

First Australians and the Assembly

Our reconciliation journey

Aboriginal people have inhabited the Canberra region since the last ice age more than 20,000 years ago.¹ In that time, multiple nations have overlapped within the region. The Territory was a hub of activity before Europeans arrived, with an estimated 3,000 heritages sites found across the region today, including those used for corroborees, women's and men's business, and camps.²

Like elsewhere across Australia, there were devastating impacts on local Aboriginal communities following colonisation.

The Assembly and its members have, since the beginning of ACT Self-Government in 1989, embarked on a journey of reconciliation with First Nations people to acknowledge past wrongs, facilitate self-determination, and to build respect and understanding.

1997: Assembly's apology to the stolen generations

On 17 June 1997, [on a motion moved by Chief Minister Kate Carnell](#), the Assembly resolved to apologise for the hurt and distress inflicted on Ngunnawal and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a result of the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The apology followed the release of the [Bringing Them Home](#) report and was unanimously supported in the Assembly.

1997: Addresses from the bar

On 26 August 1997, First Nations representatives spoke to the Assembly from the Bar of the House about their experiences and those of their families of the forced separation of Aboriginal children. They were invited to speak in response to the Assembly's formal apology for the role of pre-self-government institutions involved in forced separation.

This is the only time anyone has addressed the Assembly from the Bar of the House during a sitting. Agnes Shea, John Williams-Mozley, Yvonne Mills, Maureen Bates-McKay, Caine Gorge, and Graham Mundine all addressed the Assembly.

[You can read their speeches from the Assembly Hansard here.](#)

¹ <https://www.nma.gov.au/learn/encounters-education/community-stories/canberra>

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/specials/curious-canberra/2016-04-04/indigenous-sites-in-canberra/7281812>

The passage of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body legislation

On 10 April 2008, Chief Minister Jon Stanhope presented the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body Bill 2008. The law, which was unanimously passed by the Assembly on 6 May 2008, recognises the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to freely determine their political status and to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development in line with the right to self-determination. The elected body has a range of roles including to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and to receive and pass on their views to government ministers.

The elected body meet in the Assembly building and its proceedings are broadcast on the Assembly website.

You can read members' speeches on the Bill [here](#) and [here](#).

2019: The possum-skin cloak

On 11 May 2019, a group of Ngunnawal Elders and women presented the Assembly with a possum-skin cloak. It is the first cloak made by the Ngunnawal people in over 150 years after the practice subsided due to colonisation. The possum pelts bear intricate and highly personal designs from each of the women and detail their connections to Country.

The cloak holds pride of place in the Assembly foyer where it is on permanent display as a symbol of our ongoing commitment to reconciliation.

[You can watch a video explaining the process of making the cloak.](#)



Source: OLA

2020: Ngunnawal language acknowledgement of Country

The Assembly changed its standing orders so that at the beginning of each sitting day the Speaker acknowledges, in the Ngunnawal language, that the Assembly is meeting on the lands of the traditional custodians. On [30 July 2020](#), Speaker Joy Burch began an Assembly sitting day by acknowledging Country in Ngunnawal language for the first time. It was also the first time any parliament in Australia had acknowledged Country in an Indigenous language. The acknowledgement followed an [AIATSIS project](#), started in 2014, to reconstruct the Ngunnawal language from its remaining 250 words.

[You can find out more about the Acknowledgement and watch its first delivery here.](#)

2024: Indigenous protocols as part of the ceremonial opening

On 6 November 2024, Indigenous protocols were included as part of the ceremonial opening of a new Legislative Assembly for the first time. Led by Auntie Serena Williams, the first sitting day of the 11th Assembly included smoking the members-elect into the building across a gum leaf-swept threshold and a Welcome to Country.

A series of firsts

- **The first debate on Indigenous affairs** was on 24 May 1989, the Assembly's third ever sitting, during a motion that heritage protection legislation be a priority for the new parliament. Several members spoke about the specific need to protect the ancient and sacred sites significant to Canberra's First Nations peoples.
- **The first Indigenous affairs law passed by the Assembly** was the [Native Title Act 1994](#), which passed following the [1992 Mabo decision](#).
- On 4 December 1997, the Assembly became **the first Australian parliament to display both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags in a chamber**.
- On 1 November 2004, Jon Stanhope became **the ACT's first Indigenous affairs minister**.
- On 1 June 2011, Dr Chris Bourke—a Kamilaroi (NSW-Qld) man—became **the first Indigenous person elected to the Assembly**. On 23 November 2011, Dr Bourke also became **the first Indigenous person to be the ACT's Indigenous affairs minister**.
- On 6 November 2024, Mark Parton became **the first Speaker of the Assembly with Indigenous heritage**. Mr Parton has Noongar (WA) heritage through his paternal grandmother's families, but does not identify as Indigenous himself.