

An Australia Day for All

Currently, Australia day symbolises great sorrow and pain amongst indigenous mobs whilst many non-aboriginal Australians feel uneasy celebrating our nation on this day.

The debate around this is occurring rapidly and potentially divisively- I believe Byron has an opportunity to help the nation make the transition away from the historical stain of this date, whilst still honouring the needs and values of those who enthusiastically wish to celebrate our successes as a nation and our communities within Australia.

Many other countries have grappled with this and so learning from others may point us in a good direction. I would love the way we celebrate and the day we celebrate who we are as a nation to be different.

The Date

I believe we as a nation have a lot to celebrate and a lot for which to be thankful. On the 26th, we are not just celebrating the arrival of 'whites' - as it would then be more appropriate to call the day- 'Colonising day', or 'English Arrival day' etc.

For most Australians, this day is not much more than a holiday and the mark of the end of the Summers holiday. For the remaining Australians, it is probably split evenly between those who think it is the correct day and correct way to celebrate our country's achievements and both past and present and those like me who feel it is an inappropriate way and day to celebrate when it is also the day the decimation and denigration of the first Australians began. Decimation and denigration that we still have not rectified, learnt from, apologised for or paid penance-our national wound remains.

We could change the date to one that marks the concept or reality of 'Australia'. It will never be the day of Federation- January 1st, because Australians being Australians-that is already a holiday and we can't overlap-we need great bang for our public holiday buck. We could explore dates when Henry Parkes made a famous speech about establishing 'Australia' or some other date of significance, though, this would mean a fair load of change, debate, angst and difficulty.

On Australia day, we are celebrating Australia and what it means to be Australian and celebrating our diversity and different cultural backgrounds. So, let's start with the first cultural community that has become part of our mix-the indigenous community- rather than the second group-the Anglo Saxons. Thus, symbolically, it would be more appropriate to acknowledge a time before white man arrived, when the first nations were indeed, the First Australians. So, why not the night before? The evening of the 25th.

An evening tradition of celebrating Australia day on the 25th could symbolise the richness and importance of the first Australians, it would directly and clearly symbolise that, across our towns and cities, the Australia we are celebrating began with our local mobs- we would focus on a positive time for our indigenous history-rather than a day that pinpoints the start of their collective sorrow.

This has a few benefits:

1. It is close to the current date and doesn't need a massive debate over a more appropriate date that could perhaps never reach a consensus. Maybe when we are a republic-this would be an appropriate date.
2. It utilises the current social acceptance and convenience of this date. The 26th has always marked the end of summer holidays and especially the end of school holidays. This would still be the case. The 26th will still be a public holiday, but like Christmas, we can celebrate it the night before and leave the day for people to do what they wish individually-from having a bbq, acknowledging the survival aspect, listening to the hottest 100 etc. It requires very little formal adjustment, but is symbolically different enough to serve its purpose to celebrate away from the 26th. It would also allow those who enthusiastically wish to support the 'traditional' Australia day date to do so.

I'd love my kids to also continue to acknowledge their British roots and origins and it's cultural significance of Australia's past, and for them to respect those who feel strongly and nationalistically that this day is one to pay respect for those who fought and died in the name of 'Australia' and who wish to honour our achievements of the last two hundred years. It is close enough to the 26th to fit within our social and business calendars and our lifestyles built around summer- it would be easy to do if we had the will.

The Style

Byron Bay is 'Cavvanbah'- let's once more meet and gather and celebrate and corroboree. Imagine a few hundred people sitting in circle in the grassed space within the Sandhills area. The night will still have the great local awards component-though this time with more attendees enjoying and watching it. The council funded lunch can be changed to a council funded dinner- a relaxed open feast and one that the Arakwal could have a say in what is offered, allowing for bush tucker etc.

As locals sit and chat, cultural groups can bring their music and colour to the circle, one after another-after the local mob have started the stomp.

Mary Flick chronicled in 1906 how on most Saturday nights, the local Byron Bay community would often pay sixpence to attend the local Arakwal painting up and dancing corroboree style in the Sandhills area- most probably where the library currently sits. There is local historical significance for this area to hold a space for white fellas and black fellas to come together.

Proposal Details:

1. An Australia Day event, to be held on the evening of the 25th January.
2. The event to be funded by BSC
3. The event to be organised where needed by BSC
4. The event to be curated, and developed by the Arakwal Corp.

N.B: It is crucial that the onus doesn't go onto the Arakwal to do everything- council could simply have the Arakwal be 'project managers'. The Arakwal could decide on the food-perhaps bush tucker and decide how the event should unfold. Like the thousands of years prior, the local custodians could again open and hold a gathering space- inviting others to come and celebrate, whilst Council pays for the event and puts the infrastructure in place.

When my family joins me at the various events on Australia day, I'd love them to be part of events and ceremonies co-created by our local mob-instead of them only invited to welcome us to their country and then have them sit to the side for the formalities or leaving to celebrate Survival day.

I imagine celebrating an Australia Day with my kids starting at dusk on the 25th, consisting of an indigenous feast, music and celebration from many ethnicities, awards as per usual acknowledging great actions by our locals and circles of everyone- momentarily together- for one beautiful moment a year- acknowledging our collective past, present and future.

I'd love to a part of that. I'd love my kids to be a part of that. I'd love the diverse country I love to be a part of that.