



THE **STORIES**

06

FAIRFAX SYNDICATION



# Tom Calma

Advancing Rights For  
Indigenous Australians

**WARNING** THIS ARTICLE INCLUDES NAMES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE NOW DECEASED

According to organisations such as Oxfam, the Australian Human Rights Commission and the World Health Organization, indigenous people in many parts of the world remain significantly disadvantaged when compared to their non-indigenous counterparts. Australia has been identified as one of the slowest of the developed nations to implement policies and strategies for improving living standards for its indigenous peoples.

Ever since colonisation, Indigenous Australians have been marginalised and, until the 1960s, had been excluded from many of the social rights afforded other citizens, including access to welfare, pensions and industrial award conditions and wages, the right to be regarded as equal to other citizens in the eyes of the law, the right to be acknowledged and included in the national census, and even the right to vote.

In the struggle for change, Indigenous Australians have long led the way, using activism, workshops and conferences to raise awareness and protest against inequality, injustice, dispossession of land and protectionist policies. One of the earliest examples of this is the Day of Mourning declared by the Aboriginal Progressive Association on 26 January 1938. It marked the first of many such gatherings, over many decades.

In the field of education, successive state and commonwealth governments have imposed various education strategies upon Indigenous Australians, such as the NSW Aborigines Act of 1909, which prohibited Aboriginal children from attending public schools. Without any consultation or collaboration, Aboriginal children only 'schools' were then established on reserves and, more often than not, the reserve manager's untrained wife would teach from syllabuses that focused on manual or domestic servitude training.

In 1940 responsibility for the education of Aboriginal people was transferred to the Department for Education, which took control of reserve buildings and started to provide trained teachers. By 1950 Aboriginal children began assimilating into mainstream public schools, but it wasn't until the establishment of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in 1976 and the National Aboriginal Education Committee in 1977, along with the numerous conferences

they conducted over the following decades, that positive changes in the approach to education for Indigenous children were implemented.

The Aboriginal Education Conferences of the 1980s and 1990s enabled Aboriginal leaders and experts to have a say in the education of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, and paved the way for the improved outcomes we see today, such as a doubling of the number of Indigenous students enrolled in tertiary education, and Year 12 retention rates for Indigenous students up from 32 per cent in the late 1990s to 60 per cent in 2014.

Professor Tom Calma AO, now Chancellor of the University of Canberra, was involved with those early conferences, and says they gave people from a diverse range of backgrounds the opportunity to talk about the issues that mattered, and became one of the key drivers behind the social and political shifts that have occurred for Indigenous Australians over the past 40 years.

*“There’s quite a number of senior Indigenous academics now and leaders in academia who went through and attended those conferences, and they were really important in terms of Aboriginal policy formulation and debate.”*

An Aboriginal elder from the Kungarakkan tribal group and a member of the Iwaidja tribal group whose traditional lands are south-west of Darwin and on the Coburg Peninsula in the Northern Territory, Tom has been involved in Indigenous affairs at all levels for over 45 years, including serving as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner from 12 July 2004 to 31 January 2010.

He believes the Aboriginal Education Conferences marked the start of real change for Indigenous Australians and that the impacts are being seen today in the improved educational outcomes being realised.

*“They started off at probably a few hundred people but grew to four or five hundred at some of the conferences, and we had speakers like Eddie Mabo, who was involved in education at the time, and some prime movers and big power-brokers like Linda Burney, who was Chair of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group.*

---

## Power Of Conferences

*“The Commonwealth Department of Education had Aboriginal education as its number one major policy reform back then, so there was federal funding for these conferences, but they were run by the Aboriginal people ourselves, which worked well.”*

As a result of these conferences, Indigenous Education Policies that focused on things like the importance of Indigenous studies for all Australians, the promotion of cross-cultural understanding, and ensuring that Aboriginal people were involved in the future direction and management of their own education were established, and those policies influenced the way Australia’s history was taught in the classroom. Importantly, the conferences focused on all tiers of education and all geographic areas.

