

Racism and Allyship in Australia

Prof David Hollingworth Talk Given at First Nations Allies Day August 9 2025

First off, I acknowledge we are meeting on lands owned by Kabi Kabi peoples and honour their knowledge holders past and present.

Secondly, I want to thank the organisers of today's event, the Sunshine Coast Reconciliation Group, for the opportunity to suggest how non-Indigenous allies can more usefully Stand with First Nations peoples. International Allyship Day

Thirdly, a disclaimer. The title of this short talk is "What All First Nations Allies Need to Know about Racism in Australia". I can't do that even though I have been trying to learn and teach about Australian racism for the 50 years since the Whitlam government passed the *Race Discrimination Act* in 1975.

One because it would take hundreds of hours not just half an hour, but also because of my positionality. Positionality is an academic way of saying where I stand in the racial landscape as a "white, mid-70s, increasingly disabled, cis male" with the many privileges that brings.

Among the implications of my positionality is that I can only provide insights into how racism is generated and maintained in Australia as a settler society and what some of the impacts of racism are on both those who experience it and those who benefit from it.

Secondly, what those impacts are on those who live it, can only be known and conveyed by those with lived experience, and we have some fantastic teachers who will do that today for all of us in possession of white privilege.

There are so many good sources of truthful information about our shared histories and the enduring background of dispossession, colonisation and racism. We will share some ways to access those resources later today.

Racism preceded Cook's declaration of the east coast of Australia as a British possession in 1770. Racism grew and became taken-for-granted alongside the spread of settlers across the continent. All other expressions of Australian racism are founded on that racism towards First Nations peoples as acknowledged in the Australian Human Rights Commission's *National Anti-Racism Framework* (2024). That racism is still often denied or minimised by those who benefit from it. That racism also ignores the incredible diversity among First Nations communities and populations, and the need for place-based efforts to transform and strengthen relationships between them and those who now reside on Aboriginal lands.

The key message is that to be a good ally you must educate yourself. It is not the responsibility of First Nations people to educate the rest of us; they have more than enough other urgent needs. All too often, in our schools, universities, corporations, government agencies and NGOs, a small number of First Nations people are expected to be experts on culture, history and justice, despite generations of shattering families and knowledge transfer. They are frequently called upon to do the difficult and sometimes damaging work of educating non-Indigenous associates whether they want to or not. This often unpaid work is finally being recognised as an inappropriate "cultural load".

So, what can I share today to help you engage in these decolonizing dialogues and conversations? One idea is that more and more Australians accept there is a need for truth-telling, despite current efforts by right-wing governments to prevent them.

However, truth-telling is not going to "free" us from our colonial past without open-eared and open-hearted **truth-listening** by non-Indigenous Australians.

Another thing I want to stress is that there are different forms or levels of racism, not just those specific things that are covered by existing racial discrimination legislation and complaints mechanisms. Those legislated examples can be called individual or interpersonal racism, especially in the provision of services. Typically, less than 15% of those who experience racism report it to anyone. 75% say they don't know who or how to report. Many quite reasonably fear going to police. Reluctance to report results from complaints taking too long, poor outcomes including unfair or unsafe

mediation rather than a disinterested judgement, as well as bad consequences for naming racism where victim/survivors are put down or targeted.

One subset of these interpersonal racisms is called micro-aggressions that often are completely unnoticed by those who commit them but are instantly recognised by those who have been exposed to them since childhood. Examples include non-verbal exclusions, racialized language or assumptions, disinterest, disrespect, or talking over First Nations people.

'The Invisible Discriminator' Stop Think Respect (Beyond Blue)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=089T-SDfsf0>

The second (and for me, the more powerful and destructive) form of racism is called institutional or systemic racism. These refer to the structures, processes, laws and regulations, established practices and procedures that collectively construct a solid but largely hidden and unacknowledged architecture that reproduces racial oppression without requiring conscious intent by those working in dominant institutions such as education, justice and health systems, workplaces and welfare services.

These are the forces that create the Gap between First Nations and other Australians, and prevent actual closing of those Gaps, despite huge budgets and good intentions. We have known since 2008 that efforts to “fix” Aboriginal disadvantage repeatedly fail because governments and non-Indigenous service providers refuse to relinquish control despite rhetoric about Reconciliation Action Plans, partnerships and co-design. Because systemic racism is hard to detect and prove, because power elites and most of us want to deny our advantages come from racism rather than our “merit”, efforts to combat or eliminate systemic racism are poorly planned, uncoordinated, and largely ineffective.

