

Aboriginal Historical Memory and 'Australia Day'

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The symbolic "Australia Day" celebrations should be juxtaposed against the normalised violations occurring against indigenous populations and their terrain, Ramona Wadi writes.

January 26 marks Australia Day in colonial narratives, when the British First Fleet arrived in 1788 to establish a penal colony on indigenous land. For the Aboriginal people, the annual commemoration is a reminder of the colonial invasion and its ramifications – the historical massacres, heritage theft, exploitation of history and a political system which to date discriminates against the indigenous.

Defying Covid restrictions, Aboriginal people and activists [demonstrated](#) in Sydney and Brisbane, calling for the day to be celebrated on another date. The chosen date marginalises Aboriginal ancestry, attributing Australia's history only to its colonial legacy.

Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** described the day as "the moment where the journey to our modern nation began." Such discourse of modernisation has been used in other colonial contexts – the legitimisation of destroying one history and people to impose a purportedly superior and industrialised culture. Establishing such settler dominance, alongside the economic exploitation of colonised territory, is the first step towards the political oblivion of the indigenous population. Indigenous resistance, often times organised belatedly upon realisation of the settler-colonial intent and politics, is then used as a [pretext](#) upon which to dehumanise and massacre the indigenous population. The colonial narrative, however, blames indigenous populations for their decline, once again exploiting the concept of modernisation to cultivate impunity.

The Australian government endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in 2009, thus recognising the Aboriginal right to self-determination and compensation for crimes related to colonial violence. However, there is no signed agreement between the Australian government and the Aboriginal people which would commit to addressing the country's colonial past, Aboriginal land rights, history and memory. Aboriginals are still not recognised as Australia's first people.

Besides the debate on whether the commemoration should be scrapped, or the date changed, the question of Australia's identity should be raised. With Aboriginals marginalised, economically and socially, the narrative remains settler-colonial, hence the commemoration has nothing to do with Australia's earlier heritage.

The change needs to start from within – coming to terms with the settler-colonial history of

the country in order to find common ground for reconciliation with the indigenous population.

Reconciliation Australia [reveals](#) that awareness regarding the colonial violence of British colonialism in the country is increasing. In 2016, the organisation identified five concepts upon which reconciliation could be achieved: historical acceptance, race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity and unity. The [2021 State of Reconciliation Australia Report](#) makes one important point – reconciliation with the Aboriginal people was sought by a small percentage of the early colonisers. Expounding upon this history would bring about an acknowledgement of the settler-colonial violence against the indigenous Aboriginal population, thus strengthening the historical, collective memory of Australia.

At government level, however, exploitation of indigenous lands, carrying on from the earlier colonial framework, remains paramount. Earlier in January the South Australian government gave permission to Argonaut Resources subsidiary company, Kellaray, to [drill](#) for mineral exploration at Lake Torrens – a site of Aboriginal heritage but without native title protection, as decided by a 2016 Supreme Court case. “I am not persuaded that a determination of native title in favour of any of the three applicants should be made in respect of any part of the claim area,” the judge [ruled](#), citing the absence of proof of ownership in the pre-colonial era.

The symbolic “Australia Day” celebrations should be juxtaposed against the normalised violations occurring against indigenous populations and their terrain. Unless indigenous rights are politically recognised, the symbolism associated with Australia Day will take precedence over Aboriginal history and collective memory – the reason being that one commemoration is being carried out on a daily level in Australia, excluding the indigenous to pave the way for the colonial legacy to flourish.

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