

BlackScreen Africa Opening Night

17 June 2016

DHOM speech

Ladies and gentleman, good evening, and welcome to the opening of the BlackScreen Africa Film Festival. For those of you whom I haven't met, my name is Ben Playle, and I'm the Australian Deputy High Commissioner to South Africa.

Allow me to acknowledge, in particular, our Direct Aid Program partners, several of whom are here this evening; our fantastic Australian Volunteers for International Development, several of whom are also here this evening; and a group of aspiring film makers who join us from the Big Fish film school. We look forward to seeing some of your films soon.

It's a real pleasure to have all of you here, and thank you to the Bioscope Theatre for hosting us. Before we screen *The Redfern Story*, allow me to provide some modest insight into the cultures of Indigenous Australians, in an effort to set the scene not only for this evening's film, but for the BlackScreen Africa Film Festival as a whole.

Were we gathered in Australia this evening, I would begin my comments with an 'acknowledgement of country', to pay our collective respects to the traditional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander owners of the land on which we were standing.

We are a long way from Australia, but this evening's film is set in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern. In lieu of a more usual acknowledgement of country, I can at least acknowledge that the film is set on the traditional lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and can pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

While the Australian national flag is hopefully somewhat familiar, many of you may not be familiar with the other two flags displayed behind me: the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag.

The black of the Aboriginal flag represents the Aboriginal people of Australia; the yellow, the sun; and the red, the red earth symbolising the spiritual importance of the land.

The Torres Strait Islander flag is emblazoned with a white Dhari, or headdress, which is a symbol of Torres Strait Islanders. The blue represents the sea; the black stripes, the people; and the green, the land. The five point star symbolises the five major island groups in the Torres Strait that sits between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

It's no accident that both flags pay homage to land. For Indigenous Australians, land is at the core of all spirituality. The spirit of 'country', the traditional lands, is regarded as central to their identity.

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise just three per cent of Australia's population. Yet, together, their cultures constitute the oldest living cultural history in the world, dating back at least 50,000 years, and possibly as far back as 65,000 years.

You may notice that I refer to 'cultures' in the plural. There is no single Indigenous culture in Australia. There were about 600 different clan groups, known as 'nations', around Australia when Europeans arrived in the 18th century, many with distinctive cultures and beliefs. Their 'territories' ranged from lush woodland areas to harsh desert surroundings. Different groups developed different skills, and built unique bodies of knowledge for their environments.

There is also no common Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language. We believe that there were 600-700 distinct language groups in Australia prior to European settlement, of which at least 250 were recorded. Regrettably, many of these languages have since been lost, or the maintenance of them has fallen to just a few, thanks in the main to the resettlement and assimilation policies of past Australian Governments.

Today, there is increasing recognition of the importance of preserving the remaining indigenous languages, which are a critical part of Australia's rich heritage. The movie *Buckskin*, screening here over the weekend, tells the story of a young man seeking to save the Kauma language of the Adelaide Plains from extinction.

The quality and variety of Australian Indigenous art also reflects the richness and diversity of Indigenous cultures, and the distinct differences between clans, languages, dialects and geographic landscapes. Many of you may be familiar with the Indigenous 'dot paintings' which emerged from the deserts of central Australia in the 1970s, and garnered significant international recognition and acclaim.

The short film *Mimi*, also screening this weekend, has a humorous take on white collectors of Indigenous art in modern Australia who do not appreciate its cultural significance. While I'm no collector, I must confess to having a few pieces of Indigenous art hanging on my walls, about which I wish I knew more.

Together with painted artworks, music, song and dance are an equally important part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life and customs. Unique songs and dances for all occasions are passed down from generation to generation, a key part of a great tradition of oral learning and story-telling about the 'nation' or clan.

Several films screening as part of the BlackScreen Africa Film Festival feature Aboriginal dance, song and performance, both the traditional and the modern, including *The Djarn Djarns*, *Big Name No Blanket* and *Yolngu Guya Djamamirr 'The Chooky Dance'*.

Several films also have as their central theme the struggle for recognition, equality and justice by Indigenous Australians. This evening's film, *The Redfern Story*, is no exception. And as a result of its powerful depiction of this struggle, *The Redfern Story* will also feature in the Durban International Film Festival this weekend.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were denied the right to vote from Australia's birth as a nation in 1901, through to the 1960s. They gained the right to vote in national elections only in 1962.

To make matters worse, each state in Australia was able to make its own laws for Indigenous people, including with regard to marriage, family, movement, employment and property rights. This meant that Indigenous people were treated differently across the country.

