

What does 26 January mean for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

26 January 1788 – Invasion Day

- British invasion commences with the establishment of the first settlement at Sydney Cove.

26 January 1838 – Waterloo Creek Massacre

- 26 mounted police accompanied by several stockmen and settlers drove a party of Gamilaraay warriors into a lagoon near Waterloo Creek (south of Moree, NSW), shooting and killing at least 40 and possibly as many as 70 of them. The massacre was allegedly in reprisal for the spear wound of a mounted police trooper two hours earlier.

26 January boycotts

- Before the 1920s, Aboriginal rights groups boycotted 26 January in protest, however the broader Australian public were largely unaware of the boycotts. Several organisations, particularly the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association (AAPA) in 1924 and the Australian Aborigines League (AAL) in 1932, emerged to raise awareness within the wider Australian community.

26 January 1938

- The Australian Aborigines League and the Aborigines Progressive Association hold a National Day of Mourning. “[P]rotestors marched through the streets of Sydney, followed by a congress attended by over a thousand people. [It was o]ne of the first major civil rights gatherings in the world.”

26 January 1938

- Yorta Yorta man William Cooper, on behalf of the Australian Aborigines League, sent the Prime Minister of Australia a petition for the attention of King George VI, asking the king to intervene in Australia ‘to prevent the extinction of the [A]boriginal race; to secure better living conditions for all; and to afford [A]boriginal representation in parliament.’ Cooper had spent several years travelling around Australia collecting 1,814 signatures and thumb prints for his petition. The Australian government decided not to send the petition to the king.

21 January 1940

- The Australian Aborigines League persuaded many religious denominations to declare the Sunday before 26 January as ‘Aboriginal Sunday’, to serve as a reminder of the unjust treatment of Indigenous people. The first of these took place in 1940 and continued until 1955, when it moved to the first Sunday in July, and expanded also to become a day to celebrate Aboriginal culture. Major Aboriginal organisations, and state and federal governments supported the formation of the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC). The second Sunday in July became a day of remembrance for Aboriginal people and their heritage. In 1975, NADOC changed the event to a whole week, from the first to the second Sunday in July. Since 1991, the event has been expanded also to celebrate Torres Strait Islander culture. The National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee continues to hold NAIDOC Week every year.

26 January 1972

- Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Coorey set up an “Aboriginal Embassy” under a beach umbrella on the lawns opposite Parliament House in Canberra, in protest against the government’s failure to recognise Aboriginal land rights. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra is still there today.

26 January 1988

- Woiworrung and Yorta Yorta man, Burnum Burnum, planted the Aboriginal flag beneath the white cliffs of Dover, and claimed England on behalf of Aboriginal Australia.
- Tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people held marches in Australia’s towns and capital cities, protesting against celebrations for the bicentenary of the colonisation of Australia - which caused injustice, suffering and dispossession of Aboriginal people – and defiantly celebrating their own survival.

“For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, 26 January is a reminder of the pain and suffering of their ancestors, the theft of their land, the enormous loss of life in the Frontier Wars and the intergenerational trauma that comes with that history.

Celebrating on this day ignores the historical atrocities committed against First Nations Peoples and obscures the many uncomfortable truths of our shared history. But it also overlooks the many ways in which colonisation is ongoing – the grave injustices of Black deaths in custody, ever-growing gaps in health outcomes and life expectancy, youth justice statistics, destruction of sacred sites and contemporary child removal that our systems and structures continue to permit and in some cases promote.

In recent years, awareness around the pain of 26 January is building. Many local councils—including City of Melbourne, Geelong, Yarra, Moreland, Darebin, City of Sydney and Sydney’s Inner West, Launceston and Flinders Island in Tasmania as well as Fremantle, WA – have cancelled and/or replaced their 26 January events, or voiced formal support for changing the date. These changes are welcomed.”

ANTAR, Rethinking 26 January, <https://antar.org.au/issues/survival-day/rethinking-26-january/>

What does 26 January mean for the Tasmanian Aboriginal community?

Nala Mansell, “Why January 26 should not be a day of celebration”, SBS News

“Ever since the beginning of time and right up until the 25th January 1788, Aboriginal people across Australia enjoyed rich, happy, and healthy lives. We had our own land, languages, education and political systems, customs, traditions, and laws. We had exclusive rights over the whole country, its Islands, and its seas. We were strong, proud, and sovereign people with full control over our own lives and destinies.

Then suddenly, on that date, the tall ships arrived on our shores, and the British Invasion of Aboriginal lands began. They were armed to the teeth with a mission to wipe out the entire Aboriginal race and claim our lands as their own. From that day forward, the lives that Aborigines had known for thousands of years were destroyed, forever.



Aboriginal protest in Hobart against the Bicentennial Celebrations, 26 January 1788
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eye to the misery it has caused, can't celebrate, yet politicians claim that Australia day is a day of unity.

