

Reflecting on land acknowledgements: What could we do in England?



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Introduction

On 27 May 2025, King Charles III opened a new session of the Canadian Parliament with the following land acknowledgement¹.

I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people. This land acknowledgement is a recognition of shared history as a nation. While continuing to deepen my own understanding, it is my great hope that in each of your communities, and collectively as a country, a path is found toward truth and reconciliation, in both word and deed.

Similar approaches have been adopted in Australia², New Zealand, the United States³ and Canada⁴. We might wonder if Central and South America, South Africa and other nations have considered a parallel approach. In England⁵, the idea might be broadened to acknowledge⁶ the rights of every community that has experienced marginalisation and exclusion, to admit that experience of privilege limits the ability to see clearly, and to support efforts to form a community that offers respect and opportunity to all. This paper documents a continuing search⁷ for a declaration of this kind which might be suitable for England and an attempt to craft something suitable.

Whilst gathering ideas from a variety of individuals, we note that participatory approaches should be used to decide on the merits of such a declaration, as this will help to avoid reproducing the very challenges we are trying to face up to. Oppressive practices continue when powerholders assume the right to speak on behalf of others or issue a pre-written script.

Colonialism and its legacy

We recognise and reflect on the ongoing impacts of colonialism⁸, both internationally and on British society and culture. The historical legacy of white supremacist imperialism has lasting effects on communities, systems and us⁹. We advocate for challenge to dominant narratives and encourage critical re-examinations of ourselves and history, particularly from the perspectives of marginalised communities.

British and global North colonialism had a profound impact on the UK, shaping its cultural landscape, political structures, and social norms, and structuring injustices particularly upon those of African, Asian, and Caribbean descent as well as working classes of all ethnicities, and intersections of age, disability, sexuality and gender. We acknowledge this legacy and its ongoing influence on power imbalances and the oppression and underservicing of marginalised groups in health and social care, education, housing and the criminal punishment system.

By embracing cultural and structural humility, we continue to¹⁰ platform the voices of marginalised and excluded communities, centre them in decision-making, and collaborate and reflect with them in services use and social justice.¹¹

While acknowledging the good intentions behind these statements, we must ask who wants to include such a declaration, who chose the words, who has given their approval and who is missing. Such an acknowledgement can imply that the speaker can know and name what the other went through, while in reality, we all have a limited grasp of the lore and cultures of others. Instead, we can humbly acknowledge that we can never fully understand their experiences, ask for their help and seek justice together. Asking excluded persons to proofread a pre-drafted script, correct pronunciation and repair errors of fact can be trivial window-dressing in contrast to genuine partnership from the outset.

The strengths of marginalised communities

Where the work relates to a specific marginalised group, this could be added to or take the place of the declaration about place, as in the following example regarding services for people with learning disabilities:

The entrenched individualism of enlightenment thinking has contributed to the consistent devaluation and silencing of family members.

It is important to recognise the strengths of communities that have been marginalised by unjust systems and people. See, for example, the recognition of strengths in the following land acknowledgement from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Canada:

CAMH is situated on lands that have been occupied by First Nations for millennia; lands rich in civilizations with knowledge of medicine, architecture, technology and extensive trade routes throughout the Americas. In 1860, the site of CAMH appeared in the Colonial Records Office of the British Crown as the council grounds of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, as they were known at the time. Today, Toronto is covered by the Toronto Purchase, Treaty No. 13 of 1805 with the Mississaugas of the Credit. Toronto is now home to a vast diversity of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples who enrich this city. CAMH is committed to reconciliation. We will honour the land through programs and places that reflect and respect

its heritage. We will embrace the healing traditions of the ancestors, and weave them into our caring practices. We will create new relationships and partnerships with First Nations, Inuit and Métis – share the land and protect it for future generations.

CAMH is clear¹² that their land acknowledgement should be spoken by a non-indigenous leader, so is not assuming that First Peoples are proffering a welcome.

Land and place

Some of the complexities that are embedded in the notion of land ownership need to be elaborated, since these same issues may also entangle themselves in any attempt to move beyond the narrow consideration of land to a wider reflection on access to community resources.

