**WHAT IS A SMOKING CEREMONY?**

A smoking ceremony is an ancient, indigenous custom where native leaves are burnt as part of a cleansing ritual to ward off bad spirits.

They also symbolise the strong connection Aboriginal people have with their land over more than 60,000 years, however critics say the ceremony is in danger of looking forced if it is done too often.

Smoking ceremonies are conducted by indigenous elders at major events, including the opening of parliament after an election.

They are traditionally performed in indigenous culture at births, marriages and at separate men's and women's business.

They can also be part of a 'welcome to country', where recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders recognise their ancestors and welcome visitors to the traditional owner's land.

But unlike New Zealand's traditional Maori Haka at All Blacks games, speeches by Aboriginal elders aren't as well meshed with the broader Australian culture.

The 'welcome to country' was adopted into Australia's parliamentary protocols in 2008, after then prime minister Kevin Rudd delivered his apology to the stolen generation.

However, two years after that decision Aboriginal entertainer Ernie Dingo claimed that he invented the concept in 1976 when Pacific Island dancers demanded they receive a traditional welcome.

An 'acknowledgement of country' is when a speaker recognises the traditional 'elders past and present' of the land they are meeting on, and is often recited by civic figures and politicians at the beginning of speeches.

University of Adelaide anthropologist Peter Sutton is a critic of indigenous symbolic gestures as indigenous people continue to die 10 years earlier than non-Aboriginal Australians.

'Too often, unhappily, these profoundly difficult questions are turned into a compassion contest,' he told The Age in 2009.

\* Source: James Cook University, Parliamentary Education Office, Fairfax Media.