

Which Day for Australia Day?

Pip Wilson

Australia Day, January 26, commemorates the day in 1788 on which Captain Arthur Phillip (1738–1814) organised and officiated at the first ceremony of the new British colony then called New South Wales. It was for a selected few, done with a little pomp, but generally low key, and was mainly to wish the colony good luck, as was recorded by Phillip:

In the evening of the 26th, the colours were displayed on shore, and the Governor, with several of his principal officers and others, assembled around the flagstaff, drank the King's health, and success to the settlement, with all the display of form which, on such occasions, is deemed propitious because it enlivens the spirits and fills the imagination with pleasing presages.

More than a week earlier, on January 18, Phillip had actually landed at Yarra Bay on Botany Bay's northern shore, and later there was in fact a plaque commemorating that day, set in the wall of the first Government House, which said that on January 18 'Arthur Phillip ... arrived in this country with the first settlers'. January 18, then, might have been taken up as the date of the colony's beginnings. It could have become Australia Day, but it did not.

Just as good a contender, perhaps better, might have been February 7, because on that day in 1788, Governor Phillip conducted a ceremony before a crowd of more than 1000, virtually every European on the continent, in which the formalities associated with his royal commissions were carried out, and the assembled convicts were 'harangued' (as a contemporary described his speech, though it was apparently well received by the audience). Phillip even gave the assembly the afternoon off. February 7 never caught on, although promoted by eminent historian C.H. Currey in the 1950s as a possible Australia Day.

Even in the early days of settlement there were other possible contenders for the honour of being Australia Day, such as any number of days on which Captain James Cook, or even Dirk Hartog or Abel Tasman, made important discoveries on the Australian coast. Nonetheless, from very early days in the colony, January 26 was seen as the Foundation Day, or Anniversary Day, of the New South Wales colony, which in a sense 'became' Australia.

The pedigree of January 26 is impeccable and unrivalled. We know from early documents such as the *Sydney Gazette* and the *Howe Almanacs* that as early as 1804, and right through the following decades, January 26 was commemorated as either ‘First Landing’ or ‘Foundation Day’. In a manner of speaking, then, January 26 has been ‘Australia Day’ for a decade before Australia was even named.

Governor Lachlan Macquarie (1762–1824) recorded in his journal on January 26, 1818, the following insight and event:

This being the 30th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Colony of N. S. Wales by Governor Phillip, who landed first at Sydney on 26th of Janry 1788, I directed 30 guns to be fired from Dawes Battery in honour of the occasion corresponding with the age of the Colony.

As well, government workers were given a holiday on this 1818 ‘Australia Day’. Soon after, it became the norm for banks and public offices to be closed on January 26.

In 1885, by which time the continent was being managed as a number of separate colonies, the idea of an Australian national day was put forward by a Mr H.I. Swifte, and was taken to the Victorian premier, who liked the concept and put it before the other premiers. ‘Foundation’ or ‘Anniversary’ Day was soon gazetted in each of the colonies.

In New South Wales, the Catholic Archbishop, Cardinal Patrick Moran (1830–1911) suggested Australia Day as an alternative to Empire Day. William Holman (1871–1934), Premier of New South Wales, agreed with the idea. *The Worker* newspaper, organ of much trade unionism in New South Wales, vehemently disagreed with any form of celebration on January 26. On Australia Day, 1911, it stated that while it had a deep regard for the past, the landing of Phillip was not worth celebrating. Rather, the election of the Labor Party in 1910 (Australia’s first federal Labor Government) was a far more commendable achievement. *The Worker* concluded,

What of the future? A thousand barriers to progress have been swept from our path; a thousand still remain. The work is not completed; it is in fact only beginning. As those men in 1788 claimed Australia in the name of England, we in 1911 claim the land in the name of Labor. Let the British tie remain ... Labor works to a practical goal and her great concern is the well-being of the whole people. As the early settlers faced a wilderness of forest and plain, we, their sons, are called upon to face a wilderness of traditional evils and deeply-rooted wrongs. Our work is different in nature, but the spirit in which it must be performed is the same. Let us see to it that the second century marks as great an advance as the first ...

