

Words To Win By

Episode 8: Changing the Narrative About First Nations - Australia

Transcript

Larissa Baldwin: (00:00)

I think I'm most proud of presenting something that talks about us in a strength-based message. Our solutions are about how we see ourselves and just do that. Just say the thing that you say in your family, in our organizations to them basically, but also how we connect, how we connect to each other. Those things have been like, oh yeah, like this is like a, a light switch. Like that's how I want to talk about myself.

Theme Song:

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing? And so many others, grieve. By way of they reply, I say a Fool, such as I who sees this song is Somewhere to begin.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Hi, I'm Anat Shenker-Osorio, and this is Words to Win By. Today we're wrapping up our season by heading to Australia, a place I've had the incredible fortune to work and even live over the last few years. We're doing a deeper dive into the behind the scenes work required to reframe entrenched narratives and win. This means analyzing what's working and not in our messaging, conducting empirical testing to vet these hypotheses and training activists to apply these new approaches. This story begins in 2015 when I met Larissa Baldwin, the voice you heard at the top of the show, Fair warning Larissa's always on the road, and that takes her into deep rural parts of the country. And so her audio isn't the best.

Larissa Baldwin:

My name is Larissa. I'm a Widjabul Wia-bul woman, first Nations woman in Australia, and I live in Brisbane, and I work as a First Nations justice campaign director at an organization called Get Up.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

At the time I was living in Australia, researching and reframing the narrative on people seeking asylum, which human rights campaigners turned into a series of four incredible wins, profiled in a season one episode. If you haven't already, go back and give it a listen. In 2019, Larissa was part of my Global Messaging Programme, put on with Centre for Australian Progress and the UK-based NEON. It was a course for international communicators to learn to analyze and reframe narratives and messages. Larissa looked at framing of sovereignty for First Nations in Australia. Here she is laying out how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were spoken of since the late two thousands.

Larissa Baldwin:

We went through a period of relentless government attacks to the point of we had like a national broadcaster, a publicly funded broadcaster come out and say, make allegations that we were like pedophiles and pornography was rampant through our communities. And we've seen in a 72 hour period, basically the Racial Discrimination Act removed, um, within the Northern Territory and the police rolled in and, and the military and basically taking control of aboriginal land. So the people don't know the Northern Territory, um, is one of the, um, biggest places where land rights exist. So 70% of the land mass belongs to Aboriginal people, not the government. And so, you know, rolling that in, having it, uh, splashed right across the media, it, it came, it got exposed like a couple of months later that the person that was making the allegations was actually a staffer for one of the, um, members in the Senate. So it was like this big massive thing that happened that kind of upheaved all of our worlds. And so we spent a lot of time saying, we are not these things and fighting against these really paternalistic policies that are still in place in, in a lot of places. Things like who can, who has control of aboriginal communities and coming in and out and, you know, taking so many children away. We have more children removed today than were during the stolen generations.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The stolen generation Larissa references is the period from the 1910s to the seventies when a countless number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families under government policy, claiming this was for the children's protection. This stemmed, of course, from deeply racist beliefs that sought to wipe out these communities. All of this left advocates very much on defense.

Larissa Baldwin:

So our advocacy, um, turned into this place where we were defending ourselves and saying what we were not. And we are also trying to appeal to a conservative government and really compromising what we're saying. And so we speak like government, we're constantly try and prove who we are and that sort of stuff, but it's, it's all very vulnerable and deficit and help us and we're hurting and it's not convincing anyone to help us.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

You may have noted the word that Larissa used deficit. Deficit messaging, which is common across advocacy is where a group is spoken of principally, if not exclusively, in terms of their problems. And deficit was the dominant framing here for the very reasons Larissa named. When there's attack on that scale and size constantly happening to a community, there's a default to go on defense. But deficit messaging is often all what and no why all outcome and no origin story. It says, for example, that incarceration rates are much higher among First nations, but fails to indicate that this is because police target detain and imprison Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at higher rates leaving listeners to potentially conclude they simply are more prone to criminal acts. Further, if we've just established that poor health, poverty and prison irregular elements of life in these communities, it becomes incredibly difficult to make a persuasive case for self-determination. Here's Larissa, on what deficit messaging sounds like in practice.