The excuse that we are 'all Australian' and that 'what happened to Aborigines is in the past so we should all move on' is bulls**t - could you imagine the reaction if we said the same thing every Anzac or Remembrance Day?



Invasion Day Rally, nipaluna / Hobart, 26 January 2023.
Credit: TAC tacinc.com.au/campaign/invasion-day/

www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/opinion-why-january-26-should-not-be-a-day-of-celebration/mitq7xoln

For many of us, January 26th will always be a day of mourning, hurt and sorrow but also a day to honour the many Aboriginal warriors who fought and died while having to defend their lands and lives.

The celebrations of this date each year are degrading, hurtful and downright racist. Those of us who feel an obligation to our ancestors can't join in the celebrations and those who feel a sense of shame that a nation would proudly gloat about the victory of one race over another while turning a blind

Most people who spend Australia day at the beach or having a BBQ with their mates aren't celebrating the significance of the date. They're celebrating all the things that being Australian means to them; none of which should relate to the atrocities committed against our people which began on January 26th.”

“First Nations people divided over whether to participate in Australian of the Year Awards”, ABC News

“As annual awards ceremonies get underway in each state and territory to decide who will contend for the national title of 2025 Australian of the Year, some First Nations Australians are grappling with whether to participate...

Palawa elder Rodney Dillon, who has twice accepted a nomination for the awards, said the position was not uncommon and ‘there are a lot of Aboriginals around Australia who feel like that as well’.

‘The people that have got that feeling. It's important because we all feel it on the 26th ... or the day before, the 25th — the last day of freedom,’ Mr Dillon said.

Mr Dillon was nominated for 2024 Tasmanian Senior of the Year and 2011 Tasmanian Australian of the Year.



Rodney Dillon has accepted two Australia Day Awards nominations. Image credit: ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke



While being recognised was an “honour” for palawa lawyer Maggie Blanden, she still felt she had to turn down an Australia Day award.

Image credit: ABC News: Ebony ten Broeke

Lawyer Maggie Blanden said turning down her nomination for Young Tasmanian of the Year 2025 ‘was not an easy decision’. ‘The awards platform really provides mob with a voice, and that's something that we're demanding, as everyone knows,’ Ms Blanden said. ‘We really want our voices to be heard. We want to be seen. We want to be at the decision-making tables.’

Ms Blanden felt she could not accept an invitation to celebrate national progress when little progress had been made to address the disproportionate suffering of Aboriginal people.

The placement of the January 25 ceremony and subsequent celebrations in a period of mourning for her people did not sit well with her, she said. ‘It still surrounds the date and is still about celebrating Australia Day. That brings a history of genocide, of rape, of dispossession, of stolen children, stolen wages, stolen land.’”

www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-25/indigenous-perspectives-australian-of-the-year-awards/104357050

What can I do about 26 January?

Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Listen to what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to say

Amplify the voices of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people on social media

Attend your nearest Invasion Day rally – search online for 'Invasion Day', 'Survival Day', or 'Day of Mourning' events

Buy a t-shirt, hat, or badge from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander business

Be an active bystander. If you hear someone saying something uninformed or racist – Support, Record, and Report.

See Australian Human Rights Commission *Racism. It Stops With Me – Guide to Bystander Intervention*
https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-11/ahrc_sr_2021_6_bystander_intervention_a4_r3.pdf

Inform yourself

Learn about the Traditional Owners and contemporary Aboriginal community in your area.

Learn about what happened in your area during invasion.

Learn about the ongoing impacts of colonisation.

Inform others

Talk to your workplace about whether you can work on 26 January and take a different day off

Write a letter to your local paper, or call your local radio station, to share what you have learned and why you are choosing not to celebrate on 26 January

Wear a t-shirt, hat or badge to spark conversations with family and friends

If you hear people making uninformed comments, take responsibility for sharing what you have learned about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

“We want allies. Allies are important but what is your job as an ally? If you know me a little bit, we've got a bit of a relationship and maybe you meet me on a particular day, I don't know, near the end of January and we go for a bit of a walk down the street. At the end of the [26 January protest] march, [we head off to your uncle's barbecue]. And then [your] old Uncle Frank says something messed up.

It's not my job to say, 'Hey Uncle Frank, that's based in a stereotype and not really nice' – because that's when we have to share something that comes from our heart and our guts and it makes us feel rubbish.

A true ally – actually I prefer the term accomplice, because accomplices are willing to get into trouble. I don't know your Uncle Frank and if I call him a racist person he might want a bit of a barney about it – but you've got a relationship with Uncle Frank because you love him because he's a family. You're the one who should have a chat with him because you've got a relationship. It shouldn't be up to me.

A true accomplice – someone who understands us – can look at me and go, 'You're not up to it today'. No, because that march was pretty intense. 'All right I'll take it on, I'm the one going to have the yarn'.”

