

CLOSE THE GAP

VOYAGE TO VOICE, TREATY, TRUTH AND BEYOND



CLOSE THE GAP CAMPAIGN REPORT 2024

Prepared by Lowitja Institute for the Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group
March 2024

Acknowledgements

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The terms 'our' and 'we' are used throughout this report to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the Indigenous Leadership Group of the Close the Gap Campaign. We note we use those terms because we are a part of that collective identity rather than asserting ownership. The report also refers at times to the wider Close the Gap Campaign, which includes non-Indigenous organisations.

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WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that the Close the Gap report may contain images, names and voices of people who are deceased.

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Foreword

This year, in recognition of the immense work undertaken to progress the Uluru Statement From the Heart, we are proud to release our fifteenth Annual Report, 'Voyage to Voice, Treaty, Truth and Beyond'. In the aftermath of the referendum, there was much to consider, both for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

The political landscape has shifted, public discourse is contrary, and the pain that people felt at the referendum's defeat remains palpable. Yet, through all this, a national movement to progress the principles of the Uluru Statement was born and today it remains thriving and strong.

Our journey to a voice was generations in the making. The principles in the Uluru Statement are foundational to realising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' inherent rights as First Nations peoples.

To demonstrate this, we continue to publish First Nations-centred, strengths-based reports because true health equity and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cannot be achieved without us.

The nine case studies in this report are the work of visionaries and pioneers, teachers and advocates, trailblazers and entrepreneurs dedicated to lifting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. They elevate First Nations voices and perspectives and centre First Nations leadership, culture and learning, and in doing so, provide tangible evidence of how to close the gap.

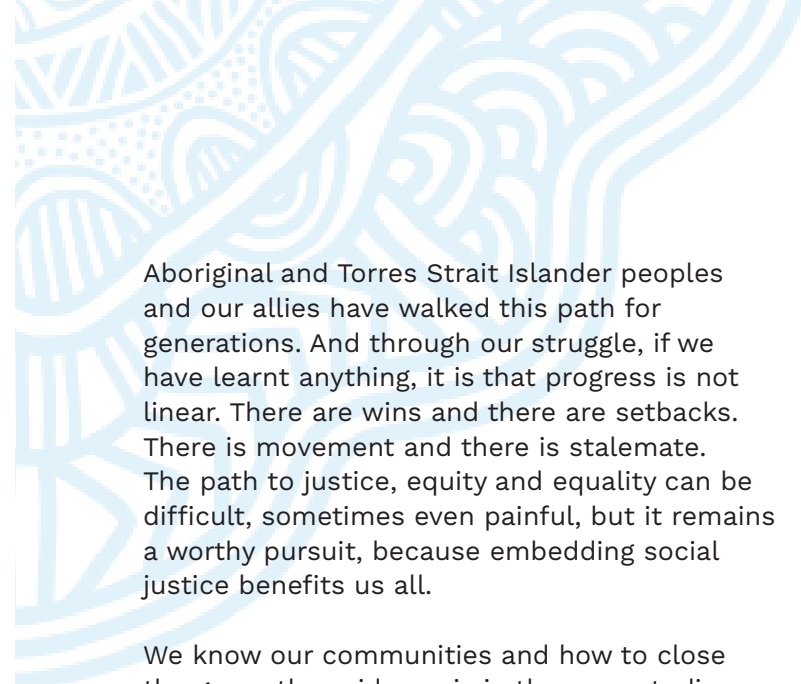
The case studies demonstrate how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to build the infrastructure necessary to create genuine systemic reform. 'They show what is possible when we have autonomy, when we exercise our inherent right to be self-determining, when we listen to those voices in our communities calling for change,' said Co-Chair and Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' activism, our continual fight for genuine partnership, shared agreement making, recognition and survival has moulded our peoples, formed part of our identities, and shaped the social and political progress of this country. This is an important part of our story, of our truth telling; but it is also the story of our shared journey as a nation.

It is with great pride that we recognise, when we fight for self-determination for ourselves and our communities, we extend that principle to others.

When we fight for large-scale structural reform to build and embed economic development, that knowledge and reform benefits everyone.

As Co-Chair Karl Briscoe highlights, 'When we talk about progressing Voice, Treaty, Truth we build a broader understanding of how history, activism, leadership and compassion are inextricably linked and necessary to building socio-economic and political equity'.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and our allies have walked this path for generations. And through our struggle, if we have learnt anything, it is that progress is not linear. There are wins and there are setbacks. There is movement and there is stalemate. The path to justice, equity and equality can be difficult, sometimes even painful, but it remains a worthy pursuit, because embedding social justice benefits us all.

We know our communities and how to close the gap – the evidence is in the case studies, and the work that our peoples do every day. We know how to mobilise, how to build allyship and actualise the dreams of our ancestors for future generations.

We are proud to share with you, once again, the work of outstanding organisations in our communities who have shared their journey and their successes in closing the gap.

Ms June Oscar AO

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner



We want to thank our members who remain steadfast and committed to our shared purpose of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equity, equality, and improved life outcomes. As always, we look forward to continuing the legacy of this Campaign.

In solidarity,

We journey together,

Co-Chairs – Close the Gap Campaign

June Oscar AO – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission

Karl Briscoe – Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners

Mr Karl Briscoe

CEO, National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners (NAATSIHWP)



IN MEMORIAM:

Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG

1 August 1932 – 4 February 2024

The Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group pay our deepest respects to the memory and legacy of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG, who passed away on 4 February 2024 at the age of 91. We are grateful to Lowitja Institute – her namesake – for authorising this tribute.

A true trailblazer, leader and advocate for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Indigenous peoples globally, Dr O'Donoghue lived a remarkable life and made an enormous contribution to public life and the pursuit of justice and equity. Her commitment to championing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and health research will always be remembered, and her legacy continues through her family, the Lowitja Institute and Lowitja O'Donoghue Foundation.

A proud Yankunytjatjara woman, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue was born in 1932 in the remote north-west of South Australia, and was removed from her mother at just two years old. She did not see her mother again for more than 30 years, until reunited in 1967 at Oodnadatta.

Dr O'Donoghue's dedication to health and wellbeing – to fighting for justice and closing the gap – began at a young age, when she fought discrimination to become the first Aboriginal trainee nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital in 1954. She would soon become Charge sister at that same hospital, and went on to spend more than two decades as a senior public servant and leader in Aboriginal affairs. Most notably, in 1990 Dr O'Donoghue was appointed the founding chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, where she played a key role in drafting the Native Title



legislation that arose from the historic Mabo decision.

As the inaugural chair of the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health, later the Lowitja Institute, Dr O'Donoghue worked tirelessly to reform health research through ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and researchers were in the driving seat to influence better health outcomes. With an open heart, she spoke of the need for recognition and a voice for our peoples – advocating to work closely with governments 'to get the job done' and appealing to non-Indigenous allies to work alongside us.

Noel Pearson once described her as 'the greatest Aboriginal leader of the modern era ... the rock who steadied us in the storm.' We are committed to continuing her legacy for the health and wellbeing of our peoples.

Your job is to work ceaselessly, with confidence in who we are, with our knowledge timeless and modern, our endless strength and resilience, our capacity for hard work, our wise heads, our wonderful talented young.

– Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG,
'The future is in your hands', 2016



Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, individuals, and organisations have worked tirelessly over the last 12 months to push for better outcomes and recognition for our communities.

The year has seen extraordinary advocacy, action, and strength, as well as steep challenges and deep disappointments, including the defeat of the Voice proposal in the October 2023 Referendum. Despite the setbacks, this report refocuses the narrative on our peoples' strengths and successes.

It showcases our people's unwavering commitment to our communities, and our staunch calls for governments and, more broadly, Australia to do more towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition, rights, justice and equity.

This follows a difficult and often devastating year where mainstream media and political commentary projected an intense deficit lens about our peoples that went to the heart of our identities and rights, the issue of racism in our country, and the need more than ever for a truth-telling process.

The themes of this year's report are **Progressing Voice, Treaty, and Truth; Leadership and Governance; and Building our Economies**. They are explored through nine case studies, which are exemplars of Blak excellence. The themes speak to economic, social, political and cultural determinants of health that are crucial to commitments by Australian governments to closing the gap.

The sub-themes are important topics that provide insight into how First Nations leaders see and understand their roles and responsibilities, both to themselves and their communities. They also clearly demonstrate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know what is required to create meaningful change.

– June Oscar AO, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

The report also features a Year in Review, highlighting other important issues that inform our recommendations, including progress (or lack thereof) under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and the need for a standalone National Plan for First Nations Family Safety as part of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032. We call for ongoing investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, and in cultural safety in healthcare, both crucial to close the gap.

The Year in Review also features the Voice Referendum, playing special tribute to the dedicated work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the campaign, with three spotlighted organisations: Wungening Aboriginal Corporation; the Central Land Council; and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO).

Focus of our themes

Despite the devastating 2023 Voice Referendum result, the Close the Gap Campaign and many in our communities remain committed to the principles of the Uluru Statement From the Heart and will continue to seek Voice, Treaty, and Truth, despite their grief at the vote.

Historic place-based jurisdictional progress towards these goals in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria is showcased in the case studies under the ‘Progressing Voice, Treaty, Truth’ theme. As they show, our leaders and communities are paving a way forward for future generations. However, this progress is at risk, following the disappointing withdrawal of principled political bipartisanship in the wake of the Referendum. We call for renewed commitments and dedicated work from governments and political parties to ensure this important work is not derailed or disrupted.

Despite the attention in 2023 on the Referendum, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap continued to be a significant focus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (ACCOs) and governments alike over the past year. Achieving the targets and meeting the four

Priority Reforms under the National Agreement remains the focus across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy landscape.

Leadership and governance are not qualities to be underestimated as we strive for self-determination, and 2023 saw opportunities for our peoples to elevate our voices, advocate, and demonstrate our expertise on the national and global stage.

Under the ‘Leadership and Governance’ theme, we focus on the internationally ground-breaking role being forged by Australia’s inaugural Ambassador for First Nations People, Lowitja Institute’s work to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in climate action in Australia and globally, and how the First Peoples Disability Network’s (FPDN) Disability Yarning podcast became an act of self-determination and driver of policy change.

We recommend funding for the establishment of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health, and support the FPDN’s calls for greater inclusion of disability in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and for greater cultural safety in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

The ‘Building our Economies’ theme reflects that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have always been innovators and entrepreneurs and are pursuing economic empowerment for our peoples. Here, we share success stories that highlight the work of leading profit-for-purpose retailer Clothing The Gaps, the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation and its focus on community, culture and commerce in the Pilbara, and the Australian Indigenous Doctors’ Association’s dedicated efforts to support the growth and capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical specialists.

The case studies underscore the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and building culturally safe workforces; they shine a light on what needs to change. We call for understanding and accountability on the racial wealth gap that our people experience after generations of exploitation; support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses and entrepreneurship under the Australian Government’s Indigenous Procurement Policy

(IPP) review in 2024; and for restored and expanded opportunities for our peoples to engage and succeed in international trade.

The themes in this report speak to the principles underpinning the Priority Reforms and demonstrate the strides our communities have taken. They show that, with opportunity, leadership and empowerment, comes success and impact – an important reminder in a post-Referendum environment.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need representation at the highest levels of government. They need genuine shared agreement-making, bipartisanship, unity, and a shared collective vision, driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and knowledges, to address the gaps in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's life outcomes. Because we know this is how we close the gap.

– Karl Briscoe, Chief Executive Officer, National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners

It is critical that governments implement the National Agreement in full and commit properly to Priority Reform Three: systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is the reform which most deeply challenges governments and relies on them to act. The report calls for independent oversight of this priority, as part of a refreshed National Agreement in 2024.

The report also calls for stronger work on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data development, in accordance with Priority Reform Four, and commitments to the 2021–2031 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and other supporting plans.

The Productivity Commission's Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap¹ makes it clear that governments have not come close to transforming the ways they work and relinquishing the power they hold. It found that overall progress against the Priority Reforms

has been 'slow, uncoordinated and piecemeal'. Governments must restore our peoples' rights, authority and autonomy to recognise the inherent truth of our self-determination: that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the answers.

Our communities have held – and will continue to hold – governments accountable for their progress, or lack thereof, towards meeting their commitments under the National Agreement. We will continue to call for self-determination and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership.

This report sends a clear message to allies and supporters to stand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and empower us to lead in the solutions that affect our communities and our futures.

We commend our recommendations to Australian governments and stand ready to work with them towards their implementation.





Recommendations

Progressing Voice, Treaty, and Truth

The goals of the Uluru Statement from the Heart remain relevant and key to improving health outcomes for our peoples. The 2023 Voice Referendum outcome has not changed the importance of these goals.

We call on the Australian Government as well as state, territory, and local governments, to:

1. Deliver the objectives of the Uluru Statement from the Heart by advancing Voice, Treaty and Truth mechanisms in their jurisdictions. This includes establishing representative structures that can facilitate agreement-making and progress cooperation and collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments.

We call on political parties across the nation to:

2. Unite on their support for the Uluru Statement by renewing and strengthening their commitments to undertaking truth-telling, representation and agreement-making.

We call on Australians to:

3. Take the initiative to act on truth-telling by undertaking their own processes in their organisations, institutions, professions, and communities to enact the objectives of the Uluru Statement.

Leadership and Governance

We call on the Australian Government to:

4. Fully implement and monitor the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This requires enacting the 2023 recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Inquiry into the application of the UNDRIP in Australia.

