

# Recognising the power of community truth-telling

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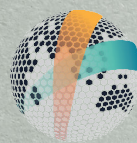
## ADI Policy Briefing Papers

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# Executive Summary

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have long called for a comprehensive account of Australia's history and emphasised the significance of truth-telling for political transformation and reconciliation. This has most recently been expressed in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, which calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth.

Survey data from Reconciliation Australia shows there is widespread community interest in and support for truth-telling at local, state and national levels among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Eighty three percent of the general community and 87% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples surveyed in the 2022 Australian Reconciliation Barometer believed that Australia should undertake formal truth-telling processes (Reconciliation Australia, 2022).

Our research on community truth-telling, based on a unique collaborative study between the Centre for Inclusive and Resilient Societies, Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation and Reconciliation Australia, found Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have shown significant leadership in truth-telling, often with few resources or support. Importantly, they have invited non-Indigenous people to partner with them in truth-telling.

Community truth-telling can take the form of memorial and commemorative events, repatriation, renaming of places, public artwork and healing sites. In the light of the growing national support for truth-telling, we conducted in-depth research by carrying out 25 case studies, including ten where we held extensive interviews with community organisers. In addition, we consulted approximately 600 documentary sources. This research helps shed new light on rich and diverse ways to engage with the complex truths of Australian history.

The study offers important lessons for how the vision of truth-telling in the Uluru Statement could be realised and supported in order to build a fuller understanding of Australia's history and the need for lasting structural transformations.

The investigation contains numerous case studies of successful community truth telling activities. These case studies provide easily understandable examples of what truth-telling looks like, what constitutes best practice and how to ensure safety and protection from re-traumatising.

This briefing paper outlines our key findings and suggests ways in which truth-telling could be supported. It proposes a set of principles which the research indicates could enhance the power and impact of truth-telling and makes recommendations about how truth-telling could be progressed in the light of the research.

# Why is this issue important to Australia today?

Truth-telling is critical to reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Islander Peoples and non-Indigenous Australians. Currently, there are differences between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians' understandings of colonial history and the impact of this on the country today. Truth-telling is crucial to developing a shared understanding between all Australians that can contribute to meaningful reconciliation.

There is increasing national recognition of the importance of truth-telling with initiatives in a number of states to create truth-telling bodies. Victoria is currently leading the way with the establishment of the Yoorrook Justice Commission in 2021. The Queensland government is using truth-telling to help inform the path to treaty and in Tasmania the implementation of the Pathway to Truth-telling and Treaty report is currently being negotiated.

Our research shows that there are already many examples of local community truth-telling activities, which provide positive case studies for how truth-telling can build understanding and collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous communities.

If Australia is to effectively engage in national and state-level truth-telling, it is crucial to draw on the experience developed at a local level over many decades to inform truth-telling that is effective and ethical.

“Reconciliation happens every time we are there because of the fact that is Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people coming together to acknowledge the horror of an event and to celebrate the continuing culture.”



Ann Madsen (Winga Myamly Reconciliation Group Member)

# Findings

## A rich and diverse community engagement with the past

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have not waited for formal processes to tell their historical truths. They have shown significant perseverance and innovation in proactively advocating for repatriation, renaming, reparation, commemoration, public art and education, and other forms of recognition and truth-telling, often with minimal resources over extended periods. Our research has identified hundreds of such initiatives across the country, demonstrating the enormous diversity and creativity with which the legacy of colonialism can be acknowledged and its harmful effects mitigated.

## First Nations leadership of truth-telling

A substantial proportion of the projects we documented have been initiated and driven by First Nations communities who are currently carrying a large share of the responsibility for educating the next generation about the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at a local level. This is a significant achievement, however placing this responsibility solely on local communities, particularly on individuals who have been traumatised, such as members of the Stolen Generations, as well as people who have experienced other forms of intergenerational trauma, is problematic.

## A significant impact on the national narrative

These community initiatives have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of historical violations and the important contributions of First Nations Peoples throughout Australia. The research found that the impact of community truth-telling has been substantial, contributing over time to a re-evaluation of Australia's colonial history and an increasing recognition of the conflict it entailed.

