



PASSING THE MESSAGE STICK

CONVERSATION GUIDE

A practical toolkit to guide your conversations about transformative change on First Nations justice, now and beyond the referendum.

We are in a historic moment, not only because we are going to a referendum, but because of the momentum that has been built for First Nations justice. This momentum was seeded by our Elders who've gone before us, leading protests, building grassroots power, tirelessly advocating for justice and speaking truth to power. We are strong, resilient and we have the solutions.

This moment is so much more than a Yes or No binary – it's about our vision for the future and how we can use this moment to build a mandate to get us there.

If we build a groundswell of public support and win a resounding Yes, then a wave of transformative change for First Nations justice will follow, because public momentum and demands gives governments a political mandate to act on bold policy reform.

Passing the Message Stick is a groundbreaking multi-year First Nations-led research project designed to shift public narrative in support of First Nations justice and self-determination.

This latest phase of research expands on the foundational report to find persuasive messages that build support for transformative change, such as treaties, truth-telling and representation, now and beyond the referendum.

The project is led by a steering committee of Dr Jackie Huggins AM, Larissa Baldwin-Roberts, Millie Telford and Kirsty Albion, delivered by GetUp and Australian Progress.

Artist Credit: We thank Tarsha Davis, a proud Kuku Yalanji woman from Far North Queensland, for her artwork featured throughout the Passing the Message Stick materials.

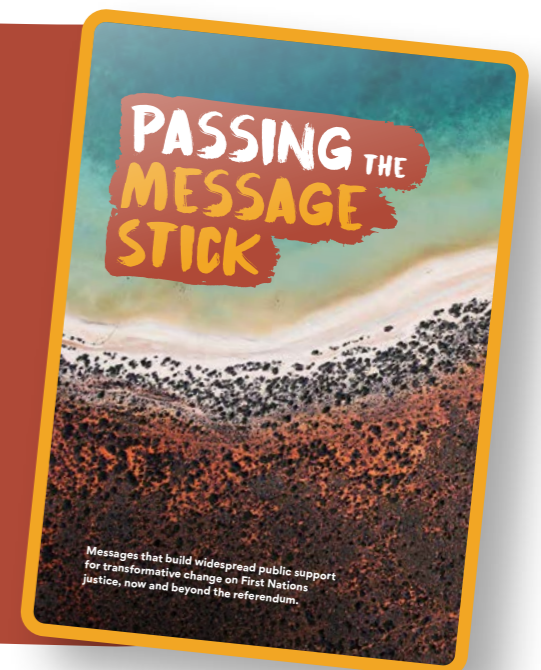
WARNING: *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that the following toolkit may contain images of deceased persons.*

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This conversation guide is part of a multi-year message research project into building widespread support for transformative change. Get all the recommendations, the full report and summary guide at passingthemessagestick.org.



THE POWER OF CONVERSATIONS TO BUILD OUR MOVEMENT FOR FIRST NATIONS JUSTICE, NOW AND BEYOND THE REFERENDUM

As organisers, activists and changemakers, conversations are a powerful tool to build connections, share information and give people the opportunity to get involved. Through conversations, we build relationships, encourage action in our local communities and in turn, we build the power of our movements for justice.

Conversations about setting an agenda for transformative change on First Nations justice require time, truth-telling, respectful listening and sharing.

We win when we lift the conversation up to a place where most people agree and can speak with confidence – to shared vision and values like equity and respect, and who we want to be as a nation.

Leaning in to shared values, empathy, our strengths and our solutions is the best way to approach a conversation, because this will ultimately be a referendum on how people see us, as First Nations people, and whether they believe things need to change.

We've developed this toolkit based on our message research findings on what works with both First Nations and non-First Nations audiences.



Tips for persuasive conversations

Before you have any conversation, it's important to set clear communications goals. Are you trying to engage your audience on this issue? Do you want to listen to their vision for change? Are you trying to recruit people to attend an upcoming event?

We don't need to cover every element of the campaign narrative in every conversation. However, we should be clear beforehand about what we want each specific conversation to communicate.

