

A TIMELINE OF First Peoples' Advocacy



There is a long history of First Peoples advocating for the right to representation and participation in decisions that affect them. Although colonisation has significantly disrupted First Peoples Law, structures and culture, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have persevered, demonstrating remarkable strength and tenacity when engaging with the Australian Government to have their rights recognised.

First Peoples have resisted state-sanctioned injustice since colonisation began. Legal and policy reforms that support the rights of First Peoples are rarely initiated by a single event, but rather decades of growing national and international advocacy and support for change.

The events listed below are a selection of moments in history when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have taken action to call for large-scale change by Australian governments to realise their rights as First Peoples.

The terms used throughout this document to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are used interchangeably to acknowledge the diversity of identities, communities, and preferences across Australia. These terms are not intended to be limiting, and individuals may choose to self-identify in ways that differ from the terminology used here.

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following timeline contains names of deceased persons.

Please note, the following section uses culturally inappropriate terms that have contributed to the historical erasure of hundreds of distinct Nations, languages and cultures that make up the lands now known as 'Australia'. Terminology can change over time, and it is best practice to find out what the preferred term is from the respective Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander group or individual you are referring to.

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1924

Formation of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association

The Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, founded by Fred Maynard in Sydney in 1924, is recognised as Australia's first united and politically organised Aboriginal activist group.¹ The group was vehemently opposed to the involvement of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board in the lives of Aboriginal people and called for its abolition. They demanded that Indigenous affairs be managed by First Peoples.²

1933-8

William Cooper Petition

In 1933 Yorta Yorta man William Cooper established the **Australian Aborigines' League** (AAL) in Melbourne together with Margaret Tucker, Eric Onus, Anna and Caleb Morgan, and Shadrach James. Cooper was the founding secretary of the League which lobbied to improve the lives and rights of First Nations peoples, on behalf of their communities. From 1933–1938 Cooper gathered nearly 2000 signatures from First Nations people, on behalf of the AAL, for [a petition to the King](#), calling for First Peoples representation in the federal parliament.³

The Government refused to present the petition to King George VI.⁴

1936

Torres Strait Maritime Strike

In January 1936, Torres Strait Islanders united against the substandard working conditions of pearl divers. At the time, Torres Strait Islander communities made up a significant proportion of the labour workforce, as was the case with many First Nations groups in northern Australia, meaning that industrial action became a particularly effective tool for advancing change. Through the Maritime Strike, Islanders advocated for the right to choose how they spent their wages and to have control over their own affairs, in other words the right to self-determination. The Strike lasted 9 months and led to the repeal of highly restrictive legislation and the introduction of the [Torres Strait Islanders Act in 1939](#).⁵ Although restrictive, this legislation recognised Torres Strait Islanders as a separate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group with the right to vote and elect their own chairmen and councillors to local government.

The Torres Strait Maritime Strike not only paved the way for future reform towards self-government in the region but is also one of the first recorded strikes by First Nations peoples on the continent, initiating the Indigenous workers' rights movement in Australia and leading to pivotal events, such as the Wave Hill Walk-Off in 1966.



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1938

Day of Mourning

On 26 January 1938, Australian governments held celebrations to mark 150 years since the colonisation of Australia began. In response to this, the Australian Aborigines' League and the newly established Aboriginal Progressive Association, declared a [Day of Mourning](#).⁶ They held a conference in Sydney, a landmark gathering of First Peoples, to draw attention to the violence, dispossession and inhumane conditions imposed upon Aboriginal communities, and to request full citizenship status and rights.⁷ This was one of many First Peoples protests against injustice, denial of land and protectionist policies, and is considered by many to be the start of the Indigenous political movement in Australia.

A few days later, members of the Australian Aborigines' League and the Aborigines Progressive Association led a delegation to the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, with a proposed national policy for Aboriginal people. Their requests were rejected by the Government.

1963

Yirrkala Bark Petitions

In August 1963, [bark petitions](#) were presented to the Australian House of Representatives, written in Yolŋu Matha and English, with differing and distinct paintings framing the text. The paintings represent the two Yolŋu moieties, Dhuwa and Yirritja. This was the Yolŋu's first formal proposal to have their land rights recognised. The 1963 petitions still hang in Parliament House, Canberra. The petitions were the first documents to have incorporated First Nations ways of representing relationships to land that were formally acknowledged by the Commonwealth Parliament. Four additional petitions were made and presented in 1968, 1988 (see 'The Barunga Statement' below), 1998 and 2008.⁸

The petitions directly led to the establishment of the Select Committee on Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve. They were the first petitions in Australian history to instigate such an immediate parliamentary response. The committee travelled to Darwin and Yirrkala to hear evidence from the Yolŋu and Northern Territory officials.