5. Recommit to the aspiration outlined in the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy 2020–24, to achieve a target of 3 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee representation for the Senior Executive Service.
6. Commit to targets, pathways, and resources that advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in senior Foreign Affairs roles, both domestically and globally, and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities to be able to engage with the agenda of the Ambassador for First Nations people.
7. Continue to grow the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in international forums and dialogues that affect Indigenous peoples.
8. Invest in the establishment of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health.
9. Ensure the timely development of a standalone National Plan for First Nations Family Safety, co-designed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and communities. This should include direct funding for ACCOs, including a dedicated funding stream for the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum via long-term funding arrangements.
10. Fully implement the 2021–2031 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and other supporting plans. This should include:
 - a. A commitment to long term (10+ years) needs-based and coordinated cross-sectional funding by the Australian, state and territory governments.
 - b. A review of current government governance models and partnerships over the Health Plan and other supporting plans to assess whether they represent genuine decision-making opportunities. This review should aim to create efficiencies and maximise decision-making power for members.

- c. Investment in the urgent establishment of suitable governance mechanisms over the Health Plan to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is fully imbedded in its implementation.

We also call on governments to:

11. Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership development programs, including cultural leadership programs, and expand opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce leadership in line with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021–2031.
12. Support the revitalisation and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages, and extend investment in initiatives that strengthen cultural authority, including traditional community governance and nation building.

Building our Economies

We call on the Australian Government to:

13. Understand, report and address the wealth gap that the colonisation process has created between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, marginalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from fully benefitting from economic and financial systems.
14. Support the development and expansion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander international trade opportunities.
15. Ensure that the 2024 review of the Indigenous Procurement Policy increases opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, which promote entrepreneurship and provide opportunities for our peoples to use assets and resources in a way that aligns with our objectives and priorities.
16. Ensure the outcomes of the IPP review benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and ensure a flow of opportunities that support the ongoing growth of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses.

17. Invest in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander profit-for-purpose business sector to support the development and implementation of business models for future growth and sustainability.

National Agreement on Closing the Gap

We call on governments to:

18. Accelerate action to fully implement the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, including urgent work to implement the four Priority Reforms in all jurisdictions. This includes implementing the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's 2024 Closing the Gap Review. Specifically:
 - a. Establish an Independent Mechanism to have oversight over Priority Reform Three, which commits to the transformation of mainstream agencies and institutions.
 - b. Include Indigenous Data Sovereignty under Priority Reform Four.
 - c. Invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data development, and uphold the principles of Indigenous Data Governance and Indigenous Data Sovereignty, by empowering and resourcing communities and individuals to develop data infrastructure and access place-based data to design community-driven initiatives in accordance with Priority Reform Four.
 - d. Commit adequate resourcing for the implementation of the National Agreement. This should include resourcing to ensure that governments have sufficient capability and capacity to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.
19. Support the First People's Disability Network's call for greater inclusion of disability in the National Agreement, and embed cultural safety standards in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Workforce and Cultural Safety

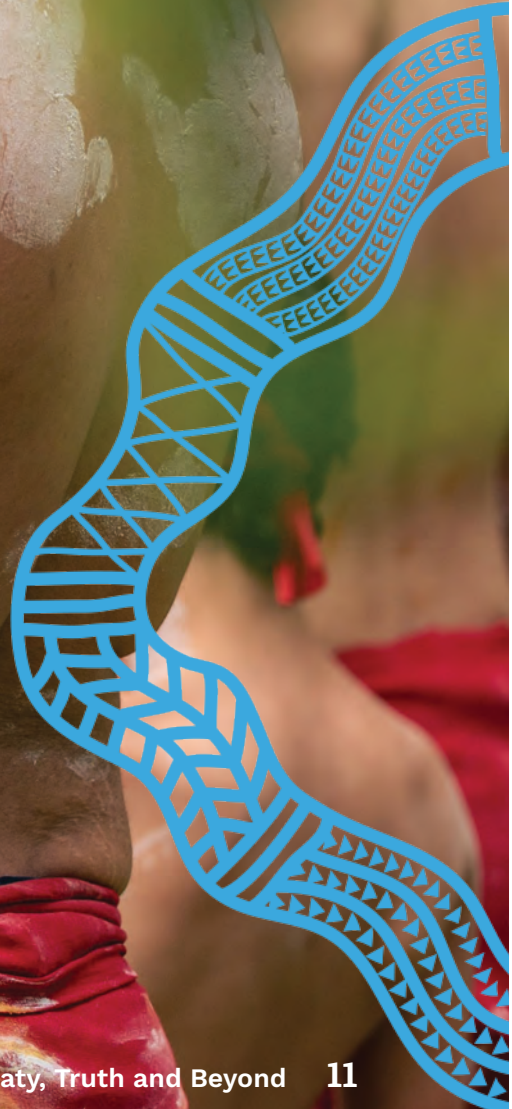
Underpinning so many of our recommendations is the need for a stronger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and cultural safety, particularly in the healthcare system.

We call on governments to:

20. Invest in the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce as outlined in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031.
21. Create a culturally safe Australian healthcare system that is responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, where institutional racism is acknowledged, measured, and addressed; cultural safety training is undertaken regularly and valued as an important step in Closing the Gap; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are integral and valued members of the health workforce.
22. Develop Commonwealth guidelines and standards for cultural safety.



Gathering of Mob event, Camp Jungai,
Taungurung Country (photo supplied by VACCHO)



Introduction

Since 2009, the Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group has delivered an annual report to follow the Australian Government's Closing the Gap Report. In 2019 our focus shifted from delivering a 'shadow report' to the Government's report, which too often required us to address a deficit discourse about our peoples, to instead publishing a strengths-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led analysis. Each report now focuses on priority themes with relevant case studies demonstrating Blak excellence.

This 2024 Close the Gap Campaign Report pays tribute to our peoples' strong leadership and legacy, our entrepreneurial thinking and innovation, and our continued fight to 'take our rightful place in this country'² and to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for our peoples.

It marks and celebrates the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to pursue self-determination and exercise power and decision-making.

This is despite a gruelling year that saw racism and misinformation unleashed in response to the campaign for a Voice, the devastating outcome of the Voice Referendum, and the continued failure by governments to meet their commitments on Closing the Gap.

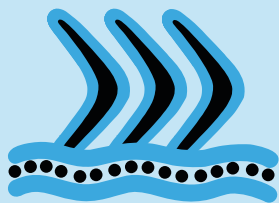
It was a year in which mainstream media and political commentary projected an intense deficit lens about our peoples, which further politicised our very existence in Australia, and debated our fundamental human rights as Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples to live in good health on our own unceded traditional lands.

This 2024 report reminds all Australians of the strengths and successes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It rebukes the false lens that has been applied to us. It is a celebration of our peoples as we once again dig deep in the face of racism and work towards healthy and bright futures for our children and future generations.

It is an invitation to our allies to continue to work with us to create respectful, equal, and just relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

This report also takes a wider geographic lens, looking at how we can restore and build upon our international First Nations relationships.

To underscore all this, we focus on three key themes: **Progressing Voice, Treaty, Truth; Leadership and Governance;** and **Building our Economies.**



**Progressing Voice,
Treaty, Truth**



**Leadership and
Governance**



**Building our
Economies**

We note that we have been here for millennia, and we will remain here for millennia, strong in culture and community.

We are over 65,000 years proud and Deadly and we are unbreakable with a rich, diverse culture. We want to share our ancient cultures with the rest of Australia. We are a resilient, determined, and fearless people – and we will not take a backward step.

– Jill Gallagher, Gunditjmara woman, CEO of Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), 12 November 2023³

No matter what has come to pass or what will come to pass, the words of the Uluru Statement are true, always.

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.⁴



A Year in Review

The Road to Referendum

In October 2023, Australia held a long-awaited national Referendum for the establishment of a constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice (**the Referendum**). If successful, it would have fulfilled one of the three requests (Voice, Treaty, Truth) of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (**Uluru Statement**).

The Voice was intended to be an important mechanism to address institutional and systemic racism embedded in Australia's legal, political, and government systems.⁵ Institutional racism within the justice, health, and child protection systems is responsible for disempowering our peoples and harming our peoples' health outcomes.^{6,7} These colonial systems need to be dismantled and rebuilt through decolonisation in order to improve our peoples' health and wellbeing, and to ensure bright futures for our children and the next generations. This is also a key part of the Priority Reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (**National Agreement**).

In the lead-up to the Referendum, following in the footsteps of our ancestors and Elders, our communities and leaders drew on our collective strength, desire for justice and the power of our advocacy to campaign for a Yes vote. We mobilised our leaders, our allies and supporters, and our communities. For example, the Yes23 Campaign rallied tens of thousands of supporters and volunteers from across the political spectrum.

What is critical to note is that there was strong support for Yes from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In remote communities, booths with strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation recorded more than 60 per cent in favour overall and as high as 92 per cent in individual locations.

Unfortunately, the Referendum was unsuccessful: a dispiriting and distressing outcome for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that followed a harmful public debate. We experienced intensified racism and discrimination, which are known to have detrimental impacts on health and wellbeing.⁸

The continued existence of racism in Australia was clearly on display, as was the power of misinformation, disinformation, and ignorance about the nation's true history. A fear campaign based around the slogan, 'if you don't know, vote no', confused voters and stripped them of agency and responsibility.⁹ Misleading claims about the extent of support for the Referendum by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also significantly impacted the vote. This demonstrates how vital the Uluru Statement's goals remain; in particular, truth-telling.

This report looks beyond the Referendum outcome at what is needed now to protect our existing rights and advance the implementation of the Uluru Statement.

In the wake of the referendum, it seems to me that we must again find, with renewed purpose, common ground on what [reconciliation] might look like in the form it might take into the future.

– former Senator Patrick Dodson, *Yawuru man, former Special Envoy for Reconciliation and Implementation of the Uluru Statement, Australian Parliament, November 2023*¹⁰

But in this section we pay tribute to those who worked so hard for a Yes vote.

Our Elders and leaders have guided our young people for millennia, finding strength in culture and community and steered by strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and values, despite challenges and setbacks.

The leaders who fought for a Yes vote continued this legacy. To them, we say thank you.

Below we spotlight three organisations, showcasing the impressive work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations in the lead-up to the Referendum. This work was not wasted; it will carry us further towards our goals and achieving the underlying principles of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Wungening Aboriginal Corporation

When reflecting on Wungening’s journey leading up to the Referendum, its CEO Daniel Morrison-Bird, a Noongar/Yamitji and Gija man, spoke with pride and hope, emphasising that, despite the challenges and disappointing outcome, there were some definite ‘silver linings’ from 2023. For Wungening and the entire community, there is much to be proud of.

Wungening is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisation that provides culturally secure, confidential, and free services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Perth. It provides services to community across alcohol and other drugs (AOD), family and domestic violence, youth and adult justice, homelessness and housing, and child protection.

With 35 years of operation and more than 350 employees, Wungening was in a strong position to have an impact ahead of the Referendum.

Since 2017 Wungening’s Board of Directors have been passionate and upfront in their support for the Uluru Statement. They were unanimously supportive of the Yes campaign, which gave Wungening the authority to publicly announce this to community and stakeholders. It acted decisively by appointing a campaign manager to its communications team.

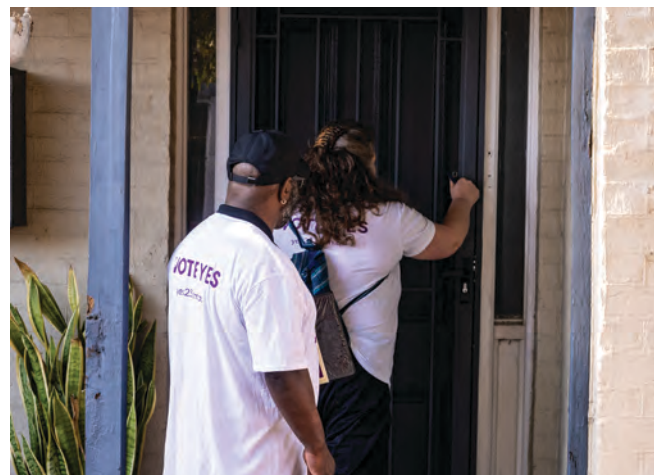
The campaign strategy was smart and efficient, looking at how best to utilise community and staff resources and time to maximise impact. One way that they did this was to engage with the offices of state and federal MPs to align their campaign strategies, complementing existing efforts on the ground.

A large focus for Wungening was on upskilling staff so that they could feel confident to campaign in their communities by door-knocking and staffing phone banks. This was a huge source of pride for staff who, post-Referendum, reflected on the new skills and confidence they had gained.

Daniel Morrison-Bird spoke about how staff put themselves out there and had new types of conversations – some positive, some negative. But with supports in place to ensure that the emotional toll on staff was reduced as much as possible, overall staff feel more confident and empowered to know they now have the skills to have challenging conversations like this and campaign for something they care about.

Staff got a lot out of it and that is a time in history they can look back on and be proud of. They can talk about it to their kids.

– Daniel Morrison-Bird, CEO, Wungening Aboriginal Corporation



Wungening staff, including CEO Daniel Morrison-Bird, door-knocking to campaign for a Yes vote

Wungening also facilitated a range of events, including an information session for Elders with Noel Pearson and multiple public information sessions, and participated in many rallies.

Alongside its impressive external efforts, Wungening focused internally to ensure staff felt culturally safe during this process, even if they didn't participate directly. They were able to utilise the many counsellors, support workers and healers who are there to support their community. These therapeutic practices, which included yarning circles and art therapy, were offered to staff throughout and after the campaign. Wungening also increased the number of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services that staff could access if they needed.

On the Tuesday following the Referendum, Wungening held a debriefing session with staff where they could talk through their experiences of the campaign, how they were feeling afterwards, and collectively support one another.

'There was a massive change in vibe from the start to the end of that day, and days after. Everyone felt more supported and pumped about the work that they did and the impact they made,' Daniel says.

The question Wungening and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and leaders are now asking is how to keep the momentum up.

We had 70,000 volunteers across the nation. How do we continue to mobilise and use that going forward? None of us want to lose that momentum, we don't want to lose those people who can now campaign. How do we turn the 40 per cent into 51 per cent?