There is so much more we need to understand about other forms of racism, how they have evolved and changed in different times and places, and what we know about eliminating racism in all its forms. **We need to do the work!**

But now I want to move on to what that work means for our opportunities and obligations attached to our desire to be or become a good ally for First Nations peoples.

I think it is safe to assume that most of this audience has seen themselves as supporters of Aboriginal rights, often for a long time. A few of you might have voted Yes in the 1967 Referendum, more will have celebrated the Whitlam and Fraser governments recognition of limited land rights, rejoiced in the Mabo decision and Keating's 1992 Redfern speech, and Rudd's 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations. You will probably have mourned the refusal to implement the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the 1998 attacks on native title and heritage protection by John Howard and his 2007 Northern Territory Intervention exploiting alleged child sexual assaults to destroy self-determination. Among the many other tragedies and cruelties since then, you will have cried when disinformation and racism produced a national No vote in the Voice referendum of 60%. Notably the No vote across Queensland was more than 68%, and in the Fisher electorate that most of us live in voting 68.6% No.

But never forget, your pain and grief at these cruelties and defeats are minimal compared to those whose lives and loved ones are made vulnerable, even unsustainable, by such entrenched racism.

The newly elected LNP government of David Chrisafulli has defunded and dissolved existing truth-telling processes towards a treaty process. Why would this government, full of its dramatic success in weaponizing a racist anti-youth crime campaign into a massive electoral success, want to stop truth-telling? Because they know that it was lies, historical suppression of truth in education and the media, lack of representation and resourcing of First Nations voices, that enabled the No campaign to win when most Australians genuinely want better outcomes for Aboriginal people. They must keep denying and discrediting the real histories of this country's colonial and racist legacy not only to prevent self-determination but also to fragment and disrupt the more inclusive struggle for social justice and human rights.

PLAY ADVANCE AD:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZIqm_HaJdw

A quarter of a million people have viewed this and many have shared it on their social media.

But enough editorializing: How can we become an active good ally? Again, learning how to answer this question can take decades not just years, but we must start now if we haven't already been on that journey for some time.

What is an ally? An ally is a person from the dominant group who makes a conscious alignment with marginalized groups, while recognizing that inherent power dynamics and privileges must be acknowledged and addressed.

Given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up about 4% (or a million people) of the Australian population, allies are very important in pressuring governments at all levels to address disadvantage and lack of human rights for First Nations communities. Despite goodwill, the strength of that pressure grows and ebbs in response to spectacular injustices as well as competing concerns such as the cost of living or atrocities such as Gaza or cruelty to asylum seekers. At least until Rudd's 2008 apology, the horrors of the Stolen Generations cut through, as did deaths in custody and incarceration of children. Less well grasped barriers for many First Nations people include the extent and effects of intergenerational trauma including exposure to racism in all its forms. However much we as non-Indigenous people know or think we know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives, there is heaps we don't know or really get. So doing the work of educating ourselves never ends. You never become culturally competent, so own your uncertainties and practice cultural humility.

But there are hundreds of opportunities to recognize similarities and intersections between ourselves and those we live next to who are seen as "Other". This is why I love the concept of intersectionality which emphasises the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, and ability, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of

discrimination or disadvantage through the oppressive results of racism, sexism, ablism and so on.

Intersectionality acknowledges that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and privilege, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise or represent a person as deficient or lacking in some way. Conversely, intersectionality not only points to our separate existences but equally to our connections. While culture or “race” or gender might divide us, at the same time age or being a grandfather or loving dogs and the bush or hating Trump and Abbott join us together. In this very room I have had wonderful conversations with Iranian elders and Anglo-Indian parents. In other places with Somali mothers or Pitjantjatjara health workers that reinforce our human capacity to recognize each other as “same same but different.”

This awareness often lies at the heart of the desire to be a good ally. But the truth, of our shared humanity and the shared potentially disastrous future of environmental collapse, pandemics and war, cannot deceive us about the lived gaps and silences that make our lives mutually unintelligible in many ways. No cultural awareness course can enable me to feel or understand the daily lives and experiences of other peoples.

Maybe you watched that clip and thought okay but how does that connect with us trying to be good allies in Australia? Well, Albanese’s envoy on antisemitism, Jillian Segal, wants any criticism of Israel’s government or military to be evidence of antisemitism and be met with bans, punishment and funding cuts. In the same way when in 2007 we attacked the Howard government’s NT Intervention as blatantly racist, they responded by accusing us of not caring about alleged sexual abuse of Aboriginal children by paedophile gangs of Aboriginal elders. We must anticipate and rebut these efforts to silence our concerns through disinformation.

