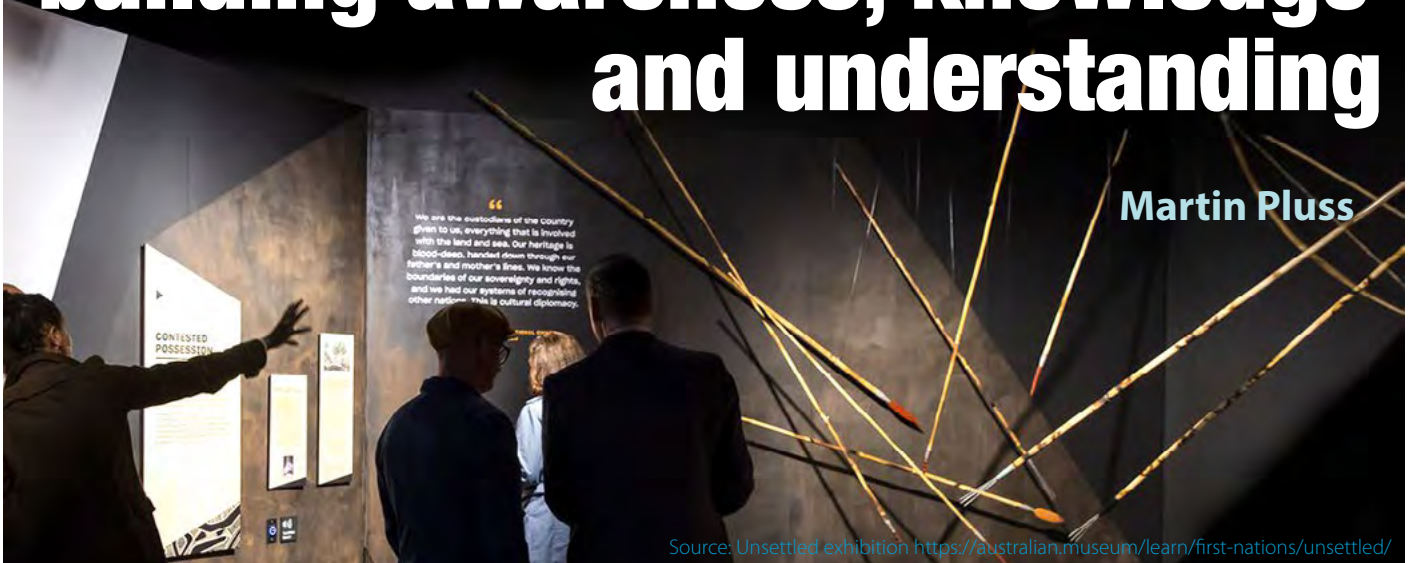


First Nations Peoples, Australia: building awareness, knowledge and understanding

Martin Pluss



Source: Unsettled exhibition <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/>

This is a follow up article to the 2021 publication “A framework for learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Geography classroom” (Pluss, 2021). The framework step through three stages of awareness, knowledge and understanding of the potential future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are explicitly referred to in the NESA Stage 4 and Stage 5 Syllabus documents and there is the capacity to make further references. **Figure 1** is a summary of specific and integrated references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples for the geography classroom.

This article draws on new resources including the Unsettled Exhibition at The Australian Museum which was wrapped up the day after Australia Day, 2022, having been established as a response to the 250-year celebration of Cook in 2020 (**Figure 2**). This is followed with an exploration of the ideas and practices drawing on Buraadja (Bragg, 2021) which presents government and community policies as he builds a case for reconciliation.

This article is in three sections.

- an investigation of eight themes drawn from Unsettled.
- the timeline of policies, legislation and strategies is outlined since Federation.
- a brief outline of current issues pertaining to First Nations Peoples.



Figure 2 : Unsettled Exhibition, Australian Museum. Photo by M. Pluss

Stage 4 and Stage 5 Syllabus First Nations Peoples References

SYLLABUS	FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES REFERENCES
Geographical Concepts	
There is no specific reference to First Nations Peoples in Geographical Concepts but connections can be made.	Place is references “culture of its population”. Environment refers to “values and worldviews”. Interconnections there is relevance to “sets of cause-effect interactions that can operate between and within places”. Sustainability includes “there are a variety of contested views on how progress towards sustainability...”
Learning across the curriculum	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are specifically mentioned.	Communities are strong , resilient, rich and diverse. Emphasises relationship people have with places and interconnections with environments. Integrate their use of land, governed by a holistic spiritual based connection to country and place, environmental management and regional economies. Learn about different ways about and interacting with the environment and how it can influence sustainable development.
Stage 4	
Landscapes and Landforms	Value of landscapes and landforms: investigate aesthetic, cultural, spiritual and economic value of landscapes and landforms for people , including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Landscape management and protection: investigate ways people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Manage and protect landscapes.
Water in the World	The value of water: investigate the economic, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic values of water for people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples...
Stage 5	
Environmental Change and Management	Environmental Management: investigate environmental management, including different world views and the management processes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
Syllabus Integration	
There are several places where of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples references can be integrated.	Stage 4 Place and Liveability: access to services and facilities, community, enhancing liveability. Stage 4 Interconnections: production and consumption. Stage 5 Sustainable Biomes: challenges to food protection and food security. Stage 5 Changing Places: internal migration. Stage 5 Environmental Change and Management: Investigative Study. Stage 5 Human Wellbeing: human wellbeing and development, spatial variations in human wellbeing, human wellbeing in Australia and improving wellbeing.

Figure 1: Stage 4 & Stage 5 Syllabus References – curated by Martin Pluss <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/k-10/learning-areas/hsie/geography-k-10>

Unsettled

Now let's investigate the aboriginal perspective on their issues as portrayed by the Unsettled Exhibition at the Australian Museum (Mc Bride, L & Smith M, 2021). There is also a website of Unsettled with a virtual tour and updated information.