– Daniel Morrison-Bird, CEO, Wungening Aboriginal Corporation

Images supplied by Wungening Aboriginal Corporation



Wungening staff support the Yes vote collage

Central Land Council Deputy Chair Warren Williams (left) and Geoffrey Matthews signing the Barunga Voice Declaration



Central Land Council

The Central Land Council (**CLC**) has proudly supported the Uluru Statement's Voice, Treaty and Truth priorities since 2017. After the May 2017 Uluru Convention, CLC delegates gathered at the Brumby Plains outstation. There they endorsed the Brumby Plains Statement, which fully supports the Uluru Statement, and invited all Australians to join them in the path towards constitutional reform.

The CLC executive was galvanised to act after Prime Minister Anthony Albanese strongly supported the Uluru Statement and Referendum at the 2022 Garma Festival. In early 2023, they agreed to establish a small CLC team, tasked with informing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Central Australia about the Referendum, recording their views and promoting them Australia-wide.

The information campaign kicked off in May 2023, with a community information meeting in Kaltukatjara (Docker River) near the Northern Territory/Western Australian border. To strengthen the consultations, statements were recorded in eight regional languages and played at the start of each meeting. The CLC also created locally designed T-shirts and used

local faces on banners and corflutes. The black-and-white cockatoo imagery on the shirts was so popular that they spread quickly across the region and popped up in far-flung locations from Tasmania to Perth.

Another powerful media platform was the CLC's Land Rights News, distributed across Central Australia since the mid-1970s. During the Voice information campaign, three covers of the publication showcased the Voice, and each edition shared information, stories and images from remote consultations and the national campaign.

The CLC also spread the views of its members to a wider audience on social media, including short videos demonstrating how strongly the Voice was supported out bush. The most popular video featured Geoff Shaw, an Arrernte Elder and Vietnam veteran from Alice Springs, and fellow veteran Malcolm Spencer from Queensland. The two old mates were reunited after Mr Spencer read in the media about Mr Shaw's support of a 'yes' vote. Together, they called on other veterans and Australians to support the Voice.



Vietnam veterans Malcolm Spencer (left) and Geoff Shaw

The August 2023 meeting of the Northern Territory's four Aboriginal land councils at Barunga was another campaign high point. Two hundred land council executive members and delegates endorsed the words of the Barunga Voice Declaration¹¹ and presented the signed statement to Minister for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney and later the Prime Minister. Videos recorded at the meeting were popular on social media.¹²

Closer to the vote, the CLC released a series of multi-language radio and TV ads themed 'listen to the leaders you trust'. Young Aputula Ranger Kitana Shaw featured in the most popular of the CLC's eight videos, holding a small joey and calling on young people to vote at the Referendum.

While the Voice Referendum was unsuccessful nationally, the Yes vote in Central Australia bucked the trend, with more than 60 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities and town camps voting in favour of the Voice.

The CLC is proud knowing that, despite the false information saying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were against the vote, its campaigning empowered people to make informed votes and a majority voted Yes.

Images supplied by the Central Land Council

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Last year, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) led campaign efforts to share information, educate Victorians, and bring Mob together to mobilise for the Yes vote.

In September 2023, VACCHO, the peak representative for 33 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations in Victoria, convened a gathering of Aboriginal leaders at the Aboriginal Advancement League.¹³ A powerful show of support, the leaders highlighted that the vast majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people supported a Voice, and implored Australians to vote Yes.

VACCHO also conducted a survey of 1,600 health workers in Victoria, which found that:



80%

believed that health and wellbeing outcomes would be improved if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had more involvement in developing health policy.



76%

believed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people did not have enough involvement in developing health policy that affects us.

VACCHO held a press conference with more than 50 other health organisations to share these results publicly and declare support for the Voice.



After the Referendum, VACCHO was honoured to be a part of the historic ‘Gathering of Mob’ event. This event brought together over 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across Victoria on Taungurung Country at Camp Jungai, an ancestral ceremonial site that is culturally significant to Aboriginal communities in Victoria.

The purpose of the day was community healing. It was a celebration of 60,000 years of culture, where Elders, youth, and clan leaders gathered around the ceremonial fire to yarn and share stories and unite. Those attending delivered a clear message – Aboriginal communities are strong, resilient and will not falter. Our ancient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures were key to healing from 2023 and they will forge the way forward.



Jill Gallagher, VACCHO CEO, (left) with Pat Anderson AO, co-architect of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and Lowitja Institute co-patron

National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Against the backdrop of the Referendum and the high emotional toll and national attention it brought, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders remained staunch and honest about where the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is at and where it needs to be.

Our leaders stayed focused on the importance of the National Agreement's implementation to improving our health and wellbeing, while our community controlled organisations, health workers, and communities continued to work towards closing the gap in health outcomes for our peoples. The parties to the National Agreement have commenced their Second Implementation Plans and First Ministers reiterated their commitment to Closing the Gap at National Cabinet in February 2023.

Now three years into the National Agreement, our focus has shifted from celebrating what was a new and important milestone for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and Australia more broadly, to a deeper critical analysis of how all parties are tracking against its targets.

In short, the verdict is that progress towards the Agreement's socio-economic targets has been inconsistent, and governments have been too slow to implement the Priority Reforms.

Our leaders have been fearless in calling this out.

Priority Reforms and accountability are key to making progress

In 2023 the Coalition of Peaks, as well as the Productivity Commission, told some hard truths about the need for Australian governments to take the National Agreement's four Priority Reforms seriously (see box). They have called for greater transparency and accountability, and a renewed commitment to the reforms.

Priority Reforms

1. Formal partnerships and shared decision-making to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
2. Building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled sector to deliver services to support Closing the Gap.
3. Systemic and structural transformation of mainstream government organisations to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
4. Shared access to data and information at a regional level.

The 2023 Coalition of Peaks Implementation Plan¹⁴ highlights the need to accelerate progress on these reforms, in particular Priority Reforms Three and Four. The Productivity Commission's Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap¹⁵ highlights that 'overall progress against the Priority Reforms has been slow, uncoordinated and piecemeal', and that many of the initiatives listed by governments within their first implementation plans were ones that were already underway. Putting it plainly, governments have not transformed the ways that they work sufficiently to meet (or even come close to meeting) the aspirations of Priority Reform Three. It could be said that these aspirations form governments' main challenge and responsibility in Closing the Gap.



The Coalition of Peaks has unflinchingly held governments to account on this, with all parties agreeing in February 2023 to re-signing a refreshed National Agreement in 2024. Discussions have progressed in relation to the establishment of an Independent Mechanism under clause 67 of the National Agreement, which would have oversight over Priority Reform Three. The Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) was commissioned to conduct research into independent mechanisms to guide this work. The final report was delivered in 2023 with recommendations to be implemented in 2024.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and communities have been calling for decades for an Aboriginal-led mechanism, independent of government, that can hold [governments] to account. So too [have they urged] the need for structural shifts which embed and protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to self-determination and allows Aboriginal peoples to regain control over the processes and practices through which their affairs are governed. – *Lowitja Institute, Victorian Aboriginal Authority: an initial feasibility study for discussion*¹⁶

The Coalition of Peaks has also cast a close eye on government expenditure, under clause 113 of the National Agreement, so that there can be prioritisation of opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait community controlled organisations.

Most governments delivered their expenditure reports, with agreement that there will be a gap analysis and review of the Indigenous Expenditure Report and the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report next year.

Policy Partnerships

Two key mechanisms for progressing Priority Reform One are Policy Partnerships and place-based partnerships.

Under clause 38 of the National Agreement there is a commitment to establish five Policy Partnerships between the Commonwealth, states, territories, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives. The aim is to improve outcomes under the National Agreement by identifying opportunities to work more effectively across governments and to avoid duplication and gaps. The Policy Partnerships have three-year terms and are intended to feed strategic leadership.

All five Policy Partnerships have now been established: Justice in April 2021, Early Childhood Care and Development and Social and Emotional Wellbeing in August 2022, and Languages and Housing in December 2022. A Policy Partnership Evaluation Methodology is in development as per a commitment in the Commonwealth 2023 Implementation Plan.

The Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership is working on a refreshed National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing, and the development of an associated implementation plan. The Justice Policy Partnership is finalising a Guidance and Reporting Template for measuring the impact of new justice policy and law reform on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults and young people. This is intended to drive greater accountability and transparency of decision-making for justice system policy and law reforms through shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities.





More key developments on Closing the Gap

- \$424 million in new Commonwealth funding to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage across areas such as housing, food, education, and water infrastructure.
- \$7.2 million in Commonwealth funding for Reconciliation Australia to include the Priority Reforms and Closing the Gap in the Reconciliation Action Plan framework.
- The sixth and final Community Data Project was agreed to in Gippsland (Vic). Clause 39 of the National Agreement commits to the establishment of up to six community data projects. The Commonwealth has also commissioned the development of a web-based platform that these projects can use, which will include data capability and training.
- An additional three new sectors were added to the development of the Sector Strengthening Plans (SSPs): justice, languages and family, domestic and sexual violence. These additional SSPs will commence in 2024.
- The Australian Public Service (APS) Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data has been endorsed.
- The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) published the Commonwealth Engagement and Partnership Framework.
- NIAA published a Grants Prioritisation Guide aimed at supporting government agencies to prioritise funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in grant rounds.
- The Joint Communications Strategy Implementation Plan was endorsed by Joint Council.

Standalone First Nations national plan to end violence against women and children

In October 2023 the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan (Action Plan), which sits under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, was released. This is a three-year action plan designed to address Target 13 of the National Agreement:

By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced by at least 50%, as progress towards zero.

The Action Plan is a precursor to the development of the first standalone National Plan for First Nations Family Safety, which is expected in 2024.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations, including Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLSs) have been advocating for many years for a standalone national plan. Family and domestic violence impacts disproportionately on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children¹⁷ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander solutions are ‘distinct from mainstream cultural approaches’.¹⁸ Effective solutions are evident in the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations in this space, such as programs and services delivered by FVPLSs.¹⁹ Culture is centred in these holistic programs and services, which operate from prevention to recovery. These services require direct government funding that is not tied to outcomes.





UNDRIP Implementation in Australia

On 28 November 2023, the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs published the final report of its Inquiry into the application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in Australia.²⁰ Australia signed onto the UNDRIP in 2009. However, the Declaration is non-binding on signatories, and nation states cannot be compelled to implement it.

The Standing Committee report found that there is no centralised way in Australia to implement the UNDRIP and that implementation approaches have been ad hoc. The report also highlighted that the Uluru Statement is the embodiment of the implementation of the UNDRIP.

In the wake of the referendum result, Australia appears at a crossroad with respect to how to navigate Indigenous issues. I believe that the enhanced application of UNDRIP and the general acceptance of these rights as a fundamental component of our democracy is where we must start.

– former Senator Patrick Dodson, as chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, November 2023²¹

The report makes some key recommendations, including on:

- ensuring that the Australian Government aligns all legislation and policy development with the UNDRIP
- the development of a National Action Plan, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which outlines the approach to implementing the UNDRIP. This should include coordinated agreements with all levels of government
- the establishment of an independent truth-telling and agreement-making process to assist healing and implementation of the UNDRIP
- education campaigns for all Australians to improve understanding of human rights and the UNDRIP, Australian history and colonisation, and general civics, including the functions and operations of Australian political and legal institutions
- inclusion of the UNDRIP in the Human Rights (Parliamentary Scrutiny) Act 2011 (Cth).

Progressing Voice, Treaty, Truth



Despite the setbacks in 2023, the Close the Gap Campaign Alliance Group remains committed to the Uluru Statement's principles of Voice, Treaty, and Truth²² and believes every individual, organisation, and community can work towards achieving these aspirations.

To our young people – our future leaders – the future of reconciliation and self-determination will need your energy and input, with the guidance and support of our Elders and leaders.

To quote Martin Luther King, *'let us realise the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice'*. While 2023 may seem like a significant setback, we are 60,000 years strong, and we are walking in the footsteps of our Elders and forging new paths.

The Uluru Statement is a call for national action; however, its principles can also be implemented at state, territory and local government levels. Other important areas – institutions, organisations, workplaces, professions, communities – don't have to wait for government to act to address systemic and structural racism and to commit to system transformation through initiatives that empower Voice, Treaty, and Truth and transfer power to Aboriginal and Torres Islander communities.

The urgent need for truth-telling was laid bare during the Referendum campaign last year, when the Australian media was flooded with misinformation and disinformation about the Uluru Statement and the potential impacts of Voice, Treaty, and Truth. This truth-telling requires Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and for cultural safety to be front and centre for participants in the process. We are seeing this exemplified in Queensland's Path to Treaty Act 2023 and actions underway to progress Treaty and Truth in that state. Non-Indigenous Australians have a responsibility to do whatever they can to ensure that truth-telling occurs in a culturally safe way, and that they listen, reflect and act.

While, disappointingly, support for truth-telling in some jurisdictions has wavered or been withdrawn after the Referendum, our peoples' advocacy has not stopped. The 'if you don't know, vote no' campaign was effective because of widespread national ignorance. Truth-telling is the cure for this, and governments must act to get these processes underway.

Truth-telling is also a key part of healing for our peoples, as well as for healing the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. It can be a catalyst for action, and for improving outcomes for our peoples. Now it is even more important for formal truth-telling processes to be enacted, so we can shine a light on the ways that colonial systems impact on our peoples and our environment and so we can act to transform and decolonise them. Truth-telling also legitimises the historic and contemporary truth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences.

Importantly, truth-telling must be accompanied with meaningful systemic change and justice for our peoples.²³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions are arguably the most important factor in achieving positive outcomes for our future. We call on individuals, communities, organisations, and governments to match their words with action. We ask that you engage our leadership, value our cultures, share your power, and let us lead decisions about matters that affect us.