To engage and persuade audiences on any issue, we must engage their hearts and minds and motivate them to take action. **In each conversation, try to use a combination of thinking, feeling and action messages (see below for examples).**

Your task is to ask questions, listen with empathy, share your story and experiences (why you think, feel and act the way you do), and thank them for raising their questions and concerns.

By doing this, you open up space for an honest conversation where you can build connections, listen without judgement, share your vision for the future and help the other person see where they fit, what they can do and get them to commit to taking action.



FRAMEWORKS OF A PERSUASIVE CONVERSATION

The Four C's

The Four C's provide a framework to meaningfully engage with others and have persuasive conversations that lead to action. This framework can be used in conversations on any issue.

1. Connection

Let the person know who you are, why you care about this issue, and ask them why they care about it too. The best types of conversations build connection in a way that finds common ground through shared values and experiences. For example: *"Hi, I'm having conversation about the upcoming referendum, because I care about First Nations justice."*

2. Context

This is your chance to briefly share background information on the issue and explain how the action you're taking is important. Be honest about the challenges, but also the opportunities and hopes too. You also want to hear from them about their context eg. have they been involved before and if so, how? Ask questions to draw out how they feel, any questions they have and what their vision is for the future.

3. Commitment

Ask the person to take a particular action, this builds their commitment to the cause and gives them something meaningful to do. Be specific about the date, time, and place. For example: *"Can we count on you to join us at _____?"* or *"Will you join me in doing _____?"* or *"Can you commit to having 5 conversations with your family and friends by the end of the month?"*.

- a. If they say yes, move on to the catapult.
- b. If they say no or are unsure, remember there are many reasons why people might be hesitant. If appropriate, go back to building connection by asking questions, as they might have important questions or concerns, or they might not be sure about the theory of change and how that particular action is going to make a difference.

4. Catapult

Think about the catapult as a springboard to more, whereby you increase their commitment and the chances of them following through by asking them to take on an additional role or responsibility and have a plan for how to get there. Here are some examples: *"Who in your family and friends can you talk to about the upcoming referendum?"* or *"Can you bring a friend to the upcoming event?"*

Following up with people afterwards, to check in about how they went with the action they committed to, is a great way to strengthen relationships, address any barriers that may have arisen, ensure we are doing what we say we're going to do and in turn, build the power of our movements for long-term change.



Thinking, Feeling, Action

Another framework to guide persuasive conversations is the Thinking, Feeling, Action structure – which helps to lift conversations out of the detail and into the shared experience and action.

MESSAGE	WHAT'S INCLUDED	EXAMPLE
Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Facts and figures > Informational narratives 	<p><i>“First, we vote - everyone will vote on the principle of whether we should have a representative body, and then we decide the model. The government has expressed an intention to lead a thorough consultation process with First Nations communities to develop a truly representative body. We must demand this and hold them accountable.”</i></p>
Feeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Vision > Stories and lived expertise > Emotion > Inspiration and ambition 	<p><i>“Right now, we have an opportunity to say enough is enough. We respect First Nations people and we believe that they are the right people to decide what is best for their future. Together we can say ‘Yes’ to transformative change, ‘Yes’ to treaties, ‘Yes’ to truth-telling, ‘Yes’ to ending black deaths in custody and ‘Yes’ to justice. Together, we can build momentum for transformative change.”</i></p>
Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Specific behaviours > Tangible actions 	<p><i>“Getting involved can be as simple as talking to five members of your friends and family about why you are writing Yes and why you care about the referendum being a step in the right direction towards treaties, truth-telling and justice. Ask them why they think it’s important for First Nations people to have a say in the laws and policies that impact First Nations people”.</i></p>