Unsettled presents another view of history which is shaping decisions in the present by focusing on signal fires, recognising invasions, fighting wars, remembering the massacres, surviving genocide, continued resistance and healing nations.

We need awareness of the past to understand the present to make shared decisions for the future.

Unsettled gives voice to First Nations Peoples as stated by the Director in the first exhibit:

"Why should we speak for others when they can speak for themselves?"

1. Cultural differences

Healing is not possible unless there is an understanding of cultural differences and to an extent this continues to today. Captain Cook's story is challenged in the process of recognising and understanding a shared past as the step on the shared journey.

Take for example the cultural significance of signal fires.

There is a difference between smoking ceremonies, campfires, cultural burning and signal fires. When Cook arrived the aboriginal peoples lit signal fires on headlands as warnings. Cook noted the fires but did not have the cultural knowledge to understand it was an emergency response by First Nations Peoples and evidence that the continent was inhabited - contradicting Terra Nullius.

2. Environmental balance

The environment is in balance and the Aboriginal people live respecting air, water and fire in a balanced manner for survival until their lives were disrupted. The disruption in the environment is evident today at a much larger scale. Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* is a very good starting point for a synthesis of this approach to environmental land management.

3. Recognising invasions and Terra Nullius

Aboriginal lands were taken by declaring the land uninhabited, so no treaties or agreements were made. The Kaurareg First Nations people, the Traditional Owners of Tuin (Possession Island), maintain Cook never landed. Firstly because, the painting of the proclamation does align with the landforms and

landscapes of the area. Secondly, the smoke signals up the coast indicated the warriors were ready for war should the strangers have disembarked.

4. Fighting wars

A peaceful settling of Australia is an illusion. Unsettled sites colonial documents as evidence.

In the Sydney Gazette on May 23, 1839, an article titled 'The War of Reprisal' discusses the retaliatory war of aborigines in the north west district. There are references to the deaths of the stock of sheep and cattle, colonialist and stockmen. With a distinctive tone:

"...the aborigines must be made to understand, that while they are under the protection of English law, they are also amenable to these laws. They must be taught to seek redress than other means than their spears and tomahawks."

The location of hostile aborigines was identified, for example, Fort Burke was established as a fortified depot in Warrego country by Thomas Mitchell in 1835 to protect stores for the attack of hostile aboriginal people.

The Sydney wars tended to be geographically specific. There was a concentration in Windsor, Parramatta, along the harbour and rivers, on land between the harbour and Botany Bay and then spread to the edge and beyond the 19 Counties.

5. Massacre sites

An Unsettled exhibit states:

"Killing became a defining colonial tactic used by government troops, police officers and even ordinary Australians, to retaliate against the resistance efforts of First Nations Peoples defending their homelands, families and resources."

In archival records 'dispersal' was code word for widespread systematic attacks on Aboriginals across Australia. Lachlan Macquarie, for example, was explicit in his instructions which lead to the Appin Massacre.

Dr Lyndall Ryan and the team at Newcastle University academics have conducted a detailed methodological survey of massacres their location and numbers. (Ryan, 2019) Colonial written history does not always align with living histories and oral histories of First Nations Peoples. The academics have identified the characteristics of massacres and recorded the details of massacres in text, maps and numbers. **(Figure 3)**

"To-date, the team has been able to verify that over 8,400 people were killed during more than 300 massacres between 1788 and 1930. Ninety-seven percent of those killed in the massacres were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."

