

Grattan on Friday: Liberals stir the culture war pot but who's listening?

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

As a new round of the culture wars bubbles, West Australian Liberal senator Dean Smith has urged that we should legislate to “protect” the January 26 date of Australia Day.

Smith came to national prominence as one of the small coterie of Liberals who forced the Turnbull government to act on same-sex marriage. He advances his causes with moderation and respect, and always warrants a hearing. But in this instance he does not make a convincing argument.

Australia Day's date – which marks the First Fleet's landing - has become increasingly contentious in recent years, opposed by Indigenous and other critics on the grounds that it is really “invasion day”.

If we were starting again, I think it would be better to have Australia Day on January 1, to celebrate the birth of the Commonwealth.

But given the present date has strong community support, there is not a compelling case for change. Equally, there isn't a case to bake in the current date either. (This date, incidentally, only appears in legislation as a public holiday)

In an [opinion piece](#) in Thursday's Australian Smith writes that “Australia Day remains unprotected and could easily fall victim to the whims of a political party or special interest lobby group interested in political point-scoring rather than celebrating the virtues of a contemporary and forward-looking Australia.”

He proposes legislation to “guarantee that January 26 ceases to be Australia Day only after the Australian people have been consulted directly, and that to change the date of Australia Day an alternative date must be submitted to every Australian elector.”

In reality, the January 26 date won't “fall victim” to “whims”. No government would change it lightly.

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An alteration would only happen if there was evidence of a big shift in community sentiment. Maybe that will come in future years - if it does, so be it.

Change is certainly not on the cards any time soon. Bill Shorten remains committed to January 26.

The Coalition has been using the (annual) debate about Australia Day as political ammunition.

This became a little messy, however, because Warren Mundine, Scott Morrison's star candidate for the marginal NSW seat of Gilmore, has been a forthright advocate of moving Australia Day to January 1.

Read more: [*View from The Hill: Morrison's Gilmore candidate is the man who's been everywhere*](#)

Mundine [wrote](#) on January 24, 2017: "The 26th of January is the wrong day to celebrate Australia Day.

"Firstly, Australia wasn't founded on January 26, 1788. It was founded on January 1, 1901 ...

"Secondly, the tension between commemorating British conquest on the one hand and celebrating Australian identity and independence on the other isn't going away. This isn't a recent tension drummed up by Lefties. It's always been there, even before anyone cared about what indigenous people think."

Despite his new status Mundine is sticking to his view – he's just saying now that this is not a

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priority issue for him. “I’ve got 100 different things in front of that, before I even get to that stage,” he told a news conference as he stood beside his leader on Wednesday.

He declines to be drawn on his position if he were elected and faced a Smith private member’s bill. He told The Conversation, “I’ll jump that hurdle when I get there. At the moment I’m fighting a tough battle to win the seat”.

As this year’s Australia Day approached Morrison ramped up the nationalistic and culture war rhetoric in general, and accompanied it with some controversial actions.

The Liberal party [tweeted](#) , “The Government is taking action to protect Australia Day from activists.”

The government proposes to force local councils to hold citizenship ceremonies on Australia Day, after the refusal of some to do so. Councils defying the edict would not be allowed to conduct them at all.

This has come with a recommended dress code for these occasions – no thongs or board shorts. “I’m a prime minister for standards,” declared Morrison, to something of a national horse laugh.

Councils have been given to the end of next month to provide feedback.

Morrison has struggled to differentiate himself from Shorten over Australia Day, since they are at one about the date.

“It’s not good enough to say that you just won’t change it. You’ve got to stand up for it and I’m standing up for it, ” he declared. “Bill Shorten will let it fade away”. It’s true the level of rhetoric around Australia Day has varied over the years but the notion of it just “fading away” is ridiculous.

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This week the debate moved on to Captain Cook, with Morrison's announcement of \$6.7 million for the Endeavour replica to circumnavigate Australia to mark next year's 250th anniversary of Cook's arrival and take the story of Cook to 39 communities across the country. (The money is from \$48.7 million set aside earlier to mark the anniversary.)

Morrison - who was visiting Cooktown in North Queensland - was described by Shorten as having a "bizarre Captain Cook fetish". (Liberal MP Warren Entsch recalls Morrison's special interest in Cook from his days in tourism. In parliament Morrison happens to represent the seat of Cook.)

The prime minister, who argues that the narrative of Cook can be used as one pillar for Indigenous reconciliation, hit back by accusing Shorten of "sneering at Australia's history", declaring "you can't trust this guy on this stuff."

He added that "political correctness ... is raising kids in our country today to despise our history", and alleged that Shorten wanted to "feed into that".

For some in the right of the Liberal party, the culture and history wars are a continuing preoccupation.

But these issues hover on the fringe of politics in this election year, even if they do resonate in Hansonland and similar territory.

It mightn't have been front and centre, but the battle that's been going on this week between treasurer Josh Frydenberg and his shadow Chris Bowen about the economy, tax policy and the like is a lot more relevant to most voters than the culture wars and political correctness.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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