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR YOUR CONVERSATIONS

PRINCIPLE	WHY
<p>Values - always start with shared values like equity, respect, inclusion and self-determination that many people agree with.</p>	<p>When we’re trying to persuade people on an idea, we want to find common ground. This is why we start with values. Values build alignment across the political spectrum, and give people the confidence to take a stand without being an expert on facts.</p>
<p>Empathy - in conversations, media and social media interactions, have empathy for your audience and treat them with respect. Don’t bombard them with facts or start arguments.</p>	<p>The opposition is sowing fear and division, turning the conversation into an argument. This makes people feel uncomfortable and like they’re not smart enough if they don’t know the facts. We are empathetic and don’t attack First Nations contributors to this conversation.</p>
<p>Bring people into the frame - focus on people and communities, rather than facts and figures, mechanisms and policies.</p>	<p>Ultimately this referendum is a vote on First Nations people, whether or not people support us and want to see change. When we focus just on mechanisms and policies, it dehumanises the conversation. When we are describing a problem, we must also say who is causing it, as well as the people (all of us) who can be a part of the solution.</p>
<p>First Nations strength and leadership - lead with stories of our strength and leadership, show that when we lead, we get the best outcomes for First Nations communities and for everyone.</p>	<p>People don’t know stories of Aboriginal strength and leadership, but when they hear them they are much more supportive of us having control over our lives.</p>
<p>Combining truth with action - we need to share our truth in a way that’s grounded in our strength, and motivates action.</p>	<p>Both base and persuadables understand that truth-telling helps all of us move forward together, and that truth-telling must translate into action. So combine your truth-telling with a clear ask or action that our audience can take.</p>
<p>Solutions - share the positive, tangible and practical solutions our communities have been calling for for decades.</p>	<p>People want to support a more positive future, so we need to focus on the solutions that can exist if everyone supports us. Make them tangible and practical, for example, on housing, health, cultural heritage, land management and education.</p>

RESPONDING TO COMMON CONCERNS

1. Requests for more details about how the representative body will operate

Both First Nations and non-First Nations base and persuadable audiences have significant concerns about how the Voice to Parliament will be genuinely representative and meaningful – and this is especially important for mob. Calls for more detail do resonate with persuadable audiences, but instead of getting stuck in conversations about detail and repeating the opposition frames, be clear and transparent about the process from here.

Messages that communicate the two-step process help overcome calls for more detail. For example:

- “First, we’ll vote on the principle of the matter – then once we have the mandate, there will be a thorough consultation process with First Nations communities to make the representative body truly representative.”
- “First everyone will vote on the principle of a representative body, and then we’ll all be part of a consultation process to shape what it looks like. The government has committed to principles of representation, and it’s up to us to make sure it is.”

2. Uncertainty about whether this will deliver substantive change

It is fair enough that First Nations people are sceptical about whether the referendum will deliver change, especially when we’ve been calling for meaningful change for generations. Whilst we see this as a step, it is not the final destination and it’s up to all of us to win the narrative, and demand transformative change now and beyond the referendum

We have an important opportunity to hold meaningful conversations about the world that we want to live in, how we centre First Nations justice. Instead of telling someone who’s sceptical they are wrong, ask questions about what they think and generate discussion about what transformative change can look like and how we get there. From there, you’ve established shared values and vision, critical elements of a persuasive, winning messaging.

3. Concerns because not all First Nations people agree

Just like any community or social movement, First Nations people have a diversity of opinions, perspectives and approaches to creating change and this needs to be respected.

In our research, we found many First Nations people are largely persuadable on the referendum and almost half of all First Nations people have heard nothing or very little about the referendum on a Voice to Parliament. Overwhelmingly, we heard that most First Nations people want to have conversations in their communities and with other mob before they decide how they will vote.

What this tells us is that more resourcing is needed to support First Nations communities to come together in culturally safe spaces to learn, share, ask questions and have critical conversations amongst one another.

4. Concerns about the increase in racism and harmful narratives

We are seeing a massive culture war that is giving rise to racism, hurling attacks on First Nations people and spreading harmful narratives and misinformation that hurts and undermines our communities. We cannot allow them to take us backwards.

As seen in our foundational message research, we need to name who is causing the harm and provide a credible motive for why they’re choosing to do so - in this case, it may be a certain politician and their racist, ignorant or discriminatory actions.

We want to follow the ‘people do things’ rule. It helps people understand that the problems we face are made by people, and can be solved by people.

But remember we need to avoid engaging in the opposition frame, either walk away from these discussions or reframe the debate back on your terms using the frames and messages that we know work.

For more information on responding to common concerns visit passingthemessagestick.org



EXAMPLE Q&As

Will this make a practical difference in the lives of First Nations people?