For many allies, the Referendum outcome was a shock, and they witnessed the racism and ignorance that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience every day. Seeing the true state of racism in this country is unsettling. We hope allies can now not look away.

Allies can support us by keeping the conversation going, ensuring culturally safe environments, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance, and addressing the deficit discourses relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that permeate media, policy and systems.

Emerging opportunities for Treaty across the country are a form of meaningful structural reform that would allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to secure better representation and political power, and to make decisions about our communities, culture, and Country.²⁴ Treaty arrangements bring a new kind of engagement among settler states and offer opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations to assert their power and political will through transformed relations with settler-colonial governments.²⁵

Victoria is leading the way in Australia, as negotiations between the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the Victorian Government on the establishment of a state-wide Treaty with First Peoples progress. This has come after years of preparation and the Victorian Government's commitment to progressing Treaty in Victoria in March 2016.²⁶

As the South Australia Government and community is demonstrating with its landmark work, a Voice can be implemented by states and territories before it is implemented nationally.

The case studies in this section outline the historic processes underway in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria.



SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION:

‘Closing the Gap’ needs Sovereign Self-Determination



Professor Daryle Rigney

Daryle Rigney is a citizen of the Ngarrindjeri Nation, and Director and Professor of the Indigenous Nations and Collaborative Futures Hub, within the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney.

In 2023, Australia missed an opportunity to amend its Constitution and include a First Nations Voice to Federal Parliament. Although the outcome of the Referendum was disappointing to many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and our leaders, the failure of the Australian political system to redress colonial legacies and accommodate an authoritative and representative Indigenous Voice is not a new problem for us. In fact, it is one of the reasons why successive governmental initiatives to ‘close the gap’ on Indigenous disadvantage have routinely failed to meet their targets.

The Referendum outcome should not, however, eclipse the agency and resilience of Indigenous peoples but serve as a catalyst to our collective efforts in Indigenous nation-building.

Indigenous-led research shows that stable political governance – the Indigenous exercise of sovereign self-government enabling self-determination – is necessary for improving the socioeconomic conditions of First Peoples.^{27, 28, 29} The research finds the challenge of economic development and social progress is a political challenge, with self-determination and governance as the focus.³⁰

More positively, then, the recent refusal of Australian political society to recognise and incorporate an Indigenous Voice to Parliament has cleared the ground for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to refocus our efforts on our own internal political processes. Here the principle of sovereignty is integral. It is more than political autonomy or territorial governance – it is the profound and innate right of Indigenous peoples to determine our path, to uphold our laws, cultural heritage, and to maintain our connection to Country. Sovereignty is about re-establishing the cultural, social, and economic fabrics that have been strained but not severed by colonisation.

Giving more of our attention to rebuilding our own Indigenous political systems, so that they are effective instruments for the expression of our First Nations’ sovereignties, helps support the collective exercise of self-determination.

At its heart, self-determination involves communal decision-making enabling a people to define, on their own terms, their aspirations for the future of their society and the collective identity of ‘the self’ who is the subject of their ‘self-determination’.³¹ Evident in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, international law regards political self-determination as a collective affair that is grounded in group sovereignty, rather than about individual choice.

The source of Indigenous sovereignty is, and always has been, the Countries with which we are intimately and inseparably connected. Across Australia, each sovereign First Nation is a Country-specific Indigenous cultural community considered as a political society; that is, as a ‘polity’.

Self-determining First Peoples are polities. Every Indigenous Nation polity is unique, comprising distinctive institutions, processes, and relations, which define the privileges and responsibilities of the Nation's citizens or community. Each First Nation identifies itself through its unique political, social, and legal traditions connected to local Country; some changing over time and some continuing since time immemorial. Since Australia comprises of multiple First Nations in addition to the settler-colonial nation, Australia is a very diverse political society made of many sovereign peoples. This is our reality, our truth, even if settler-colonial governments have long refused to recognise and respond properly to our assertions of original and ongoing sovereignty.

Should Australian state governments progress towards treaty negotiations with First Nations in their regional jurisdictions, they will need to change the way they currently engage with us, since treaty is understood in international law as a sovereign-to-sovereign agreement-making process.^{32, 33} Australian governments will need to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as authoritative, self-determining polities capable of self-governance; and they will need to learn how to share governing authority and jurisdiction with Indigenous polities.³⁴ As First Nations communities, leaders and Elders, we must hold them to this if we are to fully benefit from future treaty arrangements and direct the structural changes towards self-determination that are needed for effectively 'closing the gap'.

Our leaders are best able to hold settler-colonial governments to account and develop positive intergovernmental partnerships when First Nations polities demonstrate strong capacities for self-rule and self-governance. This involves effective 'political governance', distinct from the good 'corporate governance' of the organisations that manage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services. Political governance determines how a First Nation plans its affairs, decides its social priorities, builds its economy, and uses its powers to achieve its goals.³⁵

'Indigenous nation rebuilding' is a tried and tested process that Indigenous political collectives can follow to strengthen their self-governance capabilities and exercise sovereign powers of decision-making, jurisprudence,

and jurisdiction, and so work to heal their societies. It essentially involves a community identifying in political terms, as a First Nation polity; organising itself for self-government with capable, trusted, and effective institutions; and acting strategically with authority to achieve the goals the community has set for itself through its internal processes of civic engagement.³⁶ This process might involve First Nations reinstating earlier institutions and protocols, redefined for the contemporary context of settler-colonialism; or it might involve the invention of entirely new governance structures and political tools that a community agrees are appropriate for it at the present time.^{37, 38, 39} Ultimately, Indigenous nation rebuilding enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to (re)develop our own governing institutions and strengthen our nations' economies for the purpose of sovereign self-rule.

It is well established that community controlled health services improve wellbeing outcomes within Indigenous communities, and that they thereby play a crucial role in 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancies. Recognising that health and wellbeing have cultural, social, and political determinants,⁴⁰ it stands to reason that self-governing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who exercise decision-making control over all the issues that concern us can become effective agents for addressing the other discrepancies our peoples experience. Sovereign self-determination can help address the systemic disadvantages our peoples continue to experience in education, employment, income, housing, and access to justice.⁴¹

At a fundamental level, the 'gaps' and inequities we experience arose from colonial dispossession and the disruption of our sovereign capacities, resulting in the entrenched situation of unequal enjoyment of rights and uneven socio-economic status that has continued to divide settler-colonial powers and Indigenous peoples in Australia. It makes perfect sense, then, that First Nation rebuilding for self-determination and sovereign self-rule is the pathway we must follow to close the gap.

South Australian Voice to Parliament

Demonstrating true resilience

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in South Australia this year will become the first jurisdiction in Australia to engage directly with the State Parliament and State Government on critical law and policies through a First Nations Voice to Parliament. Voters headed to the polls on 16 March to elect their Local Voice representatives.

In a living demonstration of authentic resilience, First Nations people in South Australia are determined to show how the Voice can work, and why it is important, following the devastation of last year's Voice Referendum and the racism unleashed in the national campaign, says Dale Agius, South Australia's inaugural Commissioner for First Nations Voice and a Kurna, Narungga, Ngadjuri and Ngarrindjeri man.

'We have been in a mixed space: deep disappointment around the Referendum but with big excitement about what we are about to do in South Australia,' says Commissioner Agius.

In March 2023, South Australia became the first Australian state to pass legislation to establish a First Nations Voice to its Parliament. Bipartisan support has been key to achieving this historic first. Commissioner Agius is hopeful that will continue, although that is not assured for the future, underlining why constitutional protection was sought for a national Voice.

The South Australian Voice will have two levels: a Local First Nations Voice, elected across six regions, and a State First Nations Voice, made up of the 12 presiding officers, split equally by gender, of the six local entities. The State Voice will be supported by advisory committees representing young people, Elders, Native Title holders and members of the Stolen Generations.

Commissioner Agius was appointed in 2022 to lead extensive community engagement to shape the model of the Voice and its enabling legislation to respect and reflect First Nations ways of thinking, doing, and working.

That included ensuring a diversity of voices while also respecting First Nations rites of passage and cultural protocols for Elders. Regions have been defined with boundaries that honour existing cultural alliances and community connections and were informed by nation-group connections as well as state electoral boundaries and local government areas.

Big questions were also put to communities around how they thought the principles of the legislation and model would work. 'We've been advocating for a Voice for such a long time, but we finally got to asking the fundamental question: "How would it feel if you were there?"'



Commissioner Dale Agius



Commissioner Agius says the South Australian Voice, which is expected to hold its first meetings later this year, will speak to the South Australian Parliament and Government via five key avenues:

1. Tabling an annual report and addressing a joint sitting of both House of Parliament.
2. Receiving notice of each bill introduced into parliament that may affect First Nations people and having the right to address Parliament in relation to that bill.
3. Speaking to the Premier and Cabinet twice a year.
4. Speaking to the Premier and public service chief executives twice a year.
5. Leading an annual engagement hearing where Voice chairs can request to speak to the Premier and Ministers and department heads on any issue they think important.

The annual engagement hearing, a public hearing that has been likened to the parliamentary budget estimates process, is a critical design element that offers the chance to ‘break through bureaucratic barriers, break through the political clutter,’ Commissioner Agius says.

‘Rather than having the Government blaming the Opposition, Ministers blaming each other, it can put an end to this handballing game where we don’t get any resolution of issues,’ Commissioner Agius says.

The need for public scrutiny and accountability was strongly urged in the engagement rounds by First Nations communities – who, like non-Indigenous South Australians, are ‘equally tired of the overcommitted, underdeveloped promises and the public waste of money that is committed to our communities but doesn’t hit the ground’, Commissioner Agius says.

Our people want these issues highlighted in Parliament to give more public visibility and accountability so the reality of what’s happening for our communities is front and centre of the political agenda and of the South Australian social conscience.

– Dale Agius, Commissioner for First Nations Voice, South Australia

While the South Australian government will be under no obligation to follow the Voice's advice, a relevant Minister must, within six months of receiving a report from the Voice on an issue, table a report detailing their response and any action taken.

Work on South Australia's First Nations Voice was put on hold during the national Voice Referendum campaign, so it did not create any confusion for the local communities.

Still the ramifications of the Referendum have been deep, not just for those who were devastated by the result. Commissioner Agius said First Nations people, regardless of whether they voted Yes or No, did not foresee the attacks 'on our culture and on our identity' and levels of racism that emerged in the campaign and went unrecognised and unaddressed by mainstream media. They had not dreamt they would have to defend their historical connections with this country, have to speak to the harms of colonisation, to defend cultural protocols like Welcomes to Country, and to prove their own identities, he says.

'I got feedback that Aboriginal people feel like they don't belong in Australia and that the racism is clearly visible now,' Commissioner Agius says, adding that the result also saw some No voters demanding that South Australia now scrap its own Voice model.

But what the Referendum has also done, he says, is galvanise the First Nations community in South Australia, to nominate to serve on the Voice and to register to vote.

'Our community members are feeling the responsibility of representing their communities, of being authentic and strong in what they will deliver to Parliament, and of demonstrating to South Australia and the nation that allowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to speak on their affairs is a good thing and something that can only enhance our political system.

'It goes to the heart of the resilience of our people. We read about it in books and in research all the time, but this is actually real authentic resilience from our people.'

Images supplied by Office of the Commissioner for First Nations Voice



Queensland Path to Treaty

Reframing the relationship

Queensland will take major steps along a historic pathway this year, with the establishment of a First Nations Treaty Institute and a Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry, aiming to reframe the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders and other residents of the state.

This follows a unique four-year co-design process towards Truth and Treaty that highlights the importance of self-determination, political courage, bipartisanship, and the ongoing strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Gangulu man Mick Gooda, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Don Dale Royal Commissioner, is co-chair of Queensland's Interim Truth and Treaty Body (ITTb) which is leading Queensland's Path to Treaty in co-design with the Queensland Government.

He is hopeful that genuine truth-telling in communities across Queensland over the next three years will help dispel ignorance, fear, and misinformation around the Treaty process, and restore the bipartisan support which was disappointingly withdrawn by Queensland's Opposition Liberal National Party in the wake of last year's devastating Voice Referendum.

I think the most important ingredient is courageous leadership. That's needed at the top level of government and of course needs to be supported by community leadership, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

– Mick Gooda, Co-Chair Interim Truth and Treaty Body, Queensland



Tides of Change

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have fought for the rights of their people for 250 years. It is important to recognise the struggle and advocacy of those who came before us, for truths to be revealed about our collective past, in order for healing to take place for First Nations peoples—thus creating an opportunity for treaty negotiations and reconciliation to take place for our Mob, our kin and future generations.

1. Tracks represent the path of our forefathers and the continued journey towards Treaty
2. Lunar cycles speak to the wisdom of the universe and the guidance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge keepers
3. The constellations represent our connection to one another and our shared history
4. The four winds (Sager, Zei, Kuki, Naygay) and the two tides (Kulis and Guthath) of Zenadth Kes (Torres Strait) represent drawing on sacred knowledge and spiritual journeys
5. All Mob who have fought and advocated for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since time immemorial

Artwork created by
Simone Arnol, a Gunggandji woman from Yarrabah and **Naseli Tamwoy**, a Badu Island man from the Torres Strait

Interim Truth and Treaty Body Board Members



Mr Gooda has been working since 2019 alongside other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders on the Queensland Treaty process, including fellow ITTB co-chair, actor, director, screenwriter and producer Aaron Fa'Aoso, a descendant of the Saibai region in the Torres Strait. Other leaders on the journey have included Bidjara and Birri-Gubba Juru author and academic Dr Jackie Huggins AM; Guwamu community activist and leader Cheryl Buchanan; and political scientist Dr Josephine Bourne, a Gumulgal woman of Mabuig Island.

