



## **Readying Australia for truth: The transformative practice of truth-listening**

*Blake Alan Cansdale – David Hunter Memorial Lecture 2025*

### Introduction

Yaama maliyaa (*hello friends*), my name is Blake Alan Cansdale.

I am a proud Anaiwan man, born on Dharawal Country in South-Western Sydney and raised on Darkinyung Country on the Central Coast of NSW. I began my career as a criminal solicitor with the Children's Legal Service of Legal Aid NSW, before moving into policy roles with the Law Council of Australia and the former NSW Department of Family and Community Services. In addition to legal and policy roles, I've worked as a senior executive across several ACCOs and NGOs, and am honoured to say that I currently serve as the National Director of ANTAR.

### Acknowledgement of Country

Before I begin, I would like to thank Selena Walker for the Welcome to Country, and for ensuring safe passage for those with us in person today, as we walk among your ancestors on these sacred lands.

I myself would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of Canberra and the surrounds—Country that was taken without consent, treaty, or compensation.

Sovereignty was never ceded, and that truth should remain the cornerstone of every conversation about First Nations justice in this country.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present and honour the deep, unbroken relationship between people, place, and spirit.

In fact, just recently, I spent a week with my seven-year-old son Theodore, on our ancestral Country around Armidale in Northern NSW. Standing with my little man by the creeks and boulders that our ancestors once walked beside and took shelter by, I was reminded that Country doesn't just wait for us — it calls to us. My boy was able to hear the whispers of our ancestors in the wind, and to feel a deep connection to things that he could not see, but that he nonetheless knew were there. Country is always there. Our ancestors are always there. I believe that is something worth acknowledging.

I am honoured to have been invited to deliver this year's keynote for the annual David Hunter Memorial Lecture. As a founding member of ANTAR, I owe a great deal to David; not only for the title that I now carry, but for the legacy that David carved out through his reconciliation efforts over the years. I'd like to also honour David's family, who are with us this evening, and I pay my respects to each of you personally.

## What is Truth-Listening?

So what exactly am I going to talk about this evening? Well, in this lecture, I want to talk about the important concept and practice of truth-listening.

We hear often of truth-telling, but far less about truth-listening — what might be best described in short, as the active, disruptive, political act of receiving truth.

As those words suggest...

Truth-listening is not passive.

It is not soft.

It is not safe.

It is, in every sense, a political act. A disruptive act. An act that steals our ability to look away.

If listening to one's truth does not move us, if it does not stir something within us to act, then surely one of two things is true: either we lack the capacity for empathy, or otherwise we quite simply are not listening. Now despite all the reasons in the world to think otherwise, I continue to believe that humans are a generally empathetic and nurturing species. I therefore have no choice but to put the continued (and quite frankly baffling) inaction of so many, down to an inability or unwillingness to listen.

So, what then does it take to listen? Surely it's a pretty straight forward business. After all, each of us has been doing it since roughly the age of minus 16 weeks.

## The Four Critical Conditions of Effective Truth-Listening

Perhaps though, just perhaps, it's not as easy or unconscious an act as we've been led to believe all these years.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge two scholars in Australia who have given deep thought to what meaningful listening might require of individuals in a settler colonial nation like Australia.

Dr Poppy de Souza and Dr Tanja Dreher. Two researchers who have worked extensively in media, justice and race. A few years ago, they wrote a paper with a title that says a lot on its own:

*"Dwelling in Discomfort: On the conditions of listening in settler colonial Australia."*

In their paper, de Souza and Dreher offer a framework for the kind of truth listening that we're talking about today — not the easy and comfortable kind, but the transformative kind, that changes perspectives and relationships—relationships with place, relationships with others, relationship with self.

De Souza and Dreher name four critical conditions for effective truth listening:

They are- **Refusal, Attunement, Yielding, and Dwelling in Discomfort.**

We'll take a look at each of these briefly in turn...

## Refusal

Importantly, refusal is not withdrawal — it is power. And for marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities, particularly dispossessed first peoples, refusal is an essential means of representation and survival.

It's the sovereign act of saying no to unjust terms, fighting back against systems built on dispossession and denial.

For mob, refusal is one way in which our right to self-determination manifests — we refuse not to cause aimless unrest, but to define the basic humane terms on which we expect to be treated (and deserve to be treated for that matter).

For others, truth-listening begins when we make space for that refusal — when we stop thinking that the status quo has the right to decide what gets said, when, and how.

## Attunement

The next critical pre-condition to truth-listening is attunement.

