# Melbourne Storm’s last-minute cancellation of Welcome to Country sparks disappointment and debate



Indigenous leaders and community members expressed deep disappointment following the Melbourne Storm rugby league club’s last-minute cancellation of a planned Welcome to Country ceremony prior to their Anzac Day match against the South Sydney Rabbitohs at AAMI Park on 25 April 2024.

Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy, who had been scheduled to perform the Welcome to Country, was informed on the day by the Storm’s board that the ceremony would no longer proceed, despite earlier arrangements including performances by the Maori group Ngā Mātai Pūrua and the Wurundjeri dance group Djirri Djirri.

“We were all just dumbfounded,” Aunty Joy said late on Friday, describing the Indigenous community’s reaction to the abrupt decision. Both performing groups withdrew in protest following the cancellation. Murphy noted that although the club later apologised and invited her to proceed with the ceremony, discussions among Indigenous representatives led to a decision not to continue, as "they've broken our hearts."

Storm chairman Matt Tripp explained the situation, attributing the cancellation to a misunderstanding between the club’s board and management. He stated that the board had only formally approved Welcome to Country ceremonies for the club’s multicultural and Indigenous rounds, not Anzac Day events. Speaking to The Sydney Morning Herald, Tripp said, “We weren't sure it was happening in this game, and when we asked the question, there was a bit of confusion.” He added that the board was now considering including Welcome to Country at future Anzac Day matches. Tripp also condemned separate disruptions at Melbourne’s dawn service earlier that day, calling the behaviour “disgraceful” and affirming the club’s condemnation.

Despite the Storm’s cancellation, a Welcome to Country ceremony was held successfully at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) before the AFL Anzac Day game between Collingwood and Essendon, where Wurundjeri elder Uncle Colin Hunter was warmly received. Meanwhile, Bunurong elder Uncle Mark Brown faced heckling from far-right agitators during his Welcome to Country at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance, an incident condemned by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan, and Defence Minister Richard Marles. Albanese described the disruption as “abhorrent, un-Australian, and disgraceful,” urging that those responsible face the full force of the law.

The Melbourne Storm issued a public statement acknowledging a “miscommunication of expectations regarding the use [of] Welcome to Country at Melbourne Storm events throughout the year.” The club confirmed it would continue acknowledgements at key culturally significant celebrations, including the Indigenous and multicultural rounds, and displayed an Acknowledgement of Country on the stadium’s big screens during the Anzac Day commemoration.

Community leaders and performers involved expressed frustration over the lack of clear reasoning for the initial cancellation. Murphy reported that Storm chief executive Justin Rodski attributed the decision to the board. Djirri Djirri’s lead dancer, Ky-ya Nicholson Ward, said, “After being disrespected, we couldn't then go forward with a smile on our face and act.” Murphy added that Indigenous groups wished to rebuild their relationship with the club, emphasising that the decision was “wrong, hurtful, deceitful and tokenistic.”

The controversy follows the Melbourne Storm’s announcement in December 2024 that Welcome to Country ceremonies at regular season games would be scaled back, maintained only for culturally significant events. This move attracted criticism from Indigenous artists such as Yorta Yorta rapper Briggs, who on social media questioned the club’s commitment to cultural recognition. The debate was further inflamed by revelations that Storm part-owner Brett Ralph donated $175,000 to the ‘No’ campaign during the Indigenous Voice referendum debate.

In Western Australia, similar incidents were reported during Anzac Day ceremonies. At Kings Park in Perth, a heckler interrupted Noongar elder and former soldier Di Ryder’s Welcome to Country ceremony, but was quickly silenced by supportive spectators. Uncle Ricky Morris, a veteran and former AFL player, condemned the behaviour as disrespectful both to Aboriginal people and all Australians who have served, stating, “They need to go back and have a good hard look at themselves.”

The Melbourne Storm’s cancellation divided fans and commentators online. Some condemned the decision as “disgusting” and accused the club of enabling racism, while others supported the move, describing Welcome to Country ceremonies as “divisive” and “woke.” One fan speculated the club sought to avoid potential crowd conflicts, suggesting that “football games are charged with adrenaline and 'fighting spirit.'”

Overall, the events of Anzac Day 2024 highlighted ongoing tensions surrounding cultural recognition and respect in public commemorations and sporting events, underscoring complex conversations within Australian society about inclusion and remembrance.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.northweststar.com.au/story/8951528/melbourne-storm-slammed-as-welcome-to-country-cancelled/> - This article supports the claim that the Melbourne Storm faced criticism for cancelling a Welcome to Country ceremony at their Anzac Day match, leaving an Aboriginal elder disappointed.
2. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/indigenous-groups-dumbfounded-after-welcome-to-country-axed-at-melbourne-storm-south-sydney-rabbitohs-clash/news-story/301839e5ebc529ab7683ff4523fcb786> - It corroborates the report of Indigenous groups being 'dumbfounded' by the cancellation due to a 'miscommunication'.
3. <https://www.news.com.au/sport/nrl/melbourne-storm-cancel-nrl-welcome-to-country-before-south-sydney-match/news-story/c19cb672d8a676e2f1ffca0f1858f5ca> - The article explains how the Melbourne Storm attributed the cancellation to a 'miscommunication' and discusses the controversy surrounding it.
4. <https://www.northweststar.com.au/story/8951528/storm-lashed-after-welcome-to-country-cancellation/?src=rss> - It highlights the backlash faced by the Melbourne Storm after the sudden cancellation of the Welcome to Country ceremony.
5. <https://thenightly.com.au/australia/anzac-day-disruptions-highlight-tensions-over-welcome-to-country-ceremonies-c-18482154> - This article discusses Anzac Day disruptions across Australia, including protests at Welcome to Country ceremonies, which underscores tensions surrounding cultural recognition.
6. <https://www.noahwire.com> - Although not directly accessible, this is mentioned as the source of the initial report regarding the Melbourne Storm's cancellation of the Welcome to Country ceremony and related tensions.
7. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/nrl/article-14649275/Indigenous-groups-claim-Welcome-Country-Melbourne-Storm-clash-cancelled-minute-not-Nations-ceremony-axed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data