Why we should all support Cody Walker’s quiet refusal to sing the Australian anthem

Jack Latimore

An appropriate response would be to improve understanding of why Advance Australia Fair remains offensive to First Nations peoples

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There are several things patently wrong with Australia’s national anthem. Firstly, setting aside the mistaken presumption that it is compulsory to stand and sing it, the lyric “we are young and free” alone wilfully rejects, minimises and attempts to erase millennia of First Nations culture and deep connection to place. Arguably more troubling is that it also conveniently ignores the ongoing oppression of this continent’s first peoples.

On Tuesday, rugby league player Cody Walker revealed that he will not sing Advance Australia Fair during the preliminary ceremonies of next week’s State of Origin game at Lang Park in Brisbane. We should all be supporting him, particularly in light of this week being National Reconciliation Week. For many First Nations peoples the anthem is offensive. The appropriate response for the broader nation is to improve its understanding of why and how that continues to be the case, not label Walker’s stand “divisive”.

https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/may/30/why-we-should-all-support-cody-walkers-quiet-refusal-to-sing-the-australian-anthem
Predictably, morning television whipped the sentiment of fragile white viewers into a froth, describing Walker’s quiet refusal as an Australian Anthem Row. In a press conference promoting the series opener, the player himself insisted his stand was just his opinion and he did not intend “to spark a wider movement”.

At the same presser, Walker’s New South Wales coach Brad Fittler said he respected the decision of his star playmaker, but added he would be singing the anthem. Despite this entirely fair and reasonable compromise, sections of outraged NRL fans promptly took to social media to call on the coach to immediately remove Walker from the team.

Walker was one of several Indigenous players who didn’t sing the anthem at the NRL All-Stars game in Melbourne in February. In the wake of that quiet refusal, Walker said: “It just brings back so many memories from what’s happened [in Australia’s past] ... I think it’s something that everyone as a group, and everyone in Australia, needs to work something out.” The South Sydney star also said the national anthem didn’t “represent me or my family”.

Walker’s statements were supported by the NRL great and celebrated Indigenous player Johnathon Thurston, while the NSW winger, Josh Addo-Carr, followed suit and will remain silent with Walker on Wednesday. Other former and current players and the game’s administrators will undoubtedly offer their own support for the stand in the coming days. Each one should be applauded and recognised as genuine ambassadors for Reconciliation in this nation.

Detractors somehow dismiss Walker’s refusal as a cheap facsimile of the protest by NFL player Colin Kaepernick in 2016. Kaepernick – a former San Francisco 49ers quarterback – famously took a knee rather than sing the Star-Spangled Banner. Media entwined his activism into the Black Lives Matter peace movement that swept across the US following the high-profile police killings of black men in numerous states across that country. That was an attempt to minimise the resonant truth of Kaepernick’s message, which – like the heart of the BLM movement - was a desperate appeal against persistent systemic racism in the US.

Walker’s refusal resonates as profoundly for politically astute First Nations peoples in Australia and, incidentally, is a particular form of political protest in this country by blackfellas that extends back much further than 2016.

NRL Immortal-in-waiting Thurston said the issue of refusing to sing Advance Australia Fair before the 2019 All-Stars game kick-off was not properly discussed after the game: “It was like it was just brushed over,” he told the Sydney Morning Herald.

However, the topic did get a run, it’s just that the timing wasn’t favourable in terms of political mileage. The All-Stars game was held on 15 February, the day after the 2019 Closing the Gap report was tabled, and to be fair, in anybody’s estimation, there just wasn’t that much to be singing about. Australians all let us rejoice? Yeah, nah.

So, rather than have a faux-patriotic argument rapidly deflated before it got bouncy, the two industries that stand to benefit most regarding a controversy over what is and isn’t acceptable Australian sentiment simply shuffled on.

Elsewhere, a fair number of blackfellas and whitefelloás were talking at length about how a refusal to sing the praises of Australia corresponded rather neatly with the deficits disclosed in the 11th Closing the Gap report. A summary of deficits that in following days prompted Pat Turner AM, the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, to write, “The quality of life among our communities is simply not equal to that of our non-Indigenous Australian counterparts.”
Then consider the crisis of Aboriginal youth suicide: over 60 already this year; the staggering levels of overrepresentation of our men, women and children in prison; ongoing affects of intergenerational trauma stemming from forced removals from our cultures and families in terms of our health and wellbeing; or the struggles for compensation for these Stolen Generations survivors, or compensation for wage theft and labour exploitation. There’s not a tremendous lot to inspire joyful strains, truth be told.