## Truth-telling is about recognising the self-determination and contribution of First Nations Peoples

Community truth-telling is about more than acknowledging past violations. It can also be a powerful reassertion of First Nations identity and self-determination, countering stereotypes of First Nations communities as disempowered victims and the lack of representation of their contribution to Australian history and society. It seeks to highlight the roles of First Nations Peoples in resistance against colonialism, their acts of bravery and sacrifice and their contribution to local communities and economies.

## Truth-telling is essential for reconciliation

While truth-telling does not guarantee reconciliation, the participants in our study stressed that meaningful reconciliation cannot occur without truth-telling. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities see truth-telling and acknowledgment of the past as crucial steps towards genuine reconciliation. Interviewees highlighted the importance of forging new relationships between First Nations and non-Indigenous communities, in recognition that these relationships have often never existed, or are in need of fundamental repair.

## Truth-telling has built partnerships between First Nations and non-Indigenous communities

We found when non-Indigenous people participated in truth-telling, it helped build a deeper shared understanding of the past and the achievements of First Nations peoples. As a result, more and more non-Indigenous Australians are becoming critical partners in truth-telling. This provides an important model for truth-telling as a collective social responsibility in which non-Indigenous Australians are crucial participants. This truth-telling enriches the country as a whole.

# Findings

## Local and experiential truth-telling initiatives are important

Our study found truth-telling is most effective when it occurs through immersive experiences. Embedding truth-telling in local places – on Country – has emerged as significant across many types of initiatives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices, such as smoking ceremonies, walking on Country, storytelling, and personal engagements with survivors, contributed to healing, dialogue, and a deeper mutual understanding of history. Through these events First Nations communities strengthened their connections to community, history and Country and non-Indigenous people learned about these connections from them.

## National recognition is vital

Greater systemic national recognition of First Nations history and agency could help create a more conducive and equal environment for truth-telling and reconciliation. For example, a national commemoration of Mabo Day to recognise the overturing of the doctrine of *terra nullius*. National recognition of the frontier conflicts and more recent violations such as the Stolen Generations through formal commemorative events and dedicated museum sites, is also crucial.

## There is more work to do

Many important historical violations and First Nations achievements remain substantially unrecognised. Local governments have played a key role in supporting truth-telling in some municipalities, but more support for local truth-telling is required. Sustained funding, support, and the recognition of historical events at local and national levels, is essential.

“We know that truth-telling is central to the healing we must all go through. Without the truth we will never heal properly... This healing is what we all will need, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and non-Indigenous people alike”

▶ Mick Gooda (Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner)

# Principles for Truth-Telling

First Nations communities stress the significance of local truth-telling, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all blueprint is unsuitable. Instead, a variety of approaches is more effective. However, our research indicates that truth-telling initiatives guided by the following principles are most likely to have a positive outcome.

## Prioritise First Nations leadership, agency, and self-determination in truth-telling

Through our First Nations leadership, the agency and self-determination of local First Nations communities is centred and guides the truth-telling that occurs, including identifying the harms that need to be addressed and the means through which this redress will occur. Non-Indigenous communities are invited into this space of cultural authority and autonomy to build relationships that are reciprocal, healing and transformative.

## Partnership with non-Indigenous Australians is critical; truth-telling is a shared responsibility

First Nations communities underline that truth-telling is a shared responsibility. It needs to be viewed as a collective activity that benefits all Australians. It involves mutual recognition by every Australian of a colonial system and its ongoing effects, rather than a focus on blameworthy individuals.

## Active engagement with history by all Australians is essential to create change

Instead of a passive recounting of past events by victims, an active engagement with history promotes effective collaboration between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians. It requires non-Indigenous Australians to reflect on their own history and agency in relationship with First Nations communities reclaiming their identity and self-determination.

## Truth-telling processes must ensure safety and prevent re-traumatisation

Safety is essential for successful and ethical truth-telling. Ensuring the process does not lead to harm or trauma is crucial. This includes paying attention to the integrity and safety of the truth-telling process, being guided by cultural protocols and ensuring informed consent. It requires recognising the potential emotional cost of truth-telling and providing adequate support to respond to this. Importantly, it also involves ensuring that truth-telling leads to effective change so that truth-tellers do not share their stories in vain.

## Truth-telling is localised, taking into account the specific history and context of different areas

Truth-telling in Australia is deeply connected to the principle of being 'on Country', which involves understanding and deepening relationships to the people, land, and the environment in local contexts. Truth-telling is seen as crucial to strengthening these relationships to Country. Successful truth-telling focuses on local history, awareness of community dynamics, and the unique resources available in each context. This helps foster a genuine understanding of each community's truths based on shared recognition of past harm and a more truthful relationship between community members on Country.