In 1931, NSW Premier, Jack Lang decided that from 1932, 'Anniversary Day' would be designated 'Australia Day'. In 1934, however, his naming decision was reversed by Premier Sir Bertram Stevens.

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Government in 1935 stated that all states, bar NSW, had agreed to the name 'Australia Day'. In 1945, harmony was achieved when Sir William McKell's government in NSW adopted the proposal, making January 26, 1946 the first 'official' Australia Day, so named, with all state governments in agreement—although the public holiday was instead taken on the Monday closest to the actual anniversary.

Since 1988, when national bicentennial celebrations were celebrated on January 26, Australia Day has been celebrated on the actual day. If it falls on a weekend, the public holiday is on the following Monday, but the official celebrations still occur on January 26.

Australians' characteristic antipathy towards 'flag waving' has sometimes led to a lack of usage of the day, and editors for decades have bemoaned the lack of spirit sometimes observed. The editor of *The Educational Magazine* from Victoria's Education Department in 1957 suggested that the main reason for that attitude is that January 26 falls within the long school holidays. The author got behind historian Currey's unsuccessful campaign for February 7.

In the 1990s various individuals and organisations campaigned for date changes. Michael Mansell (National Secretary of the Aboriginal Provisional Government), wanted Australia Day on May 27. Journalist Padraic P. McGuinness said February 1. The Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee said January 1. Clyde Holding MP, in 1994 promoted April 25 as the national day. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, at times in the '90s editorially campaigned for January 1. On January 26, 2009, Australian of the Year Mick Dodson called for the date to be changed, and both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition expressed opposition to Dodson's proposal. (It is understandable that Aboriginal activists might well want January 26 to go, as many call it 'Invasion Day'.)

In 1954 the influential periodical *Meanjin* published an article by James G. Murtagh arguing for New Year's Day as the Australian National Day, and as mentioned above, some others today so argue. However, it has also been argued that on January 1, a good proportion of the population of Australia, and of the world, is hung over, and most of the rest is just plain tired. Sleeping-in is *de rigueur* on that day. Even sober Baptists and Methodists have watch-night services on New Year's Eve, and are up until all hours of the morning. One could scarcely choose a more unsuitable day for public activity than New Year's Day, the

argument goes. One must bear in mind, too, as some argue, that January 1 is already a day of national celebration for at least eight other countries. As well, it is also no more politically correct than January 26 in terms of the indigenous people of this country, as they were not a part of the federation process that came to fruition on January 1, 1901. The Indigenous community's varied views on a suitable date have yet to consolidate, or perhaps yet to be shared with the broader community.

New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, while in opposition in early 1995, rejected arguments against our national day's date. He conceded that if more emphasis were placed on Aboriginal achievements, the day would have a greater standing, but he also emphasised that it was fashionable to express disgust at the British origins of the nation. Carr pointed out the beneficial things brought by British people to the continent, including trial by jury, freedom of the press and a parliamentary democracy.

In 1994 a *Sydney Morning Herald* Saulwick poll found that more Australians preferred January 26 for their national day than any other proposal. While this author personally prefers December 3 (Eureka Stockade Day), the strength of the argument to retain January 26 as the National Day of Australia lies in the fact that it has been celebrated as such, in various styles but substantially the same way, from the beginning of European settlement—since ten years before Matthew Flinders named the continent and fledgling nation. In a time when the familiar is an endangered species, January 26 has probably earned an indelible red letter on the calendar.

Nowadays, each year on January 26 an estimated 7.5 million people attend celebrations and functions across the country, and, anecdotally, participation might be increasing rather than losing favour. Debate, however, will no doubt long continue just as it always has.

*

*

*

[Eds. Pip Wilson is an ardent amateur student of history, folklore and calendar customs (www.wilsonsalmnac.com).]