Eminent non-Indigenous people have also been closely involved in Treaty consultation and design bodies throughout the process; for example, Sallyanne Atkinson – the first and only female Lord Mayor of Brisbane – is a current member of the ITTB's Board and previously sat on the Treaty Advancement Committee.

Since 2019, members of Queensland's Path to Treaty consultation bodies have gone out into communities across the state, listening to priorities and concerns and offering skills and insights from wide-ranging perspectives to develop the Queensland Treaty model.

Their recommendations to include truth-telling in the process came after being struck by the limited understanding among non-Indigenous Queenslanders about the treatment and

experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the state since colonisation.

'My generation was brought up learning only about Captain Cook and the white explorers. We knew nothing about what really went on,' Ms Atkinson says, urging meaningful and respectful conversations that can illuminate the truth. 'Racism and fear stem from ignorance.' That's why Queensland's Treaty architects brought Treaty and Truth together, Mr Gooda says. 'To take a really simple view, you can't have Treaty unless you base it on truth.'

While calls for treaties can be traced, in Queensland as well as in other jurisdictions, to the early days of colonisation, this advanced Path to Treaty process emerged from the work of the Queensland Stolen Wages Reparation Taskforce which Mr Gooda headed. Witnessing the impact on those affected – in having to reopen old wounds and revisit the trauma from those days – led to the call for a reframing of relationships in the state.

Treaty was finally put on the political agenda in Queensland in 2019 by then Deputy Premier Jackie Trad, who lent the process her full commitment and support, a critical act of leadership. 'I'm not sure it would have happened without her,' Mr Gooda said.

While Queensland’s process, set out in the Treaty Advancement Committee Report, has been informed by Treaty and Truth arrangements in other jurisdictions, it also has unique features.

Wanting to avoid adversarial and expensive legal proceedings, the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry will not have Royal Commission powers – rather, it aims to encourage voluntary participation and sharing of histories, stories, experiences, and truths from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Queenslanders alike. Only government agencies will be compelled to produce people and documents if required, although a 12-month review will determine if that needs to be expanded.

The First Nations Treaty Institute will be an independent statutory body to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to prepare for, and participate in, Treaty negotiations with the Queensland Government. Importantly, it cannot itself be a party to the Treaty negotiations or act on behalf of one. ‘When the rubber hits the road, that’s got to happen out in community’, Mr Gooda says.

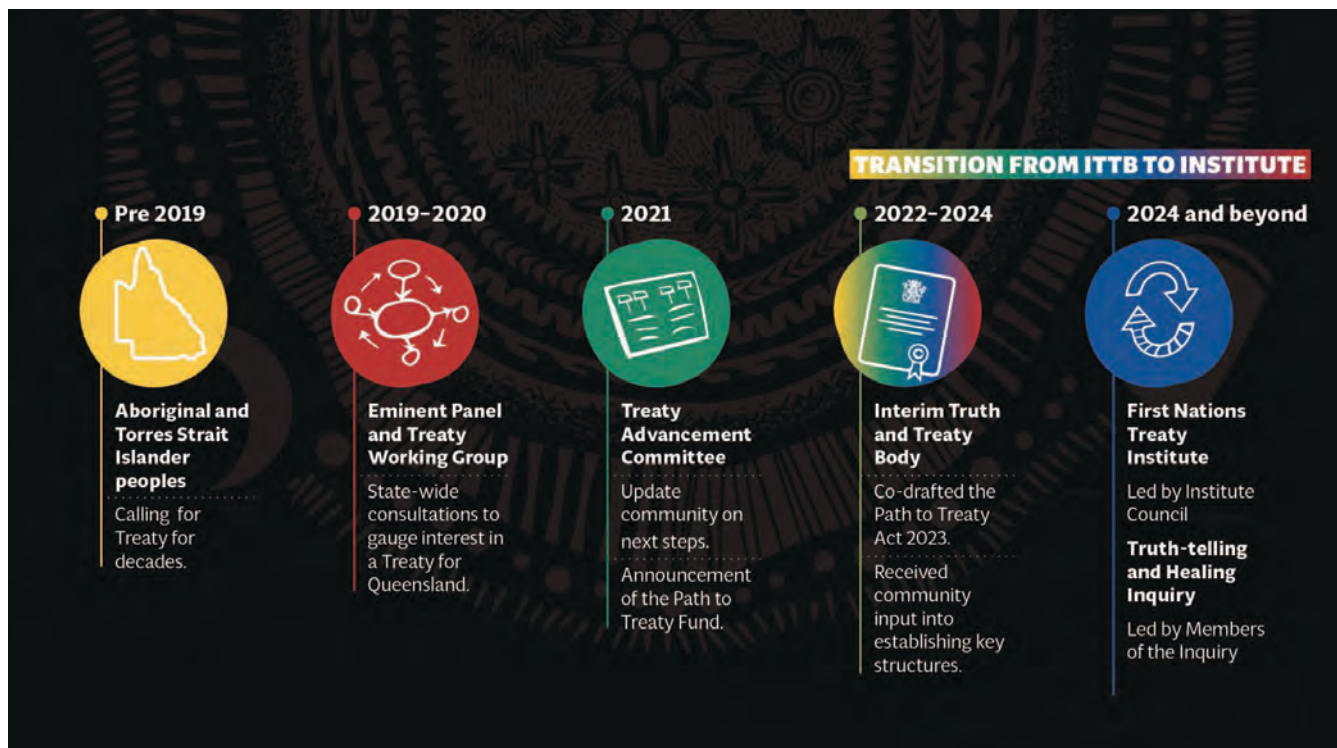
The Path to Treaty Act 2023 is unique in Australia, the result of remarkable co-design, with the ITTB and Queensland Government

negotiating its provisions ‘clause by clause’. The result is a piece of enabling legislation that restructures power dynamics for Treaty negotiations and embeds truth-telling in its powerful preamble – stating explicitly that the colonisation of Queensland occurred without the consent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and often against their active resistance. It notes the importance of respecting and protecting Aboriginal law and tradition, and Torres Strait Islander law and Ailan Kastom (island custom).

The legislation was passed amid tears, hugs and applause at a regional Parliamentary hearing in Cairns in May 2023.

Mr Gooda said he and the other architects of Queensland’s Treaty process hope this year’s historic steps will begin to educate the wider community on the need for new relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples in the state, and on how treaties can – and do – work. They also want to demonstrate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who may be suffering fatigue and cynicism, that meaningful change can be delivered.

Images supplied by Interim Truth and Treaty Body



Yoorrook Justice Commission

Truth telling

From its very first Yarning Circles with Elders in early 2022, amidst the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of Victoria's landmark Yoorrook Justice Commission has been emotional, uplifting, and illuminating – upending the skewed official history of the state that for too long has excluded and denied First Peoples' perspectives.

Professor Aunty Eleanor Bourke AM is a Wergaia/Wamba Wamba Elder from north-western Victoria and Chair of Yoorrook. She has been overwhelmed by how important it has been for First Peoples in Victoria to share their experiences, and those of their families and communities – to be genuinely heard, despite the pain of revisiting trauma.

'I wasn't prepared for how much people wanted to come and tell their stories,' she said of the truth-telling process that has journeyed across Victoria over the past two years, including meeting on sacred places, former missions and massacre sites, in prisons and community controlled health services, as well as holding its own formal hearings in the offices of the Commission.

I wonder at the strength of some of our people. After all of the trauma, all of the heartache, all of the tears, all of the bitterness, people still want to help make things better.

– Professor Aunty Eleanor Bourke AM, Chair, Yoorrook Justice Commission

Yoorrook, which means 'truth' in Professor Bourke's Wamba Wamba language, is the first formal truth-telling process in Australia, constituted as a Royal Commission so it can compel evidence, including from Ministers, public servants and Victoria Police. It is Indigenous-led: four of five Commissioners, more than half of its executive, almost half of the other staff, and two of its four barristers are First Peoples.

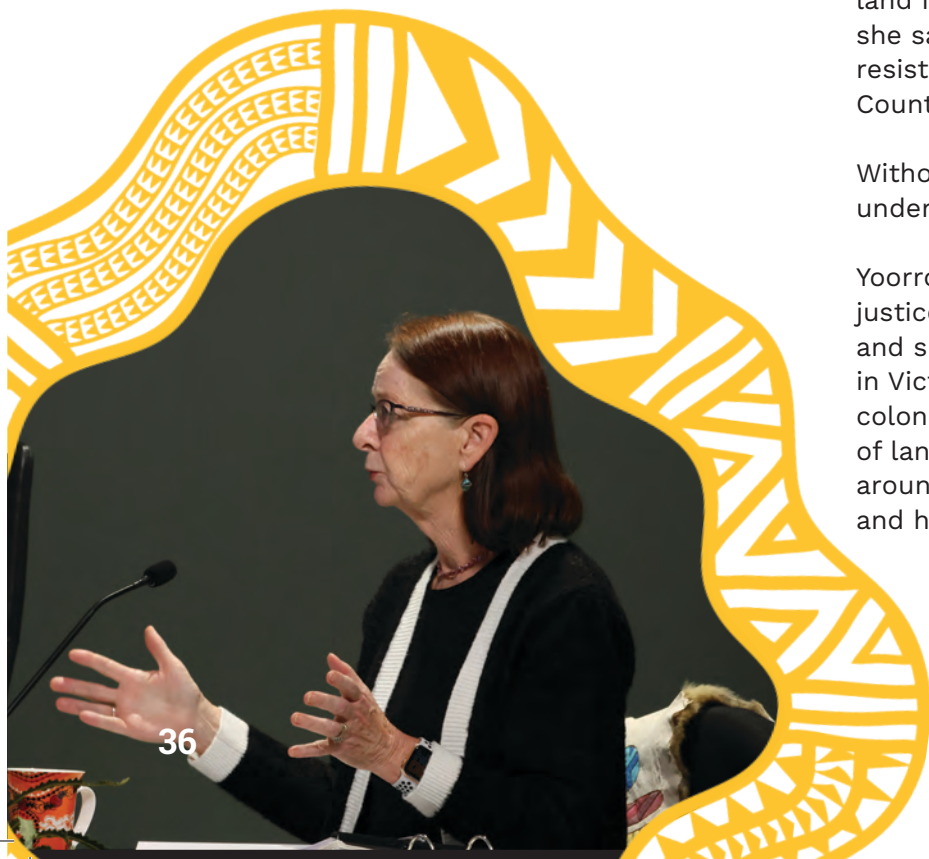
Yoorrook's mandate is to inquire into past and ongoing systemic injustice faced by First Peoples in Victoria, aiming to create an official public record that builds a shared understanding amongst all Victorians of the impact of colonisation, as well as the diversity, strength, value and resilience of First Peoples' cultures.

To date Victoria has had 'an incomplete story, an incomplete history,' Professor Bourke says. So much of what has been, and continues to be, experienced by First Peoples 'happens out of sight' – it can be denied, covered up, and ignored. 'The history of Europeans coming to Victoria 200 years ago and taking First Peoples' land is one of wrongdoing and devastating loss,' she says. 'But it is also a story of first Peoples' resistance, survival and ongoing connection to Country.'

Without that full story, there cannot be understanding and transformation.

Yoorrook has its origins in the land and social justice movements led by First Peoples and supported by allies over many decades in Victoria, which shone a light on early colonisation having built prosperity on the back of land theft, and on later laws, including those around native title and land rights, that split and harmed communities.

Yoorrook Commissioner,
Distinguished Professor Maggie Walter



Yoorrook Commissioners with members of the Wadawurrung Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation



Yoorrook was established by the Victorian Labor Government in 2021 as part of its commitment to Treaty processes that included the creation of the First People's Assembly, also a first in Australia. Professor Bourke said early Treaty work, led by Victorian Aboriginal leader Dr Jill Gallagher throughout 2018 and 2019, had asked the critical question: 'How do we do Treaty when Victorians don't know what the story is; when they don't know our story?'

Yoorrook has consulted with similar bodies in other countries, including Canada, the United States and Timor-Leste, and worked closely with the International Centre for Transitional Justice. With its Letters Patent requiring it to work in ways that minimise harm and re-traumatisation for First Peoples, it employs a social and emotional wellbeing support model, aiming for truth to also bring healing.

Victoria's First Peoples have been able to give evidence in a range of different public and private ways. That's included closed hearings and anonymising submissions, but has also expanded the notion of evidence to include artwork, poetry, cultural artefacts and music, contributing to a rich and unique cultural tapestry, unlike any other public records held by the State.

To date, Yoorrook has spoken with over 3,000 community members, including receiving evidence from more than 800 First Peoples through submissions, roundtables and hearings.

Working under punishing timelines – a four-year commission to unearth two centuries of history – it has held a focused investigation into systemic injustice experienced by First Peoples in Victoria's child protection and criminal justice systems. It is now investigating land, education, health, housing and economic prosperity, noting that these systems 'do not operate in silos – they are connected, often pipelining children from one injustice to the next'.

Yoorrook's power to compel witnesses saw it last year call out the Victorian Government's non-compliance with the Commission's orders to produce evidence. It also presided over an historic public apology from Victoria's Chief Commissioner of Police, Shane Patton, for police actions that have harmed First Nations Victorians. This prompted a demand for accountability from Professor Bourke on behalf of the Commission, saying police must work to bring about real change, 'because if actions do not follow your apology, then what hope will we have?' she told Commissioner Patton.

That accountability is at the heart of Yoorrook's priorities as it prepares to wrap up its profound work next year, to ensure that the faith invested in truth-telling by First Nations people, often at such personal cost and amid deep frustration at the pace of change, results in better systems and embracing of truth by the broader community.

'Just saying it doesn't make it so,' warns Professor Bourke. 'It took all this time, two centuries, to systemise the way [racism is] embedded. It's going to take time to undo that.'

She hopes Yoorrook's work is the start of a truth-telling process that will outlive the Commission itself, that it will inform and

transform whole systems, such as education and housing, as well as prompting government responses to the issues it has already raised.

