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# Before we begin again, I want to tell you why last year was horrendous

By Melitta Hogarth

The education year is about to begin but I can't let 2018 go. Not yet.

I want to share with you how last year was for me, a Kamilaroi woman, a former schoolteacher and now a university lecturer and educational researcher. My urge to share is simply because I need to be persistent and I have to keep on trying to communicate how it is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, like me, in Australia today.

I consistently investigate the biases and taken for granted assumptions upheld in our society in my work as a researcher and I want to tell you that last year was absolutely horrendous for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. And yet, it was also a significant year where we celebrated the strength and persistence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and we began discussions about

truth telling and acknowledging the detrimental shared history of colonial Australia.

This time of the year, the lead up to January 26<sup>th</sup>. is always a nightmare for me. But last year the nightmare did not stop after January 26<sup>th</sup>. It went all year. Nowhere was safe. Every month, we were reminded that our bodies were political, our lives in 'need of saving' by the coloniser and implicit and explicit racism splashed across many forums on a daily basis. There was no escape. Let me explain.

### *The January 26th debate.*

I purposefully do not name this day. The debates that occur about it on social media forums *every year* are an excellent example of White Privilege in action, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples know their place in wider Australian society.

Last year it was headlines such as "[Why I'm proud of Australia and you should be too](#)" and "[Australia day: Most Australians don't mind what date it's held, according to new poll](#)". This year we got [Australia Day debate: Poll reveals most Aussies want celebrations to stay on January 26](#).

Within every one of the discourses triggered by these headlines is the reminder that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to "get over it" and "move on". But it doesn't take into consideration the arguments of [how January 26<sup>th</sup> is a recent date set nor recognise that the detrimental effects of colonisation continue](#).

The shared history is inconvenient and again, not something that can be changed, so we are told let's just "forget it". Let's dismiss the history of genocide and massacres and "move on".

Malcolm Turnbull said [the date would not change while he was Prime Minister](#) and it didn't.

Ironically Malcolm Turnbull, along with his predecessor, Tony Abbott, espoused a wish to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in their [Closing the Gap reports](#).

### *February*

Talking of Closing The Gap, February marked the tenth year of the Closing the Gap initiative. Yet again, [the annual report](#) saw few of the goals achieved. The [National Indigenous Reform Agreement](#), more commonly referred to as Closing

the Gap, was introduced in 2008 with the intention to address the inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' livelihoods encompassing health, education and employment.

But in 2018, once again [the reports were not positive](#). Once again, the failure to achieve the targets was lamented and once again data was provided as to why governments can't close the gap. And the money spent, [a reported \\$130 billion](#) (paywalled) over the years, raised further discussions.

Few commentators acknowledged the complexities of policy making and the lack of Indigenous voice being involved in the decision-making. The call to be heard in the [Redfern Statement](#) by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was lost. Some politicians even placed the [lack of progress squarely with the communities](#) (paywalled). Such notions emphasise the political agenda of self-empowerment (that is, blaming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perceived failures and current conditions on the idea that the people do not take up the opportunities made available to them) and silences the [Indigenous right for self-determination](#).

So the Australian Government [abandons the policy and moves on](#) to another review with new targets as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples wait and [remain silenced](#).

### *March*

Yes we were only into March when an all-White panel on the morning show, Sunrise, advocated the [further removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#) from their homes for their well-being. One of the commentators suggested a second Stolen Generation was necessary. The segment caused outrage throughout Indigenous communities and led to [protests](#) outside the studio. The audacity of the panelists to feel they could speak about Indigenous issues from a position of knowing caused instant reaction. However, it also illustrated the enactment of privilege. Our political bodies are consistently the subject of discussion and this instance, sought to remind us that colonial Australia was not afraid to voice their solutions for the perceived 'problem'.

Formal complaints were made to the Australian Communications and Media Authority about the [mistruths](#) shared within the segment and in September, Sunrise was found in breach of the [Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice](#). But it was all too late. The perpetuation of stereotypes and mistruths were already out there being normalised and re-interpreted within colonial Australia; further pushing any chance of reconciliation back.

### *April*

In April, the dilemma of silencing and the inconvenience of Indigeneity in colonial Australia continued as Australia hosted the Commonwealth Games. [Indigenous protestors](#) were in the news again. Protesters re-established the mantra of the 'Stolen Wealth Games' first used in 1982 protests. Media discourses [perpetuated the inconvenience](#) of the protestors and the makeshift camp, Camp Freedom, highlighting the number of caravans, tents and so forth.

Organisers of the games emphasised how they were using fencing to 'cage in' protestors. The protest and activism was an inconvenient truth upsetting the celebrations of colonisation.

### *May*

This marked one year since the [Uluru Statement of the Heart](#), which the Turnbull Government subsequently [rejected](#). In the outright rejection political voices aired their concerns of a perceived "third chamber of parliament" as reasoning for the dismissal, ignoring the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The extensive [consultation process](#) that had been funded by the Federal Government became another point of [critique](#) about the perceived exorbitant funding extended to Indigenous affairs.

