

26 January: Australia Day

Australia Day looks back to the arrival of Governor Phillip in Botany Bay and to the British claim to Australia. Whether Phillip and his contemporaries thought he was making such a massive claim or was making a more routine and limited claim to British occupation of the area where he landed in order to exclude other colonial powers, is still questioned. He was certainly the beginning of a process that led to colonists supplanting Indigenous Australians and shaping a very different society.

Australia Day marks both the day of Governor Phillip's arrival and the beginning of that supplanting. For some it is a time for unalloyed celebration. For most Indigenous Australians with a sense of their own history, it is an occasion for grief. For many Australians it is an uncomfortable day, one for rumination, for pondering the creation and the destruction of cultures and for revisiting the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the overseas invaders.

It has often been suggested that Australia Day should be moved to another date that all Australians can celebrate. The proposal is superficially attractive, but it could degenerate into yet another attempt to redefine Australia in a way that conceals the dispossession of one race by another. To combine Australia Day with Anzac Day, for example, might say that real Australian history begins with the colonists and that the long story of Indigenous nations and their dispossession are no more than a prelude to a story in which their destined role was to be a relic. It might suggest that their crowning glory was to be invited to fight and to die in British wars on behalf their conquerors.

If, however, we see the anniversary of Governor Phillip's landing as a day for reflection on the complexity and ambiguity of Australian history, it might invite us to wonder together at this first meeting of cultures and at the richness of each. Phillip's expedition was not only about discovery and possession and demonstration of superior power. It was about enriching the European world's knowledge of flora and fauna, of mapping universal as well as local seas and skies, of curiosity about the Indigenous peoples encountered on the voyage, of marking points of connection and of haven in the circling of the world. For good or for ill, and in this case great ill, Phillip was one of the people who brought very different peoples into contact and collision.

The landing of Governor Phillip can now be seen to have offered the colonists opportunities and choices they did not take – to be curious about the Indigenous people whom they met, to go to school on the ways in which they cared for the land and the rituals with which they engage with one another, and on their respect for their world. We more recent Australians, including those of us at Jesuit Social Services, are beginning to learn this through the rituals of honouring the Indigenous owners of the land and their descendants, smoking ceremonies and particularly in conversation with the Indigenous people whom we accompany in our work.

After a year in which the ways in which Western cultures have dealt with the environment have been evident in bushfire and global warming, and in the cavalier response to viruses crossing species, the delicacy and sophistication of many Indigenous rituals in passing on respect for the land bear honouring.

By Andrew Hamilton SJ