# Indigenous groups protest Melbourne Storm's last-minute cancellation of Anzac Day Welcome to Country



Indigenous performers have accused the Melbourne Storm rugby league club of dishonesty following the abrupt cancellation of a planned Welcome to Country ceremony just hours before their Anzac Day NRL match at AAMI Park in Melbourne on 25 April 2024. The ceremony, integral to cultural respect and community unity, was suddenly called off, revealing a troubling lack of commitment and respect from the club’s leadership.

The event was set to feature a Welcome to Country address by Wurundjeri elder Aunty Joy Murphy, alongside performances by the Māori group Ngā Mātai Pūrua and the Wurundjeri dance troupe Djirri Djirri. However, as performers rehearsed that afternoon, Murphy was informed by club board members that the ceremony was no longer proceeding. In protest, both Indigenous groups withdrew their planned performances.

The Storm issued a statement blaming a "miscommunication of expectations" regarding the use of Welcome to Country ceremonies, limiting them strictly to multicultural and Indigenous rounds. Melbourne Storm chairman Matt Tripp claimed the board approved these ceremonies only for those specific rounds, not for Anzac Day events, and professed ignorance of any disruptions at Melbourne’s dawn service. This explanation feels like a disingenuous attempt to sidestep accountability and mask the club’s failure to uphold respect at a crucial cultural moment.

Contrary to the official line, members of Djirri Djirri revealed that the real reason for cancellation was reportedly linked to the booing of Bunurong elder Uncle Mark Brown at the Anzac Dawn Service earlier that morning. Djirri Djirri’s statement described how CEO Justin Rodski informed them that the board felt uncomfortable proceeding due to the earlier incident. This admission exposes a disturbing tendency to penalize Indigenous voices rather than confront or address unacceptable racist behaviour. It underscores how cultural recognition has become hostage to public discomfort rather than being honoured as a vital display of respect and reconciliation.

The wider context is equally troubling. On Anzac Day, far-right agitators heckled Uncle Mark Brown during his Welcome to Country, an incident condemned by politicians across the spectrum, including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan. Yet, the Melbourne Storm board’s response appears weak and evasive, prioritising corporate convenience over genuine inclusivity. Their concession to maintain Welcome to Country ceremonies only for selected 'culturally significant' rounds further diminishes the ongoing commitment needed to integrate Indigenous recognition authentically within Australian sport.

This pattern follows the Storm’s December 2023 decision to scale back such welcome ceremonies during regular-season games, a move widely criticized by Indigenous artists and community leaders for tokenism and indifference. The controversy deepened with revelations that Storm part-owner Brett Ralph had contributed significantly to the ‘No’ campaign during the Indigenous Voice referendum, casting further doubt on the club’s sincerity.

In stark contrast, other major sporting venues demonstrated stronger leadership and cultural respect. At the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Wurundjeri elder Uncle Colin Hunter’s Welcome to Country received warm applause, perhaps in conscious recognition of the earlier incidents. Similarly, in Perth, Noongar elder and veteran Di Ryder’s Welcome encountered brief heckling but was ultimately supported by the crowd—a clear indication that respect and recognition can still prevail when communities refuse to tolerate disruption.

Social media reactions to the Storm’s cancellation reveal a divided public but expose an uncomfortable truth: that too many institutions, including this club, still view cultural recognition as optional or inconvenient, rather than foundational to Australia’s identity.

Given the recent political shifts and leadership changes in Canberra, it is more urgent than ever for sports organisations to reject half-measures and token gestures. Genuine integration of Indigenous recognition can only be achieved through earnest commitment and honesty, values that the Storm have so far failed to demonstrate. Without such commitments, the club risks alienating fans and communities seeking real respect and inclusion, a glaring lapse at a time when national unity and cultural dignity should be paramount.

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> - Corroborates accusations against Melbourne Storm for abruptly cancelling the Welcome to Country ceremony, highlighting community backlash and the board's role.
* <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/melbourne-storm-linked-to-lobby-group-campaigning-against-welcomes-to-country/z67xs6cz1> - Supports claims about Storm's leadership connections to groups opposing Welcome to Country, and their stated rationale about limiting ceremonies to specific rounds.
* <https://www.allsides.com/news/2025-04-26-1915/world-aboriginal-elder-broken-hearted-melbourne-storm-cancels-welcome-country> - Documents the immediate cultural impact of the cancellation, including emotional responses from Aboriginal elders and performers.
* <https://www.foxsports.com.au/afl/storm-criticised-for-cancelling-welcome-to-country-amid-mcgs-response-to-anzac-day-booing/news-story/c4177b5d5e1af5ee2a579729cab656cd> - Links the cancellation to broader controversy around Anzac Day booing incidents and contrasting responses from other venues like the MCG.
* <https://www.batemansbaypost.com.au/story/8951528/melbourne-storm-slammed-as-welcome-to-country-cancelled/> - Reinforces allegations of last-minute cancellation and community outrage, particularly from Indigenous performers.
* <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/melbourne-storm-linked-to-lobby-group-campaigning-against-welcomes-to-country/z67xs6cz1> - Further substantiates the club's policy shift regarding ceremonial restrictions and links to anti-Welcome to Country advocacy groups.
* <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