

The Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country in Australian Parliament

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“Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any Aborigines in Australia?”¹ Auber Octavius Neville’s words capture the essence of what Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised for on the 13 February 2008. On behalf of the Australian Government, Prime Minister Rudd said sorry to the members of the Stolen Generation. The term ‘Stolen Generation’ refers to numerous Indigenous Australian generations, that, under a collective of abhorrent state and federal legislated injunctions saw the forced “systematic removal of Indigenous Australian children from their family.”² The aim of this policy was the destruction of Indigenous Australian culture and identity,³ and viewed through a post-colonial lens, it was a catastrophic abuse of power.

Understandably, Minister Rudd’s formal apology attracted significant media coverage,⁴ and was largely well received.⁵ Given the significant degree of media coverage, the apology eclipsed federal parliament’s first Welcome to Country.⁶ At the time, Minister Rudd concluded that the Welcome to

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¹ Auber Octavius Neville in Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, Held at Canberra, 21st to 23rd April, 1937* (1937) p. 11.

² Robert van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization: Cultural Genocide and the “Stolen Generations”,’ *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 2 (1999), p. 297.

³ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 308.

⁴ Jean Burgess, Helen Klæbe and Kelly McWilliam, ‘Mediatization and Institutions of Public Memory: Digital Storytelling and the Apology’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2010), p. 155.

⁵ A. Dirk Moses, ‘Official Apologies, Reconciliation, and Settler Colonialism: Australian Indigenous Alterity and Political Agency’, *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2011), p. 148.

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Country ceremony should be a permanent addition to the opening of the parliamentary year. Robert McKenna characterised this ceremony as “swapping the mace for the digeridoo.”⁷

The first federal parliamentary Welcome to Country attracted some controversy. At the time, both the Welcome to Country, in its parliamentary genesis, and the Rudd Government’s decision to continue with it, met resistance, particularly from the conservative side of politics.⁸ The second notable issue included accurately determining on whose land Parliament House sits.⁹ Tanya Riches noted the continual tension that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.¹⁰ After the first Welcome to Country both Victor Hart, a leading Indigenous Academic, and Kristina Everett from the Australian Catholic University, reduced the action to tokenism,¹¹ while Dirk Moses described it as cultural imperialism and continued racial subjugation.¹²

In the political realm, for Indigenous people, frustration reigned supreme, particularly around what could be described as an Aboriginal Reconciliation touch-stone.¹³ The Welcome to Country followed almost a decade after the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation devised a protocol for such events. The delay for the apology-which some have indicated was over ten years late due to the Howard Government’s position on the matter¹⁴-also appears to have encapsulated the delay in the national parliamentary Welcome to Country. Federal Parliament was lagging behind, particularly considering that nine years earlier, on the 175th anniversary of the NSW

⁶ Mark McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition? Welcome to Country and the Emergence of Indigenous Protocol in Australia, 1991-2014’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2014), p. 476.

⁷ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 477.

⁸ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 478; Alessandro Pelizzon and Jade Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country: Legal Meanings and Cultural Implications’, *Australian Indigenous Law Review*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2012), p. 59.

⁹ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 485.

¹⁰ Tanya Riches, ‘Acknowledgment of Country: Intersecting Australian Pentecostalism Re-embedding Spirit in Place’, *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2018), p. 11.

¹¹ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 478.

¹² Moses, ‘Official Apologies, Reconciliation, and Settler Colonialism’, p. 145.

¹³ Riches, ‘Acknowledgment of Country’, pp. 1-15.

¹⁴ Burgess, Klabe and McWilliam, ‘Mediatization and Institutions of Public Memory’, p. 155.

Supreme Court, Chief Justice Jim Spigelman had organised a comparable ceremony.¹⁵

Given the significance of Indigenous peoples and their culture in Australia, it is interesting to note that there has been little scholarly attention around the place of the Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country (to be discussed later) within the civil realm.¹⁶ This article seeks to explore the historical and contemporary religious nature of the Welcome to Country ceremony, defining and contrasting both the Acknowledgement of and Welcome to Country. Also of interest is the wholesale uptake of this practice in broader society, the place of religion within the Australian Constitution, and a number of issues that have emerged from both scholarly literature and the secular press.

