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NEW SOUTH WALES ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL

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Abbott headline hunting in his opposition to traditional owner acknowledgement

Chairperson of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council Bev Manton has hit back at suggestions by the federal Opposition leader that ceremonies acknowledging Aboriginal traditional owners, which are routinely embraced by millions of Australians around the nation, are “out of place” and acts of “tokenism”.

The Australian newspaper reported this morning that Mr Abbott attacked Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's speech at last week's Australian Medical Association dinner, labeling it inappropriate that the PM began by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which they were gathering.

“The Prime Minister’s acknowledgement of Aboriginal people at official events is both appropriate and welcome,” Ms Manton said.

“It’s a wonderful way to continue the process of building bridges – and healing a broken past – with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and I commend the Prime Minister and his government who embracing this practice. It’s a refreshing change.

“However, it’s disappointing Tony Abbott sees it as a threat. Although it’s not surprising.

“This is the same man who opposed an apology to members of the Stolen Generations for 12 years while in government, and then embraced it in Opposition when he realized the nation had left him behind.

“It was the same man who boycotted the Reconciliation Walks in 2000. Tony Abbott is John Howard with less wrinkles and no tracksuit.”

Mr Abbott is quoted in the article as remarking that “Sometimes [an acknowledgement] is appropriate... but certainly I think in many contexts, it seems like out-of-place tokenism.”

Ms Manton said: “An out-of-touch politician talking about out-of-place tokenism. I’d love Mr Abbott to explain when he thinks it’s appropriate to be impolite and disrespectful.

“In my book, ‘out of place tokenism’ is when politicians pretend they’re listening to Aboriginal people but have already made up their minds.

“So let’s hope Tony Abbott hears this: Australians are trying to move on from the Howard days of ignorance and race politics. If Tony Abbott can’t bring himself to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which he meets, then maybe he should find another land.”

Ms Manton said Tony Abbott’s relative inexperience in life was shining through.

“This is a young man with a great deal to learn in life. He, more than most, should be listening to his elders, black and white.”

Ms Manton also objected to statements in The Australian opposed to Welcome to Country ceremonies being performed at government events.

“The majority of the Elders who perform these acknowledgements are people who’ve been most affected by past Government policies. They’re the Aboriginal people who were removed, or had their children removed; the Aboriginal people who were forced off their land and onto missions and reserves, away from their extended families; the Aboriginal people who were prohibited from practicing their cultural ceremonies and speaking their languages.

“Yet after all that’s happened to them, our Elders are still prepared to stand up in public and say ‘Welcome’.

“They’re showing a generosity of spirit from which people like Tony Abbott could learn a great deal.

“Aboriginal people are shy people by nature. Often, a Welcome to Country can be a traumatic experience. But they stand up and do it anyway because they know in doing so, they are helping to fix things for generations to come.

“They’re trying to put a stop to generational trauma, so that their kids and their grandkids are not left to carry the baggage of past atrocities.

“It’s about letting go of the anger and hurt that they have held for so many years. It’s seen by Aboriginal people as a way of forgiving the past, of moving forward together, black and white.

“It’s also about healing, getting on with their lives and not being caught up in this terrible past that was forced on them.

“It’s about forgiveness, and moving forward together – black and white. It’s an act of generosity.

“Now what sort of person would oppose that?”

Ms Manton said suggestions in the article that Aboriginal people should not be paid for Welcome to Country duties were wrong.

“I guess those who think Aboriginal people should not receive a small remuneration for their out-of-pocket expenses or services rendered come from the ‘haves’ of this world, not the have nots,” Ms Manton said.

“I wonder if John Howard asks to be paid when he speaks at events?”

Ms Manton said if Tony Abbott expected to work cooperatively with Aboriginal people, he needed to listen and learn.

“I believe that in this life, you get back what you put out. If Mr Abbott chooses to treat Aboriginal people with disdain and disrespect, he can expect it back in folds.

“But if Mr Abbott wants to get serious about building relationships with Aboriginal people and achieving practical outcomes - something which alluded him during his lengthy time in government – then he’ll find elected Aboriginal leaders, particularly those at the NSW Aboriginal Land Council, ready and willing to engage with him.

“In the meantime, I hope the Australian people will see Mr Abbott’s comments for what they are –the headline hunting of a desperate young man with a great deal to learn.”

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