

Australia Day debate: There are 364 other days to wear a black armband



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

- TONY ABBOTT, *The Australian*, 12:00AM January 22, 2018
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“All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?” asks the John Cleese character in the classic film *Life of Brian*. It’s worth asking the same question of the British settlement of Australia at the same time as we acknowledge the dispossession of the original inhabitants.

Sure, not everything’s perfect in contemporary Australia; and it’s possible that Aboriginal life could have continued for some time without modernity bursting upon it, had governor Arthur Phillip not raised the Union flag and toasted the king on January 26, 1788, but it’s hard to imagine a better Australia in the absence of the Western civilisation that began here from that date. The rule of law, equality of the sexes, scientific curiosity, technological progress, responsible government — plus the constant self-criticism and lust for improvement that makes us so self-conscious of our collective failings towards Aboriginal people — all date from then; and may not have been present to anything like the same extent had the settlers fanning out from Sydney Cove been other than British.

We could all make a list of the things that should be better: trust in politicians, economic competitiveness, standards in schools, safety on our streets (especially in Melbourne), congested roads and inefficient public transport, and — yes — the wellbeing of the First Australians, but is anything to be gained by this annual cycle of agonising over the date of our national day? Besides, there are drawbacks to all the other contenders: too many people are the worse for wear on January 1, the anniversary of the foundation of the Commonwealth of Australia; and Anzac Day commemorates an unsuccessful military campaign (led, you guessed it, by the despised British). So let's grow up and treat Australia Day as a good time to reflect on how far we've come as a country and, for those in public life, how far we've yet to go. It's pretty obvious that the Greens and other far-Left councillors resolving not to have citizenship ceremonies on January 26 are really just telling voters that they're uninterested or incompetent at the job they were elected to do — which was not to bay at the moon and pretend that facts aren't facts.

For his time, governor Phillip was a remarkably humane and enlightened man. There was no punitive expedition after he was speared at Manly. He declared “there shall be no slavery in a free land”. The British government had instructed the expedition to treat the native people “with amity and kindness”. And while many Aboriginal people were exploited and mistreated, seven white men were hanged after the Myall Creek massacre in 1838.

In some ways, it's hard to imagine a less auspicious beginning. The 800 convicts who arrived with the First Fleet were a pretty representative slice of Britain's criminal class.

Those were tougher times to be sure but few of them had merely stolen a loaf of bread to feed their families. The coming ashore of convicts after official proceedings to inaugurate the settlement was supposedly followed by a drunken orgy of relief after nine months at sea. Yet within a generation, a new society had emerged that was as law-abiding (if not, perhaps, quite as hardworking or God-fearing) as any other. Australia's early settlement is probably history's most successful exercise in penal reform.

The Australia of those days had all that era's faults: women were kept in their place; dissent was barely tolerated; different races were discriminated against; not everyone could vote; few had access to good education and health care. But the spirit that animated the society thus established has subsequently addressed all these issues, not perfectly, but as well as anywhere.

The surest sign of our success (and of the decency and magnanimity that characterises our people) is that the vast majority of Aboriginal Australians are as proud of our country as they are of their indigenous heritage. How could any Australian's heart not beat with pride?

There are 364 other days of the year when we can wear a black armband and strive to overcome our national failures. For instance, I expect again to spend a week this year trying to come to grips with the challenges facing remote indigenous Australians, and spend another week cycling through regional areas for Soldier On to raise awareness of the problems facing veterans during the annual Pollie Pedal.

Doubtless, you'll hear a lot from me this year about ending the emissions obsession that's sending power prices through the roof and killing industries. I'll have more to say about scaling back immigration (even though migration is central to our national story) to keep wages up and housing prices down. And regrettably, there will be too many instances of political-correctness-gone-crazy to criticise and correct. But this Friday I will gladly join millions of my fellow Australians to declare my faith in what, to us, is surely the best country on earth.