Professor Calma has an impressive list of appointments, awards and achievements to his credit including the roles of Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia, Chair of the Close the Gap (CTG) steering committee for Indigenous Health Equality (2006–2010) and Senior Advisor to Immigration and Indigenous Affairs Minister, Philip Ruddock, on Indigenous affairs (2003). He received an Order of Australia in 2012 for distinguished service to the Indigenous community, and for his advocacy of human rights and social justice.

Throughout his years as a social advocate, Calma says he consistently used conferences as a platform to educate those in the audience about the gamut of associated issues he believed were important.

*“If I’m given a topic to speak about at a conference, I do talk about it but I’ll also bring in a whole range of other issues and try to present what we call a determinant or a social determinant perspective. So when we talk about Indigenous health, for example, and prisoners, or our people being incarcerated, you need to discuss the very high proportion who have mental health issues or who have experienced a lot of intergenerational trauma and issues impacting their life like fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or other general health issues, to overcrowded housing, to lack of education, lack of employment and so on. These are the things that bring them into contact with the justice system.”*

He says a lot of his presentations take a holistic approach and bring in human rights or social justice approaches to look for solutions.

*“All of these other issues like unemployment, housing, crime, alcohol etc. have got to be considered when you look at health or you look at justice issues or you look at education, and it’s not as simple as some people like to present.”*

In terms of the importance of the role of conferences in facilitating the dissemination of information and knowledge in his area, Calma says they sit at about 7 or 8 out of 10, depending on how they are run and the way presenters and audience members approach the opportunity.

*“As a presenter I’d give conferences around about seven or eight out of ten but it really depends on the conference and what people are willing to put into it.”*

*“I think there’s always a difference between what one presenter gets out of a conference and what others do. I’m one who will never, if I can help it, do a presentation and then leave. I will always stay around for at least half a day at a conference and give people an opportunity to have a chat and follow up on any issues or I try to attend a session or two and it really frustrates me when people breeze in and breeze out. It’s not good for achieving outcomes. I suppose it’s all just personal approaches but that’s the way I like to operate.”*

He says talking to people at conferences also helps him to gauge whether important messages are being understood by the general public.

*“Every conference I present at – and I present at a lot – I always get very positive feedback, but I also get to find out how many people still don’t know about important initiatives like the Close The Gap campaign, and how many people don’t understand what social determinants are, so I’m always pushing that agenda and conferences have helped get a lot of people involved in those things.”*

Close the Gap is a strategy that aims to achieve health equality in terms of life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment outcomes. Developed in response to the 2005 Human Rights Commission Social Justice Report, it is a formal commitment endorsed by the Australian Government and monitored by the Council of Australian Governments

---

## Power Of Conferences

(COAG) to achieve health equality within 25 years.

Another important observation of Calma's, when reflecting upon his conference experiences, was a notable under-representation of women on expert panels and in keynote speaker roles.

*"At one recent health conference I was at, I was on a panel of speakers comprised of only men.*

*"I pointed out to the organizers that they needed to be conscious of involving more women, and they took my comments well, but they have to be more conscious of these things.*

*"There's plenty of meritorious women around who can talk on these issues probably more eloquently and authoritatively than some of the men, and organisers should always be aware – get smarter on some of these things – because, is it a lack of consciousness or is it just discriminatory? With this case it wasn't discrimination, because there were a number of women on the committee that selected the panel; they just didn't even think about it."*

He says, whilst some conferences are just about distributing information or advising people what is available to them, the most memorable ones for him were those that set out to bring about social change or achieve specific outcomes.

*"If you look at something like the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) conferences, or the important Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA) conferences I'm involved with, at the end of them, we develop up a set of outcomes and recommendations and they include research and advocacy and they establish partnerships with funding bodies."*

As one of the inaugural White Ribbon Ambassadors, one such memorable conference for Calma was the 2012 Indigenous Men's Conference at Ross River, just south of Alice Springs.