But truth itself is a powerful tool for future generations, she says.

'Whether the action happens now or later, it's now there on the record, from the voices of our people,' she said. 'It needs to be digested now, because a lot of people just do not know our history, they do not know what was done to Aboriginal people.'

Images supplied by Yoorrook Justice Commission



TRUTH



Yoorrook will create a lasting public record about what has happened in the past and is still happening, how it came to occur and who or what is responsible. It will draw on a wide range of sources and take a holistic approach that recognises the diversity, commonalities and continuities of First Peoples's experiences.

UNDERSTANDING



Deep listening to the voices of First Peoples, hearing their experiences and learning how culture has evolved and survived amid trauma, will enable the broader Victorian community to understand the links between past, present and future.

TRANSFORMATION



Yoorrook will propose changes to laws, institutions and systems which can be taken up through treaty negotiations and other ways to build new relationships between all Victorians. These reforms must remedy injustices against First Peoples so that Victoria can turn a new page.

Yoorrook's Strategic Priorities.

Leadership and Governance

Governance is defined as the values or principles and practical mechanisms by which the shared vision of a people is translated into sustained, organised action.

Nation governance (also called political governance) is how an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation organises itself and uses its powers to achieve its goals.

– Indigenous Nation Building and the Political Determinants of Health and Wellbeing, Discussion paper, Lowitja Institute⁴²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance is necessary for appropriately defining success and achieving successful outcomes for our peoples. When our leadership and governance is embedded, this empowers communities. It is important for decolonising systems and structures, dismantling institutional racism, and shifting attitudes from deficit-based to strengths-based.⁴³ When these transformations are achieved, our peoples will enjoy improved health and wellbeing outcomes.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is distinct from mainstream approaches for several reasons. It is underpinned by culture and includes cultural authority. It is guided by community priorities and responsibilities⁴⁴ and aims for the health and wellbeing of community. It is underpinned by a deep responsibility to care for Country and takes a long-term view to ensure the wellbeing and empowerment of future generations. It puts culture at the centre of priorities, policies, programs, and strategy.⁴⁵

This is why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led solutions are more effective than top-down mainstream approaches. Western systems are often founded in hierarchical structures of power, centred on individual gain and accountability, compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches that centre collectivism and accountability back to community. The power lies in community and is focused on outcomes for, with and by community.

Leadership and governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is also enshrined under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Article 3: Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Article 4: Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.

– United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁴⁶

Strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders throughout history have forged opportunities and reclaimed power for our peoples in the face of significant barriers, securing a seat at the table for our peoples to have a say on decisions that impact us,⁴⁷ as well as creating our own tables and inviting governments to sit with us.

Refreshed national policy frameworks such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 (Health Plan) and the National Agreement are successes of this advocacy. They recognise the importance of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in national governance mechanisms. They also recognise that investing in formal partnerships and shared decision-making at national, state, local and regional levels is critical to ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are represented in governance structures. Governments now need to invest in the effective implementation of these governance structures under the Health Plan to ensure its success.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled sector is a great example of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (ACCOs) work for and are accountable to our communities. ACCOs are governed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, work towards community priorities, and deliver services that build strength and are tailored to the needs of local communities.

Leadership is central to achieving and maintaining effective governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and, in turn, achieving positive social, economic and political outcomes. Our communities have the right to lead in decisions that affect us. Meaningful participation and leadership of our communities at all levels is required to restore justice and protect the rights and interests of our communities. These principles are at the heart of the Uluru Statement.

Forging effective partnerships underpinned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and governance is the key to creating change, as this will contribute to establishing equitable power relationships and shared decision-making at national, state, local, and regional levels.

The case studies below highlight leadership and strong governance proposals at the global and national levels, which inform the recommendations of this report. These include growing the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in international forums and dialogues that affect Indigenous peoples; funding of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Climate and Health Coalition and a greater focus on disability in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.

Ambassador for First Nations People

Taking a global view

For Ambassador Justin Mohamed, a Gooreng Gooreng man from Bundaberg, Queensland, it has been both daunting and exciting to be ‘building the plane while flying it’, following his appointment in April 2023 as Australia’s inaugural Ambassador for First Nations People.

His is not only the first such appointment in Australia — it is a world first, so building his office and prioritising the work ahead, while other nations look on to see what this role will bring, has all been part of the journey so far.

‘Being first in the world provides a lot of opportunities, but it means we don’t have the luxury of previous experiences or a blueprint – so the steps that we’re taking now are foundational and extremely important for the future,’ Ambassador Mohamed says.

‘What we know is we want to be able to see First Nations perspectives and knowledges reflected and embedded in Australia’s foreign policy, and currently this is not the case. So this is our starting point.’

The creation of the Ambassador’s role was announced in 2022 by Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong, alongside Minister for Indigenous Australians Linda Burney and former Senator Pat Dodson, who was then Special Envoy for Reconciliation and Implementation of the Uluru Statement.

In a statement, they said the Australian Government was ‘delivering on its commitment to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, and embedding Indigenous perspectives, experiences and interests into our foreign policy’.

For Ambassador Mohamed, who has worked for decades in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander health, education, justice and reconciliation, his appointment showed that the Government values a background that is ‘steeped in community: in Aboriginal community control, leadership, and self-determination’.

As Ambassador, he now heads the Office of First Nations International Engagement within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), charged with working across government on key international priorities with a strong focus on climate change, international trade, human rights, gender equality, and health (see box).

Given the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business diversity, including art and culture, Ambassador Mohamed said his role could easily just focus on trade, and it will be an important part of his work.

‘But we will never be able to sustain a strong international First Nations trade pipeline if we aren’t strong in our health, language and cultural connections; if our human rights are not looked after; if we are not able to live and thrive in our communities,’ he says.

The Ambassador’s first months in the role saw him travel to multiple international events and engagements, including to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York, the COP28 conference in Dubai, and APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) in San Francisco.



Ambassador Justin Mohamed

But his first priority was to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, travelling across Australia to hear perspectives from communities, organisations, business enterprises, and individuals on what was important to them and how this could shape and inform what he could – and should – be doing.

‘Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have travelled overseas over many decades, to advocate for our human rights, promote our culture, build commercial interests, and join Indigenous people from around the globe in advancing Indigenous peoples’ rights,’ he says. ‘They often had to do so without – or with very limited – government support, at times against the will of governments, and often against all odds.’

His role marks a huge shift, offering foreign policy that not only represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests but also implements and values Indigenous knowledges and expertise to advance the interests of all Australians.

First Nations people want to be part of the challenges we are facing as a nation and globally: we’ve got so much to offer that is unique to Australia, and something the world has a genuine interest in and wants to learn more about.

– Justin Mohamed, Australia’s Ambassador for First Nations People

Part of that offering will be to build stronger connections in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, to forge new trade routes, and rekindle cultural and regional connections that were in place for hundreds of years, such as between the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land and the Macassan people of Indonesia.

Ambassador Mohamed will also work to lead ‘First Nations-to-First Nations’ conversations across the waters, including in relation to foreign aid, where he believes the ‘institutional strength’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and services – like our community controlled health sector, legal services, women’s and children’s programs, and traditional landowner organisations – can benefit other First Nations peoples, particularly

those in the Pacific, who are undergoing rapid change and disruption, not the least from climate change.

Ambassador Mohamed is mindful that it can be difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to work in institutions like DFAT that have low Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation among staff and are often not set up for ‘our ways of doing things’.

‘However, we check in with each other,’ he says of his team. ‘We ask: are we keeping true to why we’re here and how best to advance our priorities in line with what we have heard from our communities?’

Making sure there is a space to connect is key. It doesn’t always have to be an actual place: ‘it could be with our humour and laughter, or reflecting and acknowledging the challenges and losses, or celebrating the “Blak Excellence” of our peoples’, he says.

This space becomes very important during times like the aftermath of the Referendum in October 2023 and the annual debate around January 26.

Like all government agencies, the Office of First Nations International Engagement is apolitical, so it was unable to publicly express an opinion on the Referendum, but Ambassador Mohamed said that many other countries and Indigenous people globally were watching the Referendum and the Australian Government’s commitment to the Uluru Statement from the Heart with interest, particularly given that Australia has previously not been seen as a leader on global Indigenous issues.

Though the global backlash to the Referendum result was not particularly harsh – ‘many countries and their governments know how hard a referendum is to win,’ he said – he knows many of these countries are keeping a close eye on what Australia will do next.

‘We know that a referendum was one way to advance First Nations peoples’ rights, but we also know there are many other ways the Australian Government can continue delivering on their commitment to First Nations peoples, and that’s what other countries will be watching for.’

Focus of the Australian Ambassador for First Nations People

1. Embedding First Nations perspectives into Australia's foreign policy and advising on how Australia's international engagement can best support and maximise opportunities for First Nations Australians in a globalised world.
2. Enhancing Australia's engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region, including drawing on First Nations' traditional and contemporary ties to address shared challenges such as climate change, gender equality and health security.
3. Progressing First Nations' rights and interests globally, including to identify and repatriate human remains and sacred objects located around the world.
4. Supporting First Nations trade and investment, including incorporating First Nations business interests into Australia's trade negotiation strategies.
5. Bolstering Australia's First Nations diplomatic capability and advocacy, by embedding First Nations perspectives and experiences in all facets of DFAT's work and building and strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the diplomatic workforce.⁴⁸

Images supplied by Office for First Nations International Engagement



Ambassador
Justin Mohamed

Lowitja Institute

Hearing us on climate change

The importance of the cultural and social determinants of health, cultural safety, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' leadership on climate are at the heart of Australia's first National Health and Climate Strategy (National Strategy), released late last year.

That follows strong work being led by Lowitja Institute and a network of key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and health practitioners, working alongside key allies, that has seen the emergence of a stronger national and international Indigenous voice on climate issues.

This work included the delivery of an intervention to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York last year, where Lowitja Institute CEO, Adjunct Professor Janine Mohamed, called on the UN and member nations to take full responsibility for decolonisation and anti-racism when addressing climate change and its disproportionate impacts on Indigenous peoples' rights, health and wellbeing.

We were very pleased that Australia's National Health and Climate Strategy acknowledges the work that Lowitja Institute is leading in this space and that we are engaging with First Nations representatives to identify the best models to support First Nations people's leadership and self-determination in Australia's climate and health policy and to grow our workforce and governance in this area.

– Adjunct Professor Janine Mohamed, CEO, Lowitja Institute

Adjunct Professor Mohamed welcomed the National Strategy's recognition that there is a governance gap at the intersection of health and climate change, and its inclusion of a commitment to establish a governance body under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, which will be an ongoing mechanism for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership on climate.



Lowitja Institute CEO, Adjunct Professor Janine Mohamed, speaks to international media at COP28

'This gap is something that we've identified in talking with community and urgently needs to be addressed,' she said.

In 2021 Lowitja Institute was deeply concerned that, despite the disproportionate impact of climate change on Indigenous peoples nationally and globally, our peoples were being left out of critical national and international discussions on climate, including in the reporting from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

'That's despite being intimately connected to Country, and that our knowledge and cultural practices hold solutions to the climate crisis,' Adjunct Professor Mohamed said.

That year Lowitja Institute held a roundtable with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and international First Nations experts and published a discussion paper, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*⁴⁹, in partnership with the National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF) and the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA).

Both the roundtable and discussion paper highlighted that not enough was being done to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are supported to lead climate change prevention, mitigation, and adaptation. That's to be seen especially in housing and energy injustice.

The paper also noted that climate change presents an opportunity for redress and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to lead climate action based on our intimate historical and ongoing knowledges of Country.

Lowitja Institute significantly built on this work over the following two years, including hosting a series of conversations and roundtables with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia and the Torres Strait, to deepen its understanding of how a changed climate is impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing.

‘From these conversations, it became clear that a new governance structure is required to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership on key national policy and decision making, and for collective advocacy and peer-to-peer learning,’ Adjunct Professor Mohamed said.

A summary of these conversations was included in a position paper, released in November 2023, *Let’s walk together, work together, we’ll be stronger together: The need for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health*.⁵⁰

Lowitja Institute worked with Equity Economics to develop a business case for the Coalition and began reaching out to Federal MPs to make the case for funding, noting that a Coalition would align well with the National Health and Climate Strategy. With support from Assistant Health and Aged Care Minister Ged Kearney’s office, it hosted a ministerial roundtable at Parliament House in Canberra, bringing community representatives from across Australia to speak with senior politicians.



Participants in Lowitja Institute’s Ministerial Roundtable on Climate and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

Adjunct Professor Mohamed said Lowitja Institute also recognises the importance of leveraging international mechanisms to advocate for change, and the benefit in meeting and collaborating with Indigenous brothers and sisters globally.

As well as presenting to the UN last year, she has spoken at the COP27 and COP28 international climate change events to promote the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in climate discussions and talk about the impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing.

Adjunct Professor Mohamed was joined at COP28 last year by Deputy CEO Paul Stewart, Lowitja Board Chair Selwyn Button, and Board Director Craig Ritchie to advocate strongly for urgent action.

Images supplied by Lowitja Institute

First Peoples Disability Network

Amplifying the needs of the disability community

First Nations woman Katrina McKechnie is a single mother of children with disabilities living in New South Wales. She talked about the challenges her family faces in one of the earliest episodes of the landmark First Peoples' Disability Network's (FPDN) Yarning Disability podcast.

In it, Katrina discusses the importance of culture and community to her kids, and how they and their disabilities are seen, saying her greatest hope for them is that they grow up to be happy and safe, 'able to navigate the world without these barriers of, number one, being black, or two, being disabled'.

Katrina's story helped shape the FPDN's policy advocacy to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) around the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), pressing for the Agency and the Scheme to embed in all policy work and staff training the understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability are walking between two worlds.

