

Introduction

To each individual Australian, the date 26 January has a different meaning. For some it is a celebration of the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove (1788). To others it is marked by the civic celebrations of the Order of Australia and Australian of the Year. To many it is simply the day off work to go to the Big Day Out music festival in Sydney, or to just sit at home with mates and watch the one day cricket match. However this date is not marked by celebratory festivities for all Australians. For many Aboriginal Australians, 26 January is referred to as 'Survival Day,' 'Invasion Day,' or 'Day of Mourning,' as it marks the date that white settlers landed on Australian shores and devastated the lives all of the Indigenous inhabitants already there.

Different perspectives, different meanings

26 January 1938 marked the 150th anniversary, or the sesquicentenary, of the First Fleet in Port Jackson. To many white-Australians, this date represented how far Australia had progressed in 150 years. It was an opportunity for them to be proud of how Australia had flourished since the early days of settlement, to reach its present state as a democratic nation which had officially reached Federation. At a time when Australia had recently made it through World War I and the Great Depression, the sentiment that the nation had a lot to be proud of was prevalent among members of the Australian public. They saw it as a chance for Australians to commemorate their past and to continue to progress. *See image 1*

To the Indigenous Australians, the anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet was referred to as a 'Day of Mourning.' To them, the date marked 150 years of degradation and mistreatment by the white settlers. It symbolised the beginning of the decimation of their people and the loss of their land, their culture and their basic human rights. Aboriginal people also saw the day as an opportunity to draw the attention of white-Australia, not only to make them see how it had violated the Indigenous population in the past, but also to see what they could do to secure the future of Aboriginal people as equal citizens.

In 1938, to commemorate the sesquicentenary, the New South Wales Government decided to re-enact the arrival of the Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet. The script, which focused on white middle-class British Australians, reflected the attitudes of the public at the time. To make it look 'authentic,' they wanted Aboriginal people to participate in the role-play for the public. All Aboriginal organisations in Sydney refused to participate and so the government decided to bring in 26 Indigenous men from a reserve in western New South Wales. However, participation was not exactly voluntarily, with the Aboriginal men's rations being at risk of being cut should they refuse to participate. Prior to the performance they were also imprisoned at Redfern Police Barracks, out of fear that they might run away. During the actual performance the Aboriginal men were told to run up the beach away from the British, as though in fear of their power. *See image 2*

The media at the time, neglected to include the treatment of the Aboriginal men in any of their reports. Instead, they chose to focus on the omission of convicts in the landing. Some believe that this is because the Australian public did not want to hear about the circumstances of Indigenous people, owing to it being an uncomfortable topic. It has since been suggested that this inaccurate interpretation of the landing was an unnecessary attempt at shaping history for the mass market.

Since 1988, the bicentenary of Captain Arthur Phillip's arrival at Port Jackson, there has been a re-enactment of the voyage of the First Fleet and their arrival in Port Jackson, but the New South Wales Government has refused to allow for the landing to be included out of concern that it was being insensitive to many Australians.

The Day of Mourning protest

In 1888, the centenary of the arrival of the First Fleet, the Aboriginal leaders chose to simply refuse to acknowledge the anniversary and the Australia Day celebrations. The problem was that this was in turn, ignored by the media. In 1933, William Cooper who founded the Australian Aborigines' League (AAL) in Melbourne in 1932, organised a petition to King George V. He also sent a petition to the Australian government in a request that they take control of Aboriginal affairs. However, once again the requests of the Aboriginal community were ignored. This prompted Cooper to take on a different approach for the sesquicentenary, one which would ensure that it could not be ignored. On 13 November 1937, he called for 26 January 1938 to be commemorated as a Day of Mourning. The purpose was to make the non-Indigenous population more aware of how the Aboriginal people had been discriminated against throughout history and to encourage them to meet the Indigenous people's requests for equal citizenship.

The Day of Mourning was led by three Aboriginal men: William Cooper from the AAL; William Ferguson, who established the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) in 1937; and Jack Patten, the president of the APA. It began with a march at Sydney's Town Hall, involving both Aboriginals and non-Indigenous supporters. The march was supposed to end there and be followed by a Day of Mourning congress; however the Aboriginal people were denied access. The congress, which was intended for Aboriginal people only, had to be relocated to the nearby Australian Hall. In total, around 1000 people attended, including prominent female Aboriginal activist Pearl Gibbs and Margaret Tucker, one of Australia's earliest and most notable political Aboriginal activists. *See image 3*

The Day of Mourning called for the Aboriginal people to be able to access the same citizenship rights as those of white-Australians. This included their land being returned, equal employment opportunity, improvement in standards of health, housing and education. They also requested that Aboriginal children should no longer be taken from their families. Several approaches to how these aims could be achieved were put forth during the conference. They included the representation of the Aboriginal people in parliament, the recognition of Aboriginal law, the termination of the Aboriginal Protection Board and the *Aborigines Protection Act* 1901-1936 (NSW) which restricted all areas of their everyday lives from marriage to employment.

Patten and Ferguson, compiled a pamphlet entitled 'Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights' and distributed it at the meeting. It reiterated the sentiment of the Aboriginal Day of Mourning as a day which commemorates the beginning of 150 years of hardship for Indigenous Australians. The pamphlet outlined that their land was taken away from them and that their ancestors were exterminated by disease and

also by violent conflict with the Europeans settlers. It also suggested that the way in which the Aboriginal people are allegedly 'protected' by the government in present times, does little to actually benefit them, but rather discriminates against them and makes their lives much more restricted and difficult.

The aftermath

A list of ten points was derived from the Day of Mourning meeting and was presented to the Australian Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, five days later. However, he did not heed the demands of the Aboriginal delegates and Australian Indigenous people continued to be excluded from the census, could not vote in all States and were not registered as citizens until the second half of the 20th century. It was particularly under the reign of Harold Holt as Prime Minister that Aboriginal people began to receive equal rights. The 1967 referendum changed the constitution by including Aboriginal people to be counted as part of Australia's population and consequently allow the Commonwealth to make laws in regard to them.

Ever since the first Day of Mourning in 1938, the tradition has continued each year on 26 January. In 1998, a silent re-enactment of the original Day of Mourning protest was staged by around four hundred protestors, along the same route that the group of Aboriginal people took in 1938. It also involved descendants of the original protestors reading the speeches which were given 60 years ago and the ten points which were outlined from the meeting to be reaffirmed.

In recent times, the Day of Mourning has also been referred to as 'Invasion Day' by some people who see it as a day which marks the beginning of the genocide of the Indigenous Australians, the original inhabitants of Australia. Consequently they believe that the occasion should be solemnly commemorated. However, there are other Indigenous Australians who see this as a proud day which marks the survival of their race and culture and refer to it as 'Survival Day.' *See image 4*