“Laws and policies work best when the people affected by them have a say in how they work.

Writing Yes won't change everything but it's a step in the right direction to win the bigger changes we've been calling for.

If the overwhelming majority of people write Yes, then we can create a wave of transformative policy changes - like treaties, land rights and equity - because of the momentum and the political mandate of voting together.”

I want to write Yes, but I'm not sure because we haven't seen the detail

“There are two key steps in this process. First, we vote - everyone will vote on the principle of whether we should have a representative body. Second, First Nations communities will get to make sure the model is truly representative. The government has committed to a thorough consultation process and we'll need to make sure this happens.”

I care more about securing tangible changes that will improve the lives of First Nations people, like raising the age or stopping deaths in custody. Doesn't this referendum debate distract us and take focus away from immediate actions for justice?

“With the referendum upon us, our challenge is to build a movement that will fight for the systemic change that our communities have been calling for, and use this moment as a vehicle to fast track treaties, land rights, truth-telling and justice, with the referendum being a stop along the journey but not the final destination.

More than half the population believe this moment is bigger than the referendum, and an opportunity to bring about more meaningful change. The national mood is on our side and there's a huge groundswell of support for us to tap into and mobilise.

Together, we can build a political mandate to hold governments accountable and leave them with no choice but to follow our lead.”

If First Nations people don't agree, why would I write Yes?

“There are a range of diverse views within First Nations communities, as there always are in any community.

Some First Nations advocates who have been fighting for transformational change for generations do not think the proposal will create sufficient change. That's fair enough.

We agree that change needs to be much bigger than this - and we see a representative body as a step in the right direction, moving us towards bigger change. When a clear majority of Australians write Yes in the referendum, it will send a strong message that we want justice, equality and enduring change. On the other hand, a No vote will set back First Nations justice for decades.”

A background image of a field of pink flowers, possibly a species of Asteraceae, with green stems and leaves. The flowers are in various stages of bloom, and the background is softly blurred. A vertical line divides the image into two halves.

EXAMPLE ISSUE-BASED CONVERSATIONS

To win a resounding Yes and build the momentum for transformative change, we need to have conversations within our own communities – whether it be First Nations communities, the disability justice movement, the climate movement, the health sector or our local suburbs.

We need to tailor our conversations to the context and the person we're talking to.

Here are some examples of how you could have this conversation with different people.



Someone who cares about transformational change for First Nations justice, including treaties and truth-telling

THINKING	<i>“First Nations communities have fought tirelessly to bring about change and justice for our people. Many of our Elders have paved the way, and now younger generations are stepping up and carrying on their legacy.”</i>
FEELING	<i>Over the next decade we could see huge changes in First Nations justice – from treaties, to truth-telling, land back, equity and justice. The majority of people are with us and ready to show their support. When we turn this momentum for change into a resounding Yes, much more will be possible.</i>
ACTION	<i>Writing Yes won’t change everything, but it’s a step in the right direction towards bigger changes that our communities have been fighting for. It will be up to all of us to hold governments and the public accountable to what comes next, beyond the referendum.”</i>

Someone who cares about law reform and justice

THINKING	<i>“Everyone wants to be treated equally and be free to live our own lives, but too often police target us in the streets, because of the colour of our skin. Our politicians have known this since the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and yet consecutive governments have let this report gather dust rather than implement the recommendations that would prevent our loved ones from dying.”</i>
FEELING	<i>When governments are too slow to act, it’s up to everyday people to create the conditions that make change possible. By writing Yes in the referendum, we could elect our own representatives to talk truth to power and have a say on policies and issues that affect us.</i>
ACTION	<i>If millions of people across the country write Yes, we can create the political pressure necessary for governments to listen to and act on the solutions that our communities have been calling for.”</i>

Someone who cares about education

THINKING	<i>“First Nations people are the first scientists, the first astrologists and the first teachers. Our knowledge systems have been passed down over generations, standing the test of time. But today, the western education system largely ignores our expertise, and instead promotes a racist curriculum that leaves our children feeling unsafe, unsupported and more likely to leave without a full education.”</i>
FEELING	<i>But we are not alone, everyone learns in different ways. Most people agree that we must be honest about our history, and when we respect First Nations knowledge and expertise, we can create a better and fairer future that everyone can benefit from.</i>
ACTION	<i>When millions of us write Yes, we will send a message that the country is ready to listen to and learn from the wisdom and perspectives of First Nations people which will lead to better outcomes on education, health and more.”</i>

