

Wisdom for the common good as regards 26 January and an 'Australia Day'

Bishop Philip Huggins

Late last year multi faith leaders in Victoria held a dinner which focused on how we can better support the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and the Yoorrook Justice Commission. The clear consensus unifying us was and is that the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* is a most generous invitation to all Australians to walk with First Nations people into a better future.

No one questioned that, yes, this is the right moment for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament. One which gives the Australian Government the opportunity to make policies in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people - policies which will address what the *Statement from the Heart* describes as the 'dimensions of our crisis' and the 'torment of our powerlessness'.

Because compassion and a yearning for a just peace are unifying values which are shared by our major faith traditions, we all embraced this opportunity. We could see clearly how this can be a moment where we say, in a nation-building way, we are journeying together to a place where all our children can have hope for the future. It was a wonderful night in Melbourne's Town Hall!



One of the questions asked of our Yoorrook Justice Commissioner and Deputy Chair, Sue-Anne Hunter, was regarding citizenship ceremonies on 26 January being Australia Day. A multi faith leader spoke movingly of what his Australian citizenship meant to him and how important the citizenship ceremony had been as a time to celebrate his commitment to Australia, given his background. As MC that evening, I noticed the nods around the room as he spoke of this. He

spoke of how he had come to appreciate, from First Nation people, that 26 January is not a celebratory day and wanted to ask about this. Deputy Chair Sue-Anne Hunter was tender in her response. She appreciated his love for his new homeland and reassured him that nothing tarnished that. But, at that moment, I think everyone in the room would have seen the 'wisdom for the common good' in holding citizenship ceremonies on some other day which might be called Australia Day.

Australia is the new home for many people who have sought a new beginning, often because historic matters in their country of origin remain unreconciled and the future looks hopeless. This past weekend I have been vividly reminded of this on two occasions. The first was a service for people originally from Pakistan. I have had a long involvement with this community, particularly after terrorist attacks on worshippers several years ago. On Saturday evening I listened to folk, still carrying the emotional and physical scars of violence, who are now studying and working with such gratitude to be in Australia.



Here pictured are some of the women from the community.

The other occasion was a service addressed by folk originally from Uganda.



Here they are leading a song of praise. Dr Ronald on the left and Rev'd Agatha have just received Permanent Residency. We were celebrating this and the fact that, during the long wait for this clarity of belonging, Ronald had completed a PhD in International Economics and Rev'd Agatha had completed training so as to be ordained as an Anglican priest. Permanent Residency also means they can now safely make a visit back to other family members who are still in Uganda. Jude, on the right, is still in the middle of that pursuit of visa permanency and continues to endure a long separation from loved ones.

Those of us who study peacemaking and reconciliation know that the history of a place matters. If unreconciled matters are not attended to, they sit under the surface waiting to erupt. Today, we know, from overseas, how clever and cynical propagandists can amplify these matters to cause disruption, even giving false legitimacy to acts of violence. Seen through the eyes of recent arrivals, like my friends of this past weekend, Australia is a relatively wonderful place.

In order to assist the healing of our history, it is essential that Australia Day be some other day than 26 January. It would be wise if this was decided, in bipartisan fashion, ahead of the proposed referendum. Perhaps the day the referendum passes might become the day. That would be a beautiful gesture, heart to heart. In a world full of tears, every opportunity for reconciliation and peacemaking should be embraced.

The wisdom of the saints for us as individuals also pertains to us as a nation. Wisdom is that, every day, we should ask ourselves this question: "Am I becoming a more loving person?". Changing the date of Australia Day and embracing the referendum are opportunities to be a more loving nation. The heart has its own wisdom.

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