

Charles: Yeah.

James: And it's got to be done by both the state and federal governments together. It's actually a state decision as to public holidays, but ultimately that's a national public holiday, so the state and federal government need to together. But all they need to do is make a decision to change the date. They don't have to do anything else. It's the most simple executive decision. You change the date. There's no great amount of expenditure required to change the date. You change it. You don't have to move any buildings, you don't have to build any new roads. It really is a very, very simple proposition and a lot of government decisions aren't. But this is one that could be done very, very simply.

Charles: Your co-convener, Phil Jenkyn has communicated with the federal government. Can you talk to what sort of response that he's gaining from the government on this initiative?

James: Yeah. The government's position *privately* is that they like the idea.

Charles: Privately? Okay. Off the record is it?

James: Off the record, yeah, well that's my understanding anyway. I haven't had any direct discussions with federal government. I've discussed it with both the Liberal and Labor state politicians.

Charles: Yeah.

James: And privately, and I won't say who they are because the conversations were private, but privately there is support. But they're politicians and they see this as not being a high priority item. They see it as being difficult, politically, because there is some, you know, strong opposition from the more conservative areas of Australia. And so I think it requires the middle ground to put their hand up and say this is a good idea. And that's really where we're aiming with our campaign.

Charles: You said you've met locally, and I presume that's state level with members of the opposition and members of government. I'm interested right now and understanding some of the responses you're getting from the more conservative side of politics at the Victorian level.

James: Well, they're talking to me privately, and often they're people I know. So they're cautious, I think, with what they say because they don't want to offend a belief that I

hold deeply. But so I'm sort of talking about my sense of what's going on in the conservative.

Charles: You're being a bit cagey here, James.

James: I am. I am being a bit cagey because they've always said to me that they support it, they support the idea.

Charles: That's off the record. That's off the record. But in the party room...?

James: In the party room, I think there are other things going on. There are political considerations in terms of... This probably isn't natural ground for the Liberal Party at the moment, especially in Victoria.

Charles: Sure.

James: That's where I think there's issues. The individuals concerned like the idea, but the question is selling it to the Australian public generally.

Charles: How hopeful are you, though, if it were to come to the crunch tomorrow or next week, how hopeful are you that there would be at least a groundswell of movement within the conservative political elements in Victoria, that it would be supported?

James: I'm not confident of that at the moment.

Charles: Okay, so there's still a long way to go.

James: Yeah, I think so. This sort of Australia Day season, if you like, which sort of starts in early January and goes through till Australia Day and the week after, where there's a lot of conversation about this. I think there was a lot more positivity this year. And Laura Thompson and Sarah Sheridan, from the Clothing The Gaps,, put their voices behind the proposal. And it made a big difference, I think, because Phil and I are old white guys trying to push something that is essentially seen as an Aboriginal issue. I don't actually see it that way. I see this as a much broader, much broader issue than the Aboriginal issue. And I know we're on Aboriginal news, but even if there wasn't any offence caused to Aboriginal people, you can't have a day where people, for whatever reason, aren't together. I don't think it's a particularly good choice of day. You know, the planting of the flag in New South Wales. I don't think that is a significant enough historical event on which to base an annual holiday.

Charles: You mentioned a few minutes ago, polling that had been undertaken, and I'm aware that there was a YourGov poll undertaken, a national poll to gauge interest in this particular initiative, and I believe it was supported also by Laura and Sarah at Clothing The Gaps. What sort of responses were we getting with that survey?

James: So the response was, from memory, 54% of Australians were in favour of the change of date.

Charles: Right.

James: And the question, which I don't have in front of me, but was a broad question about the changing of the date. And it's really important for people to understand that the Australia Long Weekend proposal is not about changing the fundamental purpose of Australia Day. It's about everyone getting together and celebrating all the great things about this country and focusing on the positives. And there is so much negativity and division in the community these days and it's growing. And this is really what's motivating me as much as the offence caused for Aboriginal people, is to have a day where we can genuinely put aside whatever problems there are and reflect on what a good place it is to live. Because we are the envy of the world. And sometimes I think we lose sight of that through the course of the year when we're all trying to make it quid and make things better and fix problems. There needs to be a time when put that aside and look to all the good things that have happened and use that as a base to try and make things better again.

Charles: In talking about the poll, we'll just stay there for a couple of minutes. According to my research, we're looking at around about a 70% support from youth. Was that surprising? Because that's a huge percentage.

James: Not at all. Not at all. There's a real division in this debate between the old school, 50 and above, who are sort of more fixed to the European, the British traditions, as opposed to the young people who have been brought up with a far wider view of the world. I know that's certainly the case with my two sons, is that they have a much broader view of the world than I did and at their age so it wasn't surprising at all to me that the Australian youth is heavily in favour of a change and that gives me some comfort that it's going to happen at some point in the future.