Larissa Baldwin:

It doesn't sound like a sentence, you should, should, uh, read out loud. Literally, some of our biggest advocates would stand up and talk about all the statistics of the incarceration rates of the suicide rates of poverty. So you load the front of the conversation with all this deficit and vulnerability, and then they're asking people to give us control of our lives. And it just doesn't work in the, in the logic. And when people hear that it, uh, what we found in the research a lot as well is that people like we don't, we, we don't wanna set them up to fail or like, um, we need to help them. So it kind of enables this kind of white savior advocate as well.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Deficit messaging is bad, so why is it everywhere? It's crafted and deployed with the absolutely valid intent of making people outside the affected community. Here's Kelly Williams. She's a Bundjalung woman, indigenous and diversity HR case advocate at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Kelly participated in the First Nation's messaging fellowship we'll talk about in a second and dives more deeply into why deficit messaging is so prevalent.

Kelly Williams:

It's just that ongoing effect of colonization when you've grown up with that kind of narrative, you, you don't question it until you educate yourself. And in this country it's the first nations people who are educating themselves and then having to educate, um, others and it because they're all in the same boat that, you know, we are. It's been that reinforced messaging from, um, government and corporations and, you know, the policies and, um, things that have been implemented since colonization, and that message has just been repeated for the last 200 years. And so, you know, um, waking up out of that, that's what was the life-changing moment for me.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

But despite its ubiquity, it is a choice. And one Larissa rightly indicates we should question.

Larissa Baldwin:

We've been telling you for years it's not working and stop compromising, but showing them the research and understanding that there's kind of, there's levels of, and different ways that you can apply it. Even that group of people that were really close to government, like we need to reshape everything. Like you'll love this, but there's a, there's a health initiative in Australia called Closing the Gap and their messaging just sucks and it's terrible and it doesn't expose that, you know, racism in funding and, and, and equity is the reason for the health challenges that we're seeing and the life expectancy.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Larissa and Kelly have thought lots about deficit and all kinds of messaging. After Larissa did my course, she and colleagues at the Center for Australian Progress adapted it to create an entire new fellowship for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocates, including Kelly, to examine dominant messages, reframe issues, and be heard in a society where their native languages were quite literally stripped from them. Here's Kelly.

Kelly Williams:

When you think about how, you know, society talks about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here in Australia, the messaging is always around. Um, how as First Nations peoples we need help. How dysfunctional our communities are and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, it has the, the, the way we talk about each other has always been around justice and self-determination. And when we start using that as our frame and putting ourselves in that frame of being leaders for our own community, it was really surprising how Australians in general accepted, um, the way that we had changed that messaging and embraced it.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Reframing justice and self-determination became the goal of the fellowship. In this fellowship, 20 aboriginal communicators who worked across issues including disability rights, climate change, LGBTQ, justice and criminal legal reform came together to learn, train and support each other. Participants ranged from journalists to advocates, folks from big cities to those in remote communities. In adapting the curriculum for delving deep into language. Larissa and her colleagues were bringing First Nations advocates into a brand new endeavor.

Larissa Baldwin:

They were all aboriginal people. I feel like also they kind of came into it the way that I came into it. Like this might help with something but not really sure exactly what they were in for, which is amazing. But for them to take kind of that leap of faith and, and you know, be very vulnerable because the first day that we kind of took them through like language theory and what we were talking about, they were just like wide-eyed looking at us and I was like, oh no, they're not gonna come back tomorrow.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

But they did. Indeed. The team conducted three fellowships over a period of eight months and trained each cohort in language analysis, which I often liken to a “you are here” dot on a map. It requires looking at current language from advocacy, opposition media, social media, and we're applicable pop culture to understand the range of ways people currently reason and come to judgments about our issues. To understand the dominant metaphors in semantic frames in play and what's promising and problematic about each. The First Nation's fellows collected, coded and analyzed 3,400 unique expressions that make up the messaging across diverse issues, including legal reform, gender equality, community control, land rights, racism, and what's presently known as Australia Day or January 26th. This official National Day marks the first landing of a British fleet on the island for the average Australian, it's a summer holiday for barbecue and beers with friends for aboriginal communities. It marks invasion and the onset of genocide. Kelly examined January 26th during the course.

