

# The great dividing rage

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I had hoped that racism was dying in this country, but it's back - in a funkier and official form.

Almost no government ceremony now starts without a new little ceremony to make clear that we really do rank each other by race.

I mean the one at which a politician or public servant gets up to face a crowd of white or Asian faces and says: "I pay my respects to the original owners of this land, the Wurundjeri people." Or whatever tribe's self-appointed spokesmen laid claim to that bit of the land on which we all live and work, are born on or buried in.

And there are the fawning extras that now get tacked on, like this one recited by students at the 2020 Ideas Summit: "I ask the Nggunawal people and spirits to bless and guide us."

Er, why their blessing and guidance in particular? Aren't the spirits of other ancestors not as wise?

It was bad enough that such thinking took hold of our political class, but worse is that it's now being foisted on school children - building a culture of ethnic separatism that's already causing us too much trouble.

Several state schools in Victoria (where else?) now have these Welcome to Country ceremonies at assemblies or special days, as do some in NSW, Queensland and Western Australia.

Of course, I respect some of the good intentions behind this ritual. It's surely good to want to make Aborigines feel welcome in their own country - which I guess is what most people actually mean with a ceremony that switches Aborigines from the welcomed to the welcoming to seem less patronising.

But does it make sense to fight alienation with a ceremony of reverse alienation, or racism with reverse racism? I ask not least because it's growing clearer that we are fragmenting more on racial lines.

Just this week Melbourne's city centre was gridlocked for almost a day by some 500 angry taxi drivers, almost every one of them Indian or Pakistani.

Meant to be a protest against the stabbing of a driver, an Indian, it was ignored by taxi drivers of every other race and soon morphed into an up-yours explosion of ethnic resentment at the alleged racism of police and passengers. No wonder the protesters didn't care how much they'd put out other citizens who had places to go.

Last month we had another example - 50 bus loads of young Chinese ferried to Canberra to overwhelm and intimidate human rights protesters at the Beijing Games torch relay.

We've also had recent mob violence from gangs of Pacific islanders, Lebanese, Somalians and Aborigines, as well as our standard bogan Skips. And have you seen how the Australian Open now descends into a menacing peacock's fluff of ethnic feathers?

Then there's research showing trust breaking down in our most ethnically mixed suburbs, and volunteerism - the helping of fellow Australians - falling, too.

Sure, there's nothing too bad yet to fix. But I'd have thought we had to work even harder to make people feel this was their home, from the soil to the sky, because we know citizens won't look after what they don't feel is theirs, and aren't as nice to people they don't consider theirs, either.

But what do we do instead? We give them things like this dumb ceremony.

We teach them this is not really their land, but that of other people whose tribe was here first. Which suggests that those whose race was here second outrank those who came third or last.

What the Welcome to Country in fact does is make strangers of non-Aboriginal people, even those actually born here - people who feel as indigenous to this land as anyone else. Why divide ourselves like this?

What makes the welcome even more absurd and alienating is that often the the Aborigines doing this welcome have almost as much non-Aboriginal heritage as those they welcome.

How artificial are these distinctions that we're insisting on? And that brings us to the worst of these ceremonies - how they lock individuals again into tribes.

Australia grew so free and rich thanks in part to the great humanist principle that we judge people as individuals, not as members of a race, tribe, clan or even family tree. Or, now, gender or sexuality. Yet here we are retreating to tribalism, insisting some of us are owed special honour because of who some of their relatives were, and what they once owned.

It's got so wild that some people are even claiming to be whole tribes. Take Aboriginal activist Jackie Huggins, tipped to be Queensland's next Governor: "When school students ask me sometimes, 'How old are you?', I tell them 'I'm 70,000 years old'."

Actually no one in this country is 70,000. We are only who we are as individuals and, as such, share the same claims and duties as citizens.

That would make all Australians equal owners of this land, with no one granted the right to welcome the rest. Given how we're dividing, we'd better insist on that.