*"It was more of a summit than a conference, I suppose, but it was very good and some very good outcomes came out of that, where men really declared their position on supporting other men standing up against violence against women.*

*“You just see all of these issues that are confronting us all the time and people become very blasé about it or defensive or it’s just not in their consciousness and I think it’s important to raise these things all the time.”*

Another important outcome that he attributes to his involvement with conferences was Canada’s adoption of Australia’s Close the Gap strategy which seeks to reduce the equity gap between indigenous and non-indigenous populations in a number of key areas.

As a result of his work trying to reduce tobacco use in Indigenous communities, he was asked to deliver the keynote address at the 2009 Oceania Tobacco Control 09 Conference in Darwin. The conference brought together people tackling tobacco-related issues from New Zealand, Australia and parts of Asia. Impressed by what he had to say, the Australian Department of Health invited Calma to work with them, and in 2010 he was invited to Canada to talk about tobacco control with people from the Assembly of First Nations. This assembly brings together Chiefs from all the First Nation bands in Canada and works to protect the Aboriginal and treaty rights and interests of their people, particularly in the areas of health, culture, education and language.

*“They invited me there to talk about tobacco control, but while I was there I also talked about what we were doing in Australia with the CTG campaign. I explained how we’d approached it in terms of the relationships we developed between the governments and Indigenous peoples, and then early in 2011 the National Chiefs in Canada had discussions about what we’d done, and started their own CTG program in Canada. They also declared March 22 as International CTG Day, which is pretty much the same date as our own CTG Day.”*

Later in 2011, the Assembly invited Calma back to Canada to address the first Indigenous Health Conference they’d had in 10 years.

*“It was a big gathering, and again I talked about our CTG program. The next year, in 2012, they met with the Canadian Prime Minister and declared that they wanted a similar arrangement to what we had in Australia. They also announced they would run CTG continually, which they’ve done ever since, so from just a conference address and then a couple*

---

## Power Of Conferences

*of conversations, conference presentations and workshops in Canada, the CTG campaign was able to get up and running over there.”*

Real change had been made.

*“That was probably the most memorable or significant conference outcome; being able to work with them to develop the strategies, and having been able to influence the way they approached the government. For me, that was a very personally rewarding outcome.”*

Conferences also played a big part in Calma’s role as a Senior Diplomat between 1995 and 2002 when he was charged with the task of formally developing Australia’s educational interests overseas.

One of five Senior Diplomats sent to various regions of the world to determine what potential there was for Australia to capitalise upon the burgeoning international education market, Calma spent time in both India and Vietnam.

*“Every year the five of us would come back and run conferences in every state and territory so that all the education providers, both higher education, VET and schools, could come together and get intelligence about what was happening offshore and how they should go about their business.”*

Calma says these conferences played a pivotal role in enabling Australia to establish itself in the international student market.

*“That was really the beginning of the big international education movement and for fee-paying students to study in Australia, and I was lucky to be able to do that job.*

*“We saw how arrangements could be developed across the world, and we’re seeing the outcomes of those relationships now. In 1995 when I first went overseas, the international student market was worth just under a billion dollars and now it’s worth over \$19 billion; it’s a major international export.”*

Named *The Bulletin* magazine’s Most Influential Indigenous Australian in 2007, *GQ* magazine’s Man of Inspiration in 2008, and the ACT’s Australian

of the Year in 2013, Tom Calma has a reputation as a leading Indigenous scholar who has worked tirelessly to remove barriers and advance living standards for Australia's Indigenous peoples. By his own admission, much of what he has done in terms of advocacy and public education has been achieved by using conferences as a platform to raise awareness and gather momentum for change. He believes conferences have played an important role in the development of current programs and policies aimed at improving Indigenous peoples' quality of life and the issues that impact on their lives. He concluded:

*“For me, conferences are fantastic because they really do raise awareness, especially those that are well supported by the corporate sector. They are also a great venue to advance reconciliation and develop greater social, cultural and political understandings of Australia's Indigenous populations generally.”*