FIRST NATIONS: AUSTRALIA

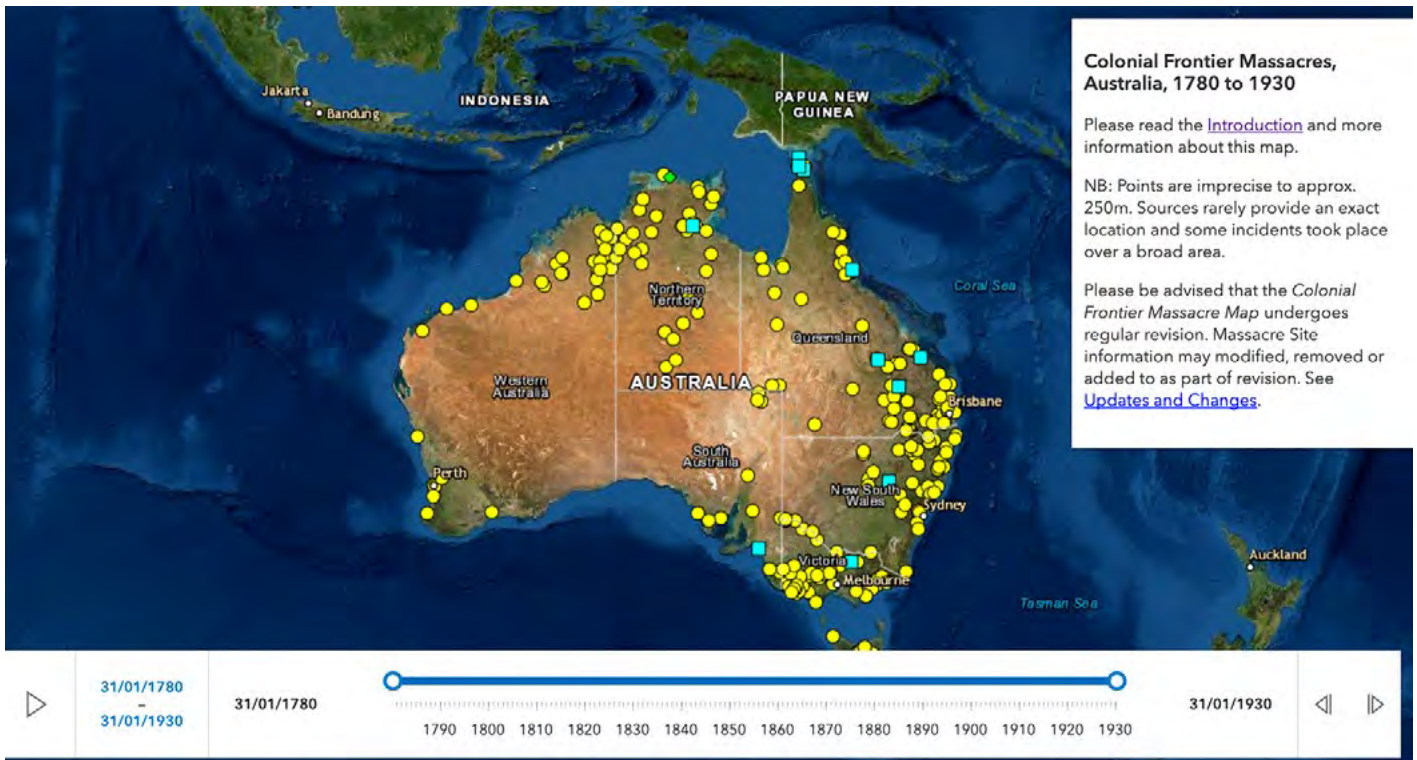


Figure 3: Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia, 1780–1930. Source: <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>

6. Missions, Reserves, Stations and the Stolen Generations

Unsettled outlines a history of government controls over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders lives, which led to the Sorry Statement in 2008 and initiatives since then. Welfare and Protection boards were set up, through race based legislation, forcing people on designated areas of land and the removal of children. There were missions, reserves and camps all over Australia (Figures 4 and 5).

As well there were stolen generation institutions in regional Australia with a concentration in the capital cities of Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. Unsettled mapped 28 institutions throughout Sydney mostly located in the west and south of the harbour. There were regional institutions/homes such as Kinchela Boys Home near Kempsey and the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home.

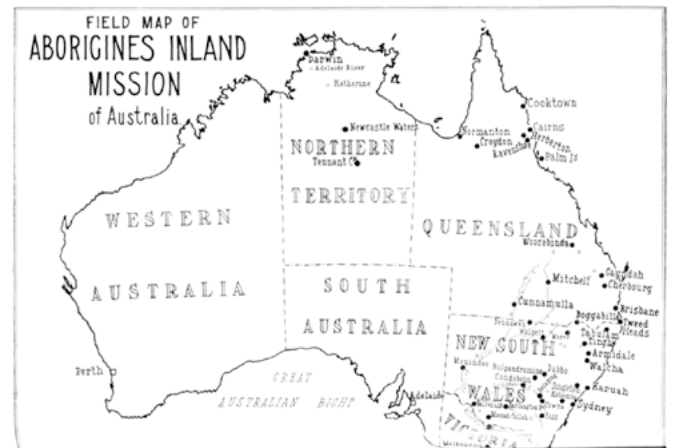


Figure 5: Australian Missions Map 1930 Source: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/featured-collections/aborigines-inland-mission>

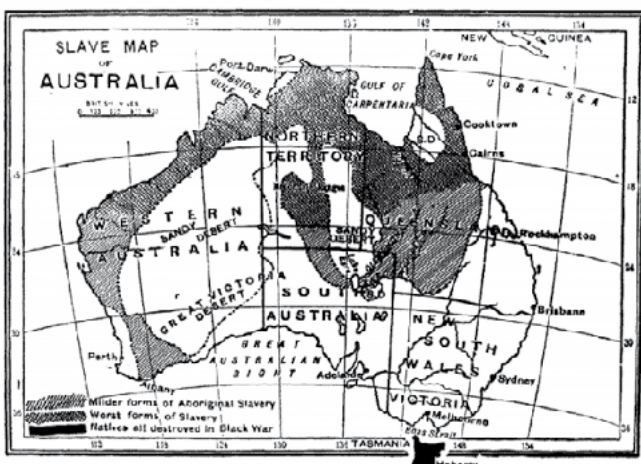


Figure 4: Slave Map of Australia 1890 Source: <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australia-has-a-history-of-aboriginal-slavery>

7. Aboriginal deaths in custody.

After the death of John Peter Pat in 1983 the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was commissioned and reported in 1991. In 2018 it was reported there were 164 deaths per 100 000 for those 25–34 years old and 368 for those 35–44 years old. In June 2021 there have been 489 indigenous deaths in custody since 1991. Further details can be viewed and used for geographical skills in Figure 6 and Figure 7.

FIRST NATIONS: AUSTRALIA

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
ATSI	1,992	1,565	1,826	2,008	3,383	523	2,504	1,904	2,039
Non-ATSI	176	133	156	204	206	151	193	108	163
Over-representation ratio	11.3	11.7	10.5	9.8	16.4	3.5	13.0	17.7	12.5

Figure 6: Imprisonment rates, 2016 Source: <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/pathways-to-justice-inquiry-into-the-incarceration-rate-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-alrc-report-133/3-incidence/over-representation/>

