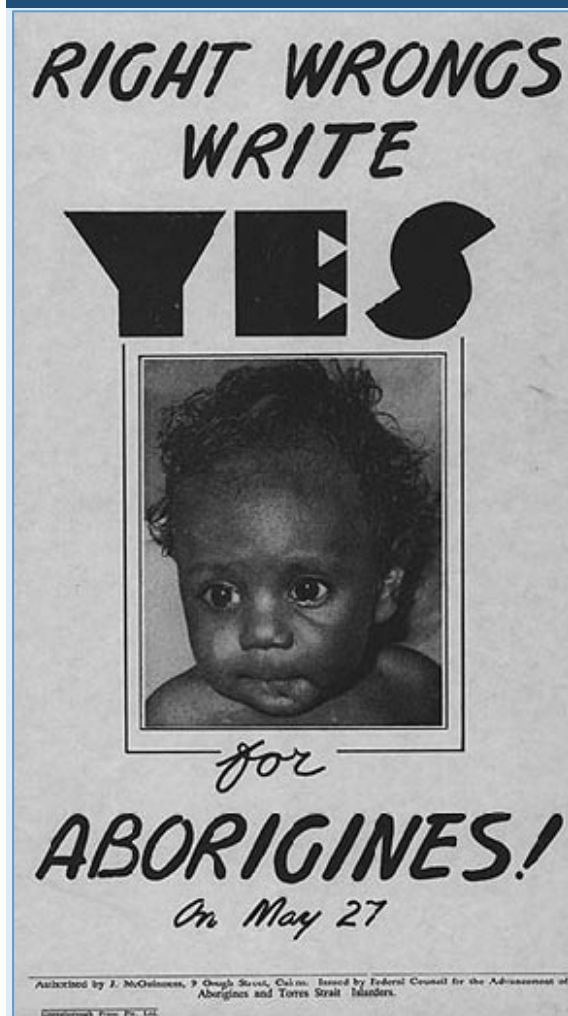


# The 1967 Referendum



On Saturday May 27, 1967, the Australian Government held a referendum. This was a momentous turning point in Australian history and for our nation.

More than 90 per cent of Australian voters chose 'Yes' to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national census and give the Australian Commonwealth Government the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is what we call a landslide vote!

Before the 1967 referendum, responsibility for Aboriginal affairs rested mainly with state and territory governments, which controlled many if not most aspects of Aboriginal people's lives through their own laws and policies, including movement, employment, wages, housing, and the removal of children from families.

The question put to voters in May 1967 was:

*Do you approve the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled -*

*"An Act to alter the Constitution so as to omit certain words relating to the People of the Aboriginal Race in any State and so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning the Population"?*

The purpose of the 1967 Referendum was to make two changes to the Australian Constitution. These changes would enable the Commonwealth Government to:

(i) make laws for all Australian people by amending s51 of the Constitution stating that *people of the Aboriginal race in any state* were excluded, and

(ii) take account of Aboriginal people in determining the population of Australia by repealing s127 of the constitution. Until then Aboriginal people had been haphazardly included in the census but not counted for the purposes of Commonwealth funding grants to the states or territories.

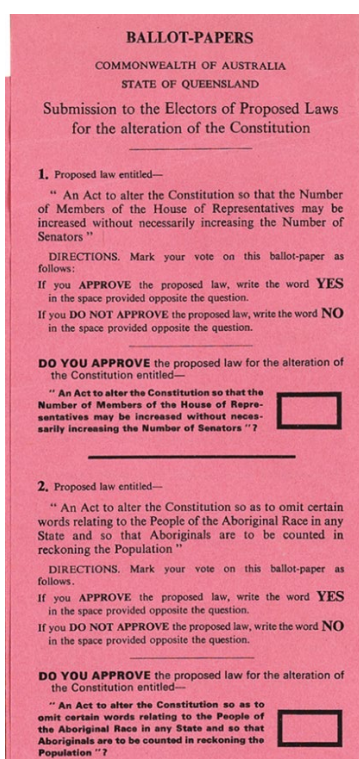
From 1967, all Aboriginal people were to be counted in the census and included in base figures for Commonwealth funding granted to the states and territories on a per capita basis.


Contrary to popular thinking the 1967 Referendum did NOT

- give Aboriginal peoples the right to vote
- give Aboriginal peoples citizenship rights
- give Aboriginal peoples the right to be counted in the census.

Prior to the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were treated differently under various census classifications and government policies. From 1947, many Torres Strait Islander people were included in official population counts under classifications such as “Polynesian” or “Pacific Islander,” while many Aboriginal people remained excluded under Section 127 of the Constitution. Earlier census practices prior to 1947 had also excluded many Torres Strait Islander people who were classified as “Aboriginal natives.”

