

Symbolism uncomfortable for many Australians

By Michael Pembroke

January 16, 2018 — 7.40pm

On January 21, 1788, when Arthur Phillip's advance party rowed in longboats through the Heads at the entrance to Sydney Harbour, he and his men were the first Europeans in all history to enter the waterway that Phillip described as the "finest harbour in the world". When the 11 ships of the First Fleet arrived a few days later, the dispossession of the Aboriginal people from the Sydney Basin commenced. Tribal lands were appropriated; trees cut down; fishing and hunting grounds ruined.

Phillip's official instructions may have required him to "conciliate the affections of the Aborigines" and to encourage everyone to "live in amity and kindness" with them, but he could not see that he and his men were invaders. Nor could he understand why Bennelong, whom he kidnapped and treated like a son, would choose to run away. But one winter's day in 1790, perhaps the penny dropped. Phillip wrote wistfully, and probably insightfully, to Sir Joseph Banks, saying that "nothing will make these people amends for the loss of their liberty".



Dancers from the Koomurri perform on Sydney Harbour to promote Australia Day festivities. *CREDIT: JAMES ALCOCK*

This is the conundrum that we face every year. How do we make amends? There is no doubt that the symbolism of January 26 is uncomfortable for many Australians. It is not a date that celebrates the unity of the nation. It is not a date that applies with equal force to all of its peoples.

Furthermore, it is a somewhat arbitrary date, whose description as "Australia Day" and celebration as a national holiday, are of relatively recent origin. January 26 is not the day when Phillip first came to Sydney Cove. Nor is it the

day when the fleet first arrived. Nor is it the day when the royal proclamation was read in the name of George III.

And it was not until 1935 that all the states and territories agreed to use the name "Australia Day" to mark January 26; and not until 1994 that they began to celebrate that day uniformly as a public holiday. And opposition to the choice of date is not a new phenomenon. By the time of the sesquicentenary in 1938, there were substantial protests. That year the Australian Aborigines Conference declared January 26 to be a "day of mourning and protest" – 80 years later, it continues.

There is no getting away from the fact that the choice of January 26 will always be a focus of resentment and unhappiness for some Australians. A more appropriate day to celebrate the unity, the bounty and the good fortune of this lucky country may well be January 1 – a day that is beyond criticism; one that all Australians can join in without hesitation; one that celebrates our unification; when the independent colonies joined together in one golden federation; when the Commonwealth of Australia first came into existence.

There is, of course, every reason to honour and celebrate Phillip's achievement in founding the settlement from which this country has grown and multiplied in the modern era. It is in a real sense a foundation day – of European settlement. But it is not inclusive. The national day of most countries is one that celebrates – inclusively and unambiguously – the nation's collective harmony, unity and solidarity.

Canada's national day on July 1 celebrates the unification of the separate colonies into one dominion. India's national day, which coincidentally is January 26, celebrates its declaration of independence, which took legislative effect on January 26, 1950. New Zealand's national day celebrates the Treaty of Waitangi, which among other things, made an accord with the Maori and guaranteed them rights to their land. The United States national day celebrates the declaration of independence by the 13 American colonies. These are all unifying events. The same cannot be said with confidence about our current national day.

Federation Day – January 1 – does achieve that sense of unity. And it has the added advantage of avoiding the antagonism of all those worthy citizens of Aboriginal descent whose ancestors resided in this country tens of thousands of years before Phillip arrived to build a new society.

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(2013). This is an edited extract of a speech given to the Fellowship of First Fleeters in January 2017.