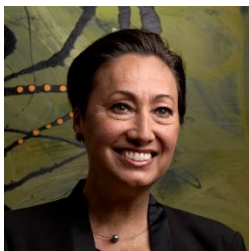


The Arrilla Circle



A quarterly communicate exclusive to Arrilla Digital, where authors of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent share their life experiences in order for us to walk in the shoes of another.

January 2025



We need to stop talking about January 26 and draw a line in the sand. Now is the time. In this edition of *The Arrilla Circle*, Djirribul woman of far north Queensland and Arrilla CEO, Shelley Reys AO, explains why.

We've talked enough about Australia Day. Here's why

At the turn of each and every new year, for as far back as I can remember, I'm asked about my views on how we choose to celebrate Australia Day. By mid-January, the day looms and I'm inundated with well-meaning observers who wish to tell me their preference based on what it means to them to be Australian.

I recall a time in 2006 when I was the Vice Chair for the National Australia Day Council, where I was encouraging states, territories and local councils to consider First Nations' perspectives by making their celebrations more inclusive. I was hoping to see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in their planning, the introduction of traditional welcomes, smoking ceremonies to invite good blessings, poetry to give a different lens over our first day of colonisation, and a conversation about a possible change of date and what that might look like. Overall, I sought to inspire a genuine display of reconciliation, no matter the town in which one chose to gather.

Nearly 20 years on, I've been watching with interest the national and global discourse on diversity and tolerance, or lack thereof, and I've become increasingly concerned for Australia's diminishing appetite for different points of view and brave conversations.

It's true that First Nations people and their perspectives are a greater part of every Australia Day. It's true that the conversation around changing the date is no longer a fanciful, outlier topic but has become a movement unto itself. And it's true that First Nations voices are no longer working alone as a vast number of people – those involved in 'the people's movement' for reconciliation – join the call for a date that is a better fit for who we are and what we hope to become.

It's also true that it's now time to take the next step. It's time to move beyond the conversation and take a brave stance. We need to change the date.

While we Australians don't believe in taking our nationhood too seriously (think, for example, of hand-on-heart celebrations in the USA from weekend softball matches to Independence Day), we are nonetheless exceptionally proud. This inspires a great deal of passion around the date but also, in my view, creates confusion. So allow me to outline some facts in order to dispel the most common myths surrounding a change of date.

If you support a change of date, you're not a proud Australian. Not true. Everyone who has taken the time to form a view on this topic is engaged in being Australian. The date is intrinsic to who we are, what we've become and the kind of future we want to carve for ourselves, as Australians. I consider anyone who supports a change of date to be amongst the proudest.

If you support a change of date, you don't want to celebrate being Australian. Not true. Changing the date is an opportunity to celebrate being Australian on an alternative date. It is not a move to extinguish Australia Day.

Australia Day is about being outdoors, going to the beach, picnicking with family and having a day off with friends. True, but there's no reason why we can't find an alternative date that falls within summer to celebrate who we are and affords everyone a public holiday. It'd be un-Australian to do otherwise, right?

Let's just accept the date and move on. Might you consider asking Ukrainians to celebrate their nationhood on the date that Russia invaded them? It's not my intention to shame the coloniser but it's hardly a date that a Ukrainian would consider to be a symbol of unification and pride.

So what date would I choose? I'm drawn to the method used to decide the date for Melbourne Cup Day each year, which is always the first Tuesday of November. I propose Australia Day using the same approach so it doesn't mark a particular date in our historical calendar but is still a stand-alone opportunity – an Australia Day that brings us all together for no reason other than to celebrate being Australian.

I'd also like to see us combine celebration with a time to reflect. I'd like to see an Australia Day that reflects on what makes us great, what we've achieved, where we are today, where we are challenged, and what kind of future we want to build for ourselves, our families and our workplaces as part of our global citizenship.

Changing the date has been debated for long enough. And in this spirit, our commitment to reconciliation has reached a tipping point. We need to take the courageous action of changing the date in order to reach the lofty aspirations that many of us have for a united tomorrow.

Now is the time. ■

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