

**Speech by Dr Lois O'Donoghue CBE AM at the launch of The Australian Flag - Professional Design
Competition and Exhibition**

Museum of Sydney - Sunday 25 January 1998

Co-Chairmen Greiner and Whitlam; distinguished guests; friends -

I must begin today by acknowledging that the land we stand on was Aboriginal land for tens of thousands of years. It's a small thing to make this point and to remember the traditional owners who cared for this land, but even small symbolic gestures can be powerful.

A simple thing like shaking hands is a symbol of goodwill and openness. We show courtesy in our speech and manners to avoid offence to another person and to show that we want to include them.

And we don't withhold from other people the things that are in our power to grant - things that cost us so little yet may symbolise so much, such as saying "sorry".

Our national flag should be a symbol of our national ideals and of the people we want to be. We regard ourselves as independent, individual and inclusive - but our existing flag, our national symbol, says none of this.

Instead, it symbolises a narrow slice of our history including a significant period when the rights of Australia's indigenous peoples were overlooked. For this reason, most of Australia's indigenous people cannot relate to the existing flag. For us, it symbolises dispossession and oppression. And it just doesn't reflect the reality of Australian life in the late 1990s.

We are a country that prides itself on diversity and tolerance, yet some of us cling to a flag that represents a monoculture and intolerance. We are a country that has debated important national issues such as justice, rights and identity, yet the current flag symbolises quite the opposite - complacency, dependency and subordination.

I reject the proposal that we are risking our sense of historical place by seeking a new flag. We are on the brink of national renewal, wrestling with such issues as the republic, respect for indigenous rights and where we place our economic priorities.

We are facing up to the demands of the 21st century by examining our institutions and reviewing our assessment of ourselves. We need to get into shape to survive the scrutiny that the 2000 Olympics will force upon us - a scrutiny we have invited.

If we are a just nation, let us be able to prove it. If we are an independent nation, let us be able to point to the evidence. If we are a tolerant nation, let us have no sense of division within our community.

And let us have national symbols that both transmit that message to the world and remind us of it at home.

It's time to leave the Union Jack behind, along with other mementos of our infancy as a nation. It's time to agree upon a flag that has meaning "for all of us" - if you'll forgive me for using that tainted phrase. It's time to realise that a reconciliation movement has taken root in our community that needs symbols to help it along.

Prime Minister John Howard has promised to move the reconciliation process forward, but his ideas on how to do that have been unsuccessful so far. I think we have a right to expect the Prime Minister - our elected national leader - to understand that the country is in the mood to define an identity for ourselves that is in no way ambiguous.

Overseas visitors see us more clearly than we see ourselves. They appreciate the unique aspects of our country including the contribution that Australia's indigenous people make to our national identity.

I'm pleased to see that many of the designs on display here today include a reference to indigenous culture, or the colours of the indigenous flags. But the most important thing is that our new flag should be acceptable to all of us. And that won't be possible without a willingness to discuss and consider options to the sadly dated symbol that currently adorns our national institutions.

I congratulate all the designers of the entries on display here for their inventiveness and their understanding of the importance of symbolism. And I thank you for your support in seeking this renewal of our nation.

Thank you.