Kelly Williams:

My research partner, uh, looked at how we as First Nations people talk about the day and how we talk about that day to each other. And I took on how government and non-indigenous people talk about the day and us on that day. It was difficult. January 26th is always a difficult day for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait people in Australia. And you know, discovering in my research that Australia is the only country in the world that hasn't moved its National Day from the day of invasion, and it really is the day that epitomizes really culture wars in this country. Even the buildup to January 26th for, you know, indigenous people in Australia is fraught and many will, you know, go off social media and there's invasion Day marches, there's Survival Day festivals. That was the most difficult part, hearing how other people talked about us on that day, but it was also really empowering in another way to recognize the sort of common themes in that messaging and how we could negate their messages.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Kelly then put this reframing into action where she works at the Australian Broadcasting Company.

Kelly Williams:

The usual headlines on stories that would go out on Australia Day from an indigenous perspective were stories that usually might have interviewed indigenous people but not written by an indigenous person. And so they would have headlines, uh, similar to, oh, it's a really difficult day for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And so when I was actually leading that coverage, I changed those headlines to celebrating indigenous culture and that for me was the pivot moment, putting us in that leadership frame and saying that, you know, um, culture was to be celebrated on the day, not focusing that it was a difficult day, but still talking about it in that way and the, the, you know, the ongoing effects of colonization, but actually celebrating the resilience and survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The reactions were overwhelmingly positive.

Kelly Williams:

It went really, really well, I think for me the positive was I employed young indigenous presenters and producers in the TV programs and to write the digital articles and to film on the day we had coverage across radio, TV, and online. And those positive stories were picked up from an ABC audience. And you know, let's face it, as a national broadcaster, you're not reaching young people, you're reaching older Australians who probably hadn't had an opportunity to engage or reach out. But the Reconciliation Australia runs this barometer every two years and they call it a Reconciliation barometer. Um, and the last one they did said that 80% of Australians had never met an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, but that same 80% really wanted to and wanted to reach out. And so those positive stories engaged those people and they went very well.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

All of this training and community building culminated with a major qualitative and quantitative research project. Again, the first of its kind on this topic to understand how to most effectively engage the base and persuade the middle. They conducted nine focus groups with base persuadables and opponents sampled from the Australian population at large as well as with

First Nations people. They then tested short statements and full messages in an online dial survey of 1500 Australians and an additional 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents.

Larissa Baldwin:

And we decided on looking at self-determination and justice because it was kind of like this is the first time we've had the resourcing to do something like this. So we thought let's research something that's kind of a foundational messages.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Among the winning messages tested this one called Community Knows Best proved, especially effective at moving target audiences toward favoring self-determination and away from both opposition tropes and status quo paternalism.

Community Knows Best:

People are better off when they're afraid to set their own course, yet the government keeps locking us out of decisions and forcing their policies on us, insisting they know what's best for Aboriginal people, but we know what our communities need. 40 years ago when government health services were failing us badly, we took the driver's seat and set up Australia's first community health centers. Today our services are the best in the country and the government models their health, legal aid and childcare systems on ours. Our people are strong and resilient. And when we are afraid to choose our own path, the whole country benefits

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

This message and the rest of the language that proved most effective speaks both to the real injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while positioning them as rightful leaders and protagonists of their own story, activating shared values that enable Australians to understand how justice for First Nations is critical for the entire nation. This comprehensive analysis, training, and testing culminated in the report, passing the messaging stick a nod to a critical element of aboriginal culture and a powerful reminder of the maxim that a message is like a baton that must be passed from person to person in order to spread and thus work.

Kelly Williams:

The whole thing was totally awesome having a look at such a beautifully crafted report right from the artwork, from how it came exactly from that First Nation's perspective. Reading a report where we were in that leadership firmly put in that leadership frame about we knew what was best for our communities, we had the answers to bring everyone together and move this, you know, um, whole country forward with the messages that we were using. And the proof was there from our early activism where people from across Australia actually came in around land rights and community health and how that activism had helped this country and set the standards for community health that for the wider Australian community today. So recognizing all those strengths and seeing them, you know, displayed in this report and that kind of, for me,

it just solidified all the research, all the work that we've done and it's been really fantastic to go and present that to the wider community.

