

Claire G. Coleman

The Forever War

5 It's January already. Here I am, writing yet another opinion piece about the 26th day of this month, the day on which the nation celebrates the invasion and genocide imposed on my people and my sacred Noongar Country and all other Aboriginal people and our lands.

10 January comes around every year and every year, including this one, Blak mob are mourning while the racists and bad actors are flaring up and crowing. A part of me is desperate to avoid the world, to pretend Invasion Day doesn't exist, to stay home and stay safe. Another part, the part fuelled by my eternal, justifiable anger, wants to march on the street on January 26, to fight for our rights against the burgeoning far right, against the white nationalists and the government that provides them succour

15 The third part of me is tired – of the fight, of explaining Invasion Day to racists, which I am completely aware I am doing again. That part of me is mourning for the people lost to colonial violence over the past 234 years, losses that are ongoing. These losses are likely to continue because of a lack of the political will needed to stop overpolicing, court prejudice and Blak deaths in custody. That part of me is also mourning the people currently dying in the Northern Territory from yet another disease brought here by the colonisers.

20 I consider it the responsibility of the coloniser to fight against the colony, even to dismantle it. You outnumber us, you have the political power, although you apparently lack the political will to do better than you are doing

25 I long to mourn all this in peace. I want to be on Country, in peace. I want to be with family, in peace. But Australia has never offered peace. This is something people never discuss, never speak of or unpack: if war was declared in 1788, peace has never come; there has been no declaration of peace, no meeting of peoples to sue for the end of the war, no treaty. The Blak War is ongoing, eternal, a forever war.

30 Every year since 1994, on January 26, Australians have celebrated the invasion and subsequent genocide of Indigenous people. Every year, in Melbourne at least, the audience enjoying the Australia Day parade gets smaller and is increasingly dwarfed by the Invasion Day march, which keeps growing bigger. I've seen it. I was there

35 The calls to change the date, the calls to abolish Australia Day, become increasingly loud. Perhaps people are beginning to see what the day truly is for many people – a spasm of jingoistic white nationalist fervour and an insult to Indigenous Australians, the survivors of genocide.

40 Recent polls, while disagreeing on the precise percentage of people who want to change the date, all agree that the number is increasing. The movement to change the date is gaining momentum. It seems inevitable that eventually Australia Day will be supported by only a tiny minority. This year, in 2022, in Melbourne, there will be no Australia Day parade, no waving of flags, no empty nationalism, no white supremacy. Critics say the decision is political. But accusing the

Andrews government of politics is like accusing a plumber of working with pipes. Frankly, it's about bloody time: the parade should have been axed years ago.

50 To me the politics is clear, the path to a better country is unambiguous. The original decision to celebrate January 26, to hold Australia's national day on the date that the continent was invaded and the genocide of Indigenous peoples began, was a political one. It can be seen as nothing more than a statement of intent, to celebrate and idealise Australia as a British colony and, above all, as white.

55 This is, perhaps, why Australia's white nationalists are so obsessed with Australia Day and with keeping the events as they have been for the past 28 years. Despite their regular protestations that the day is not a celebration of invasion and genocide, they seem well aware of what the day marks. It's a white nationalist celebration and Australia's right wing are completely cognisant of that.

60 This explains their desperate, vitriolic responses whenever there's an attempt to make the reasonable decision to change the date, cancel Australia Day or even when people begin to understand it is an insult to Indigenous people.

65 There are two competing majority opinions among Indigenous people I know about what to do next – either changing the date or abolishing the day altogether. Over the past few years of fighting white nationalists on Invasion Day my opinion has become more firm: Australia does not deserve a national day. Australia Day should be abolished until you have earned a national day.

70 I don't know when that will be. Perhaps it would be when treaties have been signed, perhaps when all the "crown land" is handed back to the true owners, perhaps it will never happen. Australia doesn't really need a national day.

75 In Victoria, the state government is still providing plenty of opportunities to commemorate the day, many of them without jingoism. There will be a concert in Flagstaff Gardens and a daytime event in Federation Square, called Reflect, Respect, Celebrate, providing free food and family entertainment.

80 Reflection and respect are important considerations on January 26. I am sure many other Indigenous people would agree with me when I suggest that people who might not understand why we protest against Australia Day, calling for changing the date or abolishing the event, could benefit from spending time in reflection. Perhaps they could use that time to learn to respect the land they are on and the people of the land.

85 There is much to reflect on. For those unaware of the true history of Australia, there is much to learn. Australia Day commemorates the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove, the raising of the British flag on Australian soil, the theft of our land and the beginning of the genocide of Indigenous people.

90 The first step of "reflection" should be making the effort to understand the history of the day and of the colony. There are many ways to do so, many books and articles on the topic. I myself have

written about it a number of times, as have many other writers and journalists, both Blak and coloniser.

95 There is something else I want you to think about: I consider it the responsibility of the coloniser to fight against the colony, even to dismantle it. You outnumber us, you have the political power, although you apparently lack the political will to do better than you are doing.

100 Laws once mandated the extinction of Indigenous Australians. Government policy, built on the assumption we would be swept aside, was to speed up our extinction. It almost worked. Indigenous Australians are now only about 3 per cent of the population. The people who can change the country, which lies like a shroud over sacred Aboriginal land, are the non-Indigenous people who live here. By the numbers that's 97 per cent of the people who live here, and probably includes you.

105 The colonisers benefit from the colony. Every coloniser and descendent of colonisers, every non-Indigenous person, is advantaged by the colony. I don't think it's too much to ask that the colonisers work to dismantle their own privilege.

110 That is something for you to reflect on: how much do you believe in justice? Even that is not enough. It is time to ask yourself: what can you do for the people of this land, what are you willing to do? Do you think you are doing enough? Honestly?

115 Historically, governments in Australia have resisted real systemic change on Aboriginal rights. The reason for this is simple: governments that work towards equality and land rights for Aboriginal people tend to be punished at elections, or at least fear they will be.

120 If the majority of Australians made it clear that they would vote out any party that did not support Aboriginal rights, land rights, treaties and an end to deaths in custody, government policy towards my people could change overnight. The power to effect change is in the hands of the colonisers. It has been for a long time.

125 I want you to understand this. Aboriginal people are still oppressed, we still don't have our lands back, we are still over-policed, the country is still racist because you, the coloniser voter, want it to be so. Or, at least, you don't care enough to fight for real change. In the end, there's no real difference.

130 It's time for you to reflect. What do you stand for? Who would you stand with? Will you make a stand for Indigenous rights? Will you learn to listen? Will you do what the legendary Warumpi Band asked, in their song "Blackfella/Whitefella "stand up and be counted"?

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