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Cowardly History: Australia Day and Invasion

It's the sort of stuff that should have been sorted years ago in Australia: a murderous, frontier society ill disposed to the indigenous populace; the creation of a convict colony that was itself an act of invasion rather than settlement; the theft of land and its rapacious plunder.

Even some of the rough colonists were not oblivious to such a crude record. Henry Parkes, in planning the Centenary celebrations as New South Wales premier in 1888, was asked by a fellow politician what he would be doing for the poor and needy for the occasion. Wealthy landed citizens had been promised a banquet of much quaffing and gorging. As a gesture, Parkes considered the distribution of food parcels. "Then we ought to do something for the Aborigines," came the response. The answer from the premier was coldly revealing: "And remind them that we have robbed them?"

But the use of such language is frowned upon by flag waving brigades advocating uplift and encouragement, those who can only ever babble about the exceptional country, the remarkable social experiment, the wonders of a Britannic transplant that found itself at the other side of the earth.

Generally speaking, Australia Day is not exactly one of patriotic feverishness. As the BBC describes it, Australians tend to mark the occasion more as "a late summer festival than a solemn national day its founders intended it to be". The more serious ones find time to acknowledge such words as "a fair go" and "mateship", along with "democracy" and "freedom".

For the most part the date is a scribble on the calendar, commemorating January 26, 1788 when Captain Arthur Phillip took formal possession of the land that would become the colony of New South Wales. The British flag was raised in Sydney Cove, if only because sources of fresh water had been identified. The actual date of the arrival of the First Fleet in Botany Bay was a week prior. And so, deceptions are born and lies established.

By 1935, January 26 came to be known as Australia Day in all states bar New South Wales, which preferred the even duller appellation of “Anniversary Day”. Three years later, various Indigenous groups sought a different title: January 26 would be known as a Day of Mourning and Protest. Victorian Aboriginal activist William Cooper saw little reason to dissemble: the day the British arrived was a memorial to the death of the Aboriginal people.

In recent years, the casualness has come off the gloss of the occasion. There have been campaigns launched to Save Australia Day, spearheaded by Mark Latham, former federal Labor opposition leader and now stable mate of right wing commenters in the country. In 2018, Latham’s [effort](#) involved television, radio and social media advertisements fearful of an Orwellian future of censorship. “In an environment where you have so much political correctness, where certain words, themes and values are banned in public institutions, I think the Big Brother approach, that dystopian theme, is very appropriate.”

Latham’s sentiment here that a history focused on the grim and the brutal is not constructive, being merely conducive to morbid reflection. “A lot of terrible things happened in the 19th and 20th centuries, no one’s wiping that history away, but we can’t rewrite that history.” Nor speak of it, it would seem.

The national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, has also found itself thickly involved in such disputes of title, despite pretending not to be. In attempting to keep an open church on terminology, the organisation has managed to aggravate all concerned. As the network says [in a statement](#), “Australia Day” is the “default terminology” used. “We also recognise and respect that community members use other terms for the event, including ‘26 January’, ‘Invasion Day’ and ‘Survival Day’, so our reporting and coverage reflect that.”

Prior to this year’s coverage of Australia Day events, the ABC felt the need [to clarify its position](#) after suggesting that the terms were flexible and elastic in their deployment. “Given the variety of terms in use, and the different perspectives on the day that the ABC is going to cover over the course of the long weekend, it would be inappropriate to mandate staff use any one term over others in all contexts.”

That need for clarification was driven by criticisms over an article published by the network [originally titled](#) “Australia Day/Invasion Day 2021 events for Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin.” This was [less than pleasing](#) to the Communications Minister Paul Fletcher, who represents a conservative government already cranky with various news reports from the organisation. The ABC had “clearly got this one wrong” in referencing both terms for the day and presuming them to be interchangeable. “The name of Australia Day is reflected in legislation across Australia. More important, it is reflected in the usage of the overwhelming majority of Australia.”

The pro-market, libertarian Institute of Public Affairs was also livid, and had some advice for Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The government, [suggested](#) IPA communications director Evan Mulholland, could “refuse to fund a public broadcaster that doesn’t respect Australian

values.” In a sour mood to deceive, Mulholland also toyed with a moral argument. “If Australia was invaded, not settled then native title ceases to exist. Does the ABC support the abolition of native title?”

Showing a distinct lack of backbone, the broadcaster, despite Fletcher insisting that it retained “editorial independence” proceeded to amend the headline. “Australia Day is a contentious day for many. Here are the events being held on January 26”. A minor triumph for cowardice over substance.

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