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/myths-persist-about-the-1967-referendum;>  
<http://abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0Feature+Article2July+2011>



 Download the [VCAA 1967 Referendum sample history unit](#), which can form part of a unit of learning on *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' rights and freedoms (1938–present)*, Levels 9–10. The unit contains Background reading on the 1967 Referendum, to assist teachers. *While the content descriptors in this unit have not been updated to VC2 however similar content descriptors and elaborations exist and are included at the end of this resource for reference.*



## Behind the News (BTN)

Report on the 1967 Referendum [here](#) contains great footage and coverage.



## National Library Australia (NLA)

The 1967 Referendum [DIGITAL Classroom](#) resources are well worth exploring - targeted to Year 10 and aligned to the Australian Curriculum. Featuring sources from the National Library's collections, the resource caters for flexible approaches to suit diverse classroom contexts and learning styles.

HOME / DIGITAL CLASSROOM / YEAR 10 / THE 1967 REFERENDUM

## The 1967 Referendum

### digital classroom

- Digital Classroom
- Year 3
- Year 4
- Year 5
- Year 6
- Year 7
- Year 8
- Year 9
- Year 10

Members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are advised that this resource contains names and images of deceased people. Please be aware that certain words, terms, or descriptions may be culturally sensitive and may be considered inappropriate today, but may have reflected the author's and or creator's attitudes or that of the period in which they were written.

#### Using this resource

This resource is aligned with the Australian Curriculum: History for Year 10 students. It adopts an inquiry learning approach that develops students' skills as historians. The resource engages students with a rich selection of sources and challenges them to draw their own conclusions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' struggle for civil rights in Australia.

Digital Classroom: The 1967 Referendum Intr...

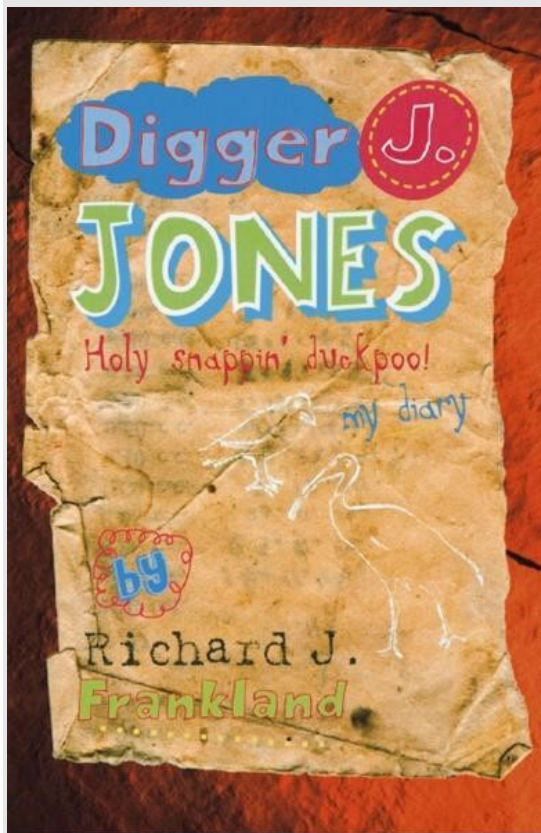


*Digger J. Jones* by Gunditjmara author, playwright and musician Richard Frankland is a great read for older students and educators alike.

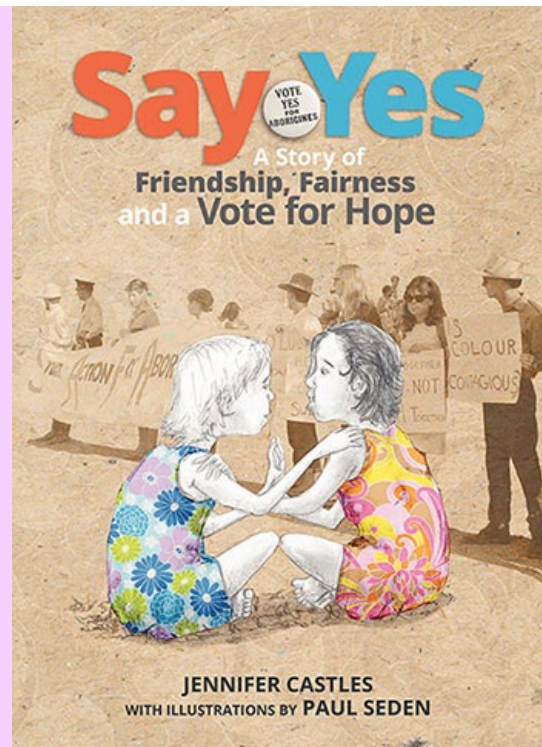
“My dad says that every day brings something different and every year's new. He said sometimes life slaps you down but you gotta get up and slap it back.”

