

It's simply about respect



The practice of being welcomed to Country or in turn acknowledging Country at official events or gatherings has been a topic of debate recently, so we thought it might be helpful to provide some answers to a few questions that come up from time to time.

Is a Welcome to Country something new, invented for the sake of political correctness?

Protocols for welcoming visitors to Country have been a part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for thousands of years. Despite the absence of fences or visible borders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups had clear boundaries separating their Country from that of other groups. Crossing into another group's Country required a request for permission to enter — like gaining a visa — and when that permission was granted the hosting group would welcome the visitors, offering them safe passage. For example, in some areas visitors would sit outside the boundary of another group's land and light a fire to signal their request to enter. A fire lit in response would indicate approval and welcome from the landowning group and often, on meeting, gifts would be

exchanged. While visitors were provided with a safe passage, they also had to respect the protocols and rules of the landowner group while on their Country. Today, obviously much has changed and these protocols have been adapted to contemporary circumstances but the essential ingredients of welcoming visitors and offering safe passage remain in place.

What is an Acknowledgment of Country?

An Acknowledgment of Country is a way of showing awareness of and respect for the traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander owners of the land on which a meeting or event is being held, and of recognising the continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their Country.

An Acknowledgment of Country can be informal or formal and involves visitors acknowledging the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander owners of the land as well as the

long and continuing relationship between Indigenous peoples and their Country.

At a meeting or formal occasion the speaker can begin proceedings by offering an Acknowledgment of Country. Unlike a Welcome to Country, it can be performed by a non-Indigenous person.

There are no set protocols or wording for an Acknowledgment of Country, though often a statement may take the following form: 'I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the (appropriate group) people, and pay my respect to elders both past and present.'

You might personalise and localise an acknowledgement to make it as meaningful as possible, so the statement above is just a guide. As journalist Martin Flanagan reflects: 'I am not going to pretend that every Welcome to Country ceremony I've attended has been brilliantly alive to me. But that would be true of a lot of, if not nearly all, official ceremonies I attend. I also think there is an onus on non-Indigenous people who acknowledge country in the course of their public utterances to do it as well as they can.'

Why are such acknowledgements and welcomes important?

Incorporating a welcome or acknowledgement protocol into official meetings and events recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and custodians of their land. It promotes an awareness of the past and ongoing connection to place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Unlike New Zealand, Canada and the United States, Australia has no treaty with its Indigenous people. While land rights laws and Native Title determinations in recent years have meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been officially recognised as having some ownership rights to some areas, for many groups there remains no official recognition of their connection to the land of their ancestors. A Welcome to or Acknowledgment of Country doesn't replace a treaty, Native Title or land rights, but they're a small gesture of recognition of the association with land and place of the First Australians.

How does a welcome or acknowledgement help address Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander disadvantage?

Some critics who disagree with the practice of being welcomed by or acknowledging traditional owners argue that it's pointless because it fails to solve practical aspects of Indigenous disadvantage. This view doesn't take into account the connection between dispossession and disadvantage, and that the ongoing effects of colonisation are at the heart of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians today. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander exclusion from our history books, our flag, anthem and for many years our democracy can never be undone — and the damage it has done cannot be reversed.

What can be done, alongside efforts in health, education and employment, are practices of inclusion. Including recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in events, meetings and national symbols is one part of ending the exclusion that has been so damaging. As Cape York leader Noel Pearson writes: 'Reconciliation is not only possible but necessary. Settlement of recognition will include many things: land issues and connection to land, solutions to economic and social issues, language rights and many other things. There will be symbolism as well.'

Why should we be welcomed by or acknowledge Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people if they no longer legally own the land?

In today's world of meetings in office buildings and school assemblies, Welcomes to and Acknowledgments of Country may seem out of place. The culture, population and environment of Australia have all changed significantly since colonisation and these ceremonies can seem strange or meaningless to some. However, all areas of Australia have or had traditional owners, including where large cities are now situated. Even though Indigenous people may not live in a traditional way on this land, they are still connected to it.

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, the meaning of Country is more than

just ownership or connection to land, as Professor Mick Dodson explains:

When we talk about traditional 'Country'... we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians...we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on the map. For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains.

While they may all no longer necessarily be the title-holders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land.

To find out more...

For advice on how to acknowledge Country the following link may help. You might also get in touch with your local traditional owners through your local land council, reconciliation group or an Indigenous community organisation.

<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/education/abled/docs/welcometocountryaug2007.pdf>

Postscript

Following recent amendments to Standing Orders in the Australian House of Representatives and the Senate, all openings of future Federal Parliaments will begin with a 'Welcome to Country' by the traditional Indigenous owners.

The amendments allow for the incorporation of this ancient cultural tradition into Australia's democracy at the first meeting of a new Parliament, after a Federal election.

The Australian Parliament witnessed the first Aboriginal Welcome to Country in the February 2008 opening of Parliament.