The Apology and the Stolen Generation

Before proceeding further, it is important to have an understanding of the historic and ongoing reality of Indigenous Australian life. The interaction between Indigenous peoples and the government has always been complex.¹⁷ In 1788, the issue of citizenship and associated inherent rights became a ‘problem’.¹⁸ Were the ‘Aborigines’ to be considered British subjects due the same rights as their new rulers (as the law indicated was appropriate)? Or, was the allure of land and profit too enticing for the British? History says the latter, with many dispossessed of their land,¹⁹ and those who resisted were removed forcibly or, killed.²⁰

A little over a century after Captain Arthur Phillip landed, the Indigenous population had plummeted in the face of land-grabbing colonialists and disease.²¹ In an effort to ‘protect’ the Indigenous people and those with ‘mixed’ parentage, integration into white Australian society was considered the ‘solution’.²² Within the framework of post-colonialism it is

¹⁵ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 482.

¹⁶ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 481.

¹⁷ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 298.

¹⁸ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 298.

¹⁹ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 303.

²⁰ Rebe Taylor, ‘Savages or Saviours? – The Australian Sealers and Aboriginal Tasmanian Survival’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 66 (2009), p. 76.

²¹ John Harris, ‘Hiding the Bodies: The Myth of Humane Colonisation of Aboriginal Australia’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2003), p. 83.

²² van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 305.

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apparent that this ‘solution’ constituted an astounding demonstration of colonialism and cultural imperialism, where white man possessed ‘civilisation’ and the ‘natives’ did not.²³

From 1910, with the Northern Territory Aboriginals Act, until 1973, with the Commonwealth Government formally abolishing the policy “in favour of self-management by Indigenous People,”²⁴ all across the land, Indigenous families were split up. Cultural ties were severed and irrevocably damaged. In the 1997 report: *Bringing them Home*, the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission concluded that the historic treatment of Indigenous people satisfied the United Nations. “definition of genocide, which includes the forced removal of children from their families with the expressed aim of the annihilation of a given ethnic, racial, religious or cultural identity.”²⁵ This is considered particularly chilling in light of Neville’s comments above, while Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia.

The Sacred Nature of a Welcome to Country Ceremony

The Welcome to Country has its roots in thousands of years of Indigenous tradition.²⁶ At this point, it is reasonable to draw comparisons with the way in which Catholic theologians approach issues of dogma from an apologetics perspective. Looking at the handing on of tradition, Catholics apologetics construct two meanings for the word ‘tradition’, denoted by the presence or lack of a capitalised ‘T’. In contemporary society, some may associate the word ‘tradition’ with old boarding schools, or sandstone universities, the apologist would label these ‘small t’ traditions.²⁷ Big or capital ‘T’ tradition refers to that which forms an essential dogmatic truth from the perspective of the faithful.²⁸

In the historical context, during a Welcome to Country, members of another nation would wait at a border area to be ‘welcomed’ into the new

²³ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 302.

²⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them Home* (1997), p. 4, at <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-8-history-northern-territory>. Accessed 19 September 2019.

²⁵ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 298.

²⁶ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or belated recognition?’, p. 480.

²⁷ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), p. 78.

²⁸ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 78.

Country. During that time, expectations would be set and those present would enter into a reciprocal relationship.²⁹ Each Indigenous nation had a complex religious system and practices associated with those beliefs. This has led a number of scholars to describe the Dreamings as a form of ‘spirituality’, as opposed to a religion.³⁰ It is in this moment, during the Welcome that the nation engages in “identifying, articulating and maintaining [its] religious worldview,” which is characteristic of a spirituality entwined within a religious structure.³¹

From an apologetics perspective, it would once again appear that the description of the ‘dreaming’ exclusively as a form of spirituality is not entirely accurate. There are indeed spiritual elements to the Indigenous religions, and these could be best labelled as “R-Spirituality” as characterised by Paul Wink.³² Wink describes R-Spirituality as “the pursuit of meaning undertaken ... within traditional religious structures typically as part of a congregation that adheres to a common creed.”³³ During the articulation and profession of the beliefs during the Welcome to Country, the people ‘practice their faith’.