'They need to understand that working with First Nations people with disability goes beyond just cultural awareness,' says Alicia (AJ) Johnson, a Barkindji and Birri Gubba woman and senior policy officer at FPDN. 'It is deeply multifaceted, it connects to identity and reflects the ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations people who live with disability.'

'We are holding them accountable to service our communities in ways that are culturally safe and culturally meaningful. They have a responsibility to do so,' AJ says.

Katrina's is one of many stories shared on the 'Yarning Disability' podcast hosted by FPDN, which is the national representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, family and communities with lived experience of disability.



Bernard Namok Junior (right) hosts the Yarning Disability podcast

Bernard Namok Junior, a proud Torres Strait Islander man and the host of Yarning Disability, says 'the podcast has been a learning journey not only for myself, but we hope for everyone who listens – and I believe it's about time our First Nations Mob with disabilities are heard'.

Recent large surveys indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were at least 1.5 times more likely to be living with disability compared to non-Indigenous Australians, and up to 2.5 times more likely to be living with a severe or profound disability.⁵¹

The ongoing impacts of colonisation mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at greater risk of disability due to increased exposure to factors such as low birthweight, chronic disease, preventable disease and illness (for example, otitis media and acute rheumatic fever), injury, and substance use, as well as due to reduced access to early treatment and rehabilitation, often because services are culturally unsafe or unavailable in remote regions.

The Yarning Disability podcast was launched in March 2023 to showcase the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living with, or caring for, someone with disability. Aiming from the start to be a catalyst for change, it has emerged as a powerful platform for disability policy and advocacy, as well as informing FPDN’s work.

Carly Wallace is Yarning Disability’s executive producer and the National Training and Engagement Manager at FPDN. She says that each episode serves as a case study for change, whether it’s the experience of a parent, someone with a disability who is homeless or has been incarcerated, for people living in a remote community, experiencing workplace issues or struggles at school.

‘Yarning Disability is unlike any other podcast out there; it elevates the stories and voices of First Nations people living with a disability and highlights the systemic barriers Mob face every day. For too long the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities have been silenced and this podcast is about giving them a platform to assert their self-determination as sovereign people and tell their stories.’

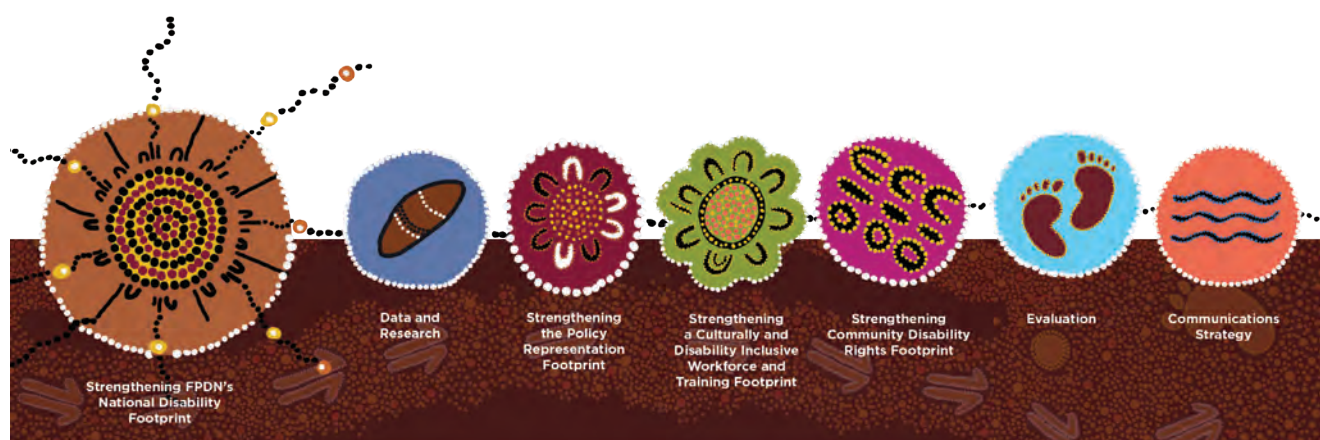
Like First Nations people with a disability, FPDN also walks in two worlds: it does much of its advocacy in the non-Indigenous sector,

working with established mainstream services and agencies like the NDIA to embed greater cultural understanding and safety.

It also works to support and inform the broader Indigenous sector about disability, in particular how colonisation and Western notions of disability have disrupted community and cultural connections, and meant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability ‘are a marginalised community within a marginalised community’.

‘We always have an Indigenous lens to our work but we also recognise the complexity around that – that an organisation deeply embedded in community might not necessarily have the knowledge or strategies around disability,’ AJ says.

FPDN is concerned that disability continues to be overlooked in the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*. It is urging for disability to be included as a Closing the Gap policy partnership area, to join five existing partnerships: justice, housing, social and emotional wellbeing, early childhood, and First Nations languages. It is also looking at the role of disability (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) in specific targets, such as the reduction of child removal rates and incarceration rates, and wants the Closing the Gap framework linked with the work of the NDIS.



FPDN’s Yarning Disability podcast is founded in its National Disability Footprint program. It has been specifically developed to align with Priority Reform Two under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – Building strong formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled service sectors.



‘Disability is not just a health issue – it connects all existing target areas: families, children and youth, housing, justice, health, economic development, culture and language, education, healing and eliminating racism and systemic discrimination,’ AJ says.

Pursuing these policy shifts, FPDN will continue to centre Indigenous peoples and experiences through the podcast and via other forums, ‘constantly reaching out to community to know they are being heard, valued and seen and their voices are shaping what we do’, AJ says.

If heard by the disability sector and governments across Australia, those insights offer hope to all people with disability, she says. ‘Indigenous people and our experiences are inherently inclusive and will greatly contribute to changing this country.’

Images supplied by First Peoples Disability Network






Building our Economies



Economic self-determination is an important component of enacting the right to self-determination, as enshrined in Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP):

Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

– United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)⁵²



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples created the first economies; over millennia we built sophisticated economic systems, labour markets, production processes, and trade relationships to maintain the lore, culture, health and wellbeing of our communities. Colonisation disrupted and prevented our peoples from maintaining these economies.

The colonial economy was built on our labour through slavery and exploitation, while none of the benefits flowed to us. The legacy of this in the modern Australian economy is a 'form of economic apartheid',⁵³ as our peoples' economic participation has been too often limited to low-paying jobs, without the power to create change. This is prevalent in the health workforce, where our peoples are underrepresented in general, and any workforce growth has been predominantly in low-status, low-paid jobs.⁵⁴

As Professor Peter Yu, a Yawuru man and Vice-President (First Nations) at the Australian National University, has said, the result is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 'have less opportunity to determine and control their economic destiny than other Australians'.⁵⁵

Through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander innovation, entrepreneurship, and strategic economic action, this is changing. The past few years have seen the growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business sector, which supports self-determination and positively influences the cultural, social, and political determinants of health.

Economic and political determinants of health and wellbeing play a significant role in determining health outcomes.⁵⁶ This is reflected in the education and employment targets under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Targets 3–8). A large step towards improving the economic determinants of our peoples' health and wellbeing is economic self-determination. However, as Professor Yu highlights, discrimination and colonisation have created an unequal playing field for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses.

Over the past few years there has been an increased focus on achieving economic self-determination for our peoples through entrepreneurial approaches and innovation. This builds on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led campaigns for improved work conditions during the 1960s.⁵⁷ Our nation's goal should be to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are the beneficiaries of our peoples' labour, innovation, and enterprise.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health services (ACCHSs) model is a key example of this approach. Born out of the Black Power movement in the 1960s, ACCHSs were established without government assistance or funding.⁵⁸ They provide an alternative health service model, operated by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that is culturally safe and community centered.⁵⁹ The establishment of ACCHSs was a response to racism in the healthcare system and an act of resistance to neoliberal, colonialist economic and political ideologies and practices. ACCHSs are a living embodiment of our peoples' self-determination and empowerment.⁶⁰ ACCHSs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations (ACCOs) provide a pathway for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into the health workforce and are culturally safe environments in which our peoples can grow their skills and careers.

Part of the goal of economic empowerment is to shift the systemic and structural power dynamics that impact on the political determinants of health and wellbeing. An excellent example of this, the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria's Self-Determination Fund is an Aboriginal-controlled fund that 'empowers Aboriginal peoples in Victoria to negotiate Treaties on a level playing field with the Victorian Government and to build capacity, wealth and prosperity for current and future generations'.⁶¹



Today there is a rising tide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses creating pathways through Australia's dominant cultural business practices and legal frameworks.⁶² These businesses measure success through a holistic lens and aim to drive change in their communities as well as achieve economic success.⁶³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses also employ a much higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, compared to non-Indigenous businesses. Both not-for-profit and for-profit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business workforces are made up of approximately 70 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.⁶⁴ This represents exemplary recruitment and retention practices for our peoples.

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

– *Uluru Statement from the Heart*

There are many examples of successful businesses that remain true to our peoples' cultural practices, are guided by our peoples' values and centre our communities. Our economic self-determination is a foundation for our peoples' improved health and wellbeing, strong communities, and self-determination more broadly.⁶⁵

We note that, in 2024, the Australian Government's review of the Indigenous Procurement Policy (IPP) is an opportunity for government to grow and strengthen this policy's intent, support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business and entrepreneurship, and benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

In this section we highlight examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses, as well as economic development and workforce strengthening initiatives, that are aimed at empowering our peoples, closing the racial wealth gap, and securing a prosperous future through nation-building, reclamation of ancestral land, ancient and contemporary trade, political leadership and career development.

‘Merch with a Message’

Clothing The Gaps

When public health practitioners Laura Thompson and Sarah Sheridan launched Clothing The Gaps in Naarm/Melbourne in 2019, their dream was for the ‘merch with a message’ business to be the vehicle to fund their health promotion work in Aboriginal communities in Victoria.

‘We didn’t realise how influential the brand could be in and of itself, and how much the business could mean for Mob,’ says Laura, CEO of the business and a Gunditjmarra woman.

Today Clothing The Gaps is a leading and award-winning ‘profit-for-purpose’ accredited social enterprise with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination at its core.

Everything we do, we do with Mob in our hearts. That’s really reflected in how we make our decisions and the way we do work.

– Laura Thompson, Clothing The Gaps

Clothing The Gaps designs both Mob-only and ally-friendly merchandise with slogans like ‘Always was, always will be’ and ‘Not a Date to Celebrate’, to educate and start conversations about causes or issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It uses its brand and growing platform to campaign, educate and elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and causes, and to promote reconciliation: creating ‘walking billboards’ for social change.

It suffered an early blow – forced by The Gap Clothing brand in the United States to change its original name of ‘Clothing The Gap’ – but it has won other crucial battles. After being served with a ‘cease and desist’ notice for using the Aboriginal flag on its clothing, Clothing The Gaps spearheaded the powerful ‘Free The Flag’ campaign that finally liberated our iconic Aboriginal flag from copyright restrictions, enabling it to be available for public use.



Laura Thompson (left) and Sarah Sheridan (right), Clothing The Gaps co-founders

‘Every single time someone, whether Mob or supporter, wears a Clothing The Gaps tee out in the world, they’re shifting the way that physical environment looks and feels,’ Sarah said. ‘Every piece of our clothing has our logo, which looks like the Aboriginal flag, on the back of the neck ... which means there’s now tens of thousands more Aboriginal flags out in the world.’

As they declare on their website, ‘Some people ask us whether a T-shirt can really create meaningful impact, and our answer is: it absolutely can, just watch.’

Laura met Sarah, who is a non-Indigenous woman, when they were both working at the community controlled Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), where they grew the Healthy Lifestyle Team from strength to strength.

They left to begin their own health promotion business for Aboriginal communities in Victoria, ‘Spark Health’, until COVID-19 struck; at which point they turned their attention to the small line of clothing they had designed, which gained traction during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. It was a crucial time in Australia, one that saw non-Indigenous Australians pause and reflect on what was happening in their own backyard after watching the injustices taking place in the United States.

Clothing The Gaps staff
at the flagship store



‘We worked hard to create meaningful content that educated people about backing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, causes and communities in those lockdowns. The support from people through the purchasing of merch was our “seed funding”, you could say,’ Laura says.

Rather than formal business training, they have applied a health promotion lens to the business: strengths-based messaging, building a community of people, peer-to-peer support, agency, and action. ‘Nothing is just a T-shirt’, they say: all sales are a connection to community, conversations, and campaigns, as well as to ethical products and a safe Blak workplace.

Customers are asked at the checkout whether they identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander: that has enabled the business to build a Mob mailing list, to deliver price equity via a Mob discount, and give early access to products and sales as well as create and share content that speaks to Mob only.

Clothing the Gaps was the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander business to gain Ethical Clothing Australia accreditation and is also a highly ranked B Corporation business – that is, one that is designed to create positive outcomes for stakeholders, whether they

be workers, community, environment, or customers.

In 2021 it created the Clothing the Gaps Foundation, running traditional Aboriginal games events and supporting communities with their own events, called ‘Mob Run This’, as well as delivering Free The Flag workshops to schools and other groups.

It also runs campaigns like ‘Shades of Deadly’, which challenges stereotypes, celebrates identities, and educates the wider community about the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as the ongoing impacts of racism and inequity.

Sarah says Clothing The Gaps also aligns its work directly with Closing the Gap targets Seven and Eight: increasing the proportion of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in employment, education or training, and more broadly helping to build strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

The business now employs 43 staff on contracts or as casuals – more than 90 per cent are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but the focus is not just on the head count.

People often talk about the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait people they have employed, but we like to talk about the hours of meaningful employment that people get through us. Anybody can sign an employment contract but there's a difference in really engaging with people in the workforce.

