

It's 50 years since Indigenous Australians first 'counted'. Why has so little changed?

*In 1967 Australia voted in a landmark referendum to finally include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in its census. But, as **Paul Daley** reports, the fight for genuine equality for the country's first people is far from over*



Indigenous protesters march through central Brisbane on 'Invasion Day' (Australia Day) in January.

Paul Daley
19 May 2017

Sol Bellear, a former rugby league player for South Sydney Rabbitohs and Aboriginal rights activist, sits in the soft autumn sunshine at a cafe intersecting Redfern Park and the oval that remains the spiritual home of his beloved club.

He sips a Red Bull “heart starter” and English breakfast tea. And he shakes his head while contemplating the anniversaries of what ought to have been transformative moments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – starting with the 1967 “citizenship” referendum that first made their existence in Australia “official”.

“Things should be so much better for Aboriginal people. I think the country saw 1967 as the end of the fight,” Bellear says. “Before 1967, we weren’t counted in the census or anything as people. Dogs and cats and pigs and sheep were counted in Australia before Aboriginal people.”



Sol Bellear at his beloved Redfern Oval in Sydney. Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

Indigenous people had never previously been officially included among the Australian citizenry, nor counted in the Commonwealth census – so the federal government could not legislate for them. But on 27 May 1967, more than 90% of the Australian electorate voted at the “citizenship” referendum to effectively bring Indigenous people into the Commonwealth.

“After the referendum, though, it was like the work was done for the rest of the country and governments – when it was actually just the bloody beginning,” Bellear says. “Every little thing we’ve won since, we’ve had to fight for.”



Australian prime minister Paul Keating delivers the landmark ‘Redfern speech’ in 1992. Photograph: Fairfax Media via Getty Images

2017 is also the 25th anniversary of two more critical moments in the story: the Mabo decision – a High Court ruling that led to native title land rights, and former prime minister Paul Keating’s landmark “Redfern speech” (“We committed the murders – we took the children from their mothers”).

It was Bellear who introduced Keating at Redfern Park. This was the first time an Australian prime minister had frankly, without qualification, acknowledged the violence, sickness, dispossession and ongoing oppression that colonialism had imposed on Indigenous people.

Yet a quarter of a century on, Bellear says his country remains deaf to all the non-government reports into Indigenous lives – and to the savage critiques of Commonwealth policies that purported to make them better.

He talks about the recent damning interim report by the UN special rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, and another by Oxfam, both scathing assessments of – among many other things – rates of Indigenous child removal, incarceration, the lack of government commitment to self-determination, health, education and employment.

“All these reports just sit there and gather dust. Now and then, someone will pick one up and say: ‘Maybe we should implement such and such’ – or maybe not, because it’s all too hard,” Bellear says.

“It’s partly racism, it’s partly history. To really address what’s wrong today, we need to drill into that colonial history and admit all the terrible things that were done to us.”

What people choose to remember

By the measure that successive governments have (since 2008) used to determine Indigenous outcomes – the annual Closing the Gap report to the Australian federal parliament – the Commonwealth has dismally failed its First People.

It has been long established that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people die earlier than other Australians and have far worse health, educational, economic and employment outcomes. Closing the Gap was formulated to end the disparity, but the last report showed Australia had failed to improve or gone backwards on six of seven critical measures.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders constitute some 3% of the country’s overall population – yet in 1991, they comprised 14% of Australia’s prisoners. A quarter of a century later, that figure was up to 27% – while more than 150 Indigenous people had died in custody in the intervening 25 years.

In some parts of Australia, many more young Indigenous men complete prison terms than high school. The Indigenous rate of imprisonment is 15 times the age-standardised non-Indigenous rate. As Thalia Anthony pointed out in her 2015 book *Indigenous People, Crime and Punishment*, rates of Indigenous incarceration in Australia today match those of black imprisonment in apartheid South Africa.

Australia would not accept such outcomes for non-Indigenous citizens. So, why does it for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Jon Altman, a Deakin University academic specialising in Indigenous economy, draws on historian Donald Horne's culturally totemic 1964 polemic, *The Lucky Country* – a withering critique of Australian complacency – to consider what has changed, or not, for Indigenous people.