Eugene Stockton’s study noted the vague translation of the word *altjira*, originally described as ‘dreaming’.³⁴ ‘Originating from eternity’ is a more accurate translation.³⁵ Moreover, when tied with Stewart Guthrie’s scholarship in the area of anthropomorphism,³⁶ it appears that when conducting exegesis into the Dreamings, there is synergy between Guthrie’s views on anthropomorphism and Stockton’s origins of eternity. Guthrie posited that “religion may be best understood as systematic anthropomorphism.”³⁷ Within close proximity to Katoomba, New South Wales is the geological formation known as ‘The Three Sisters’. There are two notable Dreaming narratives associated with the place, and both include

²⁹ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 58.

³⁰ Riches, ‘Acknowledgment of Country’, p. 7.

³¹ Paul Wink, ‘Trouble with Spirituality’, *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 21, no.1 (2010), p. 54.

³² Wink, ‘Trouble with Spirituality’, pp. 49-69.

³³ Wink, ‘Trouble with Spirituality’, p. 53.

³⁴ Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality For A Nation* (Newtown, NSW: Millennium Books, 1995), p. 54.

³⁵ Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift*, p. 54.

³⁶ Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³⁷ Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 3.

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anthropomorphism in the form of three sisters. This satisfies Guthrie's basic prescription for religiosity.³⁸ In the tale of love and war, the three sisters found forbidden love in three brothers from a neighbouring nation. This was against the law. This led to war as the brothers tried to capture the sisters. During the war a sorcerer helped the girls, turning them to stone, however the sorcerer died in battle, leaving the sisters forever turned to stone. It is through the connection to the land from the time of creation that the law is developed.³⁹ The three sisters serve to re-enforce marital law. Vicki Grieves also noted that the law is central in maintaining an "ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirits themselves."⁴⁰

When looking closely at the dreamings of the three sisters, there are two main narratives, the first tied to the law, the second, is based on a father protecting his daughters and transforming into a lyrebird. At a moment such as this, Riches⁴¹ cites Grieves,⁴² in her description of Indigenous religious practitioners as a heterodox community.⁴³ This constitutes an example where there are two accounts in the Indigenous canons of the same geological formation. That said, it would appear, that once again, that anthropomorphism is present across both accounts, which would still indicate religiosity, despite the heterodox nature of the accounts.

During the Welcome to Country, the owners of the land would describe various prohibited areas, animals and plant totems.⁴⁴ This was pivotal in their expression of their religiosity and metaphysical understanding of the land on which they lived. Put another way, during the Welcome, the host nation outlined how their guests should behave in their 'church'. This is a crucial understanding, as it directly addresses the heterogeneous nature of Indigenous religiosity across differing nations and language groups. The argument that the heterogeneity of Indigenous religious practice discounts the religious practice is erroneous. It is similar to the claim that due to the differences in practice and belief amongst Christians, that Christianity is not

³⁸ Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*, p. 3.

³⁹ Vicki Grieves, "'The battlefields'": Identity, Authenticity and Aboriginal Knowledge in Australia', in *Indigenous Peoples: Self-determination, Knowledge, Indigeneity*, ed. Henry Minde (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2008), p. 369.

⁴⁰ Grieves, "'The battlefields'", p. 364.

⁴¹ Riches, "'The battlefields'", p. 287.

⁴² Grieves, "'The battlefields'", pp. 287- 311.

⁴³ Riches, "'The battlefields'", pp. 287- 311; Riches, 'Acknowledgment of Country', p. 7.

