

### A NATION IN NEED OF CHANGE

Australia Day has come around once again and community debate over the date on which we celebrate our national day has intensified across our media platforms. While many Australians embrace this mid-summer public holiday with BBQs and beach parties, many of our First Nations people see the date as a cause for sadness, anger and regret.

January 26th commemorates the arrival of captain Arthur Phillip in Port Jackson and the formal settlement of Australia by Britain. For many First Nations people it was Survival Day, when their land and sovereignty were taken by a foreign power. No treaty. No negotiation. And to add to the injustice, being officially classified as non-people under the legal structures of Terra Nullius and consequently denied legal protection.

The tragedy of what is happening in a deeply and perhaps irrevocably divided United States should serve as a warning to all Australians that we cannot allow national division to drive our national agenda. The Black Lives Matter Movement has highlighted the danger of deep-seated inequality and injustice.

So how can we navigate this debate through the lens of justice, faith and fairness? How well can we rebuild relationships, strengthen reconciliation and heal the wounds of the past?

We need to start with a serious look at the divisiveness of the date itself and ask whether another date could be celebrated. After all, history shows that there have been a number of dates for Australia Day celebrated around the country. Is the arrival of the British and

their disregard for the First Nations people and their culture something worthy of a National Day? Or could we choose something more inclusive – the date of federation or the birthdate of one of our great poets for example? A justice, faith and fairness view would strongly suggest that persisting with a date that clearly causes pain and hurt is not the way of peace and compassion.

We could also ask why after decades of protest we have still not held a national consultation inclusive of all voices. Like the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the call for an Indigenous voice to parliament, the lack of respect for the voice and views of our First Nations people is disturbing at best. A justice, faith and fairness approach would demand that we do better to bring unity and healing. That we honour the dignity of all people in recognising their legitimate concerns and including them in the conversation.

It is critical that the Australia Day debate does not become an 'us versus them' issue mired by ideological certainties, race politics and partisan considerations. This is an issue which certainly tests those values of which we are most proud as a nation – the fair go, freedom and mateship. The lens of justice, faith and fairness would find Australia falling short of these values when it comes to the conversation we need to have about the date of Australia Day, our respect for Aboriginal culture and the truth of our history.

Perhaps we need to start the conversation at our own Australia day gathering. What exactly are we celebrating? Is the day just another public holiday? How do we see ourselves as a nation? And where do First Nations people fit into this picture? In this way we can move together towards a more united country.



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**We acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the lands on which our ministries exist and the Elders both past and present on whose land we walk, work and live.**

#### REFLECTION

**How can we walk with First Nations people in the spirit of reconciliation, justice and peace?**