I think what's been most surprising for me is recognizing the strength in yourself that, you know, you kind of, when you were, when you're with mob, you feel that connection, you feel that strength. That's a bit of kind of lingo I guess that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use in Australia to talk about each other. We call each other mobs instead of clans. I always just say if there's any more than three of us, we're a mob. And what's been good for me from this whole process around, you know, being part of the fellowship, doing the research and now presenting the findings with the passing the message tick, um, report is that I now carry that strength everywhere. So there that's been the best bit for me.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

This new messaging approach has netted them more in fundraising. It's now in their social media discourse, speechmaking and campaign strategy enabling significant progress on their biggest fights today. Land rights and climate change. More specifically, a massive battle to protect Aboriginal lands, which came to a head in May of 2020 when the Rio Tinto Mining Corporation blew up 46,000 year olds sacred site.

News Clip:

We're standing in front of the juukan gorge cave that is being dated back to 46,000 years old. Um, these caves has just recently been destroyed by Rio Tinto. They're destroying our history, not just as aboriginal people. They're destroying Australian history, you know, and and human history. We've obviously had some misunderstanding. We thought we had a shared understanding of the future of the caves that they would in fact be mined as part of our normal minor sequence. The blast has reignited debate about a controversial legal loophole in the wa Aboriginal Heritage Act known as section 18. It allows mining companies to apply to the minister for an exemption to damage aboriginal sites.

Larissa Baldwin:

Things like there was hair belts, um, that their DNA tested that were over 6,000 years old, that directly the DNA n was linked to the families that are there, which is really incredible in terms of like an estate. And you know, people go and look at these incredibly, uh, important archeological places across the world, but sometimes there's a massive disconnection of like, we don't exactly know how these people lived, whereas, you know, for our sites, the direct descendants are right there. And so there was this massive outrage, not just from our community, from the global investment community, from people who look after these places internationally, the significance of this like this, one of the older sites of human civilization that they have in the world and in this region as well. When this happened, obviously as aboriginal people, we know why this happens because our laws has been completely wide ended.

So we ran a campaign that was about explaining to a, um, our population here that like cultural heritage is everyone's business to look after and talking about the value of it, not just to us but to

a, you know, as, as an Australian icon, but also the idea that really bringing these collective values around you know, that it should be prepared, protected, but also doing education because a lot of people were outraged to find out that you can heritage list the building, you can uh, you can face court fines if you go and spray paint the side of, uh, the opera house and stuff like that cuz of the heritage listing, but you can blow up our sites. And so really explaining, um, the imbalance between mining corporations and aboriginal communities.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Larissa and her colleagues fought for an inquiry into the Juukan Gorge destruction. It opened in September of 2020 and garnered national attention week after week. They put stories into the media about how similar destruction was happening all across the country. The final report from the inquiry came out in October of 2021. It recommended a set of measures for the Australian government, including ratifying the UN treaty on the rights of indigenous peoples, expanding legislation for land rights and giving First Nations the veto or the right to say what they want protected and for their consent to be the final word. This would allow them to protect similar sites to Juukan Gorge, which the current legislation does not.

Larissa Baldwin:

And is this like a really watermark moment in terms of like the first time the government has really put, um, considerable land rights legislation on the table. This place in in New South Wales, uh, the Gamilaraay mob where they have these grinding grooves and it's like where like Gamilaraay warriors went and sharpened their spears, uh, doing white invasion and it's this like incredible like wave of rock with all these grinding grooves is like carved into it and ground into it and they want to cut that up and to build a mine. And they had the federal minister come out and say like, you know, we know there's immense value here and but the economic value outweighs that. And you know, the local people, the Gamilaraay people are saying this is our war memorial. You wouldn't go down to the war memorial in Canberra and blow it up and cut it up and this is what this is to us.

So there has been this massive, uh, public campaign of support that we've been running that's really putting pressure on government being like, you need to fix these things. We are place-based people and it's one thing that makes us unique and the idea if you blow up these places, we belong to this place. So that's our identity. So how do we continue our culture if this place is gone? And we are very place-based people and our languages talk about, uh, you different words in language and that sort of stuff and song lines like, we don't need a map to navigate this country because our language does it and our places do this. So the idea like that these places are gone, it's almost removing our entire identity in so many different ways. And so really telling those stories which are more not about, and I don't even think it's about kind of that targeting at heart things type of thing, but it's just like, this is who we are. And it was like, you know, because it wasn't, you know, trying to get out the violins and that sort of stuff, people were really angry like, you're attacking who I am and my existence to be because you're destroying this thing.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And Larissa has taken this message of the strength and knowledge of First Nations to the existential issue of our day protecting our climate, the very land, air, and water all of us rely on. Kelly described a recent video of Larissa or Ris as she's known that made the rounds on social media.