⁴⁴ Pelizzon and Kennedy, 'Welcome to Country', p. 64.

a religion. Grieves appears to have discounted the possibility that each nation has its own church whilst sharing similarities and differences with their neighbouring nations.⁴⁵

Pascal Scherre and Kim Doohan take this argument further when discussing the common understanding that Indigenous Australians have of both the land, and their interaction with each other.⁴⁶

For traditional owners, asking permission—from the cosmos and from other human beings—is a fundamental part of their culture, a deeply held obligation to care for and protect visitors to country by mediating between the phenomenological and the mundane domains of being in place to ensure safe passage.⁴⁷

Evidently, this understanding differs significantly from the dominant western cultural understanding of land and ownership. In broad terms, colonial Europeans saw the land as cultivatable earth. Taken from an Aboriginal ontological and epistemological perspective, ‘Country’ refers to a plethora of interrelated connections which link the spatial domain to the dreaming narrative, one that is to this day continues.⁴⁸ Alessandro Pelizzon and Jade Kennedy note Ambelin Kwaymullina’s description of Country: “Country is the Land, Earth, sky, universe and all the relationships of the world moving and interacting with one another,” and remembering this comes from eternity.⁴⁹

The metaphysics of the Dreaming shape and determine Aboriginal concepts of Country and must be considered as always present within the act of Welcoming someone to one’s Country. Indeed, the reference to mythical ancestors contained in a number of Welcome to Country events is revealing of metaphysical implications that are rarely if ever further explored or contextualised.⁵⁰

With reference to the earlier mention of totems, it becomes apparent that introducing totems during the Welcome constitutes a crucial metaphysical act that has been performed during Welcome in traditions that precede the European presence in Australia. Though somewhat heterogeneous between nations and language groups, Pelizzon and Kennedy

⁴⁵ Grieves, “‘The Battlefields,’” pp. 287- 311.

⁴⁶ Pascal Scherre and Kim Doohan, ‘It’s not about Believing: Exploring the Transformative Potential of Cultural Acknowledgment in an Indigenous Tourism Context’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2013), p. 167.

⁴⁷ Scherre and Doohan, ‘It’s not about Believing’, p. 162.

⁴⁸ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 60.

⁴⁹ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 65.

⁵⁰ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 65.

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describe this as a religious practice.⁵¹ During the Welcome to Country, Aboriginal Australians dogmatically established the sacred, and therefore, taking an apologetics perspective: capital T tradition.

A common phrase associated with the modern Welcome to Country and acknowledgment of Country is the reference to “elders, past, present and future.” Armed with an understanding of the Australian Aboriginal religious tradition, this constitutes a moment of liturgy, or ritualised, public prayer. Embodied in the description of the elders in this phrase is the acknowledgment of the continual Dreaming and the primacy of ownership of those storied by the elders as the *auctoritas*.⁵² Once again, this may be likened to a practice found in Roman Catholicism: the centrality and importance of the *magisterium*. As the bishops of the Catholic Church carry the line of teaching authority, so to do the Indigenous elders. Scherre and Doohan describe this as a ‘living culturescape’.⁵³ The Welcome, through the elders, re-enforce the connection to Country and sustains said relationship.⁵⁴ Pelizzon and Kennedy succinctly unified this idea when they noted that there is an “intrinsic inseparability of the metaphysics of the dreaming, the Aboriginal concept of Country and the division of Country among different people.”⁵⁵ This exercise in Indigenous religious exegesis has identified three main points central to the remainder of this article:

1. Through the continuation of the Dreaming narrative, Indigenous people practice their religion’s intrinsic metaphysic, linked to the land both spatially and temporally.
2. Aboriginals of different nations fundamentally respect and understand the religious traditions of other nations when historically engaging in a Welcome to Country.
3. The Elders are the custodians or magisterium of the sacred tradition.

With the above established, it becomes apparent that when participating in a contemporary Welcome to Country those present enter into a public prayer which reverences the Aboriginal ontological understanding of Country.⁵⁶ The sacred emerges as a prayer amongst the civic.

⁵¹ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 58.

⁵² Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 66.

⁵³ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 877.

⁵⁴ Riches, ‘Acknowledgment of Country’, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p.66.

⁵⁶ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 65.

