



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Australia Day: the Agony and the Ecstasy

Satendra Nandan

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Charles Sturt
University

It's an awareness that ennobles all today – the 26 million people from 200 cultures who now call Australia home.

A modern nation with so much diversity today should really be a light in the Asia-Pacific but its inner self- respect and self-awareness seem still scarred by, and scared of, its original sin as a penal colony.

January 26 was celebrated as Australia Day on the largest island and the smallest continent on Earth.

This ancient land has the oldest continuous living culture in the world: some 60,000 years of human habitation, before it was baptised Australia.

No other civilisation can make such an incredible claim.

Yet it is true.

What should have been a celebratory day had now increasingly turned into a day of deepest introspection, and considerable bitterness instead of a day of deepening understanding, reconciliation and recognition of a rich and enriching heritage of this most extraordinary land.

European Legacy

Australia is the last continent to be encountered by European explorers and scientists.

The world's rotundity—that the world is round and not flat— was an earth-shaking discovery and a sea-changing world experience.

Last year, 2020, was the 250th anniversary of the 'discovery' of Australia by one of the greatest explorers of any era, Captain James Cook.

Today his statue is under threat of being removed. One hears that even Winston Churchill's bust has been banished from the White House by President Joe Biden and Cecil Rhodes statue from Oxford is likely to be consigned to some dusty museum where cockroaches crawl and mice breed.

One thing common among such stalwarts of history is the invention of European racism.

Imperialism, conquests, slavery, and a culture of cruelty have been part of the inheritance of human civilisations, conquests and occupation from time immemorial.

Hardly any culture is free from its scars and wounds, its shame and sorrow.

Even those societies that didn't practise genocide because the conquered people looked slightly different because of the colour of their skin, or shape of their hair and the size of their nose, created castes that have come to haunt the modern world.

The battles continue for a more equitable world and respect for human dignity with justice.

European racism is of a different order. Why it became so virulent, with the Bible in one hand, the gun in the other, is a great historical mystery.

But the Bible is a most revolutionary book.

Trapped, enslaved peoples have often found answers to their sorrows in it from Alabama to Zimbabwe.

The saddest aspect of Australia is that in the latter days of 'discovery', it perpetrated heinous crimes against the Aboriginal peoples scattered all over this vast and splendid landmass with 8000 islands around it.

One would have thought that what began in 1492 could show some enlightenment in the 19th century towards the gentlest people found on this unique continent with its flora and fauna: Where else could you find kangaroos and koalas?

Yet the Aboriginal people who had lived on the land for 60,000 years, were recognised only in 1967 as citizens of the new nation, named Australia. They were counted.

Today it has become a most contentious day. Should the date be changed? Should it be celebrated or commemorated as a day of mourning?

'We are one and free'

Suddenly one realises that this not a young country, that it IS the oldest civilisation on Earth.

The national anthem has changed from 'we are young and free' to 'we're one and free'.

A single word can suddenly make us see deep into the deep time and deeper dreaming of an immortal and naked soul of a nation, no matter what coloured garb we put on it

It's an awareness that ennobles all today – the 26 million people from 200 cultures who now call Australia home. They have all lost their homes in their homelands and the journeys of history's nightmares shape their transmigration.

Those who have not been forced to migrate will not appreciate its callous brutality. It happened in Fiji too.

The tyranny of distance dislocates your being and becoming and your sense of humanity is affected by the inhumanity of others.

Today Australia, I'm often told, is the best country in the world.

It is.

But its treatment of asylum-seekers, refugees, displaced peoples is still selfish and tinged with race and religious colourings.

A modern nation with so much diversity today should really be a light in the Asia-Pacific but its inner self- respect and self-awareness seem still scarred by, and scared of, its original sin as a penal colony.

Uluru

Australia Day could still be a day of celebrations, if it recognised the Uluru Statement from the Heart wherein the Aboriginal people are asking to have a voice in the Parliament as the nation's first peoples.

There's considerable support generally for this most moving and thoughtfully crafted document. It's a gift to the whole Australian imagination.

Uluru Statement is a little longer than Gettysburg Address and a bit longer than the Preamble of Fiji's 2013 Constitution.

Australia will benefit immensely if it opened its heart to the accommodation in the heart of Australia called Uluru. Uluru is the sacred Rock in the middle of the continent. It is simply magnificent to behold as it changes its myriad colours.

The EU, after two world wars, is one community for many purposes with its individual identities and borders but transcending its age-old prejudices and historical hostilities.

The great Pity is that Little England has lost its prestige and power in Europe through its parochial Brexit. A lost glory of imperial hubris is still there growing like a ratoon on harvested cane fields.

We, who have been ancestrally part of the Indo-Pacific long before European arrival, should demand to be part of a continent that belongs to all of us, geographically, biologically, environmentally and historically.

It's our local region and we're integral part of it.

There should be free movement of peoples as in the EU and we could develop a regional consciousness that can promote freedom, respect and make us reflect on the many issues that confront us and our children – Together.

Surely COVID-19 is a good time to make us think afresh. After all, it got rid of Donald Trump, it may help us to seek a newer world in our own region.

To be a flag-waving nationalist or a patriot has never appealed to me – I belong in fragments to Fiji, India, England and Australia, touched by the Indian and Pacific oceans, my soul sprayed by their salt, sunshine and soil.

Life, love, language, literature, politics, travels are all part of us. What once seems our limitations are now full of possibilities for our region, it can still be the most exciting and peaceful if we begin to understand the depth and beauty of the Aboriginal and Islander peoples — the like of which is nowhere else in this known universe.

The lucky country can then be truly lucky for all of us.

Until then we'll have to live with the great grief and glory of our sad and saddening narrative of history.

A single word can suddenly make us see deep into the deep time and deeper Another aspect that I think we dreaming of an immortal and naked soul of a nation, no matter what coloured garb we put on it.

It's an awareness that ennobles all today – the 26 million people from 200 cultures who now call Australia should demand from our biggest and richest neighbour is an Australasian- Pacific concept from PNG to the South Pacific including, of course, New Zealand, the world's most admired little nation today.

Satendra Nandan's new book, *Life Journeys: Love & Grief*, will be published on May 15.