

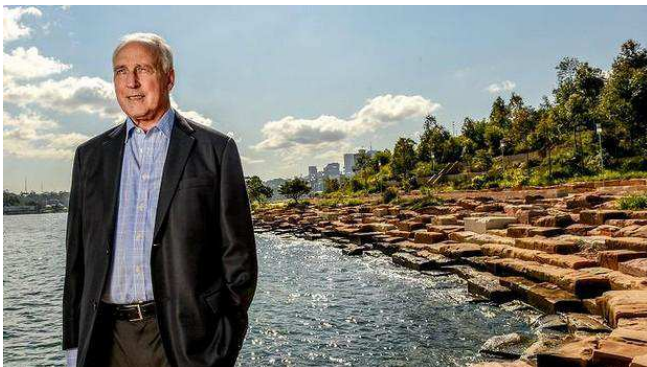
Paul Keating calls for blending of black and white Australia to create new national identity

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Former prime minister Paul Keating pictured in Sydney in August. Photo: Brendan Esposito

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Australians will only be at peace with themselves when they identify more with Indigenous Australians, according to former prime minister Paul Keating.

Genuine reconciliation also requires blending "two very different cultures" to create a composite Australian identity that both black and white communities can identify with, Mr Keating will say in a speech prepared for the opening of the Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia on Thursday.



Renita Stanley is one of the artists working at Ernabella Arts centre in South Australia's APY Lands. Photo: Steven Siewert

"We had seized the land so violently and dispossessed its inhabitants so shamelessly – that our only way back – back to being at one and at peace with ourselves, was to identify more with Aboriginal Australia, while atoning for our opportunist and brutal behaviour," Mr Keating says.

Mr Keating says addressing land rights is crucial to the process of creating a new Australian identity.

"The Native Title Act, on which I spent a large proportion of my period as prime minister – enshrines in the law of the land – the notion of Aboriginality, not only in its ownership but in lifting the relevance of culture and the virtue of customary tradition," he says.



Graham Kulyuru is one of the artists whose work will be displayed in the Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. Photo: Steven Siewert

In his speech, Mr Keating says Aboriginal art and the land are inseparable: "This has produced the greatest and longest collective memory of any continuous culture and is still largely uncompromised."

He also says native title will eventually extend over more than half of Australia's land mass.

"[As] people here know, over time, the Native Title Act will return well over half the continent to its rightful owners," he says. "Aboriginal art and its expression will be important in this. It is already important."

"Contemporary Aboriginal art still carries sacred messages through its symbols and materials – still managing to hold its secrets while speaking to a broader audience."

Mr Keating acknowledges the importance of an exhibition dedicated to Indigenous art, but says it perpetuates what he calls "the void between the anthropological 'us' and 'them' – that is, the rest of them".

"My great hope is that over the next half century or so, Aboriginal art will become so integral and so central to Australian art and representation, that it will require no separate showing," he says.

"Indeed, in a society like this, even to be known as an Aboriginal artist is to be positioned, to be pigeon-holed."

Mr Keating will also tell the audience gathered in Adelaide that Indigenous artists are subjected to commercial pressures unlike white artists.

"Contemporary Aboriginal art is pinned by its commercialism – the need of most of it to be inherently commercial – to fund community income and community service obligations," he says. "Denied the right, first to breathe and expand and grow in its own terms – in public galleries or specialised collections – it is pushed straight out to earn a dollar."

"While white artists are supported by all those non-commercial things, after which, by choice, they can sell into a kind of 'afterglow'."

Mr Keating will conclude his speech by arguing Aboriginal art has influenced how non-Aboriginal Australians view themselves.

Aboriginal art has, since the 1970s, been a conduit, a medium, first of curiosity, then of a greater understanding of the Aboriginal people," he says.

"It has been a method of translating an entire culture and of understanding an entire continent and has been a major influence in obliging Australians to come to terms with the question of who and what we are. Contemporary Aboriginal art moves us further along that road – both describing while revealing the journey."