Attunement means recognising where you stand in each moment, and in particular, what you bring into that moment.

We do not enter any space as a blank slate... not at birth, nor anytime thereafter.

Into every moment, we bring our history. our identity. our privilege. our choices. our ancestry. our inherited wealth. our inherited trauma. our learnt behaviours. our biologically hardwired instincts and our environmentally moulded mannerisms.

Truth-listening requires us to become deeply aware of these things, and to listen with them in mind—recognising our position within the systems that shape our life, and to understand how our preconceptions and biases colour the world around us.

## Yielding

The next pre-condition is yielding.

Yielding, unsurprisingly, is all about giving something up.

It's the act of stepping back from control and allowing others to define the framing of the truth from time to time— not just the content, but how truth is told, when truth is told, and how that truth should be used.

This might be the hardest part of truth-listening for many well-meaning allies, because yielding means power does not remain where it has always been... it is the act of unsettling the status quo.

For non-Indigenous Australians and Western institutions, it means giving up the urge to moderate, mediate, or manage the narrative.

### Dwelling in Discomfort

The fourth and final pre-condition for truth-listening is the ability to 'dwell in discomfort'.

By this, I mean resisting the instinct to move too quickly to harmony or hope in the face of conflict or despair.

Truth-listening is not a single act. It is a durational commitment to discomfort. It's the willingness to stay with the truth even after the event, the keynote, the training, the policy review, the parliamentary inquiry.

It means choosing not to look away when things get hard or unfamiliar.

True listening requires us to stay in the pain long enough to be moved to action.

If we only open our ears, our minds and our hearts for that one Royal Commission, that one public apology, that brief news cycle, or even that short year or two of continued allyship after a devastating referendum defeat, then we will never be truly capable of connecting with another's truth—we will never be able to feel even a modicum of their pain or their power.

### Truth-Listening in a World of Mis and dis-information

So then...

Refusal – attunement – yielding – dwelling in discomfort.

Four critical pre-conditions for effective truth-listening.

Honestly though, as I continue to reflect on each of these conditions, all of which make abundant sense to me, I keep coming back to the same question time and time again:

How can one engage in effective truth-listening, when we're drowning in an ocean of mis- and dis-information?

I often think it's a small miracle that we can hear anything at all these days; even our own pervasive stream of consciousness. There is just so much noise out there, at all times. And within that cloud of noise, how are we supposed to discern the information worth listening to from the garbage—particularly with social media and most non-independent media outlets nowadays falling firmly into the latter category. And even when we do occasionally happen upon relevant, accurate and credible information, who has the time to reflect on it properly!? In this, the digital and information age, where we are meant to be more informed and connected than ever before, I worry that in fact the opposite is true in many ways. We are disconnected and blind to truth and reality, we are disconnected and blind to our neighbours, we are disconnected and blind to our histories, many of us are disconnected and blind to our cultures, and I would hazard a guess that many of us even struggle to see our 'true selves' in the mirror most days of the week.

Before I make this next comment, it's important to note that I'm by no means a luddite—I think technology is fantastic in so many ways— yet as far as I'm concerned, contemporary global connectivity and digital information overload are largely to blame for our physical, psychological and emotional discombobulation, as individuals and as a society.

So mis- and disinformation then, what exactly are we talking about here?

Well put simply, misinformation is falsehood spread without intent to harm. Basically, false or inaccurate information—getting the facts wrong.

Disinformation on the other hand, is the deliberate creation of lies to mislead and divide... false information that is intended to con—intentionally misstating the facts.

Both are pervasive, and both are dangerous, yet dis-information is something of particularly grave concern.

In recent years, it seems that disinformation is being socio-politically weaponised at scale, as an attempt to maintain the colonial status quo—perhaps in an effort to fight back against late-stage capitalism, if that is indeed what we’re currently living through.

Now I do not mean to suggest that disinformation hasn’t been prominent in Australian society and politics for a long time, it has, you just need to look at the history of the vapid culture wars and many of Pauline Hanson’s parliamentary speeches, both of which have been blowing around like a fart in the breeze for decades. But my feeling is that things seem to have ramped up since around the time of the current US President’s first election in 2017.

I don’t want to spend time delving into the history and drivers of disinformation, though important that is, partially because that’s an area that I am still exploring myself, but more so, because I want to focus on how we might respond to this threat.

### Responding to Disinformation

If misinformation flows from ignorance and disinformation breeds on ignorance, then the antidote to both must be truth-readiness — the individual and collective discipline of preparing ourselves to receive, recognise, and act on truth.

