

Australia Day Speech
26th January 2017

Parliament House, Melbourne: The Australian Unity Great Australia Day Breakfast

Change the date of Australia Day – A conservative's perspective.

I would like to begin by offering my sympathy and condolences to those people affected by last Friday's tragedy here in Melbourne. My and my family's thoughts are with you in this very difficult time.

I recognise the traditional owners of this land on which we gather and pay my respects to their elders past and present and also acknowledge all our predecessors - those Australians of almost every ethnic background who have helped shape this great nation into what it is today.

Thanks Rohan for the kind invitation to attend this breakfast this morning and to say a few words. And thank you for that kind introduction.

Those of you here today who know me, either in person or by reputation, would probably be aware that I'm not usually known for 'bleeding heart' speeches. I'm not often one to pander to sensitivities or mince my words – I tell it like I think it is. So today is significant for me – it's the first time in my quarter century of public life that I have given what some might call a 'bleeding heart' speech.

While you probably know me as a politician, I have been a farmer, a man of the soil, longer than I have been everything else combined in my life and more than twice as long as I've been a leader in the public arena. On my family property at Boondooma, in the South Burnett region of Queensland, I grew up on and walked the same land as our indigenous people, lived off it, and cared for it for more than half my life. No matter how many suits I wear now, I will still always hold a deep connection to that land.

On the same land at Boondooma, this stone axe was honed and used by Aboriginal people to gather their sustenance. I picked it up from a paddock where I farmed, scratched and marked by one of the 18 discs of my Chamberlain plough, an implement that I used to earn my keep from the same land. Can I tell you that you can't help but feel the emotion when you step from your air-conditioned tractor cab into the past and pick up something that may have lain there in the earth for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years since it was last touched by a human hand. These days it sits on my office desk as a daily reminder of my time on the land, and the deep connection I have with it.

I am a believer in the power of unity, the real power of one. And I believe in showing leadership. That probably began with my appointment as school captain at Boondooma State School in 1967. Mind you, they didn't have a big choice – in a school of 13, I was the only person in Grade 7.

As the son and grandson of businessmen on one side and scientists on the other, my DNA is practical, fact and science based. My mode of operation is outcome driven with a dry economic rationale. However, I am also the son of one of the strongest, kindest and most sensitive and understanding women I have ever met, and I married a woman with exactly the same qualities.

Like those prehistoric hard bed rock strata my grandfather studied, my practical, matter of fact character has been moulded and softened over the years by great forces.

During that time, I have learnt two things. Tradition and beliefs are the bedrock of society and change is inevitable.

Managing those two elements at once to make things better is both an art and a science – watching people, listening, holding strong to your beliefs, collating and predicting things before they turn into chasms or mountains.

Those of us who subscribe to this artistic science believe in telling people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear - to say it as it is, not as you wish it was or pretend it is. While that doesn't make you the most popular person in the public arena, there is no point in having capital, whether it's reputational, political or financial, if you are not prepared to use it, leverage it and risk it to get things done and make things better.

I have, over the past 25 years or so, enjoyed public life (well, mostly) as a farm industry leader and cabinet minister for the business, science and resources portfolios, representing people and ensuring their views are heard. I also enjoyed working to achieve a better standard of living and quality of life for all Australians and felt much satisfaction in being part of making Australia an even better nation.

And I am in the end someone whose strongest belief is that unity is strength and Australia will be a much better place if we do not allow issues to divide us. As John Howard said, the things that unite as us Australians are greater and more enduring than the things that divide us. But there is something with the potential to divide us.

As we celebrate Australia Day and reflect on what a great nation Australia is, we should also pause to think about what we can do to make it greater, and the starting point of that has to be making us even more united by removing any “barnacles” of division.

There have been questions about Australia Day’s timing that have been simmering for decades but I, like many, dismissed them without much thought. I had grown up in a generation where the Australia Day holiday was moved around like an ice hockey puck to satisfy that great Australian tradition of having a long week-end. Depending on who you listen to, the Australia Day holiday wasn’t locked into January 26th until the mid-90’s. As a proud Australian, I revelled in this new national pride and growing patriotism of the Howard years and was particularly pleased with the way our daughters’ generation were embracing the day in the true Aussie spirit.

As part of that, our daughters, Kate and Laura, began a tradition which has continued for more than a decade, of getting their friends around to our place, filling up the esky with stubbies of beer, diving in the pool and cranking triple J on our outdoor speakers until the whole neighbourhood could hear the Australia Day hottest 100 countdown.