The 1967 referendum, widely seen as pivotal moment in Australian history, changed this. In this landmark referendum, more than 90 per cent of Australians voted 'yes' both to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian census, and to give the national government the power to make national laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The referendum opened a door for change, although it did not end discrimination. Arguably its most important outcome was to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a powerful symbol of recognition.

Another major milestone in the struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for recognition was the Mabo judgment of the High Court of Australia, our nation's highest court.

Eddie Koiki Mabo, a man from the island of Mer in the Torres Strait, was the first named plaintiff in a decade long legal battle to seek recognition of the traditional land rights of Indigenous Australians. Sadly, he died in January 1992, just a few months before the landmark Mabo judgment was handed down in June that year.

Before I explain the judgment, let me pause to note that mentioning the name of a dead person is offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, on the grounds that it recalls and disturbs the dead person's spirit. This is a relatively rare point of commonality across Indigenous Australian cultures. And referring to the judgment as the Mabo judgment is one of the few accepted exceptions.

The Mabo judgment recognised the land rights, or 'native title', of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When European colonisers arrived in Australia in the 18th century, they relied upon the legal doctrine of 'terra nullius', literally meaning 'land belonging to no-one', to vest all land rights in the Crown. The Mabo judgment abolished the doctrine in Australian law, recognising that the land had, in fact, been owned by Indigenous Australians.

The Mabo judgment altered the foundation of land law in Australia, paving the way for the *Native Title Act 1993* to pass through the Australian Parliament the following year. The Act provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to claim both traditional land rights, and compensation for their denial.

The compelling story of Eddie Mabo's struggle for land rights is told in the film appropriately called *Mabo*, which screens tomorrow evening.

Some 24 years after the Mabo judgment, Australia now has a sophisticated system for recognising native title that balances the traditional land rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with the land rights of others acquired more recently.

As part of this balancing act, the rights that attach to native title vary. They may include rights of possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of traditional country. Native title may include the right to access land for cultural purposes, or to participate in decisions concerning how the land or waters are used by others. Native title may stand alone, exist alongside, or, in some case, be extinguished by other land rights. Native title cannot be bought or sold, and can only be transferred by traditional law or custom, or surrendered to government.

Both the referendum and the Mabo judgment were important milestones in the process of reconciliation in Australia. The apology made by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008 to Indigenous Australians was another critical step in addressing past ills and injustices.

The apology focussed on the ‘Stolen Generations’, made up of those who were removed from their families as children. The heartbreaking fact is that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970.

The apology was a powerful moment. Allow me to read a few lines from Mr Rudd’s statement made in Parliament that day:

‘We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.

For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.

To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.

And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.'

Whatever progress we have made, I openly acknowledge that as a government, a nation, and individual Australians, we still have a way to go. Reconciliation is an ongoing project, as is 'reducing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Despite the efforts of successive governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still lag behind in health and educational outcomes, life expectancy, incarceration rates, and broader social disadvantage.

Many of the themes that I have discussed this evening resonate here in South Africa. Like South Africa and other nations, Australia faces the challenge of recognising and learning from past injustices, and ensuring a more equitable society today.

Part of our challenge is to promote greater awareness, not least among Australians, of the rich cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and of their history and their struggles, both of the past and the present.

Film is a powerful means to this end. And it is for this reason that the Australian High Commission is proud to present the BlackScreen Africa Film Festival, which brings a selection of films to South Africa for the first time. The Festival will also reach Ghana, Mauritius, Nigeria and Zimbabwe this year.

Before we get going with *The Redfern Story*, you'll note as the film starts that there is a warning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that the film may include images of deceased persons. The sensitivities in their cultures around saying the name of a dead person that I mentioned earlier extend to displaying images of a dead person, and a warning of this nature is now commonplace in Australian film and television.

Let me finish by thanking you again for coming along this evening. Please encourage your friends, family and others to see some of the excellent, engaging and moving films that will be shown over the weekend as part of the BlackScreen Africa Film Festival. All films are free, but we do recommend booking in advance. Further details are included in your programs.

I hope that you enjoy *The Redfern Story*.

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Event Running Order

17:00 PD team arrive for set-up

18:00 Guests arrive

Food and drinks served

(gourmet pizza, beer, wine and soft drink)

18:40 Invite guests to take a seat in the cinema

18:50 DHOM makes welcoming remarks (15 mins)

19:05 Screening of *'The Redfern Story'* (57 mins)

20:00 DHOM thanks guests for attending and promotes the
Festival