



Let's talk...the Freedom Ride

2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Ride, a remarkable journey to campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's rights in Australia. This month we reflect on our history and celebrate our movement towards reconciliation half a century on.

The Freedom Ride

Echoing the civil rights movement in the United States, the Freedom Ride was an inspiring journey through New South Wales from 12 to 26 February 1965 to campaign for rights for Aboriginal peoples.¹ Led by the late Charles Perkins, a group of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous students from the University of Sydney travelled around towns by bus to expose discrimination, rally people against the injustice of segregation, and give a voice to Aboriginal peoples.² The Freedom Ride served as an inspiration for, and a precursor to, the 1967 Referendum, where Australia overwhelmingly voted to allow Aboriginal people to enjoy the same rights and protections as all other Australians.³ This year, fifty years on, we celebrate the legacy of the Freedom Riders, our journey forward to reconciliation, and the [campaign to formally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's Constitution](#).

Discover more about the [Freedom Ride through reading Ann Curthoys' diary](#). Ann was one of the students who took part in the Freedom Ride and is now an honorary Professor at the University of Sydney.⁴

Looking back...access to rights in the 'Lucky Country'

At the time of the Freedom Ride in 1965, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were denied rights by the governments of the day. For example:

- State governments frequently dictated Aboriginal peoples' freedom of movement, personal finances and child rearing practices. Often Aboriginal people could not eat in restaurants, swim in a public pool, or have access to education.⁵

¹ http://indigenoustrights.net.au/civil_rights/freedom_ride_1965

² http://indigenoustrights.net.au/civil_rights/freedom_ride_1965

³ http://indigenoustrights.net.au/civil_rights/freedom_ride_1965

⁴ For a detailed account of the Freedom Ride see Ann Curthoys, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom rider Remembers* (Allen and Unwin, 2002).



- Government policies involved removing Aboriginal children from their families, as well as removing Aboriginal peoples from their ancestral lands and onto reserves.⁶

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were denied the right to vote in Federal elections until 1962.⁷

Today Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples still experience the negative effects of decades of

discrimination. First Australians are more likely to die young, are less likely to be able to read and write, and find it much more difficult to maintain employment.⁸ We can continue to use the achievements of the Freedom Riders as inspiration to strive towards equality and justice for Australia's First Peoples today.

Meet... the Perkins' family

An inspiring leader: Leader of the Freedom Ride, Charles Perkins was an influential activist for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, dedicating his life to achieving justice for Aboriginal Australians.

An inspiring sportsman who played soccer professionally, Charlie went on to work as the Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, was a member of the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the Aboriginal Development Commission and Aboriginal Hostels Ltd.⁹

Charlie was awarded the Order of Australia in 1987 for his noble dedication to pursuing equality.¹⁰ He described the Freedom Ride as "the greatest and most exciting event [he had] ever been involved with in Aboriginal affairs".¹¹ Why not listen to Charles speak about his motivation for the Freedom Ride [here](#)?



A legacy continued: Rachel Perkins, Charlie's daughter, is a director, writer and filmmaker, and through the medium of art continues to share the values, passion and work of her father in promoting reconciliation.

⁵ <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/government-policy-in-relation-to-aboriginal-people/>

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⁷ <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/government-policy-in-relation-to-aboriginal-people/>

⁸ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 2014*; COAG Reform Council, *Indigenous Reform 2012-13: Five years of performance*.

⁹ <http://www.perkinstrust.com.au/about-dr-charles-perkins.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.perkinstrust.com.au/about-dr-charles-perkins.html>

¹¹ The Charlie Perkins Trust for Children and Students: <http://www.perkinstrust.com.au/about-dr-charles-perkins.html>



Rachel's most prominent works include the multi-award winning feature films *Bran Nue Dae*, *Radiance* and *One Night The Moon*.¹² Rachel was also one of the directors, writers and producers of the award winning series [First Australians](#), which is 'the story of Australia, thousands of years in the making, told by its First Peoples, the First Australians'.¹³

Rachel continues to advocate for representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through her inspiring work.¹⁴ Rachel's film [Blood Brothers—Freedom Ride](#), documents the incredible journey and work of her father and the 1965 Freedom Ride.

Take action... 50 years on

The Freedom Ride emboldened Australians to take a stand against discrimination, to protect equality and foster the process of reconciliation. We can continue the passion for justice pursued by the Freedom Riders today and advocate for the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- [Join in the University of Sydney's re-enactment and celebration](#) of the Freedom Ride, starting in February.
- Support the [Recognise](#) movement to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our Constitution.
- Join the '[Racism. It Stops With Me](#)' campaign to help end racism, prejudice and discrimination.
- Support the process of reconciliation by encouraging your workplace to develop a [Reconciliation Action Plan](#), or your school to get involved in the [Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in schools and early learning program](#).
- Myths, stereotypes and their associated stigma have perpetuating negative effects on health, education and employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹⁵ Debunk these myths through [Share our Pride](#), and [raise awareness of the harmful effects of racism](#).

Reconciliation Australia would like to thank Professor Ann Curthoys for her assistance in the production of this factsheet.

Photo credits

Banner photo: Courtesy of Wendy Watson-Ekstein (Freedom rider Wendy Golding).

Photo 1: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and Courtesy Tribune / SEARCH Foundation [ON 161 / 222]

Photo 2: Charles Perkins on the way home from Uni 1963. Photo: Robert MacFarlane

Photo 3: Director Rachel Perkins outside of one of the old houses in the film 'Bran Nue Dae', in the mangroves on Dampier Creek, Broome, Western Australia. Photo: Leon Mead

Photo 4: Courtesy of Wendy Watson-Ekstein (Freedom rider Wendy Golding).

¹² http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/resource_sections/success-stories/

¹³ <http://www.programs.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/content/>

¹⁴ http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/resource_sections/success-stories/

¹⁵ <http://shareourpride.reconciliation.org.au/sections/beyond-the-myths/>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this factsheet may contain images or names of people who have since passed away