– Sarah Sheridan, *Clothing the Gaps*

On average, Clothing The Gaps now generates about 25,000 hours of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth employment each year, providing a safe Blak space for young people to develop skills. It also offers exposure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to earn a living in the business world, providing experience in retail and wholesale distribution as well as marketing.

‘Growing up, I didn’t know people who had shops or ran businesses,’ Laura recalls. ‘You can’t be what you can’t see.’

Clothing The Gaps aims to be a role model for not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses but for mainstream enterprises, given how much power and influence businesses have and their potential to promote inclusive and sustainable social change.

‘We run the business like a community organisation,’ says Laura, reflecting on its origins in health promotion.

‘Often businesses can be driven by profits and not their values, but certainly I think we’ve done a great job of proving you can run a business and lead with your values and still be profitable.’

Images supplied by Clothing The Gaps





Yindjibarndi, Yurra and Juluwarlu teams at work

Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation

Community, culture and commerce

Yindjibarndi man Terrance Warrie has worked for ten years with the Yurra contracting business, an offshoot of the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation (YAC), based in the Pilbara in remote northwest Western Australia. As one of its first employees, he started out in lower-skilled jobs like gardening and landscaping before skilling up, moving into complex, challenging roles in road construction and maintenance on Rio Tinto's extensive rail network from its Pilbara mines to ports at Cape Lambert and Dampier.

Warrie's career progression has followed that of YAC itself which, a decade ago, under the leadership of CEO Michael Woodley – also a Yindjibarndi man – and his partner Lorraine Coppin, developed a new, holistic approach to self-determination for the Yindjibarndi people.

Known as the '3Cs', YAC's focus is on community, culture and commerce. The impact has been profound, particularly as it has come without access to mining royalties.

Based in the regional centre of Karratha, Yurra, including its majority-owned sister company GBSC Yurra, now employs over 400 people and generates approximately \$120 million revenue per year. About 35 per cent of employees are Aboriginal people. In recent years, the company secured a \$20 million rail maintenance contract with Rio Tinto, a scaffolding contract with Woodside, and it will benefit from YAC's plan to develop renewable energy with an international partner.

Yurra prides itself on creating a supportive, trust-based, family and culturally oriented workplace, underscored by majority Yindjibarndi ownership, company values, leadership, cultural awareness training, and a focus on workplace safety and wellbeing – 'all of which are embodied in our company culture and everyday operations', says CEO Stephen Rogers.

YAC has itself bought and renovated a former hotel and turned it into a community centre, runs a community radio station and ranger group, and is building much-needed housing. Further, its cultural work through the Juluwarlu Group has achieved national recognition.

‘Our approach is grounded in self-determination,’ says Michael Woodley, whose grandfather Woodley King established a Yindjibarndi homeland community at Ngurrawaana (meaning ‘going back to country’), about 100km from Ieramugadu (known in English as Roebourne) in the early 1980s. Ngurrawaana is the only Yindjibarndi community on Country.

The ‘3Cs’ are not just about building businesses and assets: it’s about creating pathways of growing people into opportunities and jobs, and also being a contributor to the nation-building model. That’s how we change things. That’s how we create long-term sustainability for our people and the generations to come.

– Michael Woodley, CEO, Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation (YAC)

Like other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Pilbara and across Australia, the Yindjibarndi community suffered the effects of dispossession from the 1860s onwards. After being used as cheap or free labour by the pastoral industry for a century, the introduction of wages saw them discarded by the stations and forced to live on reserves in makeshift dwellings on the edges of towns like Ieramugadu, which is on the traditional lands of the Ngarluma people. The two communities now work together through the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation.

While mining has been a pathway towards commercial success for some in the Yindjibarndi community, it has also caused division and distress for others. Andrew ‘Twiggy’ Forrest’s Fortescue Metals Group, for example, developed the giant Solomon Hub iron ore mine on Yindjibarndi country from 2013, without a land-use agreement, while funding another Traditional Owner group that helped get the mine approved.

Developed at the same time as the Solomon Hub was under construction, the 3C approach was designed as a vehicle to unify the community and move it forward – to bring the community together in a way that respects culture but also takes advantage of commercial opportunities in an area where billions of dollars of wealth is being generated every year through iron ore and liquefied natural gas.

YAC built on early work from Michael and Lorraine in establishing a cultural preservation organisation, named Juluwarlu, that initially used Community Development Program funding to document Country. Juluwarlu has produced three large volumes that document Yindjibarndi culture and Country, and it has also established a nationally recognised archive.

In 2015, YAC embarked on an ambitious project to transform central Ieramugadu’s then-derelect Victoria Hotel into the Ganalili Cultural Centre, which opened in 2019. It has also secured \$10 million in funding from the Western Australian Government to build the Ganalili Accommodation and Training Facility, where 11 grouped dwellings will provide much-needed housing for Aboriginal apprentices and trainees, including those exiting the corrections system. The project is due for completion in the first half of this year.

In 2019 Juluwarlu created an important showcase of Yindjibarndi creation stories using large-scale puppetry and Yindjibarndi-led storytelling. The production, called Ngurra Nyujunggamu, which translates into English as When the World Was Soft, weaves stories of how the world came to be, told by Yindjibarndi people. Ngurra Nyujunggamu headlined the Red Earth Arts Festival in Karratha in 2023 and will be taken around Australia. A book based on the story will be published this year.

For Michael Woodley, it is critical that opportunities for the Yindjibarndi are considered across all of the 3Cs – community, culture and commerce – simultaneously, rather than in isolation. ‘Through greater collaboration across the 3Cs, greater and longer-lasting success will be achieved,’ he says.

Images supplied by the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation

Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association

Supporting medical specialists

In the past four years, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical specialists has almost doubled, up from 108 in 2019 to 204 in 2023.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors are now working across a range of specialties, including anaesthetics, psychiatry, surgery, ophthalmology, radiology, and gynaecology — their numbers on a steady rise as their commitment to delivering healthcare is harnessed and supported.

The result is not just a win for personal success and improving career pathways but promises significant workforce growth and improved health equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, giving them greater access to culturally safe care.

Work by the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) over many years has contributed significantly to this workforce growth. In 2022, AIDA implemented the Specialist Trainee Support Program (STSP) in partnership with the non-GP specialty medical colleges, led by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists.

The program, which is funded by the Department of Health and Aged Care, includes:

- culturally appropriate mentoring and coaching for individual trainees
- a network for culturally safe collegiate support with online and face-to-face educational activities
- collaboration with medical colleges to ensure that they understand their significant role in the specialisation experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees, and that they commit to ongoing self-assessment in order to remove barriers, ensure training programs are equitable, and enable trainees' success.

STSP was born out of 2019 research conducted by AIDA and James Cook University, titled *Strong Futures: Strengthening the Path to Fellowship for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Medical Graduates*. It found that a growing number of graduates were exiting training programs without reaching specialisation for a range of reasons, including cultural load, financial barriers, and lack of cultural safety in their training environments.

The *Strong Futures* research recommended support to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors could successfully complete specialist training, including by taking into account family and cultural obligations and implementing strategies such as cultural and bereavement leave. Additionally, it is crucial that their expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, through lived experience, is valued and respected.

It also recommended that medical colleges and training organisations become more accountable for the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees by monitoring their progress and providing any necessary support.

That year, AIDA and the 15 specialist medical colleges made a joint commitment, and developed and endorsed 15 minimum and best practice standards. The medical colleges accepted their responsibility and agreed to provide and publish bi-annual self-assessments against these standards.



Specialist trainees at a 2023 STSP workshop in nipaluna (Hobart)



Last year, the program provided one-on-one support (including performance coaching, counselling and advocacy), regular Yarn Ups, an inaugural three-day workshop, and quarterly cross-college meetings – unique in medical training in Australia. These approaches bring trainees together in a culturally safe space, effectively as a Community of practice, to share progress and challenges and seek support from each other.

One of the trainees provided this reflection on their experience of the program:

‘The passion to contribute to my peoples’ health in women’s care, by achieving a training position in my chosen field, meant I could directly impact the outcomes for my people. Specialty training is sometimes a difficult journey. Without the culturally safe and inclusive support of the STSP offered through AIDA, it’s highly likely I would never have achieved this. The overwhelming trust and commitment that STSP continues to provide is truly instrumental in my success.’

In 2023, the STSP team worked with the OCHRe (Our Collaborations in Health Research) national network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to develop advice on how research can – and should – be undertaken in ways that are culturally safe, minimising risk and negative (sometimes traumatic) experiences for trainees.

Broadly, the program also seeks to address systemic issues that make it hard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to study medicine and then go on to specialist training, ‘knowing that college processes can be designed to privilege non-Aboriginal people and perspectives,’ says AIDA’s Director of Programs and Outcomes Dr Stephanie May.

‘So there’s a lot of work to be done in that space to ensure doctors can come through, get appropriate training, be able to flourish in their careers and make a difference in their communities,’ she says, acknowledging that, while the growing numbers are exciting, they still come off a worryingly low base.

AIDA President Dr Simone Raye, last year described it as ‘sobering’ that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors still comprise just 0.3 per cent of all medical specialists in Australia, far below population parity.

Healthcare in Australia will be vastly improved when the unique medico-cultural perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialists inform and shape healthcare delivery in our country.

– Dr Simone Raye, President AIDA



Specialist trainees at a 2023 STSP workshop in nipaluna (Hobart)

In a report to medical colleges, Dr Raye and Dr Vijay Roach, Chair of the Council of Presidents of Medical Colleges, reflected on 2022 research into the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical trainees, which found that high proportions have experienced or witnessed bullying, harassment, discrimination and/or racism by senior medical staff, and that their experiences and complaints are often dismissed when they report racism to employers and colleges.

‘This is unacceptable,’ they said. ‘Racism harms our trainees and our patients.’

AIDA also is looking to improve the accountability of colleges for training outcomes by monitoring the experience of trainees throughout, measuring not only retention of trainees but time and uninterrupted progress through training.

‘We know many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors are taking longer, for various community, cultural and educational reasons, to complete their degrees and to specialise, and that some will move out of medicine,’ Stephanie says.

‘People of course have the right to choose a different career path, but it shouldn’t be because of culturally unsafe environments and lack of support.’

Images supplied by Australian Indigenous Doctors Association



Conclusion

The referendum outcome should not, however, eclipse the agency and resilience of Indigenous peoples but serve as a catalyst to our collective efforts in Indigenous nation building.

– Professor Daryle Rigney, Director & Professor, Indigenous Nations and Collaborative Futures Research Hub, Jumbunna Institute, University of Technology Sydney

This report delivers the clear message that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the solutions. We focus on three themes that address many key priorities: Progressing Voice, Treaty and Truth; Leadership and Governance; and Building Our Economies.

Even though our voices weren't heard over the last year, we will not fall silent, and will continue to speak up for our rights, justice, and self-determination. The Uluru Statement was a gift to all Australians. Our generosity in sharing our experiences and solutions should not be overlooked.

The case studies and stories within this report demonstrate the incredible

leadership, innovation, and economic self-determination being demonstrated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the country. They highlight the ways in which our peoples are stepping into our power and forging positions of leadership and influence so that we can work towards decolonising systems and controlling our own destinies. They also demonstrate how governments can take action to implement the Uluru Statement in their jurisdictions, independent of any national action.

We call on our allies and all Australians to support us in our efforts towards self-determination.

We particularly call on governments to urgently implement all of the recommendations of this report, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap and its Priority Reforms, which support self-determination for our peoples. This requires commitment to transform and decolonise Western systems, and the development of genuine equal and reciprocal partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments.

Acronyms

ACCOS	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations
ACCHOs	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Organisations
ACCHSs	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Services
AHCSA	Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
ANZSOG	Australian and New Zealand School of Government
APS	Australian Public Service
CLC	Central Land Council
CAHA	Climate and Health Alliance
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
FVPLS	Family Violence Prevention Legal Services
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPP	Indigenous Procurement Policy
ITTB	Interim Truth and Treaty Body
NAATSIHWP	National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners
NDIA	National Disability Insurance Agency
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NHLF	National Health Leadership Forum
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency
NITV	National Indigenous Television
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
YAC	Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation
VACCHO	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
VAHS	Victorian Aboriginal Health Service

Close **the** Gap Campaign Alliance Group Members

1. Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales
2. Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia
3. Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR)
4. Australasian College for Emergency Medicine
5. Australian College of Midwives
6. Australian College of Nursing
7. Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine
8. Australian Council of Social Service
9. Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association
10. Australian Human Rights Commission
11. Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association
12. Australian Indigenous Psychologists' Association
13. Australian Medical Association
14. Australian Physiotherapy Association
15. Australian Student and Novice Nurse Association
16. Beyond Blue
17. Black Dog Institute
18. Cancer Council of Australia
19. Community Mental Health Australia
20. Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives
21. CRANaplus
22. Expert Adviser – Alcohol and other drugs, Professor Pat Dudgeon
23. Expert Adviser – Epidemiology and public health, Professor Ian Ring
24. First Peoples Disability Network
25. Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia
26. Heart Foundation Australia
27. Indigenous Allied Health Australia
28. Indigenous Dentists' Association of Australia
29. Indigenous Eye Health Unit, University of Melbourne
30. Kidney Health Australia
31. Lowitja Institute
32. Menzies School of Health Research
33. National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners
34. National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
35. National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists
36. Tom Calma AO – Campaign founder and former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner – National Coordinator, Tackling Indigenous Smoking
37. National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum
38. National Heart Foundation
39. National Rural Health Alliance
40. NSW Aboriginal Land Council
41. Oxfam Australia
42. Palliative Care Australia
43. Perinatal Wellbeing Centre
44. PHILE Network
45. Public Health Association of Australia
46. Reconciliation Australia
47. Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
48. SBS, the home of National Indigenous Television
49. The Fred Hollows Foundation
50. The Healing Foundation
51. The Pharmacy Guild of Australia
52. Torres Strait Regional Authority
53. Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
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