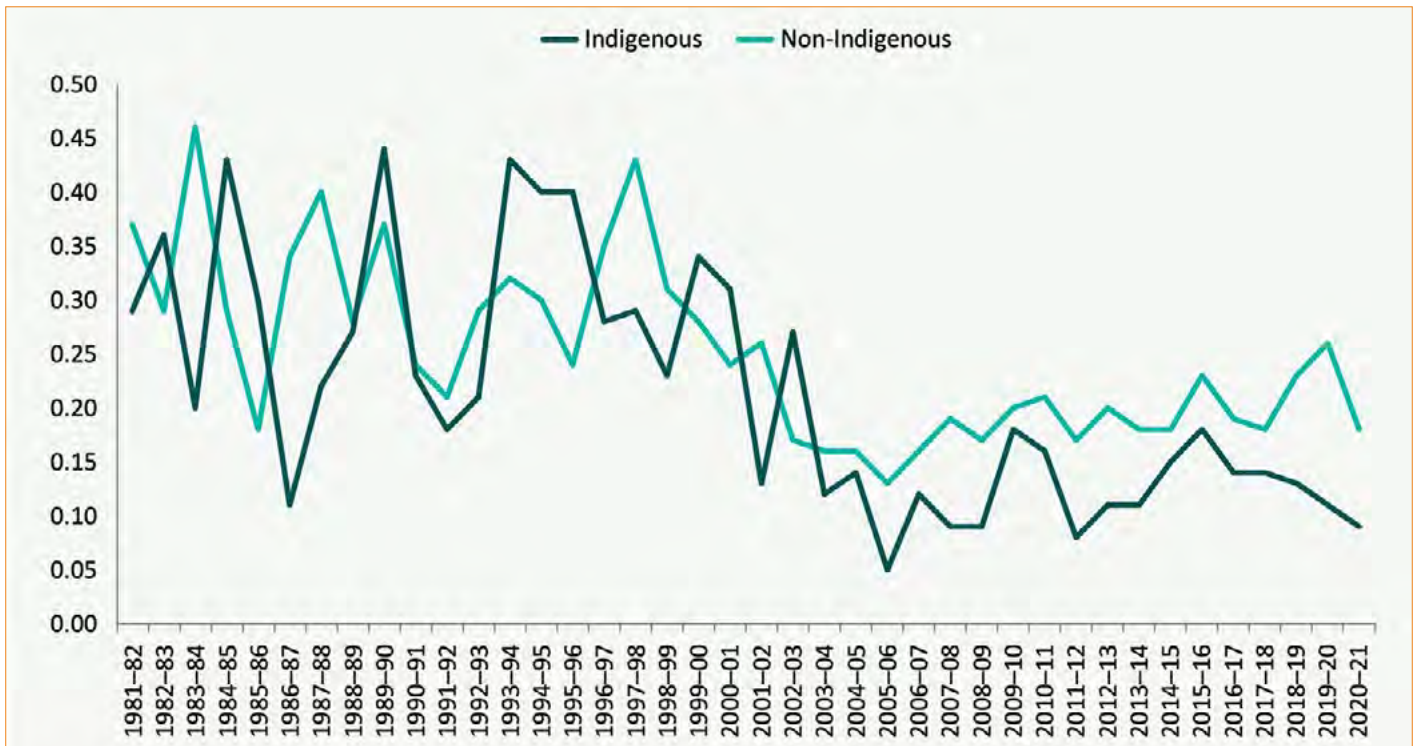


Figure 7: Deaths in prison custody by Indigenous status, 1981-2020. Source: https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/sr37_deaths_in_custody_in_australia_2020-21_v3.pdf

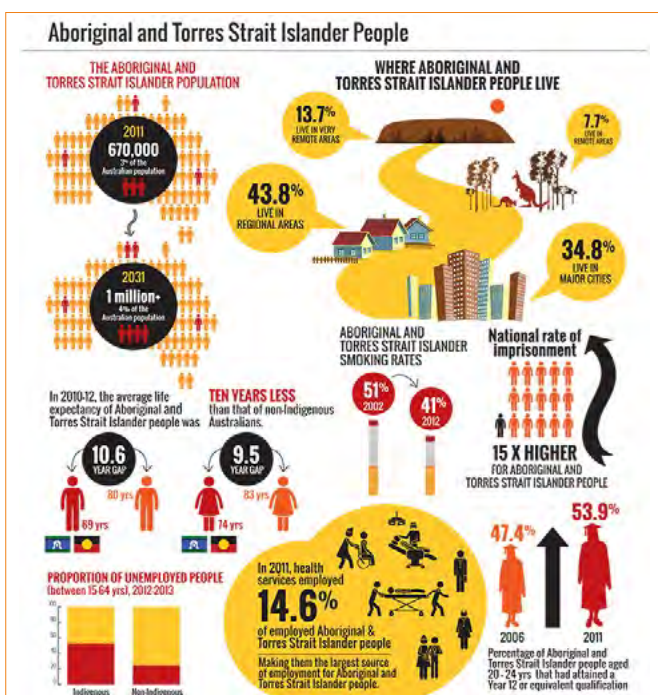


Figure 8 Face the Facts. Source: <http://humanrights.gov.au/face-facts>

8. Healing

Unsettled established a healing room based on six principles, concepts worthy of deeper investigation. These include galin.gabangbur (the spirit of Children); dhurrirra ngiyanhingu giyira (Birth Rebirthing Our Future); yawandyilinya.yindamalidya (Taking Care of and Honouring Ourselves and Ancestors) ngarrbang-dhurandu murun-gu (Dilly Bag of Life); winhangagigiladha ngunggiladha (Care for Each Other /Share with Each Other) and walumarra ngiyanhingu ngurambang (Protecting Our Country).

Healing is required at many levels in the process of moving forward but there is a lot to do to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living conditions. (Figures 8, 9 and 10)

There have been decades of government and community policies to address this with intended and unintended consequences not all of which have contributed to healing.