Acknowledgment versus Welcome

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen the emergence of a relatively new phenomenon: the Acknowledgement of Country. This article has delivered a thorough deconstruction of the religiosity and historical context of a Welcome to Country. In the contemporary setting the University of Wollongong states that “a Welcome to Country ceremony can only be performed by a traditional custodian of the Country in question, whereby a traditional Elder ‘welcomes’ people not of that Country onto her or his ancestral Country.”⁵⁷ Therefore, the individual must be from the nation providing the Welcome, and this has a logical degree of continuity with the past. An Acknowledgement of Country may be given by anyone, with the purpose of showing respect to the ongoing connection to the land for Indigenous Australians.⁵⁸

In contemporary Australia, the literature suggests that there are two categories of performance of these functions/options: the first is solemn and respectful; whereas the second and more common, noted by scholars and social commentators, is as a form of tokenistic lip service.⁵⁹ This is particularly concerning given the ceremony is “grounded performativity of Aboriginal remembering in which the land itself is the repository of history, story and knowledge.”⁶⁰ This point will be discussed further.

Civil Religion and Australia Constitution

Australia is a secular country as outlined in the Constitution. In broad terms, since the 1960s and the rise of the secularisation thesis,⁶¹ Australia has undergone a secularisation process as outlined by successive censuses. The place of religion in Australian civic institutions is unusual in the English-speaking world given the head of state is the head of the Church of England,

⁵⁷ University of Wollongong, *Guidelines and Protocols for Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of People and Country and Aboriginal Cultural Performances*, 2013, p. 3, at

<https://documents.uow.edu.au/content/groups/public/@web/@gov/documents/doc/uow151341.pdf>. Accessed 19 September 2019.

⁵⁸ University of Wollongong, *Guidelines and Protocols for Welcome to Country*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 480; Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 58.

⁶⁰ Gay McAuley, ‘Unsettled Country: Coming to Terms with the Past’, *About Performance*, vol. 9 (2009), p. 45.

⁶¹ Kevin Schultz, ‘Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay’, *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 8, no. 1-2 (2006), pp. 173-177.

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yet the nation has no established church. One difference between the American (a former British Colony) and Australian federal system is that Australia's parliament acknowledges the Christological understanding of God.⁶² This is most notably apparent through the use of the Lord's Prayer when opening parliament each day.

The current standing orders for parliament require the recitation of two prayers and the Acknowledgement of Country, each day. Both of these have been ratified by vote: in the Lower House the Acknowledgement of Country occurs prior to the century old prayer, and in the Upper House, afterwards.⁶³ It appears that there are reasonable grounds for Riches associating Australia with Christianity.⁶⁴

With no established (Christian) church, there remains an undertone of Christological religiosity in Australia's civic practices. The most obvious practices include ANZAC Day.⁶⁵ In the space of Indigenous Australia and the treatment of Indigenous people, over the past twenty years, the term 'reconciliation' has become common.⁶⁶ The term 'reconciliation' is inherently loaded with Christian Theology, particularly in light of the Catholic Churches use of the term in a sacramental sense.⁶⁷ So it appears, that while there is no established church, Australia's civic life still broadly aligns with a Christological orientation of the world. This is largely informed by colonial principals, in the case of Indigenous Australians re-enforced through the utilisation of Church missions during the Stolen Generations. This raises the issue, what does the Constitution of Australia actually say about religion? Section 116 states:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.⁶⁸

⁶² Richard Ely, 'Secularisation and the Sacred in Australian history', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 19, no. 77 (1981), pp. 553-566.

⁶³ McKenna, 'Tokenism or Belated Recognition?', p. 477.

⁶⁴ Riches, 'Acknowledgment of Country', pp. 1-15.

⁶⁵ Christopher Hartney, 'Neither Civil nor Secular: The Religious Dimensions of Anzac', *St Mark's Review*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2015), p. 110.

⁶⁶ Michael Phillips, 'Aboriginal Reconciliation as Religious Politics: Secularisation in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2006), p. 112.

⁶⁷ Phillips, 'Aboriginal Reconciliation as Religious Politics', p. 111.

⁶⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, *Australian Constitution* (1901), Section 116.

In light of the understanding of the sacred nature of a Welcome to Country ceremony, a significant question emerges. How is the line “imposing any religious observance,” to be understood? George Williams, Dean of Law at University of New South Wales wrote an opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* answering this question in light of the shift in the religious demographic of Australia.⁶⁹ His contention was that just because the two prayers had been said for 119 years, this did not justify their remaining presence. He also commented on the legally questionable nature of the prayers being there at all. The reality however, is that the High Court is unlikely to challenge the House regarding what could be seen as a relatively minor issue. He concluded that, unless parliament looks to change its standing orders, the two Christian prayers and the Acknowledgment of Country are set to stay.