Firstly, different cultures do not share a common understanding of their relationship to the land. Some focus on their duty to care for the land while others adopt the practices of possession, extraction and control. Secondly, all notions of ownership and borders must be contested when they are used to deny basic human rights to First Peoples, refugees and asylum seekers. Third, some areas of the world have been fought over for generations and any attempt to treat one group as the 'original' owners is loaded with freight. Even where it appears to be straightforward, this may be because we have a limited understanding of the history of marginalised peoples. Fourth, we must ask if there is a tokensim inherent in acknowledging that trespassers took the land by force¹³ if there is no concomitant intention to return the stolen land and its resources¹⁴. Fifth, it opens a debate about the extent to which contemporary ethics may be superimposed upon previous generations and the extent to which the current generation is morally liable for the conduct of its forebears¹⁵.

Immigrants adopt the culture and law of their new home; settlers attempt to replace it¹⁶. Once acknowledged with an *apology*¹⁷, a decision must be made about what to do in response to invasion and any continuing exploitation of the land's people and resources. *Forgiveness* can be manifested as a *welcome* to the settlers. Some of the things that have been taken can be *repatriated*; a *reparation* payment can be made to acknowledge the broader need for *redress* of past harms of trauma, pain and distress. This may contribute towards the larger process of *atonement* which puts things right, while *reconciliation* establishes a just relationship between the former oppressor and oppressed and erects defences to reduce the chance of future harms.

Alliance to place is complex and context-specific, as citizens take up and put down multiple affiliations depending on the situation. Someone who shares your language is an immediate ally when met in a foreign country, but quickly becomes your friendly rival when football is mentioned. Those making a declaration may wish to identify both with a whole nation and a specific locale, e.g.

'Here in Liverpool, the city played a significant role in the British Empire, particularly through its maritime trade and transatlantic trade. The city's wealth was heavily reliant on its port, which became a major hub for the movement of people, goods, and enslaved Africans to the Americas.'

Time and repetition

The earliest land acknowledgements were made in places where First Nations people have a long timeline occupied by their ancestors, people alive now and future generations. From this viewpoint,

it is important to understand the neglected history of justice movements and their pioneers who fought for change in previous generations. A generic statement that makes a vague reference to unknown historical figures will sound tokenistic and carry less potency than one which names the campaigners and pioneers who worked in this place at that time in history.

The pioneers who deserve a mention include those who overcame structural exclusion and made a significant contribution to the wider society through enterprise, creativity and culture; those who devoted their lives to working for equality and are recognised as key figures in the movement, and those whose stories of struggle and survival are untold.

In the present, copying a ceremony which has been developed in one context for use elsewhere is hazardous, since, while imitation can indicate admiration, it can also indicate disrespect or appropriation of cultural property. Repeating the declaration in every talk, chapter and article may empty out its meaning (even in its original location), depleting it until there is no more impact than the safety lecture addressed to passengers before take-off. Stripped of its context in time, culture and place, the ceremony becomes little more than a recitation that is mindlessly performed out of habit, carrying no conviction or interest to lift it out of the background noise. When words are used, we must consider who speaks them and to whom they are spoken; when the powerful address the powerless we must consider if it is an apology and if there is a right of reply; when the passionate individual speaks from their heart, we must consider on whose behalf they speak, and if there is any commitment to restitution from the organisation they represent.

When protecting the future, we must consider whether these declarations which started with First Nations people will be applied to other kinds of lived experience until the original focus is overwhelmed by multiple alliances, intersectionalities and hierarchies of exclusion. Such applications can reduce the decolonisation agenda to no more than a metaphor, thereby avoiding its material challenges¹⁸. Land acknowledgement is not the same as other equalities issues, since other marginalised communities may be unable to point back to a time when they had a fair share of the community's assets, even if they can point forward to a shared vision of a fair society. *Moreover*, assuming that decolonisation is a synonym for other justice movements strips away its unique analysis and distinctive agenda, replacing it with vague applause for human rights – a worthy but incomplete representation.

Education

Whitmore and Carlson discuss statements from Canada's university sector¹⁹, while Tao and colleagues considers their use in publications²⁰. An 'owned by communities' tag may accurately reflect our ambition for society but may not indicate where intellectual property is held for a piece of creative work – this is a parallel issue to the question of whether moral 'ownership' of land is the same thing as holding legal title. Tokenism is evident where universities and governments hold land taken from First Nations people and make no effort to restore title to their descendants whilst ignoring their under-representation in the student body and faculty. Some authors have suggested that the popularity of land acknowledgement statements in recent years is building up the argument for legal challenges to those who hold title to the land in question.

