

SYMBOLISM AND SUBSTANCE IN INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

We need to ensure symbolism towards Indigenous Australians remains relevant and meaningful, argues **Charles Jacobs**

Recently, the University of Sydney planted a new jacaranda tree in its famous Quadrangle, a clone of its 88 year old predecessor which died in late 2016. A native Illawarra flame tree was also planted in the opposite corner of the Quad. For the University the planting ceremony was an important moment in acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners, the Gadigal people, whilst symbolising their ‘commitment to closing the education gap’.¹

In the past decade, such symbolism has become mainstream. Acknowledgements are habitually made to traditional owners, flying Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander flags on both public and private buildings is common, and the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in school and university curricula is becoming more widespread. For some, these symbolic acts are an important way of showing respect and understanding of the unique status of Indigenous people in our history. For others, they are emblematic of a growing culture of political correctness, where those who refuse to ascribe are decried and castigated.

No matter what side of the fence you sit on it seems these practices are here to stay. So we need to ensure not only that they remain genuine and relevant to Indigenous people, but also that they do not become overly prescriptive for those who do not wish to partake. This article discusses the dynamics of Indigenous symbolism in Australian society and asks how a balance can be maintained.

The changing nature of symbolism

February 2008 is often considered a milestone in symbolic reconciliation after incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised to thousands of Aboriginal children for the historic policy of removing them from their families. The

Apology came after years of public pressure that at one point saw over a quarter of a million people walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge for Sorry Day in 2000, and it was widely hailed as a healing moment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. Such acts are significant and meaningful for Indigenous people, and convey a clear and genuine sentiment towards the receiver.

Rudd also introduced a Welcome to Country ceremony to the first sitting of parliament that has since been held every year. These symbolic ceremonies—and/or ritual acknowledgements of the traditional owners of sites where official events or meetings are held—are now commonplace in most state and territory parliaments, councils, government departments, large corporations, educational institutions, arts bodies and professional organisations.

Over the years, however, the dynamics of symbolism in Australia have begun to change. While many acts remain heartfelt, some issues have arisen with the practice. It seems, in the current environment, social pressures dictate that if someone doesn’t follow established symbolic rituals it can ‘imply a refusal to recognise Indigenous sovereignty or respect Indigenous culture.’² For example, when the eastern Melbourne City of Boroondara made acknowledgements to



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traditional owners non-compulsory they were widely criticised for disrespecting Aboriginal people.³

As a result of these growing social pressures, many are making efforts to recognise and engage with Indigenous Australians. The risk is that in some circumstances it can verge on tokenism. Emma Kowal describes this as 'performative anti-racism', where organisations do everything possible to portray an image of acceptance and equality; for example, ensuring that an adequate quota of Aboriginal participants sit on a panel discussing Indigenous affairs.⁴ The uncertain protocols surrounding many symbolic acts make it even more likely for tokenism to occur. Does one speaker make an acknowledgement to traditional owners on behalf of everyone at an event? Or should all speakers make the gesture? When the latter occurs, it can often seem rushed and meaningless.

Another example is Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs). RAPs are formal documents published by organisations outlining a framework of their commitments to reconciliation and addressing Indigenous issues. Nearly 800 organisations have a RAP, and it must be noted that many RAPs have been successful in fostering engagement and achieving tangible outcomes for Indigenous people.⁵ However, others have been criticised as a tick-box exercise that demonstrates good intentions without leading to any real change.⁶ This was evident in a review conducted for my recent CIS report *Risky Business: The Problems of Indigenous Business Policy*. Of the 100 RAPs randomly surveyed, all promised to engage with Indigenous businesses. However, only 24 listed actual 'hard' numerical targets to help track their commitments. In the 76 RAPs without hard targets the language was typically general and non-committal.

Ironically, this dynamic can actually have a negative effect. The more focus placed on ticking boxes and maintaining appearances, the less genuine acts of reconciliation can appear. It becomes more about those making the symbolic act than the Indigenous people it is directed towards. In the case of the discussion panel, the event hosts want people to know they are inclusive. In the case of some RAPs, companies want the social capital derived from demonstrating a commitment to Indigenous

people. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians may still derive some benefit from this style of commitment, it undermines the entire objective of symbolism in the first place.

Unintended consequences

Being wary of tokenism and self-interested acknowledgements of Indigenous people is important. It is also important to realise that unintended consequences can arise when policies of recognition and cultural sensitivity become ingrained in organisational structures. This may lead to policies being forced upon Indigenous people whether they want or need them or not.

