



18 September 2024

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Phone: [02 6277 4559](tel:0262774559)

JSCATSIA@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re. Reconciliation WA – Submission to the Truth and Justice Commission Bill

On the 12 August 2024, the Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, led by Senator Dorinda Cox, issued an invitation of submissions of state-wide truth-telling which will be included into the inquiry of Truth and Justice Bill 2024.

The Bill proposes to establish a Federal Truth and Justice Commission, which would provide a national framework for truth-telling about the history and impacts of colonisation, dispossession, and systemic racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The commission would also make recommendations on how to advance justice, healing, raise awareness and increase public understanding, and reconciliation for First Nations communities and the wider Australian society.

In Australia, local-level truth-telling is an established and growing practice, primarily hindered by lack of funding. Truth-telling at the community level has proven to be a potent force for change within its sphere of influence. It balances the historical record, tells modern truths, advances justice and promotes healing and reconciliation.

At state and territory levels, the work of local communities and organisations to progress local truth-telling processes provides a blueprint for engagement, participation and principles on a national scale.

To build the national understanding of truth-telling across Australia, we refer the Committee to submissions to this Inquiry from national and state reconciliation bodies, including Reconciliation Australia, Reconciliation South Australia, Reconciliation Queensland, and Reconciliation Tasmania, which provide place-based responses, insights and recommendations.

Reconciliation WA would like to formally submit to the Truth and Justice Commission Inquiry, so that our support for truth-telling is known and it's imperative for advancing unity across Western Australia and the nation.

Most importantly, we strongly advocate for clear actions that will emerge from the process after Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had countless reports written or prepared about them which have led to little or no action. This needs to consider appropriate resourcing and timelines that are determined

by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to achieve a mutually desired outcome. Equally we encourage an independent arbitration body to oversee the process and ensure accountability of all parties.

Post the Voice Referendum, **Reconciliation WA** has been leading a series of statewide stakeholder engagements to provide an opportunity to listen, learn, and lead building unity between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people across our state. At its core, the **Rising Program** is based on respect and relationships, both core beliefs within the Reconciliation movement with the underlying theme of this project being truth telling.

The **Rising Program** has engaged with over 800+ people to achieve a state-wide construct for reconciliation in a post referendum environment, where a significant trust breach has occurred.

We seek re-unify and foster positive respectful relationships which means walking together and deeply understanding our history is the way forward to a more united state and nation.

To date, data and sentiments have been collated from over 800+ engagements and states a priority area has been the notion of historical acceptance and finding common ground for advancing relations between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people. The progress since colonisation has shown to be slow and often fragile. Many participants of the public have voiced their frustrations and that there needs to be a concerted effort and a sustainable commitment towards truth-telling to reconcile across our nation.

When listening to perspective of respondents, both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal participants have shared the emotional impacts post referendum have been overwhelmingly negative and there is a call for greater engagement to address racism and systemic disparities.

Respondents have expressed the need to move past rhetoric and to focus on tangible action. Having invited respondents from diverse backgrounds and professions we've gathered a rich tapestry of sentiments that all call for the need of truth-telling and historical acceptance.

The Uluru Statement called for Truth and Treaty after Voice, and so a national Truth and Justice Commission provides an important framework to continue the important work of reconciliation across the country. Reconciliation WA is committed to supporting truth-telling and encouraging 'truth listening' across the state and believe a national approach will forge a strong pathway forward.

Truth Telling through our education system should be prioritised and be transformational in breaking down misconceptions and misunderstandings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Education is the system in which we are supposed to empower people, particularly children with the truth and where we can eradicate ignorance.

Western Australian example of the Wadjemup Project

Western Australia is already commenced on a truth telling journey with a major state funded initiative which we seek to be a blueprint for the state.

The Wadjemup Project is a state-wide Aboriginal-led project facilitated by Rottnest Island Authority with support from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. It is a significant cultural and historical initiative focused on truth-telling about the dark history of Wadjemup (also known as Rottnest Island) as the largest Aboriginal Deaths in custody site in the southern hemisphere.

This project aims to formally acknowledge the island's Aboriginal history through:

- **Truth Telling** - to acknowledge Wadjemup's history of Aboriginal incarceration and its role in the colonisation of WA;
- **Ceremony** - to facilitate healing in line with Aboriginal cultural protocol; and

- **Memorialisation** - of the former prison sites on Wadjemup, including the Quod and the Wadjemup Aboriginal Burial Ground.

During colonisation, Wadjemup was used as a prison for Aboriginal men and boys from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century. During this period, it is estimated that around 4,000 Indigenous men and boys, taken from all regions of Western Australia, were incarcerated there, and 500+ of them died due to the harsh conditions. The island is also a place of deep spiritual significance for Aboriginal people, which adds layers of pain to its history. The Wadjemup Project seeks to acknowledge these painful truths, uncovering and sharing the stories of those who suffered there, and ensuring that this history is remembered and honoured.

This initiative not only serves as an act of justice for the past but also as a foundation for healing and building a more inclusive future. The Wadjemup Project exemplifies how truth-telling can play a crucial role in recognizing historical injustices, fostering understanding, and paving the way for meaningful reconciliation.

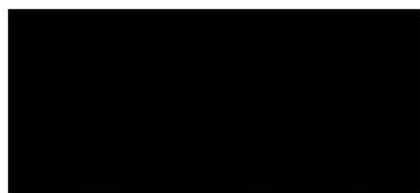
In summary

Historically, Australia's truth has not been fully acknowledged and the stain of that tarnishes our country's future. However, for us to be unified in an approach where we are committed to change, we need to acknowledge our First People's and the confronting history, and the continuing discrimination Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have faced.

We are at a critical point post referendum to heal. We can reclaim the narratives of the past, progress historical acceptance and healing for our First Peoples of Australia and indeed all Australians. Reconciliation WA is committed to supporting truth-telling and encouraging truth listening across the state and believe a national approach will forge a pathway forward. This is a powerful national opportunity.

We appreciate the Committee's consideration of our submission.

Yours sincerely



Nolan Hunter
Aboriginal Co-Chair



Debra Zanella
Non-Aboriginal Co-Chair



Jody Nunn
CEO