**A nod to traditional owners**

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**Is an acknowledgment of traditional ownership by public officials tokenistic political correctness or a genuine effort to achieve reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians?**

ONE of the good things about being a classless society is that we don't have to endure the torture of formalities. We don't have to remember to address someone as sir or my lord. We don't have to worry about curtseying or doffing caps.

Perhaps because of this, many of us can feel uncomfortable about rituals. They are so rare in our national life that any act of observance can seem stiff, contrived or disingenuous.

So when Opposition Leader Tony Abbott this week declared that the practice of acknowledging traditional owners of the land at the start of a public event was nothing but "out-of-place tokenism", he struck a bit of a nerve.

According to Abbott, the practice was but a "genuflection to political correctness".

Let's be clear what we're arguing about, though. There are two ceremonial acts concerned with Aboriginal recognition.

First, there are the formal "welcome to country" ceremonies performed by Aboriginal elders at some public events to give blessings on behalf of the traditional owners of a region.

More common, however, is an "acknowledgement of country". This is a brief statement at the opening of proceedings to the effect: "I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this event is taking place."

Abbott's remarks appear to have been directed more at the latter. At first glance, it may seem difficult to understand why there has been so much fuss about a single line of acknowledgment. The intention behind the act should be obvious: it is to offer a recognition of Aboriginal people as the original custodians of Australia.

If we are serious about Aboriginal reconciliation, why should this be so problematic?

Yet according to critics such as Abbott, those genuinely interested in reconciliation should find more practical measures of making a difference to Aborigines. The exercise of acknowledgment, it is argued, is simply an indulgence of white guilt about Aboriginal dispossession, not to mention patronising to Aboriginal people.

It is interesting that a number of prominent Aboriginal Australians have offered partial support for Abbott's view.

One of the problems with identity politics is that a multicultural preoccupation with matters of recognition -- with positive affirmations of minority identities -- can become all-consuming. Political philosopher Nancy Fraser, for example, suggests that where it is taken too far, a politics of recognition may get in the way of a politics of redistribution.

This is the crucial question: Does that one line of cultural acknowledgment, offered in a spirit of respect and reconciliation, end up taking recognition too far?

I don't believe it does. Cultural recognition needn't be mutually exclusive with practical reconciliation. Indeed, the first step towards lasting reconciliation is for all Australians, whether white or brown or olive or yellow, to feel the bond of civic solidarity with Aboriginal Australians. History tells us we can't take this for granted.

As for the repetition of rituals, no less a philosopher than Aristotle believed moral excellence was cultivated through habit or ethos. As he put it in his Nicomachean Ethics, "the virtues we get by first exercising them". We learn by doing. If a modest ritual should help us remember that Australia is home to ancient peoples and cultures, and prompt us to reflect on the place of Aboriginal Australians in our history, then that can only be a good thing.

*Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:* [*philosophercolumn@ gmail.com*](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)