

Speech delivered by 2025 Australia Day Ambassador, Arthur Gerrans



Good morning, thank you for having me today and for giving me the opportunity to share my views on the meaning of 'being an Australian.'

Before I start, I would also like to acknowledge the Taungurong people, the traditional owners of the lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to any elders here with us.

Australia Day gives us occasion to really give thought to what makes and binds us together, as a nation, and the particular values that define us—values like resilience and persistence, mateship and inclusivity. These aren't just words - they're woven into the fabric of our national story. Australians embody these values, from deeds such as the Rats of Tobruk withstanding siege for nine months in the midst of the Second World War, to acts as simple as cheering side-by-side at sporting events. Or maybe, think about the courage and camaraderie displayed during the bushfires of recent years, where people have come together to help rebuild communities. These values, and the way Australia and its people grow together, are what really makes Australia special in my mind.

It's well known that Australia's past is one of grim colonialism and racism, labeling the traditional lands of First Nations Australians as 'terra nullius' and limiting the population primarily to Anglo-Europeans under the 'White Australia Policy.' And, to me, there is no doubt that efforts must continue to be made to combat all forms of discrimination, prevalent as they unfortunately are. But, in light of the past, there's no denying that Australia has grown as a country, demonstrated by events such as the 1967 referendum to include Indigenous Australians in the census, which received the highest yes vote in Australian referendum history, with over 90 percent of Australians supporting the proposal. However, we should all recognise that further efforts are required to address the legacy of colonialism.

Opposition of the systemic racism that is in many ways still ingrained in daily life is of incredible import. A significant part of what defines Australia is its rich and enduring Indigenous culture, spanning over 65,000 years—the oldest continuous culture in the world. The vibrant art, stories, and connection to the land from First Nations peoples enriches our understanding of what it means to live in harmony with the environment and with one another, and celebrating these traditions and acknowledging their place in our national identity strengthens who we are as Australians.

Perhaps at the risk of sounding like a patriotic nationalist, Australia has also made strides to get closer to equality regarding a number of other issues. Australia was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote, doing so in 1902, and Australia's multiculturalism has improved to the point that nearly half of all Australians were born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. The legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2017 is also a significant milestone reflecting Australia's commitment to equality.

Australia has also made contributions to global progress with effects reaching far beyond our shores. Our scientists have developed world-changing innovations, like Wi-Fi technology, which connects millions of people every day, and our international student education industry is booming, with over 800 thousand international students from all around the world enrolled in Australian schools in 2024. Achievements such as these show that Australia regularly bats above its weight as a nation of thinkers, doers, and global citizens.

But for me, being Australian is about the small, everyday moments as much as the larger, more appreciated ones. It's about singing Australian jingle bells in a primary school concert, regional students being able to ski on Mt. Buller every week for a term, the local sporting clubs and the outback right at our fingertips. It's these moments and privileges that make me both proud and glad of where I live.

As we reflect on how far we have come and, indeed, who we have become, I hope that you all share my optimism for Australia's future as a place of diversity, fairness and growth that we are already on the path to achieving.