

# Tony Abbott, the prime minister for Indigenous affairs, never fully appreciated our culture



[Stan Grant](#)

The prime minister said he would ‘sweat blood’ for my people, that his personal mission was to redress Australia’s ‘national shame’. But words are easy



‘If words were solutions, my people would have already broken the chains of our history.’  
Photograph: Tracey Nearmy/AAP

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Another prime minister has gone, this one the self-proclaimed [champion](#) for Indigenous people whose personal mission was to redress our country’s “national failure”.

[Tony Abbott](#) lauded Indigenous leader Noel Pearson as a visionary, a prophet. Pearson returned the compliment: Abbott was the “Nixon to China” conservative who would lead a nation to reconcile its history and write the missing words in our constitution: that we acknowledge and respect the original people of this land, its history and customs.

Abbott appointed Warren Mundine to head his hand-picked advisory council on Indigenous affairs. He made a pledge to spend a week each year in an Indigenous community. He vowed to “sweat blood” for the cause. But [words](#) are easy.

We have grown used to the lofty pronouncements of our political leaders, sometimes augmented with tears. If words were solutions, my people would have already broken the chains of our history and been delivered from the margins to the mainstream of this country’s social and political history; our traditions and identity not just intact but enhanced.

But let's take Abbott at his word – words like “lifestyle choices”. As prime minister he saw little future in small, remote communities. He backed a plan in Western Australia to shut them down. The government, he said, can no longer “endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices”.

It's necessary to debate how we provide services and healthcare in remote communities, let alone the employment and education that are vital for all Australians, and more so for impoverished and isolated Indigenous people.

Yet, the prime minister spoke neither of consultation nor cooperation, sensitivity to connection to land, history nor kinship.

Tony Abbott's “prophet”, Noel Pearson, was less complimentary after those words. Abbott was leading a “deranged debate”, he was “disrespectful”, a man “casting fear” into people.

Warren Mundine – Abbott's “friend”, who took him on a personal journey of understanding – now reminded him that this was not about choice, like a coastal tree-change. This was about a people's very essence, their very culture.

Abbott has never fully appreciated the essence of Aboriginal culture, not if we take him at his word. This is the man who in 2014 said white settlement was Australia's “defining moment”, the moment “this continent became part of the modern world”.

Mundine again had to remind his “friend” that this defining moment was also a disastrous defining moment for Indigenous people.

Tony Abbott is a man bound by his ideals. I don't doubt for one moment they're sincerely held. But his ideals were formed by the myths, lies and distortions of an Australian history still founded on the concept of Terra Nullius – empty land.

Again, let's take the former prime minister at his word. Just last year he was moved to reflect that before the coming of the British this land was “nothing but bush” and the pre-colonisation civilisation was “extraordinarily basic and raw”.

In Abbott's words of 2014 I hear an echo of the mid 19th-century clergyman John Dunmore Lang, who justified settlement in 1856:

God in making the earth never intended it should be occupied by men so incapable of appreciating its resources as the Aborigines of Australia.

Abbott, in so many ways, seemed forged of earlier times, a man from the past delivered here and destined to grapple with very modern challenges. From attitudes to women, homosexuality, refugees, climate change or Indigenous people, he could appear out of step.

It has produced a man of contradictions. A man derided for misogyny, yet the father of three women. A man who admitted to being threatened by homosexuality, which challenges “the right order of things”; yet who greatly loves his lesbian sister. A man of great personal loyalty who could not command the loyalty of his own party.

And here was a man bound by his history who just last month could stand at the grave of Eddie Mabo – the man whose legal challenge to uphold his native title overturned Terra Nullius – and declare it a “sacred place”.

This is the nub of the failure of Abbott’s prime Ministership. Here was a man confined by his view of his country, confronted by an Australian people who looked to transform their view of this country.

The self-proclaimed “prime minister for Indigenous people” leaves a legacy unfulfilled. He spoke of closing the gap and redressing Indigenous disadvantage yet stripped half a billion dollars from spending on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

He spoke of his desire to lead a referendum to recognise indigenous people in the constitution yet leaves leaders like Noel Pearson stranded somewhere between disillusion and hope.

Abbott is far from alone in this. In December 1992 I stood on a stage in Redfern to introduce an earlier prime minister as he challenged our country to reconcile its history. Paul Keating took responsibility for dispossession, murder, stolen children, discrimination and exclusion.

“We cannot sweep injustice aside”, he said. Yet Paul Keating exited politics with his vision unrealised.

Earlier this year I spoke at length to another former prime minister; a leader who made the great apology. Kevin Rudd said sorry and he told me of his pride and great humility in a moment when our parliament spoke to what can unite us.

Yet, Kevin Rudd too exited politics, and his hopes for the plight of my people remain elusive.

We remain today as Indigenous people, at the bottom of every socio-economic indicator. We have the worst health, housing, education, employment; we die younger and we die still of diseases that no longer kill our fellow Australians.

In a country as successful, as rich and tolerant and accepting as ours I can only ask why? All of the words, the ideals, the leadership, still we fall short. I know it is complicated, that the web of our past entangles us still. Yet I also know, deep down I know, that if we wanted to cure it, we would cure it, just like we cured polio.

The great Scottish poet Robbie Burns said: “if I could write all the songs, I would not care who wrote the laws”. Politicians write the laws and the laws are inadequate. The song: that is ours and only we a people – beyond prime ministers – can complete it.