



In the beginning there was . . .

Liberal **Steve Irons** and Labor's **Melissa Parke** say it's time to recognise Aboriginals in the Constitution

Symbolism is sometimes dismissed when looking for solutions to national issues, yet three events in recent years should give pause for thought.

As Federal MPs, both of us were involved and deeply moved by the formal apologies to the Stolen Generation and the Forgotten Australians in 2008 and 2009, and later the National Apology to the victims of forced adoptions.

We saw on these days how the recognition of what had been suffered brought relief and comfort to people who had lost so much.

More than this, we now look back and see that these symbolic acts of recognition have spurred on a wave of positive developments since — such as the progress of Forgotten Australians Coming Together in Fremantle.

Symbols remind us of what binds us together. They unite us. They can help us to feel a deep sense of belonging.

They can help to heal old

wounds. And they are a spur to action.

A drive to recognise indigenous Australians in the Constitution that made a big splash at North Cottesloe yesterday is about symbolism and inclusion.

And so to anyone tempted to dismiss the value of indigenous recognition in our Constitution on the grounds it is mere symbolism, we say symbols are powerful and important — think of our flags and coat of arms. As Australians, we have many things to celebrate.

One of them is our nation's rich indigenous heritage — the bedrock of our unique place and identity in the world.

When others look to Australia, so many are inspired by the ancient first cultures of this land and the vast span of human achievement of the first Australians.

When they see the insights and ingenuity of our country's first people embedded in art and dance, stories and songs, they seek a personal connection to an unrivalled story on this planet.

It's a story of people and cultures that have survived and sustained themselves through an immense stretch of time on this continent.

And it's a story of cultures not found anywhere else in the world. How can it be that this remarkable part of our nation's heritage is nowhere to be found in our nation's founding

document?

How can it be that the binding thread of our culture is yet to be written into our Constitution?

The truth is we haven't yet secured our own formal connection to the identity that has fused culture and continent for more than 60,000 years.

What an amazing opportunity we have to be the generation that makes that connection; to be the generation that writes our special Australian culture into our founding national document for ever.

The Aboriginal actor Aaron Pedersen once put it this way: "When you recognise us, you'll recognise yourselves." Our Constitution finds time and space to mention lighthouses and coinage — but not the people who had lived here for 40,000 or 50,000 or 60,000 years before either came to this continent.

And so, we have a task before us.

As Australians from diverse political traditions and backgrounds, we need to look deep into our hearts and minds and come together across our traditional divides to recognise this unique part of our nation in our Constitution.

Recognition will help our unique indigenous cultures to survive and thrive, because after two centuries of sometimes brutal treatment of indigenous Australians and the quashing of these cultures, so much of our





precious heritage has been lost. Recognition gives us our best chance of sustaining them, so we can all be enriched, inspired, and sustained by Australia's foundation cultures.

The senior law man of the Gumatj clan of Arnhem Land, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, once wrote: "I wanted constitutional recognition to bring my people in from the cold, to bring us into the nation."

Recognition will be a powerful act of inclusion for many people who have long been made to feel like outsiders in their own land.

And it will bind us together as Australians, fusing our indigenous heritage with our

heritage as a place of arrival — which is reflected everywhere in our founding document.

This isn't about expanding rights or re-writing history — it's about making our Constitution a truer and richer record of who we are.

And it's about ensuring that mistakes we've made in the past don't happen again.

So it's time to address the omission and the discrimination in our nation's guiding document.

It's time to replace the silence with a clear voice of recognition, of celebration, of deep respect.

And if we don't do this, we'll be missing a huge opportunity

to bridge the gulf between Australians. We'll be choosing separation for another generation.

We want something better than that for our country. We want us to be one nation, united in its appreciation for its first people and cultures.

And we know that with this profound act of recognition, all Australians will share a greater sense of pride and mutual respect, as we journey into our future together.

Steve Irons is the Liberal MP for Swan and Melissa Parke is the Labor MP for Fremantle



Proud: La Salle College students Tyler Fred, Caleb Galova and Leslie Condon at yesterday's rally. Picture: Nic Ellis