Reconciliation requires an Aborigine for head of state

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Until now, if you wished to be appointed to the post of governor-general, two of the essential qualities were that you were white and male. The first appointment, of Lord Hopetoun, had its problems, not least because he was criticised as pallid, sickly and bedecked with too many plumes. When a youthful Prince Charles - possibly impressed by his encounter with local bikini girls - thought he might fit the bill, he was told to back off as Australians had their own blokes for the job.

The Labor prime minister Ben Chifley caused a furore when he appointed the first Australian-born governor-general - the...
former boilermaker and Labor politician William McKell. Chifley had reportedly wanted someone without "pomp and plumes and social glitter". Robert Menzies called it "humiliating".

Fortunately we have been blessed with many good appointments in the role of governor-general and more exacting attributes make a good one. Major General Michael Jeffery and Marlena Jeffery are a fine team who have restored dignity to the post. Jeffery derives from humble origins but has never lost the common touch; the Jefferys are conscientious in their preparation, and proud of what the nation can and might be.

Julia Gillard's suggestion that it's about time for a woman as our next head of state is commendable. While many of us await the republic, the post remains an important symbolic and ceremonial position for our nation.

I suggest that, like Chifley, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd adopt an innovative approach in choosing the next governor-general. He should consider appointing an Aboriginal woman to the position.

But first, some history. The best-known relationship between Aboriginal people and a governor is that of Bennelong and Governor Arthur Phillip - in the days when "Australia" was occupied by Aboriginal people, and called New South Wales. For his new venture to work, Phillip saw it as imperative to conduct diplomacy with "the Australians". When they avoided him, he kidnapped them - then wined and dined a select few.

He and Bennelong ended up having a strong friendship - even exchanging names - but Phillip had more trouble attracting Barangaroo, his wife, to dine at his table. After several invitations, she finally agreed. Then she requested to give birth to her child there. Unfortunately, like many other Eora people, she became fatally ill and both she and the child died. It is a pity Barangaroo, a more powerful person in her own community than Bennelong - was not permitted to reside at Government House and perform a diplomatic role.

Some of our recent governors-general tried to do something to draw attention to the plight of Aborigines. Sir Ninian Stephen, Sir William Deane and Michael Jeffery are among them. Jeffery has been committed to improving the morale of the much underemployed indigenous youth, as he did in his earlier career with Norforce - the successful indigenous army reserve unit.

As Governor-General he hosted a large gathering of the descendants and indigenous leaders who campaigned for the 1967 referendum. Although those alive in 1967 were not even considered full citizens, in 2007 they felt so at home at
Government House that they enjoyed plenty of jokes and then conducted an impromptu sing-along.

We have an opportunity to build on the work of those governors-general who appreciated the significance of Aboriginal people to the nation and its history. Without all that Aborigines have done for and mean to this land, we would not be the nation we are. Although his term was cut short by illness, Sir Douglas Nichols, himself a pioneering activist during the 1967 referendum, was widely appreciated as governor of South Australia.

We could appoint a governor-general who would again have the humanity and vision to invite Aboriginal people to Government House to honour what they have contributed to the growing of this nation. But let us go further. Let us invite an Aboriginal woman to take up the post so that she could hand out the invitations, so that she could welcome the dignitaries.

There's no trouble identifying a wide talent pool - for example, the courteous and always well-prepared Larissa Behrendt, a professor of law at the University of Technology, Sydney; the sweepingly accomplished Dawn Casey, who headed the National Museum of Australia; or the balanced and patient Jackie Huggins, who co-chaired Reconciliation Australia.

Most Australians agree the role of governor-general is ceremonial and symbolic, so it is therefore all the more timely and important that we consider an Aboriginal head of state. This would signify a new kind of national inclusion - a new shared pride in being Australian and of shared high achievement.