Fiona reminded me recently of the well-known confessional reflection by anti-Nazi Lutheran pastor Martin Neimoller titled *First They Came*. You may know it.

*First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.*

In the 80 years since Martin wrote that, across the globe neoliberalism has made us more self-centred, individualistic and less concerned with inequality and injustice, and with the fate of others. But I understand that statement to mean that I must help those who suffer injustice although I don't really know them or share their priorities but because injustice and hatreds are unacceptable and indefensible even when they don't target me. So, to the limits of our capacity, we should stand beside and speak out for all who are abused and ignored in our nation. At the same time, we acknowledge that no-one living on Aboriginal lands can be fully free or "at home" until recognition and reparations for dispossession is achieved.

So how do we conduct our efforts at allyship respectfully while never assuming or appropriating other people's lives, desires and agency? What are the limits and implications of being an ally for First Nations people in Australia when you are a settler who automatically benefits from the invasion and colonization that you claim to reject and disavow?

Clearly, the awareness of would-be allies is often hard-won and so much better than the more common ignorance and disinterest on non-Indigenous Australians, but we

now know it is not enough. Try to see it as a starting point, opening a door to a new path of stronger action that supports more critical self-reflection as well as more honest, authentic and crucially effective support for First Nations justice.

Increasingly, allyship has been seen as suspect because it can result in re-centring whiteness and white understandings, desires and needs to the exclusion of Aboriginal priorities. Allyship can become performative or virtue-signalling. It makes us feel good or pure. The acts we make as allies can be limited to the easy, costless and visible that never actually challenge or undo the status quo. With the internet, we can all be happy keyboard warriors who sign endless righteous petitions with no cost or danger to ourselves. Sometimes we remember that politicians typically discount form emails and petitions but remain comfortable that we are “good people” quite different from the majority of other citizens.

I want to back off from such criticisms not because they aren’t true but because we must understand that some of us have started earlier and learned from generous Aboriginal friends and critics, while others are just beginning this journey. But wherever we are on the road, we always must be checking in with ourselves and with trusted comrades to make sure we remain modest and open to criticism.

The key challenge is that if we think we are good non-racist people who are doing the right thing to support our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, have we asked them if they want our help and if our idea of what is support aligns with theirs? Are we being accountable? Can we be humble enough to listen and do what we’re told even when we think we know better?

The historian Henry Reynolds wrote an influential book titled “Why weren’t we told: a personal search for the truth about our history”. Regardless of its value, I have always hated the title and the idea that settlers were entitled to “be told” about our history and how it was that so many of us thrived on Aboriginal stolen lands.

Aboriginal activists from Turtle Island (also known as North America) have asked: *“How then can settler allies move beyond being sympathetic beneficiaries of colonialism? What approach is legitimately decolonizing?”*

They observe that the persistence of settler privilege presents a barrier to allyship that potential allies need to address.

Across settler societies activists have wrestled with these questions and tensions for a long time but I will try to present some pearls grown from this work. Some try to distinguish between performative allyship and authentic allyship where authentic allyship involves a deep and sustained commitment to addressing systemic issues and challenging entrenched norms. Genuine allies engage in practices beyond superficial gestures, incorporating critical self-reflection, strategic action, and ongoing support for marginalized communities. They are prepared to face actual costs and hardships because of their actions in support of anti-racism.

We often return to intentions when assessing our own or others 'authenticity'. I think intentions matter but don't guarantee or excuse the outcomes of our choices. Many of you will be familiar with the saying:

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Pioneering Aboriginal social worker Lilla Watson is usually said to have made the statement but she always says it came from shared thinking in the early days of Queensland activism.

If we are to accept this challenge to work together to fight for mutual liberation, how will we proceed? One Indigenous mentor says:

A decolonizing allyship would necessitate alliance building and alliance making that is committed to a process of truth-telling, refusal of capitalist-colonialist continuities and a commitment to Indigenous resurgence that respects Indigenous sovereignties and self-determination.

It might be hard to know what that call really means for each of us. I take from it that we can be and do nothing without establishing and building relationships with Aboriginal people. Those relationships must proceed at the speed of trust, recognizing that trust takes a long time to grow and embed and an instant to be betrayed and lost.

One useful way those of us who aspire to be good allies have thought about the work has been to contrast a limited allyship with a more authentic and courageous stance. We start from recognition that none of us settlers who continue to benefit from Aboriginal dispossession and expropriation will ever be truly free until we understand the challenge issued by Lilla Watson and commit to do the work to move beyond costless or performative allyship.