Charles: When you say some point in the future in an ideal world, not a surreal world, but an ideal world, realistically, when would you like to see this start to come about?

James: I'm sort of thinking sometime in the next five years, within the next five years it would be possible if there was sufficient analysis and thought given to the proposal by all of Australia, and especially the people that are sort of undecided or haven't thought about it very carefully. If you got to those people and asked them to look at it critically, as I've done many times in conversations, it doesn't take long to convince people that it's a good idea.

Charles: What are some of the key arguments you're hearing though, from the naysayers?

James: The cost is one of them.

Charles: We've already addressed the cost that realistically for a business, because you're going to avoid having that midweek break, it's going to be less cost impactful.

James: The people who are against the proposal often say, why should we do this to satisfy our Aboriginal people who are only between 2 and 3% of the population?

Charles: Yeah.

James: And my answer to that is because the offence that is felt by them is so deep and you probably don't understand it. I've only just come to understand it myself in more recent times. But the offence is so deep and the connection now between Australian Aboriginal people and non-indigenous people is growing and so you've got a very large proportion of the population that don't want it. It's not just Aboriginal people that don't want it, it's a lot of, a lot of the other people in Australia as well. And we say, you know, more than 50%. That's possibly arguable, but it's certainly around 50% on anyone's numbers. So we must, we must change it.

Charles: Do you see that percentage increasing over the coming years, given that more of those die-hards, quite frankly, well, they're passing on, they're going away. That younger generation, that more informed, in tune and educated generation is taking up so much of the vote and so much presence?

James: I think that will happen. You're right there. The demographic's going to change as the younger people get older and assuming that the next generation of young people are given this magnificent broad education that certainly my kids were given and with that comes a greater level of support for a change. I want to get it on before I croak. So I do think, as I said, my pitch is really to businesses, to people that haven't thought about it, don't have an entrenched position. And I want people to really consider the question deeply. Doesn't take very long. Cause there's not many arguments against it, quite frankly, other than emotional ones about that's, you know, that's always the way it's been, which isn't true. But there's a deep emotional connection for a lot of older Australians about Australia Day and Australia and the flag. And I understand that because a lot of my friends and family are in that generation.

Charles: But it's nothing to do with the flag, really, is it? We're talking about a day of national celebration. That's what it seems to me.

James: I know. But we have to overcome as campaigners, is this false emotional connection to things that aren't about the date. What's caused the division is making it bigger than it really is. It's not really a big decision to move it, but very important. It's got a huge effect on Aboriginal people and the people that support them. That's why I sort of struggle to understand why we're sitting here, why it isn't already done. It's my naivety about public interest campaigns and this is the first time I've been involved in one. It's so, so blindingly obvious to me that there is so much to gain and so little to lose by moving the date that it ought to be done immediately.

Charles: James, let's look at a call to action. A lot of people listening to this will want to actually do something to support this initiative. Apart from signing the petition, apart from speaking to their friends about it. What would you like to see occur within that groundswell that is so important in these social changes within Australia?

James: What we need to do now is we need to get an overwhelming number of people giving overt support to the proposal. At the moment, there isn't enough overt support. People openly putting their hands up, putting their faces on our website.

Charles: Yep.

James: Doing things that will put pressure on the politicians. We have to change the national narrative so that the politicians are feeling that they're going to be safe in doing what I think many of them in conscience would like to do, but their political considerations are preventing them from doing.

Charles: Given that we're approaching a state election later on this year in Victoria, do you believe this should be an election issue?

James: Yes, I think it should be an election issue.

Charles: And how do people actually make that become an election issue. Apart from raising their voices, speaking to their members of Parliament and candidates?

James: What we'd like people to do is to get onto the Australia long weekend website, www.australialongweekend.com.au there is a supporters page there where people can register themselves as supporters, put a photo of themselves on the website, we'll add that to our list of supporters. Obviously, signing the petition, which can be accessed by the website, is also important. Logging onto and following our Instagram and Facebook pages, social media presence is one of the big keys. We'd love to have several hundred thousand followers and that will give us some real clout with politicians. So on our part, we're going to be doing more of these sorts of interviews. We're going to be doing some reels to explain to people what the proposal is and try and sell the message and do it in a neutral way, an intellectual way, where people can look at the facts, make clear and well informed decisions on the facts, and hopefully they'll come down in favour of the proposal and then take some action to help us make it happen.

Charles: James Woods from the Australian Long Weekend Initiative, thanks for your time today.

James: My pleasure. Thanks, Charles.

Australian Long Weekend website [here](#)

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