

Paul Keating's challenge: view Australia through Aboriginal eyes

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Paul Keating's Redfern Park speech

Then Prime Minister Paul Keating publically acknowledges the injustices experienced by Aboriginal Australians at Redfern Park in 1992.

- [Paul Keating: The only way to understand our land](#)

Twenty-three years after he confronted Australians with the truth of Indigenous dispossession, Paul Keating has delivered another profound message on reconciliation, this time in more nuanced language.

Back in 1992, the then prime minister said the starting point in tackling disadvantage was to recognise that the problem began with "us non-Aboriginal Australians".



Former PM Paul Keating says Australians still have work to do in attitudes to first people.
Photo: Brendan Esposito

"We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol," he declared in the Redfern Park speech.

"We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice – and our failure to imagine these things being done to us."

Now, in an address at the Australian Museum in Sydney to mark the 23rd anniversary of that speech, Mr Keating said the more non-Indigenous Australians came to see the country through the eyes of its first people, the better off the whole country will be.



Paul Keating says Australia's potential will not be realised until the question of identity is settled. *Photo: Nic Walker*

"The more we rejoice in their identity – and their oneness with the country – the more the country will become ours as we become nearer its spirituality and form," he said on Wednesday evening.

The most tangible sign of progress, Mr Keating suggested, would be "when we reach the point where Aboriginal art and culture become so integral and so central to Australian art and culture that each becomes indistinguishable from the other".

"Is it any wonder then that this culture, the longest with a collective memory of any in continuous existence, with its originality and creativity, is now pointing the way for our own culture – an essentially European one, but one under constant renovation, not least at the incidence of by Indigenous inspiration," he said.



Paul Keating delivers his emotional speech in Redfern 23 years ago.

"Aboriginal art and culture draws from the land, for Aboriginality and the land are essential to each other and are inseparable.

"In terms of art, at its best, Aboriginal art still carries sacred messages through its symbols and materials, yet manages to hold its secrets while speaking to a broader audience. More

than that, it has been effective in translating an entire culture and the understanding of an entire continent.

"Indeed, the more we interpret Australia through Aboriginal eyes, through the experience of their long and epic story, the more we allow ourselves to understand the land we share."

Rather than re-enter the debate on constitutional recognition and his support for a compact, or treaty, Mr Keating explored a bigger proposition – that Australia's potential will not be realised until the question of identity is settled.

"Whatever our identity today is or has become, it is an identity that cannot be separated from Aboriginal Australia," he said. "For their 50,000 years here has slaked the land with their resonances, their presence and their spirit.

"Our opportunity is to rejoice in their identity, and without attempting to appropriate or diminish it, fuse it with our own, making the whole richer."

Mr Keating noted that Australia is positioned in the fastest growing, most dynamic part of the world, surrounded by Indigenous cultures.

"Our 200-year occupancy of this vast continent, in terms of long history, sits at odds with the settled old societies near us and around us, but this is not the case with our Indigenes," he said.

"They were never at odds with what surrounded them, nor indeed with their own land. They are entirely at home with it.

"But as it turned out, their home is now our home and the more we rejoice in their identity - and their one-ness with the country, the more the country will become ours as we become nearer its spirituality and meaning.

"The more we view the country through the prism of Aboriginality, the more likely we are to get the angle right."