Historically, Christian prayer was appropriate in the Australian context as it reflected the broadly Christian heritage of the colonial and post-colonial nation,⁷⁰ where the “Supreme Governor of the Church of England” is constitutionally recognised as the head of state. In the preamble of the Constitution, Australia, as a nation asks for the blessing of “Almighty God.”⁷¹ In the contemporary setting, an argument could still be made for prayer to be present in parliament, if it were not for the Constitution’s own clause regarding the matter, particularly in light of the religious diversity of twenty-first century Australia, including those of ‘no religion’. This article would conclude from a neutral standpoint that the presence of the prayer in its mandated fashion is problematic.

Wholesale Uptake

Since the modern inception of the Welcome and Acknowledgement of Country over the past twenty years, it has spread like wildfire. Over 200 government departments are signatories, particularly after the national apology in 2008.⁷² This is largely the result of the 2006 ‘Reconciliation

⁶⁹ George Williams, ‘Parliamentary Prayers should be Consigned to History’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (24 September 2017), at <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/parliamentary-prayers-should-be-consigned-to-history-20170924-gynk5d.html>. Accessed 8 September 2019.

⁷⁰ Riches, ‘Acknowledgment of Country’, pp. 1-15.

⁷¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Australian Constitution* (1901).

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Action Plan', which further established protocols around the Welcome to Country.⁷³ This occurs so regularly that the Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country are commonplace at events beyond the civic buildings, including spectacles such as sporting events.

All of this, however, has attracted varying degrees of criticism from various parts of the community, not exclusively conservatives. Riches has described a number of people identified in their research as a colonial appropriation, more of which will now be discussed under the heading of 'issues'.⁷⁴

Issues

This first and potentially most important aspect worth discussing is the political element associated within the complex interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Politicking

Patrick McAllister noted in his discussion of Australia Day celebrations around Indigenous recognition that "ritual symbolism is frequently used in politics in an attempt to create a certain reality."⁷⁵ With that in mind, and given the overwhelming majority of Australians seeking reconciliation, as well as the support from the Australian Labor Party over the past twenty years, significant political pressure has resulted in the emergence of Indigenous Australians in the political landscape.

Those cynical of the present Welcome and Acknowledgment ceremonies have tended to label them as 'spectacles'. Don Handelman draws the distinction between a spectacle and a ritual. Rituals are tempered with greater solemnity and meaning.⁷⁶ Those in power "based on a taxonomic

⁷² McKenna, 'Tokenism or Belated Recognition?', p. 484.

⁷³ Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *National Strategy to Sustain the Reconciliation Process* (1998), at <http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/orgs/car/docrec/policy/natstrat/6sustain.htm>. Accessed 8 September 2019.

⁷⁴ Riches, 'Acknowledgment of Country', p. 2.

⁷⁵ Patrick McAllister, 'National Celebration or Local Act of Reconciliation? Public Ritual Performance and Inter-ethnic Relations in an Australian City', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), p.165.

⁷⁶ Don Handelman, 'Rituals/spectacles', *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 49, no. 153 (1997), p. 395.

order imposed by the state and administered by its bureaucracy”⁷⁷ however, create spectacles. Spectacles serve the bureaucratic ethos.⁷⁸

The most unsettling manifestation of the Welcome to Country practice is the language surrounding it. Often, elders are ‘invited’ to give a Welcome. Given the historical understanding of the significance of the Welcome, it appears grossly offensive that these elders be ‘invited’ to Welcome people onto their own land. At the beginning of this article, the historical context of the reconciliation movement and the need for action in light of the cultural and religious genocide of the Australian Indigenous population was discussed.⁷⁹ One aspect addressed through a post-colonial lens was the power imbalance between the Indigenous population and the ‘civilised white men’. It could be construed, that when operating within the realms of Welcome to Country, that the Indigenous population are still not viewed as equals, indeed being invited to Welcome people to their own land. At best, this represents significant ignorance and misalignment with intention and action; at worst, it constitutes continued racial segregation.⁸⁰

In a more positive light, the Welcome/Acknowledgement not only tangibly acknowledges Indigenous religiosity, and the continuation of the dreaming, but so too the continued ownership and authority of the local people over the land.⁸¹ Mick Gooda, the then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner noted that the acknowledgment of traditional owners reinforces the High Court’s Mabo decision and because of that is crucially important.

