



Speech by  
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**MEMBER FOR CHERMSIDE**

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Hansard 20 June 2000

**AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL DAY**

**Mr SULLIVAN** (ChermSIDE—ALP) (12.20 p.m.): It was my privilege to have attended the recent ALP State Conference as an elected Lilley branch delegate. On behalf of the northside branch members, I moved an amendment to the State branch policy concerning community debate about the celebration of Australia's national day. The motion, which was unanimously adopted by the conference, arose out of a discussion at the ChermSIDE branch meeting. That motion was then unanimously supported at the North Brisbane ALP Regional Conference some months later. It is pleasing to see that the ALP has, as part of its structure and rules, a process which allows local branch members to raise issues which can be debated and adopted by the supreme governing body within the State branch.

The motion forms a new section 10 in the Machinery of Government policy. It reads—

"10. Australia's National Day

10.1 That the State Government initiates and pursues ongoing discussion and action within the community to consider the appropriateness of celebrating Australia Day on January 26th. This debate will be promoted and coordinated through the Office of Premier, and will include the possibility of moving our National Day to another date which is more universally accepted and which will be agreed upon through consensus.

10.2 The State Government will canvass and promote issues concerning Australia Day with Federal, other State and civic leaders in all appropriate forums."

This issue was raised in the context of developing our national identity. It falls into a similar category of debate as our national colours, our national song, our flag and our constitutional status. The recent debate on the last-mentioned topic is still very much in our minds. We are all aware of the recent referendum on how Australians saw themselves, whether as republicans or as monarchists. That debate, unfortunately, was nobbled and distorted by the way the Prime Minister, John Howard, entered into the debate. Let us hope that the debate about our national day of celebration can be open, informed, widespread and inclusive.

The motion that was successfully moved is a conservative, non-threatening motion. It does not seek to bring about radical change; rather, it simply puts the issue of our national day celebration on the political agenda. It seeks to ask questions—the answers to which will be determined by the Australian community following extensive, inclusive deliberations. It asks that the State Government play a constructive role within the broad community to consider removing what is seen by many people as an impediment to an all-encompassing day of national celebration. This motion recognises that the discussion or debate must be broadly based within the community; it cannot just be an ALP idea or policy. It is a much more comprehensive motion, inclusive of all within the Australian society.

In terms of being a matter of national identity, it helps us ask ourselves: who are we? What do we celebrate as a nation? What do we want this celebration to say about us as a united society? The seconder of the motion at the State Conference was the Honourable Con Sciacca, the Federal shadow Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Con told delegates of the 40% of Australians who have one or both parents born overseas. He asked delegates to consider how this vast section of our community felt about the current form of celebrating Australia Day.

Many delegates and people from the media approached me afterwards. I said to them that, in many ways, we do not celebrate properly the national day; it is something that passes for a variety of reasons. We should in fact consider the origins of Australia Day, and I thank Lynda Pretty from the Parliamentary Library for the research that she has done for me in this regard.

26 January, as we know, marks the day in January 1788 on which Captain Arthur Phillip landed in Sydney Cove and proclaimed sovereignty over the eastern seaboard of Australia. In 1818 the first official celebrations for Anniversary Day, as it became known in New South Wales, were held when Governor Macquarie marked the 30th anniversary of settlement by ordering a 30-gun salute at Sydney

Harbour. He later hosted a dinner and ball at Government House for officials and military officers. Celebrations of Anniversary Day in the early years of the colony were largely private affairs. Clark recounts stories of festive anniversary dinner parties amongst the wealthy colonists in 1825, 1826 and 1828.

It is interesting to note how the celebration of Australia Day as a public holiday developed. In 1838 the New South Wales Government declared in the Sydney Gazette that "Friday 26 January ... shall be observed as a public holiday in the public offices". This inaugural public holiday in New South Wales was to become an annual event from that year forward, held on or around 26 January. In 1888, with the exception of Adelaide, all colonial capitals declared Anniversary Day a public holiday. In that year many celebrations such as parades, fireworks, regattas and ceremonies took place. In 1871 the Australian Natives' Association was formed in Victoria. This influential group lobbied successfully for continuing celebrations of Foundation Day, as it was known in Victoria, from the 1890s until the beginning of the First World War.

Preparations for January 1938, marking the 150th anniversary of settlement, began in New South Wales in 1936 with the formation of the Celebrations Council. In 1938 New South Wales was the only State to abandon the traditional long weekend and hold the Anniversary Day public holiday on the actual day, Wednesday, 26 January. In Victoria the Australian Natives' Association continued to lobby for a unified naming and dating of the national day. In 1946 the Commonwealth Government and all States and Territories agreed to observe the same day, 26 January, and call it Australia Day. Again, it was only in 1946 that even that unified move came about. In 1988, for the first time, the public holiday was held around the nation on the day itself—on Tuesday, 26 January—instead of the closest Monday. From 1994, just a few short years ago, all States and Territories have uniformly celebrated 26 January, observing this date regardless of the day of the week on which it falls. If 26 January falls on a weekend, a public holiday is usually granted for the following Monday. But we must remember that this is not a long-held tradition. It is only since 1994—six years ago—that all States actually celebrated on the day itself.

In recent times—in fact, in December 1999—Tony Beddison, Chairman of the Australia Day Committee, was reported as saying that 26 January "has failed as a national day of patriotic celebration". His reasons were cited as the following: 26 January marks the founding of New South Wales rather than Australia; it is not sufficiently inclusive, alienating many Aborigines—and, Con Sciacca would add, that large group of people from other countries; and it is during the school holidays, when children are unavailable for school and community activities.

I will not go into the debate on what other day it should be, because the first thing we have to do—which this motion calls for—is to consider the appropriateness of the current day. We really have not had a debate in anything like recent times—as we have had on the national song, the flag or the Constitution—as to what should be our national day of celebration. It should be something that is inclusive, not something which is hurtful to some within our society. It is something that should have meaning for all Australians, not just for those in New South Wales. It should be something which allows us to celebrate. A very practical issue is that, because of where 26 January falls, all States are on holidays at the end of their long vacation. If we are to celebrate a national day, we have to have preparations for it; we have to get the community involved; we have to get school groups, community organisations and the general public involved. When people are on holidays, when schools around Australia are closed, when community groups have not yet reconvened for the start of their active year—which is generally in February—we actually have a very dull celebration. I suggest that even from a practical point of view, having a day which enables us to really celebrate the event is something that should be considered.

I put before the members of this House the motion that was successfully passed. I hope people do not see it along party lines, because the motion specifically is not along party lines. It recognises that the debate must be held within the broad community. It recognises that there will probably be no single day that stands out as a universal day of celebration and is something that will need to be worked on. But we must remember that this day is certainly not like Anzac Day. It does not hold the tradition or the importance of that day. As I say again, it was only in 1994 that all States celebrated this event on the one day.

We are a growing and developing nation that is just over 200 years old. We are still working out significant features of our national identity. I ask members and the public to consider our Australian national day of celebration as one of those elements of forming our national identity. I wish to table for members' interest various articles that relate to the celebration of Australia's national day.

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