



Australian Academy  
*of the* Humanities

# Trust and its discontents

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#AAHTrust

# The Reconciliation Barometer (2008-2016) as a measure of 'trust' between Indigenous and other Australians

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# Reconciliation: five desiderata

- 1. Positive two-way relationships built on **trust** and respect exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians throughout society.
- 2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians participate equally and equitably in all areas of life—i.e. we have **closed the gaps in life outcomes**—and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are universally recognised and respected, i.e. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are self-determining.
- 3. Our political, business and community **institutions actively support** all dimensions of reconciliation.
- 4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are a valued and recognised part of a **shared national identity** and, as a result, there is national unity.
- 5. There is widespread acceptance of our nation's history and agreement that the wrongs of the past will never be repeated—i.e. there is truth, justice, healing and **historical acceptance** (Polity Research nd, p.7).

Rather than ask respondents about their own trust,  
the Barometer asks:

“How would you describe the level of trust between the following groups of people?”

The survey then nominates as the two ‘groups’: ‘Indigenous Australians’ and ‘other Australians’.

The responses are interpreted as revealing actual levels of trust felt by the two parties.

# Results 2008, 2010, 2012

- Few in the general community (10-12 per cent) think that Indigenous Australians have high trust for other Australians.
- Few in the general community (12-13 per cent) think that 'other Australians' have high trust for Indigenous Australians.
- Few in the Indigenous community (12-15 per cent) think that Indigenous Australians have high trust for other Australians.
- Very few in the Indigenous community (4 per cent 'fairly high trust') think that other Australians have high trust for Indigenous Australians.

## Three features of the 2008,2010, 2012 'trust' results

1. The proportion of the general community sample responding 'don't know' is roughly double the proportion of the Indigenous sample responding 'don't know'. Perhaps the question of trust between Indigenous and other Australians is salient to a larger proportion of the Indigenous sample.
2. Both samples see the category to which they belong as more trusting **of** the other than trusted **by** the other.
3. No Indigenous respondents rated as 'very high' the perceived trust of other Australians for Indigenous Australians.

# An upturn in trust 2014, 2016?

- The proportion of Indigenous respondents who feel other Australians have fairly high or very high trust for Indigenous Australians was 34 per cent in 2014 and remained 34 per cent in 2016.
- The proportion of Indigenous respondents who feel that Indigenous Australians have fairly high or very high trust for other Australians was 39 per cent in 2014 and 46 per cent in 2016.
- The proportion of 'general community respondents' who feel that Indigenous Australians have fairly high or very high trust for 'other Australians' also rose: to 20 per cent in 2014 and 19 per cent in 2016.
- The proportion of 'general community respondents' who feel that 'other Australians' have fairly high or very high trust for Indigenous Australians was 26 per cent in 2014 and 25 per cent in 2016.

# Possible explanations for these upturns in 'trust'

## **Constitutional Recognition campaign?**

“The Coalition under both Abbott and Turnbull has shown strong support for Constitutional Recognition, although the process has slowed to undertake Indigenous consultation. These ‘mixed messages’ are arguably both helping and hindering the reconciliation cause” (RB 2016, 7).

## **A comparatively more widespread perception by Indigenous respondents that their socio-economic prospects were improving?**

My home life will improve

My financial situation will improve

My working situation will improve

# But is the 'perceived trust' question a good measure of trust?

## **Questions not asked:**

Can you as an 'Indigenous'/'other Australian' name a public figure or institution that you trust who is 'Indigenous'/'other Australian'?

Which of the following categories of persons do you trust a lot, only a little, or not at all (non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians)?

## **A question asked, but not interpreted as a 'trust' question:**

Do you agree or disagree with the statement 'I would feel fine if I had a child who decided to marry an Indigenous person'?

Only 14% of the general population disagreed with this proposition. "It is encouraging that this very personal measure of the relationship is strong despite the perceived high levels of prejudice and low levels of trust outlined previously" (RB Report 2012, p.31).