# Principles for Truth-Telling

## A holistic approach to truth-telling, informed by First Nations Knowledges, is key

The most impactful truth-telling is guided by a relational and holistic First Nations world-view that acknowledges multiple historical viewpoints can be negotiated within relationships of trust and recognition. Truth-telling is understood as a multi-faceted process, addressing systemic, individual, spiritual, collective, physical, and psychic damage. It doesn't prioritise one form of truth or outcome over another but takes an integrated approach, considering all facets of harm and addressing them collectively. Redress and reparation for the damages caused by colonialism and its continuing effects are integrated into the process rather than being deferred to a later date.

## Experiential and immersive truth-telling has the most powerful transformational impact

Experiential truth-telling engages both non-Indigenous and First Nations communities, allowing them to connect with historical violations cognitively and emotionally. While it educates about colonial history, it does so through hands-on experiences on Country and interpersonal interactions, ensuring participants deeply feel and understand the implications of colonial history and potential pathways for improved community cohesion.

## Truth-telling is ongoing and sustainable, acknowledging the deep-seated nature of past harms

Effective truth-telling acknowledges that addressing historical injustice is an ongoing process requiring a deepening understanding and commitment to redress. Long-term and sustainable approaches are the most impactful. The belief that moving forward requires forgetting the past can halt important but necessary conversations about uncomfortable truths. Instead, truth-telling is enhanced by

embracing First Nations' cyclical and holistic view of time, where the past remains relevant and informs the present. This continued engagement with history isn't a burden but improves the lives and relationships of all Australians.

## Prioritise trust-building and process over speed in truth-telling

Effective truth-telling initiatives focus on building real trust and understanding for lasting community impact. Building these relationships requires time, humility, and deep listening. Prioritising the process over quick results leads to more transformative and impactful truth-telling in communities.

## Truth-telling focuses on integrity and constructive engagement rather than on specific outcomes

Internationally, some truth-telling initiatives have faced criticism for trying to enforce specific outcomes, such as reconciliation or forgiveness. However, truth-telling is more effective if it does not impose such expectations. Few of the initiatives in our research had an explicit goal of reconciliation, but in a number of instances these processes did deepen understanding and build relationships between communities. This was achieved by prioritising the integrity of the truth-telling process and fostering an environment conducive to productive discussions about historical injustices. This open approach to truth-telling is more likely to create the conditions for genuine reconciliation and trust-based relationships.

## Diverse and creative truth-telling practices are most effective

Effective truth-telling embraces diverse approaches rather than adhering to a single, rigid model. Recognising various methods enhances the ability of communities to address local truths within different contexts. Truth-telling that utilises both Western and First Nations practices and methodologies and integrates them in innovative ways, strengthens the impact of truth-telling.





# Recommendations

- Funding and support for truth-telling initiatives needs to be provided at all levels, including local, state, and Federal. Support should come from both the private sector and government.
- Support a wider range of non-Indigenous community members to participate fully in local truth-telling processes to foster shared understanding and commitment to change.
- Encourage more local councils to systematically support community-driven truth-telling initiatives that address colonial history and its impact.
- Provide a variety of grants to local communities to support community-driven, truth-telling projects, ensuring genuine agency over funds.
- Ensure state and local governments support the development of inclusive local histories, integrating them into school curricula.
- Allocate specific resources and support to Stolen Generations organisations and survivors for truth-telling work, so they don't have to carry this responsibility alone.
- Offer support for individuals participating in truth-telling, including emotional, legal, and archivist assistance to help navigate historical records about themselves and their community.
- Foster more systemic national recognition of First Nations history, including both experiences of violation as well as First Nations contribution and agency.

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**Dr Vanessa Barolsky** works across several disciplinary areas including sociology, anthropology, criminology and transitional justice to tackle questions related to social conflict and its transformation. She is currently investigating these questions through research that critically interrogates the relationship between truth-telling, decoloniality and reconciliation. Her engagement with truth-telling in Australia is informed by her work at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) where she was one of the authors of the Commission's final report on human rights violations under apartheid. Her PHD on the South African TRC analysed the discursive construction of knowledge about political violence at the Commission.

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