FIRST NATIONS: AUSTRALIA

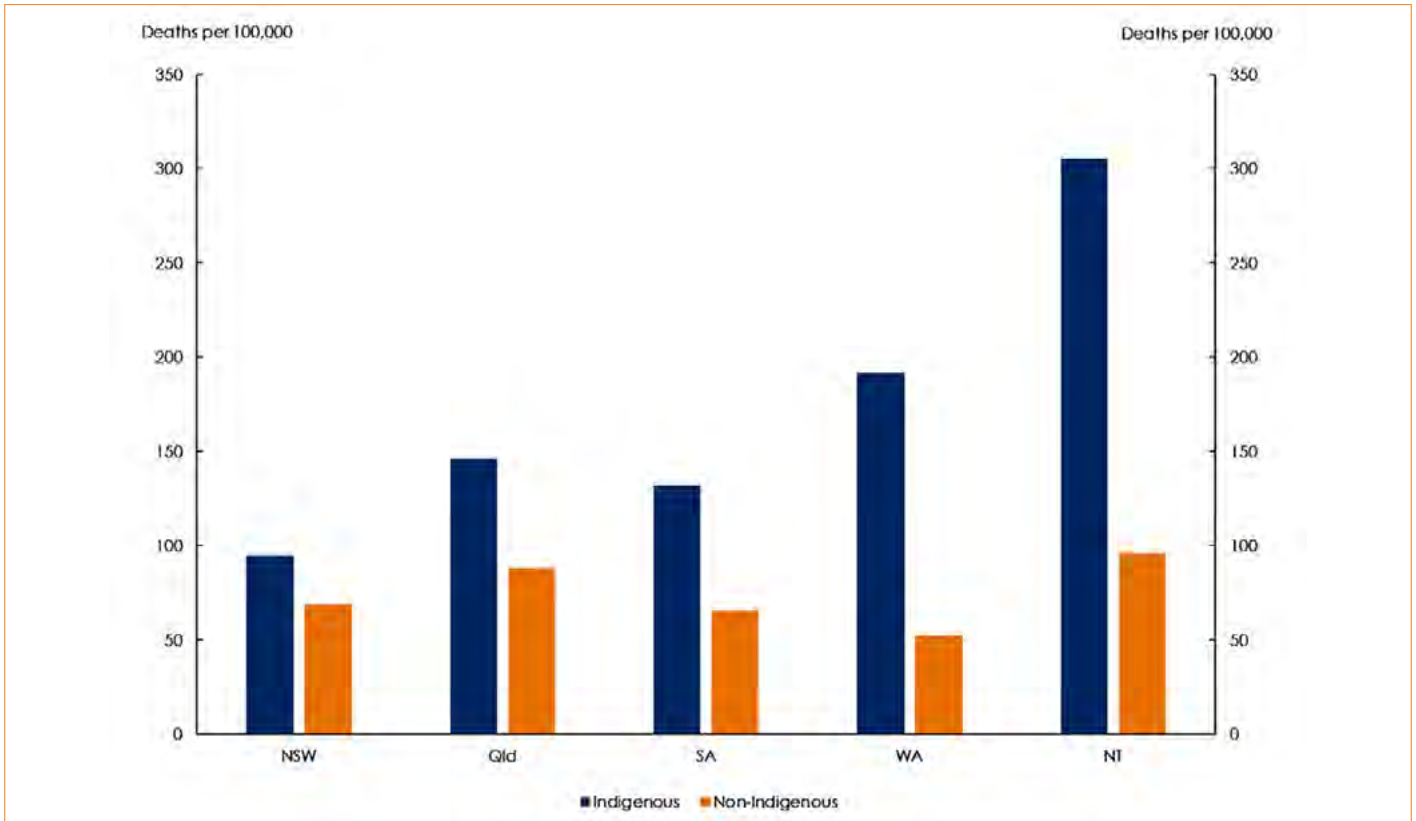


Figure 9 Child Mortality – Closing the Gap 2020. Source: <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/child-mortality>