Someone who cares about self-determination

THINKING	<i>“We’re all better off when we are free to set our own course and make decisions for ourselves, our families and our communities. But too often, successive Governments have forced their own ideas on how we, as First Nations people, should lead our own lives. Decisions about our health, our education and our homelands keep being taken away from us.”</i>
FEELING	<i>We all know what it feels like to be excluded from decisions that impact us, but like everyone else, we know what’s best for our communities. From land rights to stopping black deaths in custody, protecting cultural heritage and keeping kids in communities – we have the solutions and know what our communities need. It could make a big difference for our advocacy to have a representative body that speaks truth to power without fear of being abolished or having funding cut.</i>
ACTION	<i>If millions of people across the country write Yes in the upcoming referendum, it could create huge political pressure to realise the aspirations our communities have been fighting for, for decades.”</i>

ALLY VOICE

Someone who cares about disability justice

THINKING	<p><i>“When we listen to the solutions of people most affected, we get better outcomes. But successive governments have failed to listen to First Nations communities and act on the solutions that they are advocating for.”</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>As someone who knows what it feels like to not be listened to, you have a powerful story to share about why you care about First Nations justice – together we can say we’re ready to listen to First Nations communities and hold the government accountable to acting on the solutions put forward by those most affected.</i></p> <p><i>We’re more powerful when we support each other, imagine if our whole community came out in support, we could help create a resounding Yes.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>Writing Yes in the upcoming referendum is a way to show respect and a commitment to listening to the expertise of First Nations people.”</i></p>

Someone who cares about climate change

THINKING	<p><i>“As the first scientists and first environmentalists, Aboriginal communities have looked after Country since time immemorial and have a valuable role to play in addressing the climate crisis.</i></p> <p><i>But for too long, governments have refused to hear or take up this advice.</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>When we listen to each other, share our knowledge and work together, we all benefit. Together we can send a message to government that it’s time to listen to and respect the leadership of Aboriginal communities in shaping policies that protect our climate and future generations.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>Writing Yes in the referendum is a way to say that we want to hear the wisdom and expertise of the oldest living culture on earth.”</i></p>

Someone who cares about racial justice

THINKING	<p><i>“In recent years, we’ve seen a global reckoning with racism and more and more people are willing to challenge the status quo.</i></p> <p><i>But we know that government policies continue to discriminate against First Nations communities, as well as migrants and more recent arrivals, based on the colour of our skin.</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>Whether your family has been here for five years, five generations, or five thousand generations – everyone should be treated fairly and equally respected.</i></p> <p><i>Together we can create a future free from discrimination, where we respect First Nations people and value their knowledge and solutions on issues that affect us all.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>We all have an important role to play. Writing Yes in the referendum is a way to say we want to listen to First Nations people and make our system fairer for everyone.”</i></p>

Someone who cares about health

THINKING	<p><i>“Taking care of one another is what community is all about.</i></p> <p><i>That’s why 40 years ago, when government health services were failing First Nations people, community leaders took the driver’s seat and set up Australia’s first community health centres. Today, these services are the best in the country and the government has modelled their health, legal aid and childcare off First Nations-led solutions.</i></p>
FEELING	<p><i>Imagine a society where First Nations values and leadership are at the heart of government policy and decision making. We could ensure that everyone has access to quality healthcare, regardless of the colour of your skin, gender or where you live.</i></p>
ACTION	<p><i>By writing Yes in the referendum, we can create this society and show that when you listen to the expertise of First Nations communities, everyone can thrive.”</i></p>



Messages are passed through story, and storytelling has been at the heart of our culture since time immemorial. So please, talk to your family, neighbours, community and colleagues, share stories of our strength and solutions, and together we can create a future where our people are respected, listened to and treated with dignity.”

- Dr Jackie Huggins AM