Then suddenly last year there was an announcement on Triple J that 2017 would be the last Australia Day hottest 100 because of the offence the celebration was causing to indigenous Australians. My first reaction? “Bloody ABC” I thought – and not for the first time. Then Fremantle Shire Council announced that they were cancelling their Australia Day citizenship ceremony and fireworks for 2017. “Bloody latte drinking trendies” I thought - again not for the first time.

Then I thought “how would my Scottish cousins feel if they had to celebrate United Kingdom day on the anniversary of the Vikings launching an amphibious attack on Arrochar, raping and pillaging and producing Macfarlanes with blue eyes and blonde hair (trust me these grey hairs were once golden locks).

And how would my mother’s forbears, the Reids, feel if the same celebration was on the anniversary of the Battle of Culloden, where the Highlanders were cut down by English grapeshot and then the survivors hunted down, and along with their women and children, murdered.

My political intuition tells me that if the controversy about the date for Australia Day continues to grow, it could open up “a them and us” situation in an even more divisive community debate about indigenous policy causing a distraction from the important work that is being done across our nation to close the gap.

That’s why I agreed to give this speech, because I, as a conservative, Anglo Celtic Australian, want to play a part in the push to changing the date of Australia Day. I think it’s a no-brainer - a simple yet important way to prevent a potential chasm dividing Australia’s society and a potential mountain blocking the road to reconciliation and a greater Australia.

Hindsight is always done with 20X20 vision and no one argues there were terrible wrongdoings against Indigenous people in Australia’s past. We can’t change history but we can shape the future. In his speech to this breakfast three years ago Nyunggai Warren Mundine said several wise things.

In particular, he said by “Drawing a line in history means Indigenous people permitting themselves to love their country, express patriotism, take pride in Australia’s successes and achievement, and feel part of Australia as a nation”

We can’t reasonably expect indigenous Australians to “draw that line in history” while we continue to celebrate on a day which marks the beginning of their dispossession and the loss of their cultural control of this land.

Stephen Fitzpatrick writing on Aboriginal languages, recently recounted the first exchange between First Fleet settlers and aboriginal people on the 20th January, 1788.

First Fleeters were “welcomed” by the locals shouting “warra warra”. Apparently, this can be loosely translated in the Australian vernacular “F off – we’re full” or perhaps more accurately as “go away, go away”.

Whichever translation you prefer, right from the start, white settlers were not in any way welcomed to join Australia’s first people, and the association of Australia Day with January 26th opens old wounds.

This is not about pleasing people, it is about uniting people. It’s about healing a wound, drawing a line, getting on with the really important issues facing our indigenous communities. It’s about stopping any issues on the periphery distracting from the united, focused and concerted effort needed to fix the problems in Indigenous communities.

Having all Australians celebrating our great country on a date not associated with past wrongs can only bring us closer together. But, I acknowledge and so do many indigenous leaders, that alone won’t stem the disadvantage still suffered by many Indigenous Australians.

As a country we should look to the things that are working to close the gap for our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

I am more than aware of the social disadvantage in our Indigenous communities and have been involved in countless cabinet discussions about what needed to be done to fix it and how many billions consecutive governments were spending on it to try and solve the problem. And I know that money alone can’t solve the problem.

In the Shire of Roebourne, Western Australia, taxpayers fund 206 services, delivered to 1400 people at a cost of \$58M per annum. It works out at almost \$70,000 per adult yet is reported to be having no real impact on the social disaster of child abuse, sexual abuse and substance abuse and totally unacceptable rates of mental health and unemployment.

We are literally killing our Indigenous people and their culture with kindness in the form of welfare at the same time their social and family structure and leadership is tearing itself apart over who owns their land. The fierceness of Indigenous politics and the open feuding between historical owners and traditional owners in indigenous communities is further amplifying this societal destruction of our Aboriginal people and destroying their family cohesion, discipline, hierarchy and culture.

We need to end what Indigenous people refer to as “crabs in a bucket”. This is their description of when one of their own try to climb out of the bucket of unemployment and despair and others in their community hold on to them and pull them back in.

We need to restore the pride and ambition in these people and allow them to be proud of their heritage and be part of mainstream Australia - to be able to walk in both worlds.

Former Western Australian Premier and nation builder, Sir Charles Court, said in 1990 “I’m a great believer in people having an Australian identity while retaining the love of the country of their origin”.

That is where Australia has succeeded better than most nations in multiculturalism but somehow, indigenous people haven’t been included in that success - yet.

The mining industry has long been a driving force behind making this country great starting with the gold rush.

As Australia's longest serving resources minister I've been proud to play a role in the evolution in our resources sector, which these days is leading the way when it comes to providing the best form of welfare for indigenous Australia's . . . meaningful and well paid jobs and careers.