Kelly Williams:

I've just watched a fantastic video of Ris talking about how 80% of the world's endangered species, you know, fostered and cared for by indigenous peoples around the world and how indigenous rangers should be just as important to Australians as surf lifesavers. If any Americans ever, ever see anything from Australia, it's usually a surf lifesaver in their bud smugglers, saving people from drowning and you know, on the beach. And they're held up as an icon of Australia. So Ris is out there telling everyone that indigenous rangers are just as important as Lifesavers.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And Kelly also remarked on what the project as a whole meant and enabled starting with the opening presentation, they had me zoom in to deliver.

Kelly Williams:

I think when I kind of reflect on that in the last two years, and again it all goes back to the timing around how the messaging fellowship has come along. And we are in this, for me, this massive kind of reframing around the world around all social justice issues and the learnings that we got from you. And that with, you know, that that first mind blowing presentation around deficit messaging and hedging and negation, we were like, holy cow, we, we all want to use our voices but we didn't know how. And when you look around the world, people are stepping up now and they are believing that they do have the answers. You can go on, you know, tv, digital, social media, there's videos everywhere of First Nations peoples around the world stepping up and saying, we know how to fix this. It's really been a life-changing experience for me. And it was so weird because all your life you kind of think there's something going on. You, you think, man, why can't we break through? What are we missing? There's some kind of barrier here. What is it? And just recognizing that process and that strategy behind it to dampen the voices and to dehumanize and disassociate ownership of your own destiny. Yeah, that was awesome.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Throughout this season we've explored campaigns that swung big and won. Rethinking messaging, narrative and strategy on some of the most deeply entrenched issues of our day. Today we heard a bit more about what it takes to shift the default messaging that can seem like the only available way to describe our problems and advocate for progress. But as Larissa and Kelly and all of the incredible people we've met from around the world this season have demonstrated we can and must reconsider how we make our case. Too often we speak from a place of reaction instead of creation from rebutting. Our opposition's lies rather than speaking from and reaffirming our truths. And too often we lend credence and strength to our opposition's claims by failing to make clear who is behind the horrible outcomes. We witness revealing not just what our opponents are doing, but why as Larissa says here, the painstaking work of

reflecting on and reframing the language we too often take for granted is an act of empowerment and of actually having the freedom to say what we truly believe.

Larissa Baldwin:

So the idea of like re-reshaping messages around freedom and our strength and our capability and taking that right across the way that we talk about things. This is the conversation I think that we had a lot. You constantly reminded me that these aren't special rights. Everybody has the right to have and reframing around that. And so we are just asking for the same equity that everybody else and bringing those powerful stories and actually laying a claim down for what we're asking for right at the front instead of dancing around it. So I think in the part it's just like trying to painting that vision of what we want, really talking about who we are. So you know, when we talk about this deficit narrative and we talk to First Nations people here, that's not how we talk about ourselves. It's not how we see ourselves and it's also why our communities really resent and they see themselves as people who are surviving and people who are persistent and who have a lot of love within our communities. So even changing that and leading with who we are and you know, people are really happy to see that sort of stuff and really embrace that type of language cuz that's how we see ourselves.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The work of make believe as in making people believe what is not only true today, but possible tomorrow requires courageous self-reflection and a willingness to take on what's too often deemed common sense, but it is the path to win the better world we want and need. Thank you so much for going on this journey with us. It's been an honor to bring to light these brilliant campaigns and share lessons learned.

Words to Win by is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Grace Lynch, Britany Martinez and Sundus Hassan Nooli with editorial support from Ale Tejada, Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Liz Brown, Anthony Torres, and Jillian Marcells. Our executive producers are Jenny Kaplan and me, Anat Shenker-Osorio. Our theme music is written by T.R. Richie, produced and arranged by Dan Leon. If your words don't spread, they don't work, so please let others know and rate and review the show wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Theme Song:

A song is somewhere to begin to search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done and a song, it's somewhere to begin.