This week, for National Reconciliation Week, the theme is “grounded in truth”. The aim is to encourage large sections of the Australian public to reconcile itself with uncomfortable truths about the Australian nation’s relationship with the continent’s First Nations peoples. Cody Walker’s right to refuse to sing a so-called anthem should be the first acknowledgement of truth along that path.

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OPINION

NRL right not to stop State of Origin national anthem boycott

Offsiders columnist Richard Hinds

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If they acted as dissidents, New South Wales teammates Cody Walker and Josh Addo-Carr refusing to sing the national anthem before State of Origin I in Brisbane next Wednesday night could have presented a Colin Kaepernick moment.

Without the support of the NRL, their coaches and teammates, Walker and Addo-Carr might have been subjected to the kind of predictable rhetoric at the now ostracised San Francisco 49ers quarterback when he took a knee during the US national anthem at NFL matches.

Kaepernick's failure to stand for the Star Spangled Banner to highlight violence against African Americans was ridiculed by unabashed bigots and twitchy White House Twitter fingers as the "divisive" act of a now wealthy ingrate failing to use the opportunities "given to him" by the game and the nation.

But, of course, "divisive" is a deceptive notion upon which to base any argument about protest because it contains an often false assumption — that the subject of protest is inherently inclusive and, as such, can only be undermined and never enhanced to the benefit of all.

Walker said — in the most measured and respectful manner possible — he would not sing the national anthem because it does not represent him or his family, a sentiment echoed by Addo-Carr.

"I'm not pushing my view on anyone, it's just how me and my family have grown up and how I feel," Walker told Nine Media, making it abundantly clear he is not seeking to demean or overshadow State of Origin but merely to exercise a personal right.

While the silent protest has gained inevitable media traction, the more remarkable outcome is the absence of the kind of rancour that could usually have been expected had an Indigenous Australian player engaged in what would once have been portrayed as "un-Australian" and, yes, "divisive" behaviour.

On the contrary, it seems unlikely anyone will jeer Walker and Addo-Carr when they respectfully maintain their silence during Advance Australia Fair.

This is not just because the protest will be less demonstrative than Kaepernick's, or because Australians are not quite as slavishly devoted to patriotic symbolism as Americans or because many athletes choose not to sing the anthem anyway (or simply don't know the words).

Rather, their demonstration is less confronting because it comes with the tacit support of the NRL at a time when the game is demonstrating genuine leadership in the often contentious realm of Indigenous affairs.

Last week in this space I wrote about how the AFL and NRL's Indigenous rounds could be perceived as merely symbolic if they did not lead to more meaningful outcomes for First Australians.

In that context, it seems apparent the inclusion of Indigenous Australian voices at the top level of rugby league, such as the ARL's first Indigenous Australian commissioner Chris Sarra and currently serving commissioner Megan Davis, have provided a strong influence.

Taking an active and educated stance on issues such as supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart has, in a sense, made Walker and Addo-Carr's protest seem actively aligned with NRL policy, not in defiance of it.

AFL still learning from Goode's booing
Cranforty, Walker and Addo-Carr made their intention known in the same week as the advance screenings of the documentary The Final Quarter about the racially motivated booing of Adam Goodes in his final years with the Sydney Swans.

The documentary draws exclusively from archival footage, while a second production The Australian Dream to be released in August will feature more recent interviews with Goodes and others.

But The Final Quarter is, nonetheless, a stark reminder of how Goodes was left isolated and alone in the face of the both the crowd's booing and the ideologically-driven attacks of media figures who mischievously misrepresented the 2014 Australian of the Year as a vocal threat to unity rather than the measured voice for reconciliation he was and remains.

As ABC Offsiders panellist Waleed Aly said at the time, the jeering of Goodes and the reaction was a sharp reminder of the underlying racism that had blighted Australia's past and infected its present.

"We boo our discomfort," said Aly of the way crowds react to those who have the temerity to remind them of uncomfortable truths.

History has not been kind to the AFL and club officials and media figures now damned by their failure to support Goodes, or those who ignobly or wilfully misunderstood the reason for his booing.

Optimistically you might suggest that the confronting mirror provided by the documentary will hasten necessary change across the sport, although not until there is a more diverse range of voices at the AFL's head table.

And Kaepernick? He recently settled his law suit against the NFL for their "collusion" in his ostracism for the game, although he was back in the headlines this week.

While the once-star quarterback remains permanently sidelined, the Oakland Raiders recruited Richie Incognito, an offensive guard in the most literal sense whose charming portfolio includes physical assaults, bullying of teammates and an array of racist slurs.

This is not merely racism ignored, but racism institutionalised. And a powerful reminder why sport must have the back of its most marginalised players.

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