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Ken Wyatt: Australia Day matters more than ever



Ken Wyatt January 22, 2020 8:00pm

I love a sunburnt country,

A land of sweeping plains,

Of ragged mountain ranges,

Of droughts and flooding rains.

I love her far horizons,

I love her jewel-sea,

Her beauty and her terror –

The wide brown land for me!

Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country' beautifully captures Australia.

The good. The bad.

The beauty and the terror.

This summer, we have been tested by the raw power of our land – towns savaged by fire, homes and businesses lost, and sadly, fellow Australians making the ultimate sacrifice to protect their neighbours and communities.

This summer has also brought out the very best in this country; Australians from all walks of life coming together in an unprecedented showing of love, support and nurturing for one another.

It's hard not to feel an immense sense of pride and hope for the ambition of this nation.

As a young child, growing up in the country, I can remember facing fire.

But a stronger memory is how we always came together as a community to support one another, and to make sure that we would get through.

This is what I love about our country, and about Australians.

Through fire, drought and war we always rebound, our resilience knows no bounds, and we will always come back stronger and more determined.



The Australian flag flies under red skies from bushfires in East Gippsland, January 4, 2020. The bushfire crisis has tested us in extraordinary ways, writes Ken Wyatt. Picture: Darrian Traynor/Getty Images

This Australia Day, we should embrace what's great about Australia, our community, our achievements and the things that make us proud to be Aussie.

And while doing so we should look back and reflect on the hardships that have met Australians over the years.

It's true that for some Australians, and particularly for indigenous Australians, the 26th of January is a difficult day.

A day that reminds us of dispossession, the arrival of a fleet which would forever impact and change the way of life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

It represents an encounter of two worlds and the start of a new chapter in the history of the world's longest living culture.

This isn't to say that it marked the end of that journey – one which predates the 26th of January 1788 by some time.

The following years have been challenging and only now, 250 years on, are we as a nation finding ourselves able to have discussions about events which are confronting and difficult.

As we stand here in 2020, with a new found resolve to formally recognise indigenous Australians in our nation's birth certificate, it's right to say that indigenous Australians are survivors.

Not only are we survivors, but we contribute much to the success of our great nation. We have seen indigenous Australians grow and thrive, our challenge is to see this

opportunity, and reward for hard work and determination extended to all indigenous Australians.



Australia Day is a time to reflect on and show respect for indigenous culture, writes Ken Wyatt. Picture: David Clare
From the sports fields to classrooms, every day indigenous Australians achieving great things.

I was full of pride as I read about Charmaine Sellings' all-indigenous, all-female fire brigade, the first of its kind in Australia.

“A highly-skilled bunch of mothers and grandmothers who can pull a strike-team together faster than wildfire.

These trailblazing women are the backbone of the remote Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust, a self-governing Aboriginal community in the Victoria far east.”

This is the power of understanding and forgiveness and a demonstration of what's possible when we commit to community and pledge to protect one another.

It's a demonstration that we can as a nation acknowledge the past, work together and walk towards a united future – this Australia Day we should celebrate this, and the story of us – because no matter your views – we are all Australian and we are all part of our nation's story.

Australia Day is a day to celebrate indigenous, British and multicultural history and look forward in unity with a determination to build a stronger and more rewarding Australia for all.

As the Minister for indigenous Australians, I want to see all Australians celebrate our indigenous heritage, promote and support truth-telling to recognise and acknowledge our shared history, and work together to heal these past wounds so we can walk together towards a brighter, reconciled future.

Australia Day is not a day for hostility – or a day to discard the great achievements of all Australians who have built this great nation, and in recent months inspired us all.



Charmaine Sellings from the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust. Picture: Alex Coppel

It has been a challenging start to the year, and there is no clearer an example of the power of Australians, when working together to support one another. It is inspiring, captures our endearing quality of ‘mateship’ and the identity that resonates with so many people from around the world who want to call Australia home.

So on Australia Day I ask that you first and foremost celebrate the good things in life, celebrate with family and friends, with community, and have thought for those who are struggling – reach out to your neighbours and be a mate.

And while you do so, take a moment to reflect upon our indigenous history; respect the place of indigenous Australian culture in modern Australia, our language, art, dance and stories; and celebrate the contributions of indigenous Australians to our communities and society.

For it is worth celebrating, and it is worth remembering.

This is our story, and this is the story of Australia. It’s the story of us.

You are part of it as much as I am, and together we can walk together towards a brighter future for all Australians.

Ken Wyatt is the Minister for indigenous Australians.