In many universities, for instance, cultural awareness policies and safety standards are commonplace. Simply by virtue of identifying as Indigenous during enrolment, students are compelled to participate in an ecosystem of sheltering and protection. At Macquarie University Indigenous students are streamlined into 'Aboriginal-specific enrolment preparation and orientation sessions [which] ensure that students feel culturally safe and prepared to begin their journey at Macquarie.'⁷ Indigenous students at Sydney University are automatically considered for a range of specific scholarships.⁸ Meanwhile all Indigenous employees at the University of South Australia are assigned a mentor to provide ongoing support.⁹

While such policies help many Indigenous Australians overcome the well-documented difficulties they face in tertiary education and the workplace, a problem arises if people feel pressured to participate purely because of their indigeneity. Certain expectations can reduce their opportunity as individuals to participate as a 'normal' student in mainstream university life. Such approaches also risk typecasting Indigenous people as automatically having a deficit, regardless of socioeconomic status or academic results.¹⁰ This can put Aboriginal students in an uncomfortable position, giving them little choice but to agree to be funnelled into programs that define them by race and often separate them from the rest of the student body.

Disconnect from reality

As the nature of symbolism continues to evolve, there is also a growing disconnect from real issues.¹¹ For Indigenous people, particularly in remote areas, the

current narrative is from another world. Their most pressing problems do not involve the semantics of a Welcome to Country ceremony at a Sydney bank, nor adequate representation on television discussion panels. Senior Indigenous leaders such as Nyunggai Warren Mundine have decried the dynamics of the current situation. In September Mundine spoke out in the *Australian Financial Review*:

Last month I spent a few weeks in remote and regional Australia talking non-stop with Aboriginal people. Meanwhile, a debate raged about statues. How many times do you think anyone mentioned statues to me during my trips? Exactly zero. No one talked to me about constitutional recognition either. Or about local councils who banned Australia Day, supposedly in their name.¹²

In reality, the ongoing socioeconomic disadvantages Indigenous people face are far more pressing. Only 18% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in remote areas own their own homes and unemployment is rife. Meanwhile, the Closing the Gap strategy is failing in six out of its seven measures, and is in serious need of review. Greater focus should be placed on solving these issues by improving education and healthcare and promoting Indigenous-owned business rather than spending days debating the flag protocols of the Queensland Ambulance Service.¹³

Finding a balance

Symbolism has held and always will hold an important place in society. However, finding a balance is essential to ensure that the desire to acknowledge does not unintentionally undermine the people these practices are attempting to represent. Many acts of symbolism today do not take these dynamics into account. Some have become overly prescriptive. Others are more about image than any tangible benefits they may provide to Indigenous people, with the growth in symbolism creating a discourse that is often at odds with the reality on the ground. More than anything, Indigenous people want improved socio-economic outcomes. Symbolic acts are important, but they aren't going to close the gap.

While they won't bring quantifiable benefits, one could argue that the Sydney University trees represent a relatively balanced approach to symbolism. Despite the rather tenuous link drawn between Indigenous people in Brazil and Australia—the jacaranda is native to South America although its name is thought to derive from the Indigenous Guarani language—the flame tree does provide a meaningful connection for Indigenous students. Moreover, the trees do not force them to ascribe to racially-specific policies nor do they affect the daily university experience of those non-Indigenous students who may not wish to participate in acts of acknowledgement. While some people may appreciate the symbolism behind the two trees, others may just see them as an aesthetically pleasing contrast of vivid red and purple blossom when in flower.

Endnotes

- 1 'Flame Tree Joins Jacaranda Companion in Quadrangle' (21 July 2017), <http://sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2017/07/21/flame-tree-joins-jacaranda-companion-in-quadrangle.html>
- 2 Emma Kowal, 'Welcome to Country: Acknowledgement, Belonging and White Anti-Racism', *Cultural Studies Review* 21:2 (2015), 173–204.
- 3 Matthew Clayfield, 'Melbourne Council Makes Acknowledgement of Traditional Land Owners Optional', *ABC Radio* (15 February 2017).
- 4 Kowal, 'Welcome to Country'.
- 5 Reconciliation Australia, *2016 RAP Impact Measurement Report*, pages 6–11, https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2016_RAP_Impact_Measurement_Report.pdf
- 6 Patricia Karvelas, 'It's Time to Tackle Token Reconciliation,' Say Ros and John Moriarty', *The Australian* (19 November 2013).
- 7 Walanga Muru, 'Aboriginal Cultural Protocols', (Macquarie University: Office of Indigenous Strategy), page 13.
- 8 University of Sydney, 'Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students', <http://sydney.edu.au/study/academic-support/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-support.html>
- 9 Human Resources Unit, University of South Australia, 'Aboriginal Employment—Guide for Supervisors', http://w3.unisa.edu.au/hrm/equity/cultural/guide_sup.asp
- 10 Andrew Trounson, 'Support Centres Can Hold Back Indigenous Students,' *The Australian* (20 April 2011).
- 11 Emma Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia* (Berghahn Books, 2015), 103.
- 12 Nyunggai Warren Mundine, 'Indigenous Enterprise: Work Means More than Statues and Dates', *Australian Financial Review* (13 September 2017).
- 13 Felicity Caldwell, 'MP Asks Why Indigenous Flags, but Not State Flags, Are Provided to Ambos', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (26 July 2017).