Indigenous Cultural Display

Historically, the *display* of Indigenous culture in white Australia was tempered by colonialism.⁸² The use of the word ‘display’ is deliberate in that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the government would often ‘roll out some natives’ during royal and state visits to show something

⁷⁷ McAllister, ‘National Celebration or Local Act of Reconciliation?’, p. 174.

⁷⁸ Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

⁷⁹ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 298.

⁸⁰ Moses, ‘Official Apologies, Reconciliation, and Settler Colonialism’, p. 152.

⁸¹ Kristina Everett, ‘Welcome to Country ... not’, *Oceania*, vol. 79, no. 1 (2009), p. 56.

⁸² McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 481.

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‘uniquely Australian’,⁸³ seen but not heard.⁸⁴ To accentuate the local customs, these ‘forms of adornment’⁸⁵ often featured heightened spectacle aspects such as dance and music. This is still common within the tourism industry where the goal is for those present to experience some form of ‘otherness’.⁸⁶ When speaking about royal visits, it is easy to think of black and white photos of a young Queen Elizabeth however, this practice does not belong to the distant annals of history, but as recent as the last twenty years. The most famous international display in Australian history came with the Sydney 2000 Olympics. With 36.1 billion people watching the opening ceremony,⁸⁷ the world witnessed ochre painted Indigenous Australians singing in their language, conveying their religious tradition; this was helpful in the reconciliation process. That said, 36.1 billion people also saw a stilt-walking, fire-breathing, ‘visually spectacular’ interpretation of Indigenous religiosity, not to mention Indigenous actors dancing to Nikki Webster’s ‘Under the Southern Skies’, void of any reference to their land or political struggle for recognition. Not even twenty years ago, as a nation Australia was still ‘rolling out the natives’ during the opening ceremony.

A significant rectification occurred when singer Darren Hayes wore the Aboriginal flag, the Australian band Midnight Oil protested during the closing ceremony wearing all black, with the word ‘sorry’ emblazoned on their clothing, while singing ‘Beds are Burning’, and singer Yothu Yindi sang ‘Treaty’.⁸⁸ Yothu Yindi’s song was particularly poignant to the discussion of Welcome to Country, in that it notes that Indigenous land was never given up and, that British sovereignty did not change Indigenous Law.⁸⁹ This adds additional weight to the significance of Welcome to Country, given that in Yothu Yindi’s eyes, the country is still owned by Indigenous Australia.

⁸³ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 480.

⁸⁴ Scherre and Doohan, ‘It’s not about Believing’, p. 161.

⁸⁵ McKenna, *This Country: A Reconciled Republic* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), pp. 26-28.

⁸⁶ Scherre and Doohan, ‘It’s not about Believing’, p. 159.

⁸⁷ International Olympic Committee, *Global TV Broadcast Sets Records for Sydney 2000 Olympic Games Broadcast* (2000), at, <https://www.olympic.org/news/global-tv-broadcast-sets-records-for-sydney-2000-olympic-games-broadcast>. Accessed 19 September 2019.

⁸⁸ Catriona Elder, Angela Pratt and Cath Ellis, ‘Running Race: Reconciliation, Nationalism and the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2006), p. 195.

⁸⁹ Elder, Pratt and Ellis, ‘Running Race’, p. 195.

A lingering issue associated with this practice includes confusion around what constitutes a Welcome to Country as opposed to a smoking ceremony, typically used to cleanse an area not necessarily associated with a Welcome to Country.⁹⁰ The Sydney 2000 Olympics featured a smoking ceremony, but no Welcome. In line with the performance aspect, Pelizzon and Kennedy noted that when such rituals are merely performed, they lose their intrinsic value.⁹¹ This draws the third comparison with Roman Catholicism. The priest at a Mass does not merely say the words; rather, each should be devoutly prayed. During a ‘mumbled’ or ‘rushed’ tokenistic Acknowledgement of Country every word uttered may form an insult to Indigenous people.