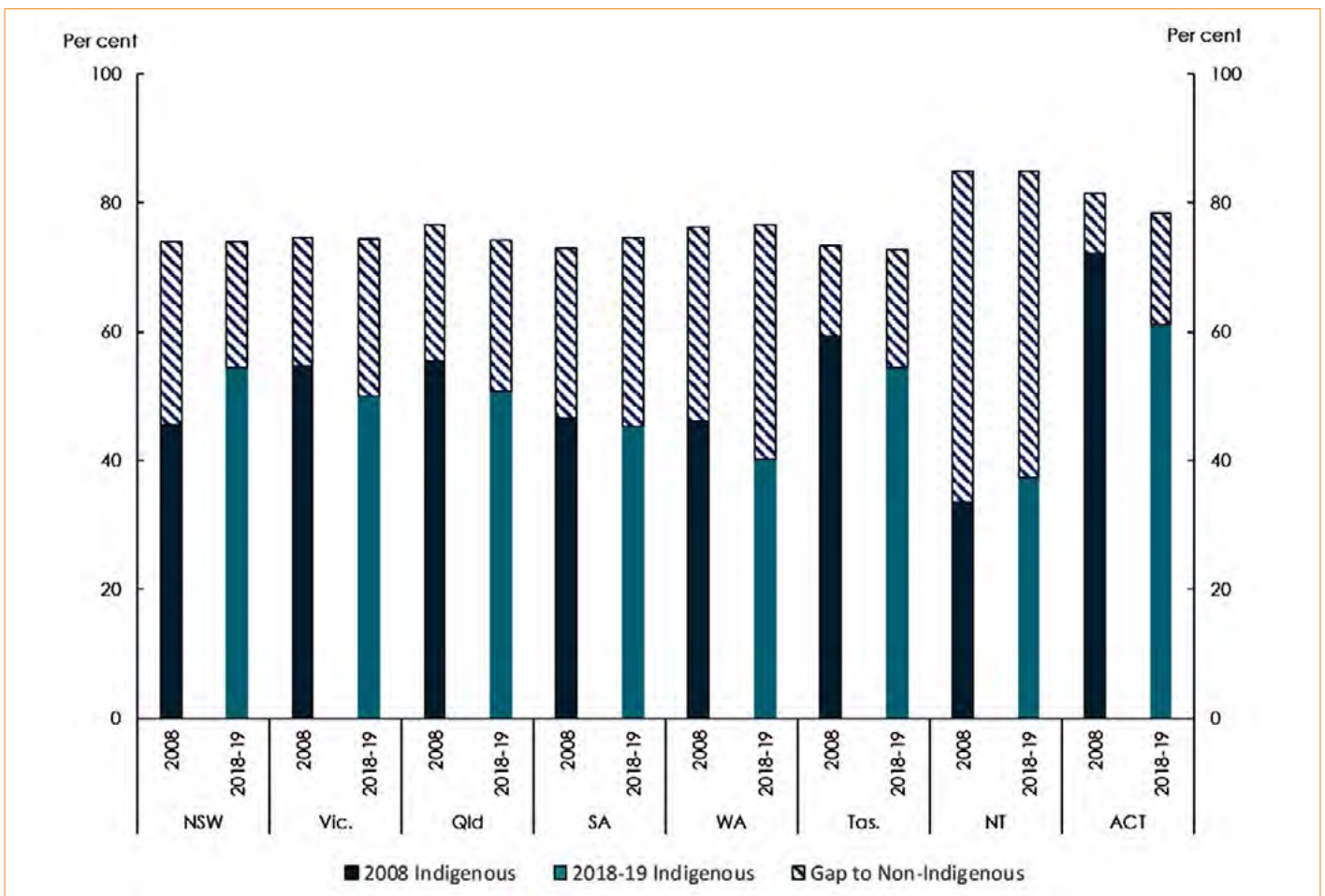


Figure 10: Employment Rate Gap. Source: <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/employment>

Policies, Legislation and Strategies

Much of this timeline has been derived from Senator Andrew Bragg's *Buraadja*. Prior to Federation there was a mixture of franchise laws for the different colonies. For example,

"In the 1850s under the constitutions of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia, Aboriginal men had the same right to vote as other male British subjects aged over 21."

Although the 1902 Commonwealth Franchise Act gave the vote to women it denied voting of "aboriginal natives" in Australia. This was also in the context for the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 which prevented nonwhite people from migrating to Australia.

The 1920 Australia Aboriginal Progress Association was the first recognised political organised aboriginal activist group. At its height it had 13 branches and four subbranches and 600 members in NSW. It clashed with the NSW Aborigines Protection Board connecting the removal of children from their families. Under strong pressure, the government and law enforcement agencies, public activity ended in 1927. Though it was privately active.

In 1949 the vote was given to any Aboriginal person in the defence forces. Ben Chifley introduced an amendment to the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 which made this possible.

In 1961 the House of Representatives Select Committee on Voting Rights of Aboriginals was set up and the Commonwealth Electoral act 1962 granted all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders the option to enroll and vote in the federal elections. It was not until 1984 that they gained full equality and compulsory voting rights.

The 1967 Referendum, with a turnout of 94% and an overall majority of 91%, made possible for the government to make laws for Aboriginal people. The result removed Section 127 which excluded Aboriginal people from being counted in the census and in doing so removed all reference to Aboriginal people in the Constitution. Holt's position was that the use of these words was discriminatory.

The question was:

"Do you approve the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled 'An Act to alter the Constitution so as to omit certain words relating to the people of the Aboriginal race in any state and so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning the population?'"

The referendum had a significant symbolic impact and went a long way to raise the expectations of Aboriginal

and non-Aboriginal people regarding Aboriginal rights and welfare in the 1970s.

The Woodward Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights was held in 1973–1974. Following this the Whitlam Government drafted the first Commonwealth legislation to grant land rights to Aboriginal peoples. The Aboriginal Land (Northern Territory) Bill was introduced (October 1975), but the Whitlam Government was dismissed before the legislation could pass the Senate. In 1976, the Fraser Government passed The Aboriginal Land Rights Act that allowed Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to make claims on land to which they could prove traditional ties.

The 1980 Policy of Makarrata "end of the dispute and resumption of normal relations" was started by the Fraser government. The idea of a treaty or a broad agreement between two groups was not in favour.

In relation to Makarrata – the National Aboriginal Committee wanted:

- Land rights over farmer reserves, national parks and traditional rights
- National Aboriginal Bank
- One seat per state in house and senate
- Self-government of aboriginal communities
- Return of artefacts and artworks
- Dedicated schools, medical centres and legal aid.

On behalf of the government of the day Fred Chaney's response was to do the following. Return tribal lands including sacred sites and freehold titles. Provided compensation in cash as a percentage of GNP or a % of the aboriginal proportion of the population. There was no agreement to reserve seats in parliament. There was no compulsory employment in government but would promote aboriginal employment. The Senate Committee Report *Two Hundred Years later: report on the feasibility of a compact or a Makarrata between the commonwealth and aboriginal peoples* was tabled.



In 1988 Prime Minister Bob Hawke promised a Treaty after receiving the Barunga Statement from Aboriginal elders. (Figure 11) This seemed to raise concerns and was replaced by a document of reconciliation, Makarrata or compact. The broad impact of the Barunga statement was as follows:

"Barunga and other festivals are important venues for the celebration and sharing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices and to provide opportunities for communities to engage with current social and political issues."

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (1990-2005) was set up to allow formal involvement in the processes of government but was dismantled.

Paul Keating Redfern Park Speech 1992 is remembered as one of the most powerful speeches in Australian history, both for its rhetorical eloquence and for its ground-breaking admission of the negative impact of white settlement in Australia on its Indigenous peoples, culture and society. It is the first acknowledgement by the Australian Government of the dispossession of its First Nations Peoples. It has been described as a significant moment in the nation's reconciliation with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In 1992 the High Court decision in Mabo case recognised native title. The lead up was with the *Torres Strait Islands Coastal Islands Act 1985*, which 'extinguished without compensation' any Torres Strait Islander claims to their traditional land. In February 1986, the Meriam challenged the legislation and in December 1988 the High Court ruled in the Mabo No. 1 case that the Act contravened the *Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975*. This enabled the High Court to begin hearing Mabo No. 2, the Meriam's Land Rights Case.