“While there are still some aborigines leading tribal lives, the possibility of preserving their civilisation either as a museum piece or in respect to their wishes seems small,” Horne wrote in 1964.

Horne added that assimilation ultimately meant “absorption, and that means extinction ... As a ‘nation’ with its own way of life, and even as a race, the aborigines are still destined to disappear.”

Altman says Horne's view shows “how little the dominant settler colonial way of thinking about the Indigenous economy has changed”, because central policy goals of many governments since have still been “to integrate Indigenous people into the conventional Australian economy and society”.

He says, “The current articulation of this goal is the Closing the Gap policy framework, pursuing targets unilaterally set by the state and measured by official statistics.”

According to Altman: “Policy is increasingly influenced by a neoliberal trope emphasising individualism, entrepreneurship, material accumulation and the free market – anathema to many Indigenous people, whose norms and values remain focused on kin, community and country. It sounds little different from the assimilation discourse of the early 1960s.”



A march through Sydney to mark the 40th anniversary of the citizenship referendum in 2007. Photograph: David Gray/Reuters

The pervasiveness of this philosophy is especially evident in the federal coalition government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy, which has resulted in \$534m cuts to Commonwealth-funded Indigenous programs. This strategy was excoriated by the UN's Tauli-Corpuz as having "effectively undermined the key role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations in providing services for their communities".

The policy coincided with former prime minister Tony Abbott's assertion that the continent was "unsettled or, um, scarcely settled" in 1788, and his suggestion (still echoed by other government members) that Indigenous people in remote communities are exercising a "lifestyle choice", rather than living culturally connected lives.



Former prime minister Tony Abbott visits the grave of land rights activist Eddie Mabo in the Torres Strait. Photograph: Tracey Nearmy/EPA

In fact, it is conservatively estimated that at least 750,000 Indigenous people lived on the continent when the first fleet arrived from Britain to begin colonisation. After invasion on 26 January 1788, Indigenous people were almost decimated by massacres and widespread poisoning, imprisonment, the forced removal of children and programs of assimilation and racial "dilution". By federation in 1901, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population had diminished to about 117,000.

However, according to the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australia is now experiencing a significant resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

After the 2011 census, the centre determined the number of people who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander had increased by 20% in five years. The national census is taken every five years, and the results of the next (from 2016) are expected to show a further increase. By 2031, the Indigenous population will be greater than in 1788.

Yet despite this positive growth, Australia's governments have consistently demonstrated an inability to make policies that improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives.

After the referendum it was like the work was done ... when it was actually just the bloody beginning **Sol Bellear**

In Redfern, LaVerne Bellear – Sol's sister, and the director of the Aboriginal Medical Service – says many of her clients won't engage with mainstream health services because of experiences with institutional racism, which manifest in assumptions about their lifestyle because of their aboriginality.

"They'll suffer rather than seek treatment," Bellear explains. "I'm of the belief that racism does make you sick. And racism was also a key factor as to why this service was established: people grow up with stories about how other [Indigenous people] would be left to last in the emergency departments, or not be seen at all, or told to come back tomorrow."

Talk to enough Aboriginal leaders, policy specialists, anthropologists, historians and everyday community members, and they will repeatedly mention the imperative of dealing honestly with Australia's terrible colonial history and lingering racism.

As Sol Bellear says: "It all goes back to history and what people choose to remember. I've argued for the need for a [South African style] truth and justice commission to reconcile with the past – but no takers."



Indigenous artwork on the boots of Rabbitohs rugby league player Angus Crichton. Photograph: Matt King/Getty Images

A crucible for change

Formed in 1944, the Redfern All Blacks are the oldest Indigenous rugby league team in Australia. After a hiatus of about 15 years, the club had a resurgence amid the activism of the 1960s, offering talented Indigenous players who were shunned by other league clubs an opportunity to showcase their skills in South Sydney.

The club formed a bridge to urban Indigenous society for young Aboriginal men from the country. Sol Bellear left northern New South Wales and moved to Redfern in the late 1960s – along with about 30,000 other Indigenous people, after the 1967 referendum resulted in the closure of the oppressive church-run missions and government reserves into which many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had been forcibly moved since the turn of the century.