The identity beyond ally is often described as “accomplice” or “co-conspirator”. Commentators describe the difference as follows:

An accomplice takes a step past allyship. This approach moves beyond performativity and addresses systemic issues through substantive action.

Another argues that: “all co-conspirators are allies, but not all allies are ‘co-conspirators.’”

This distinction underscores the difference between passive or symbolic support and active efforts to tackle oppressive barriers of any kind: between ‘hope’ and ‘action’.

Co-conspirators move beyond merely observing social justice issues from the sidelines to standing shoulder to shoulder with those fighting for their rights.

Many non-Indigenous would-be allies tell me they are often reluctant to act or intervene in response to witnessing racism in case they do or say the wrong thing. They fear appearing arrogant or even racist to Aboriginal people or others who experience racism. Some commentators call this fear “paralysis by analysis”. But as someone who has said and done what others have seen as the “wrong thing”, I would argue that those mistakes often led to critical reflection and a greater understanding of complex challenges.

Also as a non-Indigenous settler with unearned privilege, it is **your responsibility** to name that privilege and do the work of decolonizing and anti-racism because it is us that benefit from the dispossession and systemic racism.

Accept that your efforts to become a better ally and to act in solidarity with First Nations people will not always be acknowledged or change outcomes or may result in outcomes you don't anticipate.

Accept that you are doing this FOR YOURSELF to free yourself from the shame and constraints of being a colonizer and not to help or save the oppressed

Recognize that it takes years of consistent and genuine behaviour to build relationships and earn acceptance but that all that can be lost in an instant if you are exposed as “gammon” or deceitful or only there until the shit hits the fan (even if you don’t believe you’ve done anything wrong).

Understand that in most situations, your “usefulness” is not based on your insight or capacity to “know what needs to be done” but because of your largely unearned advantages and privileges. So, you must use that power and privilege to advance what Aboriginal comrades want rather than pursue your own agenda.

There will be times when you can’t in good conscience do what you are told to do or support a position your Aboriginal “bosses” propose. This will be a moment of great discomfort. In my own life a couple of examples would be when the esteemed Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress within the Uniting Church completely rejected the acceptance of same sex ministers, or when some Native Title organisations refused to allow members of their Stolen Generations to be accepted as beneficiaries of entitlements or reparations.

When this stuff happens, there are no guidelines or best practice models. You’re on your own and it can be scary. But never forget that you remain among the privileged, those who automatically benefit from colonization and racism, and must own both that privilege and the results of any efforts you make to renounce or redress that privilege.

I think the best approach is to explain what your view is, presenting relevant evidence and why you think that choice will best deliver the outcome articulated by the Aboriginal group involved. But when I am unsuccessful in persuading others, I have to decide whether I will commit to that other choice or stand aside. Usually when you stay the course, you often learn you were wrong or only half got what was involved, resulting in more learnings.

German sociologist Max Weber reminds us of the importance of such relentless persistence or as Martin Luther King and others in the civil rights movement termed “keeping your eyes on the prize”. Weber wrote:

Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly, all historical experience confirms the truth - that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible.

To conclude, one of the weird things about discussions of allyship is that, like so much other stuff here in the colony, it is focussed on whitefellas. Allies are assumed to be white (what do you reckon Walter?) and they offer support to Aboriginal people. Allies imagine they can “fix things” (do you know the concept of the “white saviour”?). This re-centres white settlers and their power and privilege.

But in my experience, I have constantly gained from guidance, support and slaps up my head from Aboriginal friends, allies or ‘bosses’, and from other Australians who have fought the good fight. So, I want to thank all those wonderful Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mentors, many of whom are no longer with us, who helped me understand whatever I know about Australian racism and how to smash it.

Thank you for listening

Resources

AHRC Race Commissioner speech to Press Club

<https://iview.abc.net.au/video/NC2511C027S00>

<https://www.amnesty.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/205-how-to-be-a-genuine-ally.pdf>

<https://www.amnesty.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/How-to-be-a-First-Nations-Ally.pdf>

<https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/resourcehub/how-be-anti-racism-ally>

<https://www.amnesty.org.au/ally-guide-series/>

<https://www.amnesty.org.au/allyship-resources/>

<https://www.catalyst.org/insights/2021/allyship-advocacy-questions-answered>

<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/>

<https://theconversation.com/you-become-a-target-research-shows-why-many-people-who-experience-racism-dont-report-it-260092>

Land, Clare. 2015. Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles. London, Zed Books.

The *Guardian Australia*. August 2025. Series called the *Descendants* (work of descendants of killers and Aboriginal people at truth-telling and recognition/memorialization).