In October 1963, the committee published a report with its findings. It did not recommend a halt to mining. Instead, it recommended that sacred sites be protected, that compensation for loss of livelihood be paid and that a dedicated committee monitor the mining project.⁹



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1965

The Freedom Ride

In February 1965, Charles Perkins and other students from the University of Sydney's Student Action For Aborigines group led a 15-day bus journey across Northern NSW 'to shine a light on the marginalisation of Aboriginal people in regional New South Wales', known as [the Freedom Ride](#). Ensuring that the protest was covered by the media, the students drew national and international attention to racial segregation and discrimination in public places such as swimming pools, picture theatres, hotels and RSL clubs, refusal of service in shops, and the inhumane conditions under which First Nations people were forced to live.¹⁰

The Freedom Ride was also a way to campaign for the dismantling of racism facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in accessing health, education and housing services, barriers which still exist today.

The exclusion of Aboriginal people from the constitution in 1901 created the conditions that gave rise to the Freedom Ride, which in turn contributed to the momentum for the 1967 referendum.

The Freedom Ride was one of several precursors to the notion of Land Rights for Aboriginal people and by extension – the passing of the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983.¹¹

1967

The 1967 Referendum

The 1967 referendum was a landmark moment in Australian history, achieved through decades of advocacy by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A significant catalyst for this referendum was the Freedom Ride in 1965. Other campaigns that contributed to this moment were run by the Australian Aborigines League (see William Cooper Petition), the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, and the Aborigines Progressive Association.¹²

Driven by these grassroots campaigns, a resounding 90.77% of Australians voted 'Yes' to amend the Constitution. This allowed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be counted in the national census and enabled the Commonwealth to make laws for them. With a majority 'Yes' vote in every state, it remains one of Australia's most successful national campaigns led by First Peoples.¹³



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1972

Aboriginal Tent Embassy

On 26 January 1972, Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Coorey set up a beach umbrella outside Parliament House in Canberra and named it [the Aboriginal Embassy](#), protesting the Government's stated opposition to Indigenous land rights.¹⁴ In response to persistent forced removal by police, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy operated in multiple locations before its permanent establishment on the lawns in front of Parliament House in 1992. The Embassy continues to operate today, advocating for First Nations land rights, sovereignty and self-determination.¹⁵

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy is recognised as the longest continuous First Nations land rights protest in the [world](#).¹⁶

1988

The Barunga Statement

Leader of the Gumatj clan of the Yolŋu, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, presented [the Barunga Statement](#) to Prime Minister Bob Hawke at the Barunga Sport and Cultural Festival.¹⁷ The Barunga Statement is an important part of the tradition of painted legal documents that have been presented to the Australian Government, beginning with the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petitions. Fusing Yolŋu, Arrernte and Warlpiri symbolism with English text, the Statement calls for First Peoples self-management and self-determination, a national system of land rights, compensation for loss of lands, respect for Aboriginal identity, an end to discrimination and the granting of full civil, economic, social and cultural rights for First Peoples.

While the Statement has been permanently exhibited in Parliament House since 1991, many of the calls for action and recommendations within it have not yet been implemented by the Government.

1990

Establishment of ATSIC

The [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission \(ATSIC\)](#) was established to replace the National Aboriginal Conference as a national representative body for First Nations people in Australia.¹⁸ ATSIC consisted of elected regional councils and a board of commissioners to monitor and advise on service delivery and policy decisions directly affecting Indigenous communities.¹⁹

ATSIC was abolished by the Australian Government in 2005.²⁰



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1988–92

Mabo Decision

The struggle for land justice led by Eddie Koiki Mabo and the Meriam people marked a turning point in the recognition of First Nations land rights in Australia. These legal developments were shaped by sustained First Nations activism and earlier legislative reform. In particular, the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) played a critical role in *Mabo v Queensland (No 1)* (1988), where the High Court found the Queensland Coast Islands Declaratory Act to be invalid because it was in conflict with the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.²¹

This pathway had been shaped earlier by political recognition of Aboriginal land claims, most notably handback of the land to the Gurindji people, enacted by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam with Vincent Lingiari at Wave Hill in 1975. This directly contributed to the enactment of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth).

In *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* (1992), the High Court recognised the Meriam peoples continuing connection to land and waters on Mer (Murray Island) and overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius*.²² This recognition led to the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), operating from 1994, establishing a national framework for the recognition and regulation of Native Title.

However, subsequent legislative amendments and policy responses were made in 1998 which led to the extinguishment of native title, replacing it with the Indigenous Land Fund. Later, a proposed social justice package was intended to address the broader structural consequences of dispossession but was never delivered.