Bellear still lives across the road from Redfern Oval – the All Blacks’ home ground, where the Rabbitohs also train - in a suburb that, despite its gentrification and \$1.5m-plus house prices, remains the Ground Zero of modern Indigenous activism.

Redfern was the crucible for the real fight for change after 1967: a place from which renowned Indigenous activists – among them Paul Coe, Gary Foley, Bruce McGuinness, John Newfong, Kath Walker, Roberta Sykes, Bob Maza, Chika Dickson, Bellear and his brother Bob (the first Aboriginal judge) – took the fight to the rest of Australia.

They formed a new wave of younger, firebrand activists, united by a determination that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders themselves would continue the ongoing fight for justice (which meant land rights and access to services), ahead of organisations such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), which had been critical to the Indigenous struggle and eventual success of the 1967 referendum.

They’ll suffer rather than seek treatment. I’m of the belief that racism does make you sick **LaVerne Bellear**

Dulcie Flower, a former FCAATSI activist who still lives in Redfern, recalls that, in the run-up to the referendum, it was not always easy to capture Indigenous hearts and minds.

“To talk to people about a referendum when what they needed was a house, access to running water, a job, basic services that everybody else had, was pretty difficult,” she says. “A lot of Aboriginal people weren’t convinced a referendum was the way to go.”

Flower, now in her 80s, grew up under the oppressive 1897 Queensland Aboriginal Protection Act, which forced Indigenous people off their traditional lands and required them to have permits to travel anywhere, to marry and to work. Nationally, the so-called “White Australia policy” – still held up by some activists as part of the template for South Africa’s apartheid laws – lasted from the country’s federation in 1901 right through to 1973.

Flower recalls: “After the 1967 referendum, I said: ‘Our work is still only just beginning. What we need to do is remove the state legislation, the welfare acts, because people aren’t free to move.’ There was so, so much more to do.”



January's Invasion Day protest march in Melbourne. Photograph: Alex Murray/AAP

Gary Foley – an actor, artist, professor of history at Victoria University and perhaps the most important living Indigenous activist of his generation – described in his 2012 doctoral thesis the disenchantment among his coterie after the referendum.

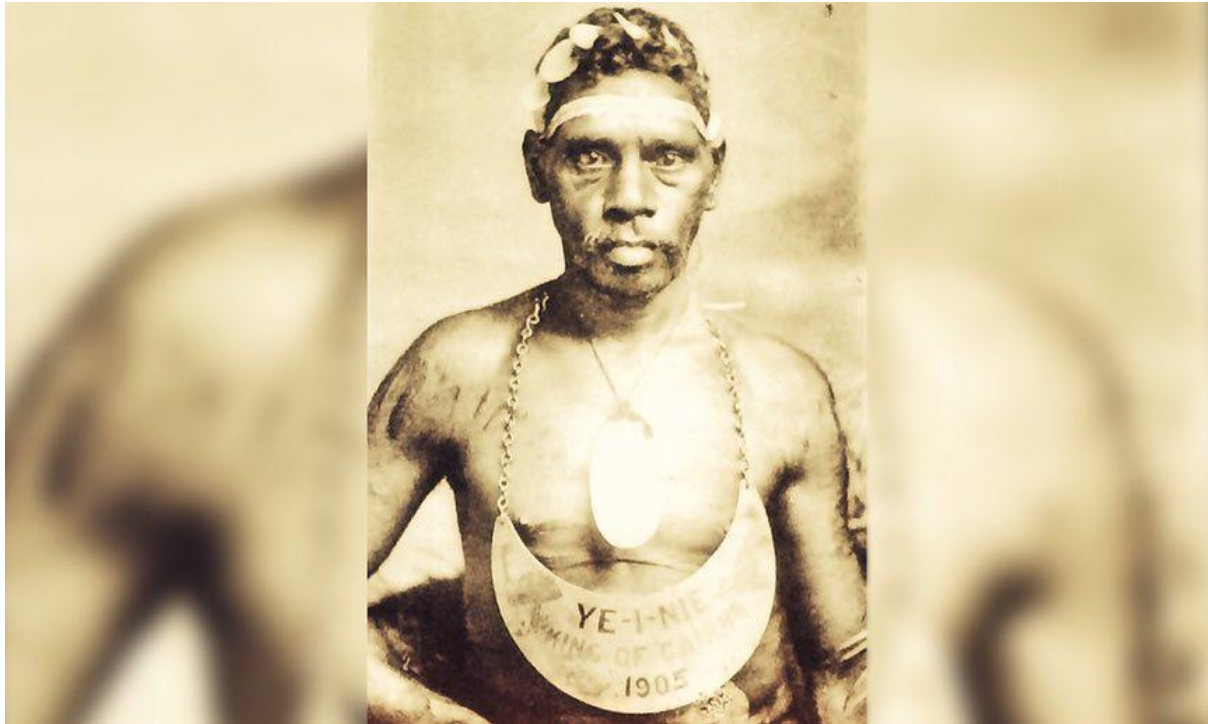
He wrote: “The young people were told to assist in the campaign for a ‘Yes’ vote as that would be the answer to Aboriginal people’s ongoing oppression and marginalisation. Then, when the referendum resulted in the biggest ‘Yes’ vote in Australian history, the old guard of the Aboriginal movement effectively declared the battle won, but nothing really changed.