Booming Business

In line with the discussion surrounding the potential lip service or tokenistic aspects discussed thus far, McKenna discussed Indigenous elder Sue Gordon’s contempt towards those Indigenous communities who treat Welcome to Country as a ‘mini business’ charging anywhere between \$100 and \$1000 per welcome.⁹² When viewed as a religious service, as this article claims, the phenomena of paying for services may be reminiscent of the sale of indulgences. On the other side of the coin, Pat Dodson noted that the services Indigenous people provide should not be *gratis*.⁹³ From this angle, paying for a Welcome to Country may be likened to paying for a wedding celebrant. Further research would need to be conducted in this area to comment more fully.

But, I’m Already Here

The final contentious point to be considered here is that as with the historic welcoming of visitors to a new nation, in its current setting, often the twenty-first century Australians listening on have “already taken up residence in Indigenous Country without the consent of [the] traditional owners,” as McKenna points out.⁹⁴ This is particularly interesting and potentially contentious for a number of reasons. Scherre and Doohan have noted the

⁹⁰ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 64.

⁹¹ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p. 60.

⁹² McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 486.

⁹³ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p. 486.

⁹⁴ McKenna, ‘Tokenism or Belated Recognition?’, p.480.

importance of the interaction between the hosts and the guest, which it should lead to cultural understanding and change.⁹⁵ However, it would appear that the “western epistemological frame [within which it is reasonable to assume the majority of Australians operate] that denies alternative ontologies about place, presence in place and action on place.”⁹⁶ How can this interaction occur effectively during a ‘footy match’, or in the rushed opening business of parliament, and is this anyone’s fault?

Conclusion

This article has investigated the current common phenomenon of the Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country. What Warren Mundine characterised as an expression of “white, middle-class guilt” in the Acknowledgement of Country,⁹⁷ has since become common practice in all facets of Australia civic life. This appears to be largely an effort to reconcile the past, and it does that, at least to some extent, in the sense that it has become a part of civic life, expressing collective shame for the crimes of previous generations and the ongoing suffering it has caused.⁹⁸

In practice, Indigenous Australian politics is anything but secular, from the use of the word ‘reconciliation’ and the Christian connotations, to the use of Welcome to and Acknowledgment of Country. This article has established that the Welcome to Country is a liturgical action associated with the religion of the Indigenous Australians. This is a religious gesture. Moreover, it has defined and contrasted the Welcome with the Acknowledgement of Country, addressed the wholesale uptake phenomenon associated within both state and broader civil Australian life. On balance, given that the Constitution expressly forbids the presence of prescribed religious observance, while the gesture (when genuine) might be helpful in bridging the significant historic divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it is (as with the Christian prayer, at the opening of parliament) problematic.

Unfortunately, what appears to occur regularly is that what should have been respectfully infused with meaning, has become a point of lip service, divisive within Indigenous communities (as it was for the first federal

⁹⁵ Scherre and Doohan, ‘It’s not about Believing’, p. 164.

⁹⁶ Scherre and Doohan, ‘It’s not about Believing’, p. 168.

⁹⁷ Pelizzon and Kennedy, ‘Welcome to Country’, p.65.

⁹⁸ van Krieken, ‘The Barbarism of Civilization’, p. 310.

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parliamentary Welcome to Country), for sale and/or considered tokenistic. In a purely academic sense, neither the two Christian prayers, nor the Welcome/Acknowledgment of Country should have a place in parliament under the current instruction of the Constitution. In saying that, there most certainly is a place for this practice more broadly when undertaken with the dignity that should be attached to the action.

From here, the search must begin to find a culturally appropriate way that parliament could regularly (as part of the standing orders) address the historic and contemporary ill-treatment of the first nations people of this land in some manner that does not contravene the instruction of the Constitution, or alternatively, alter the Constitution. It is apparent; when considering the treatment of those whom experienced the policies of the Stolen Generation it is crucial that more be done in an effort to bridge the gap.