Full of humour and told in diary form, the partly autobiographical *Digger J. Jones: Holy Snapping Duckpoo* tells the story of Digger - an Aboriginal boy caught up in the events of the 1960s and the lead up to the 1967 Referendum.

Audio books are available and can be borrowed from [Libraries](#), and [Teaching Notes](#) offer a range of class discussion points.



Inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honor Roll in 2015, read more about Gunditjmara author Richard Frankland [here](#).



For younger readers (recommended 7-12 age group), *Say Yes* is a story of friendship, fairness and a vote for hope. Written by Melbourne-based author Jennifer Castles, illustrated by Paul Seden, and shortlisted, for the 2017 Speech Pathology Award, Indigenous Readers, *Say Yes* is a story about how the events surrounding the historic 1967 Referendum played out in the everyday lives of two young girls. [Teaching resources](#) are available.

The NITV article [How a lifelong friendship inspired a children's book about the 1967 referendum](#) (2017) tells us more about the background and true-life inspiration leading to the writing of this personal story by Jennifer Castles.

Watch ABC's [7.30 Report](#) for Mandy Brown and Margaret Castles' personal perspectives on living through the era, and the transformative friendship they continue to have.



Mandy Brown and Margaret Castles (NITV)



Learn about A.O. recipient Faith Bandler, daughter of a south-sea Islander slave, 1967 Referendum lobbyist and campaign director in the following videos:

[Remembering our Icon](#) (3.16 min) and [Vote Yes - The 1967 Referendum](#) (SBS 2.52 mins).

Faith Bandler and Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker) in this great snippet from an episode of [This is Your Life: Kath Walker](#) (1.16 min).

Oxfam talks to Faith Bandler's daughter Lilon Bandler, about growing up in the era, grassroot movements, and some of the key personalities involved at the time, around Martin Place, Sydney in [1967: Students Making History for Indigenous Rights](#). (3.57 mins).

On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Referendum, ABC's Kerry O'Brien featured a comprehensive special: [Indigenous rights in Australia, 40 years after referendum](#) (8 min); also you can watch this defining moment in Australia's history brought to life, as told by historian David Hunt and Charmaine Armstrong in [Defining Moments: 1967 Referendum](#) (NMA 6.10).

The 1967 referendum had been a long time coming. As far back as 1913, a committee on Aboriginal welfare established by the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, suggested that 'this unfortunate race whom we have dispossessed' should be made 'a single and National responsibility and cared for in a National way' (SLV).

In 1938, the Australian Aborigines League and the Aborigines Progressive Association announced a 'day of mourning' to coincide with Australia's 150th anniversary celebrations:

'That we, representing the Aborigines of Australia ... make protest against the callous treatment by the white men during the 150 years past, and we appeal to the Australian nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, and we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizen status and equality within the community.'

*Australian Aborigines Conference, AAL, 1938*



Investigate the Victorian [Aborigines Advancement League's](#) role in the 1967 Referendum, and more about the background leading up to it through the [State Library Victoria blog](#).



Two days before the Referendum, The *Sydney Morning Herald* published the photograph above, with the caption: 'Racial discrimination - what's that?' as a nation prepared to vote on a referendum to bring Aboriginal people under Commonwealth legislative power and included in the census. Significantly, it would give rights to all Aboriginal people to receive social-security benefits, war pensions, child endowments and children's pensions, like other Australians. In the style of the times, the photograph was a set-up but sent a clear message.

*When you write Yes in the lower square of your ballot paper you are holding out the hand of friendship and wiping out nearly 200 years of injustice and inhumanity.*

*NSW Campaign director, Faith Bandler*

The “Yes” campaign was very strong, and uniquely among Australian referendums there was no concerted ‘No’ campaign. Even the government broke with convention by providing in the official advice to voters, only the case for “Yes”. Consequently, campaigners could talk up the importance of the changes they advocated virtually unrestrained. See more in Russell McGregor’s ‘Right wrongs, write Yes’: what was the 1967 referendum all about?’ published by [The Conversation](#).



### ABC Listen: The 1967 referendum



For a range of historical perspectives and events leading up to this historic campaign, listen to this [ABC Radio National Rear Vision](#) feature on 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 referendum, presented by Kerri Phillips (29m).