Personal statement

Individual authors and speakers should acknowledge their individual position in relation to a range of societal inequalities and the topic under scrutiny²¹. Readers who know the identity and experience of the writer may be able to discern how the work is shaped by the author's standpoint as well as their own. The statement may include emotional or motivational aspects, such as the humility highlighted above.

The author identifies as a cisgender, nondisabled white male living in England²² who has not drawn on statutory mental health services.

Some commentators have suggested that authenticity is enhanced when the speaker makes the declaration without a script. Does this mean that words are meticulously planned and memorised, or that the speaker risks all in a spontaneous moment?

Words and actions

It is not enough to recite the liturgy of acknowledgement, to recognise historical inequalities or to perform a ritual of so-called critical reflection. Making such standardised gestures to or for members of the marginalised community can be tokenistic²³ and will merely soothe settler guilt, signal false virtue and reinforce exclusion. Is public apology a self-indulgence? Would it not be better to take action to get rid of the injustice rather than shed tears in public? A commitment to evidence-based action is needed in support of rights, restitution and relationship. The words of acknowledgement must be underpinned by rigorous analysis and evidenced over time in costly endeavour.

Preparing a declaration involves much effort and wrangling which will unearth information and reveal attitudes, hierarchies and loyalties which must be changed before progress can be made. If, for example, the declaration is tacked on as merely virtue signalling, then professional viewpoints will crush lived experience and stifle commitment to action. Done well, the self-reflection and the uncomfortable, lengthy and inclusive conversations which arise on the journey become part of the tasks of researching the history, analysing the data and drawing the conclusions. Done well, the collaborative process can bring healing to everyone involved. It also stimulates wider changes. When research, systems, services, delivery and dissemination are genuinely coproduced, then the groups that have previously been marginalised appear in planning teams, on conference platforms, amongst the author list, on the prizegiving panel and threaded throughout the staff team.

Viv Kissane²⁴ has challenged the practice of making an 'Acknowledgement of Lived Experience' for the following reasons:

It borrows language from the Acknowledgement of Country — a deeply significant Indigenous cultural protocol, not a template to replicate. It feels tokenistic when placed immediately after an Acknowledgement of Country. Using this structure for other purposes is not only inappropriate, it veers into cultural appropriation. Opening your event by "acknowledging lived experience" is not evidence of genuine inclusion or co-design. It's a signal that the work hasn't gone deeper. If you truly want to honour people with lived and living experience, then:

- *embed us meaningfully in program design, decision-making, facilitation, and governance.*

- *create psychologically safe environments where our input is valued — not ceremonially referenced.*
- *ensure our voices shape the agenda, rather than decorate it.*

Authentic inclusion doesn't happen at the microphone in the first fifteen minutes. It happens months earlier, in the planning, the power-sharing, the budgeting, and the brave conversations.

I am happy to accept a 'Recognition of Lived Experience', which speaks to the decades of consumer activism and advocacy that has forged our current-day Lived Experience landscape. That identifies designated lived experience work is connected to profound life experiences rooted in marginalisation, oppression, discrimination and trauma. Of perpetuation of system harm. That speaks to the determination, the persistence and the sacrifice that we Lived Experience workers expose ourselves to, in the hope to make transformative and meaningful change. That identifies our lived experience movement as a human rights movement. If you're unsure how to do this well, please ask — there are so many skilled lived experience leaders, consultants, and organisations who can help you get it right. Let's move past symbolism and into substance.

How this paper is being written

The investigation that generated this paper is driven by simple curiosity. The work is unfunded and is conducted as a piece of citizen science rather than under the control of any organisation. It can be shared by anybody, with anybody. Accountability is achieved by following the *How to write in public* framework²⁵. I am grateful to the people²⁶ who have contributed to this evolving resource. Please send me your suggestions for further improvements.

¹ [FULL SPEECH | King Charles delivers speech from the throne](#). It might be worth seeking out the work of [Renai Buchanan](#) and [Julian Robinson](#) who did a stunning recognition of lived experience at the COMHWA 2025. It was substantive and expansive and generous and full of rich and deep learnings.

² Traditional Owners or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have been given permission from Traditional Owners may welcome visitors to their Country. Where this has not been arranged, the Government commonly asks organisers to begin events with a statement such as the following: *"The Australian Government acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and acknowledges their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to the people, the cultures and the Elders past and present."* [Acknowledgement of Country | Indigenous](#)

³ Native Governance Center (2019) [A guide to Indigenous land acknowledgment](#).

⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume One: Summary: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. James Lorimer & Company.

⁵ Scots, Gaelic, Irish, Welsh and Cornish may have a very different perspective due to their historical and contemporary experiences of oppression.

⁶ These statements have been variously dubbed a 'declaration', 'recognition' and 'acknowledgement'. Specific authors may have precise meanings and preferences for a particular term.

⁷ As author, my next task includes reading the following items and considering their implications for this evolving paper. (1) [Beyond territorial acknowledgments – Chelsea Vowel](#) (2) [Sign In - San'yas: Indigenous-specific Anti-Racism Learning Programs](#) (3) [Native-Land.ca | Our home on native land](#) (4) [Positionality statement and land acknowledgement workshop | SFU Library](#), (5) [Going-Beyond-A-Land-Acknowledgement-FINAL-VERSION.docx](#), (6) material from other countries, especially in the global south.

⁸ Modern discourse on this issue in the UK is informed by the history of colonialism alongside other streams. From 1604 onwards, the wealthy used more than 5,000 Enclosure Acts to requisition land previously held in common so that they could utilise new farming methods. The dispossessed became the urban poor.

⁹ The legacy of colonialism and oppression is not something we can neatly identify, abhor and thoroughly excise from our work. Rather, even our best attempts to act for justice may be thwarted by the legacy that remains inside all of us.

¹⁰ This sentence positions the powerful as generous donors of opportunity to the passive oppressed.

¹¹ Initial version drafted by Michael Cole, amended by the author.

¹² CAMH (2022) [Guidance for honouring the land and ancestors through land acknowledgements](#). Page 8.

¹³ The Charter of the United Nations article 2, paragraph 4 prohibits the use of force or threat against the territorial integrity of another state. Historical claims that land which had no recognised state authority could be claimed by occupation (*terra nullius*) are generally rejected.

¹⁴ See [The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). Similar disputes have occurred in relation to property rather than land, such as that regarding the marble frieze taken from Athens between 1801 and 1812 by agents of Lord Elgin and still held in the British Museum. The acquisition was disputed as early as 1811 by Lord Byron, in 1983 the Greek government asked the British government to return the Elgin marbles and in 2021, UNESCO called upon the British government to resolve the issue, but all without restitution being made.

¹⁵ Gaebler R (8 April 2025) [The Problem With Land Acknowledgement Statements](#).

¹⁶ The Doctrine of Discovery was first set out by the Catholic Church in a papal bull issued in 1492 which claimed that Christian explorers had a duty to seize the lands of non-Christians for the purpose of converting the inhabitants.

¹⁷ For example, the government of Victoria, Australia will be delivering an Apology to First Peoples on 9 December 2025, as part of its response to the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#).

¹⁸ Tuck E & Yang KW (2012) Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society*. Sep 8;1(1):1-40.

¹⁹ Whitmore C & Carlson E (2024) Making Land Acknowledgements in the University Setting Meaningful and Appropriate, *College Teaching*, 72:1, 9-14, DOI: 10.1080/87567555.2022.2070720

²⁰ Tao BK, Bondok M, Ing EB (2024) [The case for Indigenous land acknowledgments in scholarly publishing](#). *The Lancet*. Apr 20;403(10436):1538-9.

²¹ CAMH (2022) op cit. **Also** Corrigan PW & Twiss M (2025) What are the implications of investigator positionality for mental health services research? *The British Journal of Psychiatry*. DOI:10.1192/bjp.2025.114.

²² Should my status as husband, grandparent, householder, Christian and pensioner be included? Will such disclosures build a playground for stereotyping?

²³ Collins J (2019) The Trouble with Land Acknowledgements *The Walrus*. **Also** Corntassel J & Bryce C (2012) Practicing Sustainable Self-Determination: Indigenous Approaches to Cultural Restoration and Revitalization. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 18(2), 151-162.

²⁴ Viv Kissane, LinkedIn, 18/11/25, quoted here with permission.

²⁵ Bates P (2023) [How to write in public](#).

²⁶ Responses were received with thanks from Clenton Farquharson, Holly Harris, Viv Kissane and Michael Cole. All remaining errors and omissions are the sole responsibility of the author. The information is provided in good faith and so readers engage with the contents at their own risk and undertake not to hold the author liable for any injury, loss, or damage arising through reading or acting on its contents.