

# Timeline of Australian history and impacts on Torres Strait Islander peoples

01

## 60,000+ years pre-colonisation

- Torres Strait Islander peoples lived in small communities relying on fishing, hunting and growing crops.
- They traded in artifacts made of pearl shell, turtle shell, feathers, canoes and tools.

02

## 1800s: Pearl trade and 'Coming of the Light'

- Broader discovery of the pearl shell in 1960s led to influx of people from Japan, Malaysia, Phillipines, Micronesia and Europe. By 1877 there were sixteen companies operating on Wyben / Thursday Island, employing hundreds of people.
- In 1871, the London Missionary Society arrived at Darnley Island to bring Christianity to Torres Strait Islander peoples. Christian principles were seen as somewhat compatible with traditional beliefs and the missionaries helped Islanders to negotiate with outsiders about maritime activities.
- These two things brought significant cultural and societal change for Torres Strait Islander peoples.

03

## 1879-1960s: Annexation

- The State of Queensland annexed the Torres Strait Islands in 1879.
- At Federation, Torres Strait Islanders became Australian citizens but without access to many of the rights of non-Indigenous Australians.

04

## 1976-1992: Citizenship and Mabo decision

- The 1967 Referendum granted Torres Strait Islander peoples the right of citizenship and they were counted in census data. They had full access to health and social services, and freedom to travel and work in Australia.
- In 1992, after a 10-year legal battle, the High Court decision in the case of *Mabo v the State of Queensland* recognised the common law rights of Indigenous people in their lands according to their traditions, law and customs, exposing 'terra nullius' as false.
- The High Court judgment altered the foundation of land law in Australia and paved the way for the passing of the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) in the Australian Parliament the following year.

05

## 1990s-Present: Reconciliation

- The process of reconciliation started in 1991. Despite many promises, consultations and reports, progress is slow.
- The 2023 *Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum*, based on the Uluru Statement from the Heart, was rejected. Focus changed to treaty processes at state / territory levels.
- Treaty for Torres Strait Islander peoples involves the state of Queensland. Although the *Path To Treaty Act 2023* was passed with bipartisan support, following the failed *Voice* referendum, the LNP government repealed the act and closed down work towards treaty. For updates on treaty progress, go to [ANTAR](#) website.