“In fact, in New South Wales things got significantly worse, as the state government repealed the Aborigines Welfare Board and withdrew administration for reserves around the state, effectively abandoning tens of thousands of Aboriginal people who were then left in limbo. This led to disillusionment and discontent on the part of the younger generation, whose white counterparts were challenging the white political mainstream over issues to do with imperialism and neo-colonialism (Vietnam), and personal freedom.”

‘Nothing has changed’

Henrietta Fourmile Marrie was born in 1954 on the isolated Anglican mission at Yarrabah, an hour’s drive from Cairns, the tourism mecca she refers to in Yidindji language as Gimuy.

She was, like tens of thousands of northern Indigenous people, brought up under the [1897] Act, dictating where she and her family could go, work, be educated and marry. Yarrabah was established and run, with a mixture of military precision and muscular Christianity, by missionary Ernest Gribble, who introduced segregation by gender and put the children in dormitories away from their parents. It became home to more than 30 different – often historically fractious – tribes of the Gunggandji and Yidindji people.



Ye-I-Nie, 'King of Cairns' and great-grandfather of Henrietta Fourmile Marrie. Photograph: Alfred Atkinson/Paul Daley

Marrie is the great-granddaughter of Ye-I-Nie, a Yidindji leader acknowledged by the white interlopers as “King of Cairns” for his capacity as a peacemaker, and given a brass breastplate that said as much.

As a girl, Henrietta Fourmile (as she was then) would see a famous 1905 photograph of Ye-I-Nie, taken by photographer Alfred Atkinson. In the photograph Ye-I-Nie stands bare-chested, holding an elaborately painted shield. The plate hangs around his neck and he wears a shell headdress believed to have magical properties.

Marrie, with a diploma in teaching and a masters in environmental and local law, has worked for the UN and in philanthropy in the United States. But since she was a student in Adelaide in the 1970s – where she came across the South Australian Museum’s vast Aboriginal collection – she has explored the institutional theft of Indigenous culture, including that of the Yidindji.



Henrietta Fourmile Marrie in Yarrabah. Photograph: Paul Daley

As a member of the National Museum of Australia’s Indigenous Reference Group, she was consulted on the museum’s 2015 exhibition *Encounters*, featuring loaned items from the British Museum’s 6,000-piece [Indigenous Australia collection](#).

“They were showing us items that might be ‘loaned’ to Australia, which is where they come from and belong anyway. They [the British Museum] had all of these Yidindji shields – so distinctive – and then I saw my great grandfather’s jewels,” Marrie says. “I recognised the shell jewellery from that [Atkinson] photograph. I got to touch these things in London – and I wanted them returned to the country where they belong. But they said ‘no’.

“Our people, like so many people, were removed from their land and taken away from their culture and put on missions and reserves. And then their culture was taken and put in museums all over the world, and reinterpreted, so that we are now told what it means.”

I’ve watched Marrie tell this story at an international museology conference at the National Museum: people in the auditorium wept. Now she is talking about the trauma of reuniting and again separating from her ancestor’s artifacts as we take the windy, wet road to Yarrabah.

