

THE AUSTRALIAN

Celebrating a great nation

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No nation should take its good fortune for granted. Neither should it neglect to salute its best and brightest sons and daughters and its quiet achievers. Welcoming new citizens on an important national day is vital. So, occasionally, is taking time to reflect on the national identity from the vantage point of a mature and comprehensive understanding of history. Australia Day is about all this and more. As Scott Morrison says today in his characteristically homespun style, this is “the day we come together. It’s the day we celebrate all Australians, all their stories, all their journeys. And we do this on January 26 because this is the day that Australia changed — forever — and set us on the course of the modern Australia we are today.” Our story, he says, “is of a good-hearted and fair people always striving to be better. We have a go. We take risks. Occasionally we fall flat on our faces. But we get up. We always get up.”

Resilience in the face of challenge is a powerful theme in the lives of the unsung heroes and high-flyers whose achievements are celebrated in today’s Australia Day honours. From Murdoch Children’s Research Institute scientist Kathryn North to entertainer Olivia Newton-John, some have made a mark across the world, at the pinnacle of their fields. Others, whose contributions are no less valued, have made life better for people in their local communities.

Last year, few Australians faced challenges as daunting as those that confronted medics Craig Challen and Richard Harris, whose bravery and skill helped save 12 boys, members of a soccer team, and their coach from flooded caves in Thailand in July. Dr Challen, a retired vet from Perth, and Dr Harris, an Adelaide anaesthetist, are worthy Australians of the Year. Watched by the world, they placed the safety of the

children and others above their own and inspired hope when it seemed lost. As National Australia Day Council chairwoman Danielle Roche says: “Their selflessness, courage and willingness to help others in a time of need typifies the Australian spirit.” That same spirit prompted us to name these brilliant “ordinary blokes” as *The Australian’s* Australians of the Year last Saturday.

At the beach, backyard barbecues, sporting events, church services and fireworks displays today, Australia Day is a “big day out”. It is a chance to celebrate the good fortune of our democratic, tolerant, prosperous and diverse society, and to take stock about how we might do better.

Like Bill Shorten, we’re “getting a bit over the Australia Day debates”. And we welcome the Opposition Leader’s assurance that the date will not be changed from January 26, however much a few cranky Greens think otherwise. This year, former Victoria premier Jeff Kennett has added a pinch of gravitas to that annual kerfuffle. While we disagree with his call for a change of date, we respect his right to put his case and have given him space to do so today in *Inquirer*. We also agree with Mr Kennett’s rejection of the pejorative label “invasion day”. As he says: “Australia was not invaded in 1788, it was settled. The country was occupied by a people from a different community and race to those who were already here, spread in tribes throughout the land.” No nation’s history is flawless and, without question, redressing the disadvantage suffered by too many of our First Peoples remains Australia’s most urgent and complex policy challenge.

Regardless of the disquiet the events of January 26, 1788, engender in some quarters, they were profoundly significant — bringing forth a new nation from a penal colony. One of the first who recognised that, Luke Slattery writes today, was Charles Darwin, who stopped at Sydney in 1836. Darwin observed: “On the whole, as a place of punishment, the object is scarcely gained, but as a means of making men outwardly honest — of converting vagabonds, most useless in one hemisphere, into active citizens in another, and thus giving birth to a new and splendid country — a grand Centre of Civilisation — it has succeeded to a degree perhaps unparalleled in history.”

Happy Australia Day.