More than 60 percent of mining operations in Australia have neighbouring indigenous communities, which historically had been largely untapped as a source of labour. In 2007, a partnership formed between the Queensland Resources Council and the Queensland Government resulted in Indigenous people being engaged, trained and mentored to boost their involvement. This in turn provided good livelihoods for Indigenous employees, Indigenous businesses and their families and communities.

Indigenous people make up 3 percent of Queensland's population, but they generally make up a much smaller proportion of most industries' workforces.

Over the past two decades, employment of Indigenous Australians in the minerals sector has increased from 0.5 percent to a national average of 6 percent based on 2011 Census data. Indigenous women make up 26percent of those employees.

The QRC's latest figures show that overall Indigenous participation is up to 30 percent in some resources workforces in North Queensland, and Indigenous people also currently account for more than 12 percent of trainees, apprentices and cadets in QRC member companies.

A real success story comes from Myuma's Prevocational Mining and Construction Training and Construction Program, spearheaded by one of the true characters of north west Queensland, Colin Saltmere and again supported by mining companies and local shire councils. This program has successfully transitioned more than 600 highly disadvantaged, long term unemployed Indigenous people into resource and construction jobs in the North West minerals province and achieved success rates of over 90 percent.

Resources companies have found businesses run by Indigenous people are reliable, cost-effective local suppliers. On top of that, Indigenous businesses are 100 times more likely to employ Indigenous workers, so they have a trickle-down effect to the wider Indigenous community.

In Queensland, QRC member companies reported that they had engaged 55 Indigenous businesses with a business spend of about \$80 million in 2016 and we expect to see this grow.

Australia wide, resources companies spend more than \$2-billion with Indigenous contracting services

The resources sector has shown what can be done so that our first peoples share in the wealth of this great country, wealth that often lies beneath the feet of Indigenous people on their traditional lands.

It's a leaf that I'd love to see other industries tear out of our book.

But all this effort, time, training and money won't be enough - can't be enough if we're not united. If we can't come together, draw that line in the sand and move forward as a great nation. We can't let an issue become a mountain or a chasm when it's a relatively easy fix. So let's do it.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let's end the distracting division of when Australia Day should be celebrated and concentrate on working the real issues that face Australia and its people, particularly our Indigenous people. Let's be one nation with one flag and one national day of celebration and work together to fix the problems that require spirit, determination and unity, more so than money, to solve.

But the question remains: when should Australia Day be celebrated? Clearly not on January 26th. But also not on a day that evokes emotions of wrong doing such as Sorry Day. It should be a celebration and a coming together for all to celebrate this great country and all the people who live in it.

It needs to be on a date that is 'Australian' and that's not May 8, pronounced "Maaaaate", though it does reflect the Australian character. Tempting, but for me the date has to be in a warm month – I just don't think it could be Australia Day without backyard cricket, barbeques and pool parties.

Maybe we could wait for the date Australia becomes a republic. As a good supporter of that, I still bear the scars of campaigning for the republic “Yes vote” in my electorate of Groom where the “no vote” was only exceeded by one other federal electorate – the one I was born in – Maranoa. A salient reminder for me of what I said at the start – fight for what you believe in and don’t be frightened of losing. But becoming a republic isn’t a top tier issue, won’t change our day to day lives and might be years if not decades away. The issue we’re talking about today can’t wait.

In my opinion, there are three options for a date significant to Australia. I reckon it needs to be in summer but I think it also needs to be significant to our establishment as a Commonwealth, a Federation, and a proud democratic nation.

So in that context, the options are:

- 1st January, the date in 1901 when the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (UK) took effect – no, - for obvious reasons: let’s stay part of global New Year’s celebrations and not have to celebrate a great day for Australia with a hangover.
- 13th May 1901, when the Australian Federal Parliament was officially opened in Melbourne – no because it’s way too cold for a beach or pool party.
- 1st March 1901 The first Commonwealth Government of Australia begins by taking control of a wide range of functions formerly exercised by the colonies, including military forces, postal and customs departments and immigration.
It’s the day that represents Australians coming together and functioning as one nation under one government.

And yes, I know it’s not technically summer, but it’s close enough – particularly if you live in Queensland like I do.

So looks like March 1 it is.

I’m proud of my heritage, proud of where I’ve come from and where I am now, and proud to be an Australian. I hope that someday soon, everyone in this great land can feel the same and all proudly celebrate it together on one day.

So let’s get on with it, scape off this barnacle and concentrate on working together to succeed on the big challenges and make Australia even greater.

Happy Australia Day.