– Duncan Robinson

Speech delivered 26 July 2023, “Voice to Truth: a voice for generations”, University of Tasmania Island of Ideas lecture series <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvQYBAhZGK8>

Other resources:

- Reconciliation WA conversation guide - <https://www.recwa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Walking-alongside-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Peoples-on-January-26.pdf>

- Amnesty International, 10 ways to be a genuine ally to First Nations communities <https://www.amnesty.org.au/10-ways-to-be-an-ally-to-first-nations-communities/>

Some local councils publish information about why they choose not to hold citizenship ceremonies on 26 January, see eg:

- Brighton Council <https://www.brighton.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Message-from-the-Mayor-Celebration-of-Australia-Day-25-January-2023.pdf>
- City of Launceston <https://www.launceston.tas.gov.au/News-Media/Council-to-move-events-from-January-26>
- Kingborough Council - <https://www.kingborough.tas.gov.au/2023/02/citizenship-ceremonies-kingborough/>

Look for local events held by Aboriginal organisations in your area –

- Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre has held protest marches and rallies in Hobart, Launceston and Devonport in previous years. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and allies are welcome to join in both the march and the rallies.

So many other special dates we could celebrate “Australia Day” ...

1 January

- 1856 – The Colony of Van Diemen’s Land is officially renamed as “Tasmania”.
- 1901 – Commonwealth of Australia is declared.

7 January

- 1832 – 25 warriors from the Oyster Bay and Big River nations walk into Hobart Town to negotiate the end of the ‘Black War’. They walk proudly, completely naked and standing tall with spears in hand. Hobart residents are shocked that so few warriors have had such a huge impact on the Colony.

18-20 January

- 1788 – The First Fleet arrives in Botany Bay however Commodore Arthur Phillip and his party were not satisfied with the Bay.

26 January

- 1788 – The First Fleet anchors in what is now called Port Jackson, and names the area “Sydney Cove”.
- 1949 – Australian citizenship is first created. Previously, all Australians were “British subjects”.
- 1994 – 26 January is declared a national public holiday.

1 March

- 1606 – Crew of the Dutch ship *Duyfken* become the first Europeans to sight the Australian mainland, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. This was the first time Europeans had met Indigenous Australians.

3 March

- 1986 – *Australia Acts* are passed by the UK and Australian parliaments, ending appeals from Australian courts to the Privy Council; and ending other legal powers of the UK Parliament and Government that still applied in Australia.

29-30 March

- 1901 – The first federal elections for the new Australian Parliament are held.

25 April

- 1915 – Australian and New Zealand troops land on the shores of Gallipoli. “The ANZAC legend” is born and becomes an important part of the newly federated nation’s identity.

1 May

- 1987 – The *Australian Citizenship Act* is amended – Australian citizens stop automatically being considered as British subjects.

27 May

- 1967 Referendum – 90.77% of Australians vote “Yes” to : include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the census; and allow the federal parliament to make laws relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

8 May

- 1945 – Victory in Europe Day – the end of World War II in Europe.
- “Ma-aaate” (May 8), also known as Mates Day, has been proposed as a more inclusive date to celebrate Australia and mateship.

9 May

- 1901 – The first Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was opened at noon by the Duke of Cornwall & York (later King George V).

3 June

- 1992 – The High Court hands down its judgment in *Mabo (No. 2) vs Queensland*, overturning the doctrine of terra nullius and recognising ‘native title’ in Australian law.

9 June

- 1803 – Flinders, travelling with Garigal man Bungaree, completes a circumnavigation of Australia. Bungaree becomes the first known Australian-born person to have circumnavigated the continent.

13 June

- 1988 – Northern and Central Land Councils present the Barunga Statement to the Prime Minister.

14 June

- 1825 – The King of England signs orders establishing the Colony of Van Diemen’s Land, and its first Legislative Council. The Colony of Van Diemen’s Land is now separate from the Colony of New South Wales.

5 July

- 1900 – The *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act* is passed by the British Parliament on 5 July 1900.

30 July

- 1915 – The first ever official national day named ‘Australia Day’ was held to raise funds for the First World War effort.

14 & 28 August

- 1963 – Yolngu clans from Arnhem Land assert their land rights by presenting the Yirrkala Bark Petitions which are tabled in federal parliament.

16 August

- 16 August 1975 – Prime Minister Gough Whitlam hands deeds to Vincent Lingiari at Daguragu (Wave Hill station), following a successful strike action by Gurindji stockmen, domestic workers, known as the Wave Hill Walk Off, on 23 August 1966.

1 September

- 1910 – The first Wattle Day celebration took place in NSW, Victoria and South Australia.
- 1992 – The first day of September was officially proclaimed ‘National Wattle Day’, a unifying symbol of Australia and Australians.

8 October

- 1958 – The *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* is repealed, marking the beginning of the end of the White Australia Policy.

23 November

- 1971 – Australia is one of the founding members of the South Pacific Forum, along with Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Tonga and Western Samoa. The name was changed to the “Pacific Island Forum” in 1999.

21 December

- 1948 – The *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* receives royal assent and becomes law. The Act replaces citizenship of the British Empire with citizenship of Australia.