### Watch [Vote Yes for Aborigines](#) (2007)

by Yorta Yorta director Frances Peters-Little about the 1967 referendum and the campaign for Aboriginal citizenship rights that led up to it. [Download](#) the teachers’ study guide to [Vote Yes for Aborigines](#) and design some lessons and activities suitable for your students.

Further explore [Collaborating for Indigenous Rights](#) - an excellent ‘67 [Referendum site](#) with teaching resources and incorporate suggested activities into your lessons.



*Blackfella gotta walk on one side of the street, or not allowed on the street after six o’clock. There’s people in their 50s and 60s who don’t remember that.*

*Clarrie Cameron (WA)*

50 years on from the 1967 referendum, Western Australian Nghanagardi Senior Elder and educator the late Clarrie Cameron shares some memories of this historic event. For a strong contemporary Aboriginal perspective on being an Aboriginal person during this era, watch the short video [Right wrongs](#) and discuss points and issues raised. Significantly, WA and QLD received the least Yes votes at the time.



Right wrongs: Clarrie Cameron

## Victorian Curriculum:

**VC2HH6K08** the changing experiences and perspectives of Australian democracy and citizenship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, migrants, women and children since Federation. *History 5-6 Historical Knowledge and Understanding > Australia (1900–2000).*

**VC2HH6K10** significant contributions of individuals and groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and migrants, to changing Australian society *History 5-6 Historical Knowledge and Understanding > Australia (1900–2000).*

**VC2HH6K11** continuities and changes in the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples during the 20th century. *History 5-6 Historical Knowledge and Understanding > Australia (1900–2000).*

**VC2HH6S08** explain the causes and consequences of significant events and developments *History 5-6 Historical Concepts and Skills > Causes and consequences.*

**VC2HH6S09** explain the significance of events, individuals and groups that contributed to continuity and change *History 5-6 Historical Concepts and Skills > Historical significance.*

**VC2HC6K01** the features of Australia’s democratic institutions and systems, including representation in government and electoral systems. *Civics and Citizenship 5-6 Knowledge and Understanding > Government and democracy.*

**VC2HC6K07** the meanings of ‘citizenship’ and the rights and responsibilities of different kinds of citizenship, including local, state, national, global and digital citizenship. *Civics and Citizenship 5-6 Knowledge and Understanding > Citizenship, diversity and identity.*

**VC2HC6K08** how citizens (members of communities) with shared beliefs and values work together to achieve a civic goal. *Civics and Citizenship 5-6 Knowledge and Understanding > Citizenship, diversity and identity.*

**VC2HC8K10** how values based on freedom, respect, fairness and equality of opportunity can support social cohesion and a resilient democracy within Australian society *Civics and Citizenship 5-6 Knowledge and Understanding > Citizenship, diversity and identity.*

**VC2HC8K02** the extent to which Australia’s institutions and systems reflect democratic values, such as freedom of speech, association, assembly,

religion and movement. *Civics and Citizenship 7-8 Knowledge and Understanding > Government and democracy.*

**VC2HC8K06** how citizens can participate in and influence lawmaking, including through contact with their elected representatives, use of lobby groups, interest groups, direct action and submissions to parliamentary committees. *Civics and Citizenship 7-8 Knowledge and Understanding > Laws and citizens.*

**VC2HC8K12** various experiences and perspectives of national identity and citizenship, including the connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to Country and Place, and of different migrant groups. *Civics and Citizenship 7-8 Knowledge and Understanding > Citizenship, diversity and identity.*

**VC2HH10S09** evaluate the significance of individuals, groups, movements, events, developments and ideas. *History 9-10 Historical Concepts and Skills > Historical significance.*

**VC2HH10K31** the significant events, developments, campaigns and movements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ rights and freedoms. *History 9-10 Historical Knowledge and Understanding > Investigation: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ rights and freedoms (1938–present).*

**VC2HH10K32** the experiences and perspectives of significant individuals and groups that contributed to or denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ rights and freedoms. *History 9-10 Historical Knowledge and Understanding > Investigation: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ rights and freedoms (1938–present.)*

**VC2HC10K01** the role of the Australian Constitution in providing the basis for Australia’s federal system of government and democratic processes, including democratic institutions, and the process for constitutional change through a referendum. *Civics and Citizenship 9-10 Knowledge and Understanding > Government and democracy.*

**VC2HC10K02** the processes through which government policy is shaped, developed and implemented, including the role of political parties, interest groups, the media and legislative processes. *Civics and Citizenship 9-10 Knowledge and Understanding > Government and democracy.*