The judgements of the High Court of Australia in the Mabo case No. 2 introduced the principle of Native Title into the Australian legal system. In acknowledging the traditional rights of the Meriam people to their land, the court also held that native title existed for all indigenous people. This decision altered the foundation of land law in Australia and rendered terra nullius a legal fiction. The implications were wide reaching, as would become more apparent in recent years.

The 1996 Wik High Court decision examined whether statutory leases extinguish native title rights. The court found that the statutory pastoral leases under consideration by the court did not bestow rights of exclusive possession on the leaseholder. As a result, native title rights could co-exist, depending on the terms and nature of the particular pastoral lease. Where

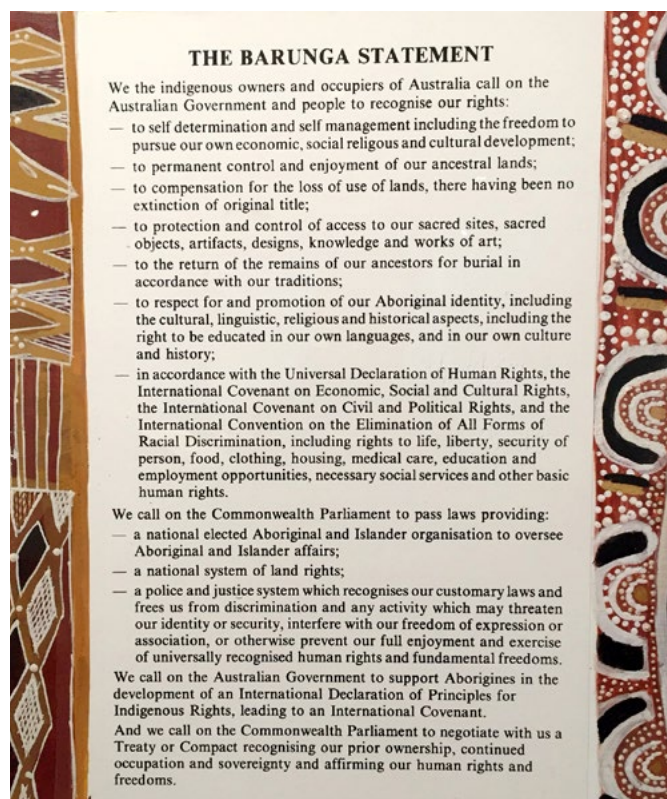


Figure 11 Barunga Statement 1988. Source: <https://www.commonground.org.au/learn/the-barunga-statement-and-agreement>

there was a conflict of rights, the rights under the pastoral lease would extinguish the remaining native title rights.

Wik 10 Point Plan. The Native Title Amendment Act 1998 also commonly referred to as the "10-Point Plan" is an Australian native title law created by the response to the Wik Decision by the High Court.

The work in the Howard years, as described by Paul Kelly in Baraadja is seen as a:

"Missed opportunity for Australian conservatives... As reconciliation evolved into symbolic and practical dimensions, it became a natural position for a conservative leader. Labour was in denial of this truth and the liberals were blind to their opportunity."

In this era the question of an Apology was significant in the public and political consciousness. It follows on the back of the Bringing Them Home Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families April 1997. This led to the National Sorry Day, or the National Day of Healing, an annual event that has been held in Australia on 26 May since 1998. The event remembers and commemorates the mistreatment of the country's Indigenous peoples, as part of an ongoing process of reconciliation between the Indigenous peoples of Australia and the settler population. The date was selected because on that date in 1997 the *Bringing*

FIRST NATIONS: AUSTRALIA

Them Home report was published. There was the symbolic 2000 Sydney Harbour Bridge walk offering Reconciliation of the Centenary of Federation.

On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd moved a motion of Apology to Indigenous Australians. His apology was a formal apology on behalf of the successive parliaments and governments whose policies and laws “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians”.

In this era the National Indigenous Council was terminated. The Government expressed a commitment to re-establish a national indigenous representative body and related issues and options were addressed in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s *Building a sustainable National Indigenous Representative Body: An issues paper prepared by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner*. Also, the Government’s 2007 commitment to a ‘new partnership’ and ‘closing the gap’ was restated in the *Close the Gap, Indigenous Health Equality Summit, Statement of Intent* which the Commonwealth signed on 20 March 2008.

Prime Minister, Tony Abbott said the following:

“As far as I am concerned, Indigenous recognition would not be changing our Constitution, but rather complete our Constitution; and until this is done our country will not be whole.”

A new section 51A was suggested for the Constitution in 2012. The Expert Panel’s report on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australia – Chair Mark Leibler and Patrick Dodson – was commissioned by Julia Gillard and released during the Abbott Years. The new section 51 A, recognised continent and islands first occupied by aboriginals, acknowledged continual relationships of ATSI with their traditional lands and waters, respected continuing culture, languages and heritage and recognised the need to secure advancement of ASTI peoples.

In 2017 the Voice emerges through the Uluru Statement (Figure 12). The Leaser and Dobson Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition provided a follow up period of consultation and reporting through 2018 and 2019. (Pluss, 2021).

On 4 January 2022 the *Ngurra: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Precinct* was announced. The government will build Ngurra, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural precinct, on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in the Parliamentary Triangle, on Ngunawal country (Canberra).

On the 25 January 2022 the *Free use of Aboriginal Flag secured for all Australians* was announced. Harold Thomas will retain his moral rights over the flag and it can now be used without the need to be granted permission to use.

