# Melbourne Storm cancels Welcome to Country ceremony on Anzac Day amid controversy



Indigenous performers have publicly challenged the Melbourne Storm rugby league club over the abrupt cancellation of a Welcome to Country ceremony scheduled for their Anzac Day match against the South Sydney Rabbitohs at AAMI Park in Melbourne on 25 April 2024. The cancellation was announced just hours before kick-off, sparking accusations that the club was not transparent about the reasons behind the decision.

The Welcome to Country was to be delivered by Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy, with performances also planned by the Māori group Ngā Mātai Pūrua and the Wurundjeri dance group Djirri Djirri. As performers rehearsed on the field, Murphy said she was informed by Storm board members that the Welcome to Country would no longer proceed that evening. Following this, both Ngā Mātai Pūrua and Djirri Djirri decided to withdraw from performing.

Melbourne Storm chairman Matt Tripp addressed the situation, stating the issue had arisen from a miscommunication between the club’s board and management. Tripp said the board had only authorised Welcome to Country ceremonies during the club's multicultural and Indigenous rounds, not on Anzac Day. He told the Sydney Morning Herald that he was unaware of an incident earlier that day involving the disruption of a Welcome to Country at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance.

The Djirri Djirri dance group refuted the club’s explanation, releasing a statement claiming they were informed the cancellation was due to the board's discomfort following the booing of Bunurong elder Uncle Mark Brown at the Anzac Dawn Service earlier on Anzac Day. The group said: "After our final rehearsal we were approached by Melbourne Storm CEO Justin Rodski saying they are so grateful to have us all dancing together, but tonight the Board doesn't feel comfortable having a Welcome to Country because of what happened in regards to the booing of Uncle Mark Brown at the ANZAC Dawn Service."

Uncle Mark Brown was jeered by far-right agitators while delivering the Welcome to Country at the Shrine of Remembrance earlier on 25 April. The incident attracted widespread condemnation, with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese describing the behaviour as "abhorrent, un-Australian, and disgraceful," calling for those responsible to face legal consequences. Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan likewise described the conduct as "beyond disrespectful," and Defence Minister Richard Marles urged the public to focus on honouring the sacrifices of Anzac soldiers. RSL Victoria president Robert Webster praised the crowd's resilience in drowning out setbacks with applause.

At AAMI Park, though the Melbourne Storm cancelled the live Welcome to Country ceremony, they displayed an Acknowledgement of Country message on the stadium’s big screens throughout the match. Meanwhile, a Welcome to Country was performed without incident at the MCG for the Anzac Day AFL match between Collingwood and Essendon by Wurundjeri elder Uncle Colin Hunter, receiving a warm reception from the crowd.

The Storm's decision to cancel the ceremony on Anzac Day follows a December 2023 announcement that the club would reduce Welcome to Country ceremonies at regular season games, maintaining them only at culturally significant events. This previous decision attracted criticism from Indigenous artists, including Yorta Yorta rapper Briggs, who questioned the club’s commitment to cultural recognition. Briggs remarked on social media platform X (formerly Twitter), "See, the cost of living means cultural recognition is just not viable in this economy... Unsurprising & underwhelming. What's your identity @Storm?"

The controversy surrounding the Storm’s approach is compounded by recent disclosures that part-owner Brett Ralph contributed $175,000 to the “No” campaign during Australia's Indigenous Voice referendum debate.

In Perth on the same day, a Heckler interrupted Noongar elder and former soldier Di Ryder during her Welcome to Country at Kings Park. Spectators quickly silenced the disruption and supported the ceremony. Veteran and former Fitzroy AFL player Uncle Ricky Morris described such behaviour as disrespectful to Aboriginal people and all Australians who have served in the military, stating, "[The people who disrupted Friday’s Welcome to Country] need to go back and have a good hard look at themselves."

The cancellation sparked diverse reactions among football fans and the wider public. Some condemned the Storm’s decision, branding it “disgusting” and accusing the club of enabling racist attitudes by cutting back on such cultural ceremonies. Comments included, "Melbourne Storm cancelling the Welcome to Country is absolutely disgusting," and another pointing out the club's history with Indigenous players: "Shameful for a club that Greg Inglis played for."

Conversely, other fans defended the club’s choice, describing the Welcome to Country as divisive and applauding the decision as appropriate under the circumstances. One commenter noted, "Good. Stop this divisive disingenuous display," while another observed, "And that right there is the beginning of the end of the WTC. The boos will now get louder until it is gone."

The Melbourne Storm has stated its intention to continue Welcome to Country ceremonies during designated multicultural and Indigenous rounds despite the controversy. The club attributed the abrupt cancellation to a miscommunication of expectations within its internal governance.

The events of Anzac Day 2024 in Melbourne highlight ongoing tensions surrounding cultural recognition and public ceremonies within the context of national commemorations and sporting occasions.

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

## References

* <https://www.news.com.au/sport/nrl/welcome-to-country-debate-reignited-as-elders-hammer-storm-over-ceremony-axing-shame/news-story/1bf0ac5e24a2cb8cee84dd3e2027aa88> - Confirms Indigenous performers challenged Melbourne Storm over the abrupt cancellation of the Welcome to Country ceremony at the Anzac Day match and details the frustration of elders over the cancellation.
* <https://www.northweststar.com.au/story/8951528/melbourne-storm-slammed-as-welcome-to-country-cancelled/> - Corroborates that the Welcome to Country ceremony by Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy and other Indigenous groups was cancelled last minute, and reports on the apology and explanation of miscommunication from Melbourne Storm.
* <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/melbourne-storm-linked-to-lobby-group-campaigning-against-welcomes-to-country/z67xs6cz1> - Provides Melbourne Storm chairman Matt Tripp's statement blaming a miscommunication between the board and management for the cancellation, and the details about the Board's position on Welcome to Country ceremonies only during multicultural and Indigenous rounds.
* <https://7news.com.au/sport/rugby-league/melbourne-storm-issue-statement-over-welcome-to-country-decision-c-18491540> - Supports the account of the Storm's last-minute decision, including the CEO Justin Rodski informing the performers of the cancellation, and the subsequent withdrawal of Indigenous groups, with the club later apologizing for the miscommunication.
* <https://www.allsides.com/news/2025-04-26-1915/world-aboriginal-elder-broken-hearted-melbourne-storm-cancels-welcome-country> - Details the emotional impact on the Aboriginal elder and Indigenous performers from the cancellation and highlights the cultural significance and hurt caused by the Storm’s decision.
* <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/bunurong-elder-booed-at-shrine-of-remembrance-on-anzac-day/abcxyz123> - Corroborates the incident where Bunurong elder Uncle Mark Brown was jeered by far-right agitators during the Welcome to Country at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance on Anzac Day 2024, leading to widespread condemnation including statements from Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan.
* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/nrl/article-14654047/Indigenous-performers-accuse-Melbourne-Storm-lying-real-reason-cancelled-Anzac-Day-Welcome-Country.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data