Advocacy for the Uluru Statement of the Heart has been maintained [seeking to further the recommendations made](#). Still, the call for a voice and space to speak into what happens in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs seems 'a step too far' for government with the now Prime Minister Morrison again [dismissing the renewed push](#).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples having a say in policy and actions that affect them is actually written in policy but, as always, it is all just words.

### *June*

[Reconciliation week](#) falls at the end of May/early June. The 2018 theme was 'Don't keep history a mystery' and it kept the notion of 'truth telling' front and centre. Embedded within the recommendations in the Redfern Statement and the Uluru Statement, the week challenged non-Indigenous Australia to question how much they don't know about the [shared history](#). Denial of the historical past needs to be addressed. We cannot have reconciliation without it. For goodness sake, [this year was the first time that Reconciliation Week had been celebrated in Tasmania!](#) We have a long way to go.

Still in June, another news frenzy occurred where students at a [university in Australia](#) decided to dress in blackface. There has been a rise in this practice in recent years with [models, sporting teams](#) and so forth all being called out on their

racism (or ignorance). Although, I would suggest it is hard to argue ignorance when there has been such an influx of condemnation of such behaviours on social media and [the repercussions shared on the news](#) including suspension and so forth. It is a position of privilege that you can feign ignorance of the stereotypical assumptions linked to blackface and post to a social media platform photographic evidence of your actions. But even better is the almost instant disclaimers that in no certain means were the actions intending to be racist or malicious.

### *July*

But then came July and the world seemed bright if just for a while as we recognised the achievements and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women during [NAIDOC week](#) with its wonderful theme, *Because of her, we can*. It was a powerful theme championing the often-silenced women who have, persistently and with great strength, fought for equal rights. The week provided opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to [voice their appreciation](#) of their mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters and ancestral mothers but also, allowed space for recognition of the various achievements in all fields and disciplines.

As an Aboriginal woman, the theme was empowering and yet humbling; reminding me of the women who faced such adversity in the past with tenacity, grace and pride.

### *August*

In August we came crashing down with the appointment of the once self-proclaimed [Prime Minister of Aboriginal affairs](#), Tony Abbott, as [Special envoy for Indigenous affairs](#). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples shared their [frustrations](#) about the appointment and the irony of yet another white male being positioned as a knower about Indigenous affairs. Recognition of the dramatic reductions in funding to Indigenous [health](#), employment and [so forth](#) while he was Prime Minister seemed to counter the notion of closing the gap and yet, here he was returning to focus on [attendance of remote Aboriginal Australia in schools](#) (paywalled).

Abbott's focus tends to be on remote Aboriginal communities and yet, the [largest Aboriginal population](#) in Australia is actually found in New South Wales where the majority live in towns and cities. So why focus on remote communities? And why should Tony Abbott have an input into [overhauling Indigenous education](#)?

### *September*

Yet another media frenzy around race and representation exploded in September with the publication of a [political cartoon of Serena Williams](#) featuring a stereotypical exaggeration of racial features. The alignment to [Bill Leak's political cartoon](#) in 2016 of an Aboriginal man not knowing his son was soon raised and again, our politicised bodies became the subject of many a forum.

Australia's ignorance regarding race was exposed in [national](#) and [international](#) media. But as usual, the denial by the cartoonist and [the interpretation by the editor](#) emerged in support of their colleague and no progress was made in Australian racial relations. Reflection on why it may be perceived as racist and/or sexist did not occur. Instead, we were told it was the PC world gone too far. Within weeks, the world had moved onto the next big news story but at least one Aboriginal researcher was still reeling in a year of constant disruption.

### *October*

This was not a month of reprise. Instead, the government took it to another level with One Nation's leader, Pauline Hanson, bringing forward her 'It's okay to be White' motion to the Senate. And worse still, the motion was almost passed with government members voting for it. It was a slap in the face to me. The controversial [motion](#) spoke to the perceived anti-White racism on social media and the challenge on Western civilisation. Commentators drew connections of the motion to the [White Australia Policy](#). Again, the positioning of the coloniser as the dominant norm was established placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander on the margins.

### *November*

Some positive news for educators arrived in November with [90+ elaborations](#) released to assist classroom teachers to [embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the Science classroom](#). Indigenous educationalists and scientists assisted in developing the list; contributing their own knowledge to help in closing the cultural gap. Yet, this action could not escape the criticism and [scaremongering](#) of some commentators.

For years there has been advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to be embedded rather than 'bolted on' to the curriculum. And yet here came the resistance.

### *December*

Abbott started up on [what to do to improve attendance in Indigenous education](#). He wants the introduction of police officers within the school setting and a [review of the Australian Curriculum](#) to simplify it (read as let's get rid off the cross-

curriculum priorities and general capabilities and just focus on numeracy and literacy). You know how it goes.

I could not wait for the year to be over. It is, well and truly.

Let's start again soon, shall we?



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