

# The Arrilla Circle



A quarterly communicate exclusive to Arrilla Digital, where authors of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent share their life experiences in order for us to walk in the shoes of another.

October 2025

## Advancing a culture of truth-telling in Australia



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*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have long called for truth-telling and there is a growing appetite for it among many non-Indigenous Australians. In this edition of The Arrilla Circle, Karen Mundine, Bundjalung woman and CEO of Reconciliation Australia, writes about building on this momentum by reducing barriers to participation and our shared responsibility for this important national process.*

Whatever your vote on 14 October 2023, it is hard to deny that the public debate surrounding the 2023 Voice referendum exposed significant knowledge gaps in the Australian population – from the No Campaign's, 'If you don't know, vote no,' to the rife misinformation, enabled by the bedrock of ignorance on which it landed. The referendum shone a spotlight on the lack of common

understanding among Australians about where we have come from and how that history continues to shape us.

### **Truth-telling: a pre-requisite to Australians working together for real change**

Truth-telling is critically important for both symbolic and practical reasons. By truth-telling, I mean the many and varied processes that enable a fuller and more accurate account of Australia's history. These are processes that help all of us to develop a shared understanding of the injustices perpetrated against First Nations peoples and their impacts, as well as the unique strengths and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. And these processes are precursors for justice and healing, for grassroots and structural change, and for a future where policies and practices do not repeat the mistakes of the past. These processes, in essence, can enable a paradigm shift.

Such a paradigm shift can enable a whole-of-nation reckoning with the legacies of advantage and disadvantage on which Australia has been built. It can enable us to acknowledge and actively address the systemic injustices and discrimination that continue to shape the lives of First Nations communities. Even so, we will achieve none of this without both personal and institutional responsibility. Non-Indigenous Australians need to be brave in owning that they have benefited from that legacy and therefore have a meaningful role to play in addressing the structural inequality it has created.

Truth-telling has been integral to Australia's reconciliation process since its beginnings. The hard truths told in the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody were the catalyst for the Decade for Reconciliation in the '90s, and all that has sprung from it – including the formation of Reconciliation Australia.

The concept of truth-telling, truth-listening and truth-acting is at the heart of why we believe it is a powerful driver of reconciliation. Setting the record straight is critical, but it will not create a stronger, more united future without a transformational response in the way our governments, businesses and communities operate. This year's National Reconciliation Week theme, 'Bridging Now to Next,' reflected an invitation to all Australians to step forward together – guided by the lessons of the past and enriched by the knowledge and cultures that have sustained this land and its people for more than 60,000 years.

### **Truth-telling: highly valued but not highly practised**

We know that truth-telling is important, and the evidence suggests that most Australians agree. The [Australian Reconciliation Barometer](#) – a biennial national survey commissioned by Reconciliation Australia – tracks the progress of reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. The truth-telling section of the 2024 survey found more than 80% of non-Indigenous Australians believe it is important to learn about the impacts of colonisation and government policy on First Nations peoples. Nearly three quarters of Australians believe it is important to undertake truth-telling. These numbers are even higher for young Australians, multicultural Australians and the employees of the thousands of Australian organisations with Reconciliation Action Plans.

Even so, the survey also reveals that this is not translating into widespread action. Of the 71% of non-Indigenous Australians who agree that truth-telling is important, only 9% report participating in a local truth-telling activity in the past year.

In 2023 Reconciliation Australia commissioned researchers at the University of New South Wales to investigate barriers to participation in truth-telling. The resulting report, [Coming to terms with the past? Identifying barriers and enablers to truth-telling](#), is a rich resource. Among its many findings is that barriers to non-Indigenous participation include:

- a perceived lack of opportunity
- anxiety and uncertainty around the appropriate role of non-Indigenous people
- fear of distress.

A key barrier identified by First Nations participants was safety. Protecting people and culture must be the priority. The principle of First-Nations-led is central, but that does not mean that First Nations people carry all the responsibility. While there isn't a template for truth-telling there are key principles that should guide the work – co-designed processes, cultural safety and direction from the communities impacted by the legacy of the truths being shared.

### Community Truth-telling Pathways

Reconciliation Australia's newest program, [Community Truth-telling Pathways](#), is working, alongside local communities and like-minded organisations to advance a national culture of truth-telling that is First-Nations-led, place based, strengths focused and action oriented. We are learning from communities that are undertaking local truth-telling activities and have recently created an online [Resources Hub to support those activities](#). The Hub will be a growing source of practical tools to address identified barriers, supporting communities at different points in their truth-telling journey. This includes a series of case studies that highlight good practice and positive impact, helping Australians understand that First Nations histories are more than horrific injustices. They include stories of strength and courage, and of leadership and innovation – forcing a reckoning with entrenched assumptions and beliefs – from the heroism of Jacky Jacky and Yarri during the Gundagai floods to the history changing Wave Hill Walk-Off to Fanny Balbuk's defiance of coloniser encroachment in Western Australia.

The evidence tells us that the majority of Australians aspire to better and fairer outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also tells us that this requires non-Indigenous Australians to acknowledge and resist reproducing their unearned structural social, economic and political advantage. It demands a rejection of the paternalistic thinking and superficial policy 'solutions' that have failed First Nations peoples for generations. It's only by grappling with our past that we can fully understand our present, and drive the structural reform required to transform the future for all Australians.

For more on truth-telling, truth-listening and truth-acting, visit Reconciliation Australia's online [Resources Hub](#).