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## Smoking Ceremony Hints at Albanese's New Indigenous Affairs Strategy

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A smoking ceremony at the opening of Australia's 48th Parliament suggests Prime Minister Anthony Albanese may be signalling a renewed focus on Indigenous affairs, following the Australian Labor Party's stalled agenda after the 2023 Voice referendum defeat.

On 22 July 2025, Ngunnawal elder Aunty Violet Sheridan led a smoking ceremony and Welcome to Country at Parliament House, urging politicians to “walk gently” and embrace “care, connection and community.” Albanese described the ceremony as a powerful tradition and a reminder of Australia’s shared history.

Some observers view this as a symbolic gesture aimed at re-energising the government’s Indigenous policy agenda, which has struggled to regain momentum following the failed Voice to Parliament referendum in October 2023, where approximately 60 per cent of Australians voted against the proposal.

Critics have pointed to the lack of progress on initiatives such as Makarrata, a term meaning reconciliation or “coming together after struggle,” as well as delays in responding to recommendations from relevant parliamentary committees. The government has been accused of favouring ceremonial and cultural recognition over practical action on longstanding issues.

Independent senator Lidia Thorpe has argued that the government’s approach avoids deeper, systemic change. She advocates for a legally binding treaty and has criticised a perceived overreliance on cultural symbolism rather than addressing urgent challenges such as Indigenous incarceration rates, healthcare access and housing inequality.

Public sentiment toward Indigenous affairs policy has reportedly shifted, with growing preference for tangible improvements over symbolic initiatives. The focus for many Australians has turned toward measurable outcomes such as reducing health disparities, improving education, and providing economic opportunities in remote communities.

Opposition Leader Sussan Ley, speaking at the same event, called for more emphasis on practical change, stating that economic empowerment should take precedence over symbolic acts. Meanwhile, the government's multi-billion-dollar budget for Indigenous programs has faced scrutiny over transparency and effectiveness, with some critics noting a lack of clear benchmarks for success.

As the Albanese government enters its second term, it faces increasing pressure to deliver real progress on Indigenous issues. While ceremonies such as the smoking ceremony are seen as respectful and culturally significant, they are unlikely to satisfy calls for robust policy action unless supported by clear and accountable outcomes.