



Australia's Groundhog Day of missed opportunity cannot go on forever

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This year's lead up to Australia Day has followed a steady pattern that appears to have us locked in a repetitive cycle we cannot escape. But escape it we must. After a year in which we've responded in extraordinary fashion to a global crisis, our country deserves a day when all of us can come together to celebrate what makes us unique.

We certainly deserve better than another Groundhog Day.

The term 'Groundhog Day', made famous by a 1993 Hollywood film, has become synonymous with the idea of repeating the same events over and over again.


Australia Day eve has become our Groundhog Day, as calls by First Nations people and others to change the date upon which Australia celebrates its 'foundation' are dismissed by the leaders of both major parties. It began when Paul Keating and John Hewson were political leaders and has been continued by their successors right up to Morrison and Albanese. The voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are wilfully ignored or silenced, while efforts and proposals to make even seemingly modest adjustments to the day are swiftly rebuked.

Forget changing the date; this year simple ideas to truly recognise our history have been opposed, such as Zali Steggall's call for our nation to observe a minute's silence to recognise the 'price paid' by First Nations peoples. Cricket Australia drew the ire of the Prime Minister for dropping references to 'Australia Day' in promotional material. In kicking the can down the road, our leaders continue to show themselves unable or unwilling to lead the public the short distance to understanding why so many First Nations people cannot celebrate the landing of the First Fleet.

It should not be too onerous a task of leadership.

NSW Premier Sir Henry Parkes was acutely aware of the difficulty of hosting an inclusive celebration on 26 January. In dismissing the suggested involvement of Aboriginal people in the 1888 centenary celebration, he retorted "*And remind them that we have robbed them?*" Of course, at the time of Parkes' candid remark, the robbery was still unfolding, with lethal and other profound consequences for Aboriginal communities across the continent.

130 odd years later, having failed to offer any formal or substantial redress for the continuing effects of the devastation wreaked upon First Nations, can anyone



seriously question why Indigenous Australians would be opposed to celebrating the arrival of the First Fleet as *their* day of national celebration?

In responding to Cricket Australia's proposal to drop the reference to "Australia Day" in promoting games to be played on 26 January, the Prime Minister was quoted on 21 January as saying:

"[Australia Day is] all about acknowledging how far we've come".

"...you can't just airbrush things that have happened in the past".

"I think one of the great things about Australia, and I think we're respected for this, is that we're pretty upfront and honest about our past".

"The national apologies that have been put in place show we are prepared to deal with our past ... and more importantly, we don't allow it to get in the way of our future".


The Prime Minister is right, we do need an Australia Day that is honest. Yet it is difficult to reconcile his statements with the long history of Australia's continuing failure to deal with the devastating loss and disruption to life, land, language, kinship and culture experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as a direct result of colonisation.

The Apology to the Stolen Generations was stubbornly refused by Prime Minister John Howard and delivered by Kevin Rudd without compensation. While momentous in its way, more than 12 years on, rates of Indigenous child removal are higher now than they have ever been. Real progress in other areas has been similarly glacial. As Noel Pearson has pointed out, in the 28 years since the Mabo decision, the compensation owing for extinguishment of native title remains outstanding. Progress on addressing disadvantage through the Closing the Gap initiative is as slow as the funding to meet the targets is deficient. The list goes on.

Most recently, over the New Year break, the Prime Minister announced a change to our national anthem, from 'young and free' to 'one and free'. This was supposed to, at the stroke of a pen, have dealt with the growing opposition to our anthem and recognised both Indigenous and migrant Australians. 'Real reconciliation', it was proclaimed.

Unfortunately for the Prime Minister and the nation, it is impossible for Australia's past not to get in the way of our future. It cannot, as he says, just be 'airbrushed' away; it must be dealt with meaningfully.

Being honest about the past means being honest about the date. First Nations people first marked 26 January as a Day of Mourning in 1938, while historically the national holiday has been celebrated on a number of dates across different states and territories, and only first observed as a national public holiday on 26 January 1994. This reflects that Australians are partial to changing public holidays. Here in Queensland, for example, we've seen four shifts of the Queen's birthday public holiday in less than a decade. Let's not pretend that is the sticking point.



Many potential solutions to the seemingly intractable problem of 26 January have been offered by many people over many years, including changing Australia Day to 1 January to mark the beginning of federation and observing a Day of Mourning or similar on 26 January. All should be considered.

While changing the date won't help address the critical issues of over-incarceration, child removal, and health and economic disadvantage, it would be a sign that we are sufficiently mature as a country to have meaningful dialogue and be honest and open about our past.

In the meantime, 130 years after Parkes' admission of robbery, we must start truly listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Voice to Parliament proposal sits at a critical juncture, and provides an important opportunity to unite and heal the nation. Countless other recommendations sit unimplemented.

One day in the future I hope to wake to find we have escaped our national Groundhog Day, having genuinely engaged with First Nations about the best day for marking our national day that can be embraced by all Australians. That could yet prove a critical springboard to even more important dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about achieving long-lasting, practical change.

Because, now more than ever, we all deserve a new national day of celebrations with honest and inclusive foundations.