

Welcome to endless poverty

Hon. Dr Gary Johns

An American anthropologist studying Sydney Aborigines commented recently, "Doing culture can reinforce one's indigeneity or it can make one appear unreal." Welcome to country is a constant reminder of a people bypassed by progress. And how long should this go on? For 40,000 years until the ledger is somehow squared? Is there nothing else an Aborigine would want to be known for?

The welcome ceremony is part of a mindset that locks Aborigines out of the world in which they desperately need to engage. Government ministers offer a rote acknowledgment of traditional custodians but don't enforce truancy laws to make Aboriginal children attend school. Ministers will hold hands, walk over bridges and spend taxpayers' dollars on busybody schemes, but to do something effective such as forcing a child to attend school in the face of an ignorant parent: never.

I recall Howard government minister Philip Ruddock giving a welcome to country in Perth while the commonwealth was opposing a native title claim by the Nyungar people over Perth. Aboriginal Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin offers an acknowledgment at most functions, even while withholding welfare cheques from Aborigines.

Whether doing the wrong thing (not enforcing truancy laws) or the right thing (opposing poorly conceived native title claims and imposing income management for poor behaviour), the acknowledgment is trotted out.

There are problems with its apparently simple wish "to show respect for Aboriginal culture and heritage and acknowledge the ongoing relationship traditional custodians have with their land". It is a gesture full of holes and with some weird fellow travellers.

One-quarter of Aborigines do not recognise a particular area as their homeland and one-quarter live in areas that may have some relationship to their original land, but those are the poor beggars who are worse off by a long way.

As for custodians, it perpetuates the myth of the Aborigine as the gentle gardener. Paul Albrecht, a former pastor at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory, says the Aboriginal concept of caring for country is not related to environmental concerns: it's about guarding sites of significance and caring for sacred objects. Their primitive technology and frequent moves meant they did not evolve rules for land care as it is understood today.

On occasions when the substantive matter has to do with Aborigines and the function is taking place on Aboriginal land as recognised by Australian law, a welcome to country or acknowledgment is appropriate. But to indulge the concept on land that is owned by others is an insult to the latter's rights.

Indeed, by overplaying the historic claims to all Australian land, the welcome acts as the original sin: it can never be expunged unless the whitefella leaves.

Peter Adam, principal of Victoria's Anglican theological institute Ridley College, was stupid enough to suggest this, saying last year that all non-Aboriginal Australians should be prepared to leave if the indigenous people wanted that, "making restitution for the vile sin of genocide".

"The prosperity of our churches has come from the proceeds of crime. Our houses, our churches, our colleges, our shops, our sport grounds, our parks, our courts, our parliaments, our prisons, our hospitals, our roads, our reservoirs are stolen property," he said. What should the three-quarters of Aborigines who are of mixed descent do? Stay or go?

In last year's Massey Lectures in Canada, anthropologist Wade Davis boldly asserted that "the other cultures of the world are not failed attempts to be modern, failed attempts to be us. Each is a unique and profound answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be human and alive?" He suggested that "the aboriginal people were never touched by the desire to improve the world" and that for them "the purpose of humanity [is] to sustain the Garden of Eden". What a paternalistic prig! Aborigines did their best to alter the environment by hunting macropods to death and burning much of Australia's forests, altering for all time the Garden of Eden.

Undertaken at the wrong time and place, the traditional acknowledgment serves the purposes of those determined to lock Aborigines out of the modern economy. If ministers don't agree, they should stop doing it.