The 1967 referendum gave us the right to be counted on the census, but it didn’t give us anything much else **Henrietta Fourmile Marrie**

Today it’s a community of 5,000. But there is an acute housing shortage: an estimated 700 more homes are needed to accommodate the population, which is largely welfare dependent.

Yarrabah has the social and economic issues – teenage pregnancy and child removal, alcohol abuse, poverty, unemployment, health problems, petty crime, inadequate housing – that underscore life in too many Indigenous communities but escape the

notice of the rest of Australia. There have been three suicides in the past few months; one just a week or so earlier.

“There’s no jobs in Yarrabah. If you want a job, you have to leave,” Marrie says.

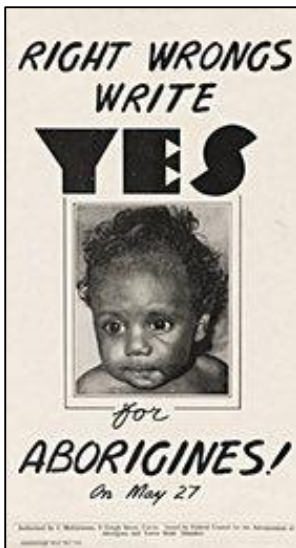
Along the way, she points out massacre sites such as Skeleton Creek, where the white men cut off the Jidindi’s heads and put them on sharpened stakes that lined the waterway as it meandered up into the hinterland. We cross Blackfellow Creek, also a massacre site and an old Aboriginal camping ground, before heading up the valley.



The cemetery at the old Yarrabah Mission. Photograph: Paul Daley

“The ’67 referendum gave us the right to be counted on the census, but it didn’t give us anything much else. It was just words on paper that had really no meaning. Everything we got after that, we had to fight hard to get – and nothing has changed.”

Marrie says the federal government was empowered to make Indigenous lives better, yet laws – state and federal – continue to oppress them. She cites the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention, during which government troops were sent into communities amid allegations of child abuse. Convictions for child abuse in relevant communities did not increase significantly during the intervention.



A 1967 referendum poster

She also discusses the 2013 Protection of Cultural Objects on Loan Act: a law passed largely at the behest of the British Museum, to provide a legal barrier to claims from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owners of items on loan to Australia from the museum's Indigenous collection. She sees this as an act of cultural imperialism and oppression – part of a continuum consistent with the theft of traditional lands, the policy of assimilation with all its malevolence, and the disconnection from her people's culture.

Back in Cairns, Marrie introduces me to a mother and son, Tarneen and Djerami Callope. Tarneen was born in Victoria in 1960, and Djerami in Queensland in the 1990s – either side of the 1967 referendum.

Tarneen's mum, born to a non-Indigenous mother and Aboriginal father from the Framlingham Mission, western Victoria, was removed at birth and shunned by her white family. She was put to work as a domestic, made to bathe in bleach and denied contact with her Aboriginal family.

History repeated. In the year of the referendum, Tarneen, her sister and brother were taken from their mother and put in an orphanage. It took the children two decades to reconnect with her.

Mother and son share a lively banter. Tarneen talks about the imperial nature of local nomenclature – of *Queensland* and James Cook University (after the Captain who made first east coast contact in 1770), where she works as Indigenous engagement officer. Djerami refers to the big increase in Australia's Indigenous population, and the irony of how the university is "being taken over from the inside" by a burgeoning Aboriginal student presence.

I ask him about 1967.

"My mother was seven at the time and so was my father. So that means I am the first person in my family line to be born a human being in Australia. I think about what that means," says Djerami, an anthropology student at James Cook.

“But we are still not free,” Tarneen insists.

“We cannot pretend we belong to a free and democratic nation, and not advocate against the human rights violations directed specifically at Aboriginal people in this country. We have to expose the truth, tell all of our stories and teach our children real Australian history – even if it strikes at the core of Australian identity, challenges land ownership, and causes people to become fearful, which in turn perpetuates racism,” Tarneen says.

“As a nation, if we are truly going to achieve reconciliation, we need to come together and acknowledge the truth and tell our stories. We have to be honest, respectful, and own our shared history.”

There it is again: history.