

Time for a fresh start with Australia Day



Analysis – Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"]
S[/dropcap]omething ugly happened in a Warrnambool supermarket last week.

A young woman wearing what she no doubt thought was a “patriotic” t-shirt for Australia Day, hurled abuse at another couple of women for speaking in Italian.

“Why don’t you speak f*&%ing English!” she yelled, among other things.

Shortly after hearing about this incident, I was driving into town and noticed the tradesman’s van in front of me proudly displaying a bumper sticker: “Like it, or leave!!”

These might not be earth-shattering incidents on their own, but more and more people are finding it deeply troubling that some Australians now feel it is acceptable – even patriotic – to behave in this way.

Since One Nation leader Pauline Hanson wrapped herself in an Australian flag 16 years ago and signalled a shift in the political landscape, Australia Day has taken on a different tone.

Flag waving and overt displays of nationalism were once something we poked fun at in others, especially when it came to highly patriotic Americans, and Australia Day was once little more than a lazy long weekend that may – or may not – [have actually fallen on January 26.](#) (It was only agreed in 1994 to hold Australia Day on January 26 regardless of what day of the week it fell).

For a younger generation, in particular, Australia Day all seemed pretty boring and and rather than wave the flag, they preferred to wave the green-and-gold colours of our sporting teams and sing “Come on Aussie, Come on, Come on.”

Then came a series of pivotal events in the late 90s and early 2000s which turned things on their head and Australia’s nationalism began to turn nasty.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A
[/dropcap]s a result of this changing political landscape – the launch of One Nation, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a hard line on refugees – Australians learned to become fearful and defensive.

Some of us began to mis-trust people who didn't look like "us", or talk like "us" or behave like "us", because they were out to "get us". Remember the post 9/11 fridge magnets that encouraged us to be alert not alarmed and to report any suspicious activity on a special hotline?

In the years shortly after, bumper stickers and t-shirts began to appear with a picture of the Australian flag and slogans like "F**k off, we're full", "Like it or Leave" or "100% Aussie".

And instead of waving the flag, we began to wrap ourselves in it, like a shield. For me, this was one of the most memorable images of the [Cronulla riots in 2005](#): angry young men and women draped in Australian flags, hurling abuse.

An influx of cheap, imported patriotic merchandise means that everyone can now cover themselves – and their cars – in the Australian flag on Australia Day, except it no longer feels like Australia Day.

To me, it has increasingly felt like Us and Them Day.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] O
[/dropcap]f course Australia Day has always been “Us and Them Day” for Australia’s indigenous population. I find it bizarre that we still expect Indigenous Australians to join the party and not be so hung up about January 26 as marking the beginning of the end for their ancient culture. (Australian of the Year Adam Goodes [emphasised this point](#) at the weekend.)

Yet at the same time, Aldi recalled a range of Australia Day t-shirts because the slogan “Australia: Est 1788” was considered offensive – and it is – but isn’t the choice of January 26 underpinned by this very same sentiment?

Perhaps the best way to celebrate our nation as a welcoming, multicultural and tolerant country with a rich indigenous heritage is to recall the whole day and start afresh.

After all, it has [only been since 1994](#) that all the states and

territories have, as one, marked January 26 as a public holiday. Various alternative dates have since been proposed – the anniversary of the Eureka Stockade, the anniversary of the Mabo Native Title decision – but each comes loaded with its own politics.

So I would suggest picking a date that is already a glorious, relaxed and apolitical public holiday: Boxing Day.



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A side from South Australia, where Boxing Day is Proclamation Day, Boxing Day now has little symbolic meaning in Australia. Ask anyone under 45 what Boxing Day is about and they will probably suggest it is the day the kids starting fighting over their Christmas toys or the first day of a big cricket match.

The [origins of Boxing Day](#), however, are steeped in the tradition of giving, of kindness, of showing respect for those

less fortunate.

How perfect, then, that December 26 become **Unity Day**.

A day when we unite as a nation: be it at the MCG watching the Ashes and reviving “Come on Aussie, Come On” (which is so much gentler than “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie Oi, Oi Oi”) , or watching the yachts set sail for Hobart, or simply enjoying the calm that comes after Christmas.

And instead of wrapping ourselves in the Australian flag, maybe on December 26 we peg out a flag on a Hill’s Hoist, together with every other flag that we feel represents who we are, so that we are a nation covered in flags – all with the sunshine and breeze blowing through.

“Happy Unity Day”...I like it.



For more opinion pieces...

[Broken link for Artlink](#)

[Losing sleep over a lot of rubbish](#)

[Close Flagstaff Hill; save Fletcher Jones](#)

[A little less conversation, a little more action](#)

[When scrutiny is sub-standard, democracy suffers](#)