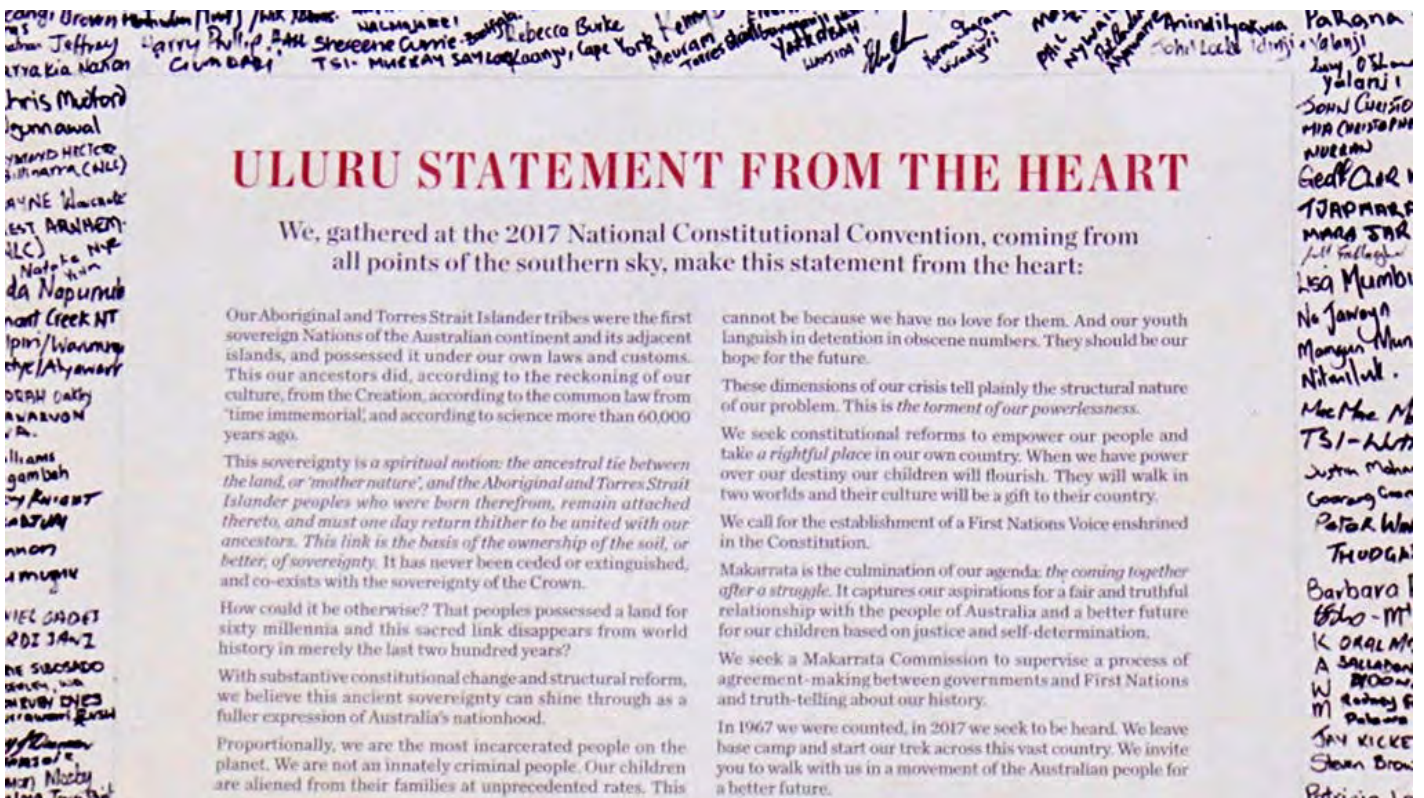


Figure 12: Uluru Statement From the Heart 2017, to read the full statement <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/>

The next section will briefly outline present day issues we can bring to the attention of geography students so they can make informed decisions now and into the future.

Current Issues

This brief section outlines some of the current issues which are useful follow up points of investigations for students.

1. Closing the Gap

The Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee first met in March 2006. The patrons, Catherine Freeman OAM and Ian Thorpe OAM, launched the Campaign in April 2007. In 2018 Prime Minister's (Malcolm Turnbull) closing the Gap Report Outlined the progress in closing the gap

"Ten years on, the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have improved but more gains need to be made.

It is clear that continued effort and action is required."

In 2021 the Morrison Government has released the Commonwealth's first Closing the Gap Implementation Plan, and with it committed more than \$1 billion in new measures to support to help achieve Closing the Gap outcomes.

"...doing with rather than doing to."

2. Aboriginal Flag

In 2020 there was an inquiry into the use of the Aboriginal flag. People seem to be using it less because of the arrangements for obtaining permission. Community groups were being issued invoices and cease and desist notices. The goal is to be able to use it in Parliament House and across other location in Australia. As mentioned above there has been progress in relation to the use of the flag as confirmed on 25 January 2022.

3. Symbolism

Symbolism can go a long way as well. There was the one word change in Advance Australia Fair. There are suggestions to create a reconciliation place in the Canberra Triangle which would also include the repatriation of Aboriginal remains in museums etal around the world. This was confirmed on 4 January 2022.

4. Delivering Reconciliation

The process of delivering reconciliation is evolving due to the Uluru statement, steps towards Constitutional Recognition, The Voice Co-Design process, truth telling, third chamber and treaty discussions.

Senator Andrew Bragg in *Baraadja* draws together possibilities. One option is to have legislation to have the Voice established in the Constitution. No detailed model has been proposed. The second option is the constitutional obligation to hear indigenous voices through legislation. The third option would be to a legislative voice where a government established body would provide the Voice mechanism without constitutional guarantee.

Our geography students may well be voting on this in the coming years and the work we do in the geography classroom could go a long way to keeping them informed.

5. Australia Day: the options

This requires a clear process around truth telling as achieved through the Unsettled Exhibition and engagement with schools. Take for example, an Australia Day goal could be to have Declaration of Recognition celebrate this on 27 January or as a service at the beginning of Australia Day. There is a path through this issue.

6. Australian's Together

Noel Pearson has stated to be an Australian involves an understanding and acknowledging of Aboriginal Heritage, British Institutions and Multicultural Australia. Geography teachers can help bring Australia together through the students they teach. The next step is to build positive, balanced and diplomatic engagement.

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