1994

Establishment of Torres Strait Regional Authority

[The Torres Strait Regional Authority](#) (TSRA) is an Australian Government Statutory Authority consisting of 20 elected representatives to administer the Torres Strait Islands, aiming to strengthen the region's economic, cultural, and social development. TSRA, previously the Torres Strait ATSIC regional body, was separated from ATSIC between 1994 and 1997. It survived the abolition of ATSIC in 2005 and continues today, providing local and government services as well as a political representative structure for Torres Strait Islanders.²³

However, Torres Strait Islander communities have identified further progress towards greater autonomy and the establishment of a self-governing territory as [key priorities](#).²⁴



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1997

Bringing Them Home Report

The first National Sorry Day event was held one year after the tabling of the Australian Human Rights Commission's report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, the [Bringing Them Home](#) report.²⁵ The inquiry and report examined the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities and paid tribute to the strength of First Nations people who shared their stories. Many of the report's recommendations have still not been implemented by the Government.

Today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their families at [rates higher than that of the Stolen Generations](#), disrupting their connection to Country, community and culture.²⁶ Sorry Day continues to serve as an ongoing call to implement the recommendations of the Bringing Them Home report, and an opportunity to acknowledge the systemic failures that contribute to the disproportionate rates of child removals.²⁷

2007

UNDRIP Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly

First Peoples in Australia played a key and significant role in the development of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).²⁸ However, Australia was one of four nation states to vote against the Declaration in 2007, alongside Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

Following considerable international and domestic pressure, Australia reversed its position and formally endorsed the UNDRIP in 2009. Canada, New Zealand and the USA also reversed their opposition around this time. However, Australia has not yet put in place sufficient mechanisms for realising Indigenous rights on a national level and has therefore not effectively incorporated the UNDRIP into domestic law.²⁹



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2009

Establishment of National Congress of Australia's First Peoples

In 2009, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma AO, led a national consultation for a new First Nations representative body, culminating in the creation of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (NCAFP).³⁰ The body was established in 2009, comprising three representative chambers: representatives from existing First Nations peak bodies, community representatives and individuals with expertise in different fields. It had a 50/50 gender parity policy for delegates and an ethics council with oversight of elections and organisational operations.

In 2013, the government withdrew the NCAFP's funding and in 2019, it was forced out of operation and went into voluntary administration.

2016–17

The Redfern Statement

In June 2016, national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations and representative bodies came together to develop and announce the [Redfern Statement](#). The Statement was an urgent call for an end to budget cuts and the restoration of funding to the Indigenous Affairs Portfolio. It laid out six key priority areas and recommendations, and covered issues ranging from engagement, health, justice, violence prevention, disability, children and families and called for a new dialogue with the Government to address some of the major challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In February 2017 the Statement was [formally presented](#) to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in Parliament House.³¹



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2017

The Uluru Statement from the Heart

On 26 May 2017, at the National Constitutional Convention in Yulara on the lands of the Anangu people, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was presented to the Australian public by a group of First Peoples.³² Regional dialogues prior to the convention were hosted in 13 locations across Australia. 250 delegates were invited to attend the convention and a majority were in support of the Statement. For those delegates, it was an expression of desires for substantive constitutional reform and proposed a First Nations Voice to Parliament, and a Makarrata Commission that would undertake agreement-making (treaty) and truth-telling. Despite the 2023 Voice referendum delivering a 'No' result, the outcome has not changed the momentum or determination of First Peoples' advocacy efforts. It has strengthened the urgency to realise them.

An ANU study conducted soon after found that 87% of voters said it is important for First Nations Peoples to have a say in matters that affect them. Evidence shows that participation in decision-making leads to positive outcomes for Indigenous communities.³³

First Peoples advocacy has since moved forward, shifting toward future opportunities and strengthening community.

2025

Statewide Treaty Act in Victoria

On 31 October 2025, Victoria's *Statewide Treaty Act 2025* (Vic) was passed by Victoria's parliament. Victoria is now the first Australian state or territory to legislate a treaty with First Peoples. The Bill establishes a legal framework for treaty-making and formally recognises Gellung Warl, meaning 'tip of the spear' in Gunaikurnai, as the permanent representative body for Traditional Owners and First Peoples in Victoria.

Developed in partnership with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, the Act enshrines three key mechanisms within Gellung Warl:

- [The First Peoples' Assembly](#) (decision-making), a democratically elected body empowered to meet Cabinet, address Parliament annually, and advocate for First Peoples.
- Nyerna Yoorrook Telkuna (truth-telling), continuing the work of the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#) to document historical injustices.
- Nginma Ngainga Wara (accountability), tasked with monitoring government performance, implementing recommendations from truth-telling processes, and advising on improvements.

The Act builds on nearly a decade of work, including the Advancing the Treaty Process with *Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018*, two Assembly elections, and the establishment of the Treaty Authority. It also commits to future binding agreements and embeds principles of justice, self-determination, and recognition of First Peoples' sovereignty.³⁴



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Endnotes

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