Truth-readiness must begin with curiosity instead of certainty.

It requires us to pause before we share, think before we click, and to ask ourselves: who benefits from me believing this information?

Rather than reworking the wheel, I want to share valuable advice issued earlier this year by the EU Parliament—an important international forum for political debate and decision-making at the EU level. The EU Parliament published an online fact sheet entitled- *‘disinformation: 10 steps to protect yourself and others’*... subtext: “Find out about ten practical steps to identify disinformation, protect those around you and strengthen democratic resilience against manipulation”. In their advice, the EU body encourages everyone to:

- **Stay vigilant-** Watch out for headlines designed to generate engagement without regard for accuracy. Look at news content beyond sensational headlines and prioritise substance over sensationalism.
- **Learn to identify disinformation-** One of the best ways of working out whether something is disinformation is by paying attention to the kind of language it uses. Remain cautious of emotionally charged news stories, as they may be part of a foreign interference campaign designed to influence public opinion. Deceptive language and vague assertions are also frequently used to mislead readers. Look for clear, emotion-free and evidence-based reporting.

- **Verify the source-** Prioritise news from credible sources with transparent practices, especially amidst increased foreign interference and disinformation campaigns targeting democratic processes.
- **Fact check-** Take proactive steps to verify the accuracy of a news story before sharing it, particularly on social media platforms vulnerable to manipulation. Help spread articles checked by your local fact-checking organisations.
- **Cross-check information-** Given the likelihood of sophisticated disinformation tactics, compare news from multiple reputable sources to counter manipulation and false narratives. Be aware of a possible coordinated effort to spread disinformation.'
- **Think twice before you share-** Make a habit of pausing before sharing content, especially on social media. Take a moment to look beyond the headline, scrutinise the details and assess the credibility of the source.
- **Investigate images and videos-** Disinformation can also be spread using non-textual multimedia content. Exercise caution when you find visual content accompanying news stories, as manipulated images and videos are common tactics in disinformation campaigns. Verify the authenticity and context of multimedia items.
- **Educate yourself-** Stay informed about common strategies used in foreign interference and disinformation campaigns. Empower yourself with knowledge to recognise and combat deceptive tactics.
- **Encourage critical thinking-** Foster a culture of critical thinking and media literacy in your community to build resilience against disinformation. Encourage scepticism and independent verification of information to mitigate the impact of manipulative narratives.
- **Report suspicious content-** Actively report instances of disinformation and hate speech to relevant authorities or platforms.

At a societal level, truth-readiness means investing in independent media, in civics education (something that we're notoriously poor at in Australia), and in supporting information platforms that privilege integrity and accuracy over expediency and clicks.

At a personal level, it means being teachable — holding humility as a civic virtue, and remembering that listening is not endorsement, it is engagement with a view to raising one's self-awareness.

Disinformation thrives in the cracks of unexamined bias. It feeds on information fatigue, distraction, distrust, cynicism, fear, anger and anxiety. Perhaps most concerning of all, disinformation breeds off the very ignorance that it begets.

Truth-readiness, on the other hand, is in many respects an act of resistance. Truth-listening in the modern age of widespread disinformation requires strategic truth-readiness — preparing ourselves intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually to locate, to receive, to hold, and to act upon truth, in the many shapes and sizes in which it finds its way to us.

Truth-readiness is the daily practice of discernment — sharpening our minds, grounding our spirits, and choosing to be consciously moved, rather than mindlessly manipulated.

And so, if we are to survive the storm of deceit that swirls around us on the daily, we must better prepare ourselves for and anchor ourselves in truth, even when it demands something of us, and especially when it makes us uncomfortable.

I feel like that's the quiet rebellion of our time —it's where truth-listening becomes an acutely political act; it's where truth and courage collide... not just for those speaking truth, but also for those receiving and responding to it.

## Closing

I'd like to finish by highlighting that, as I come into my fourth decade on this planet, I often catch myself reflecting on the many things that I am thankful for, most of all my family—I now live for my family, and for Country. And the fact is, the better a job I do caring for both of these things (which are in actuality intertwined—Country encompassing all things from the cosmic to the molecular) the better the state of the planet that my children and my children's children will inherit, and that I believe I myself will re-inherit one day.

One of the other things that I now know to be true, is that within my parental job description, lies a responsibility to make sure my children grow up with somewhat of a different story to my own— one grounded in culture, sovereignty, and the strength that comes from knowing that they are part of the Anaiwan nation—one of the oldest nations in the world.

The colonial project almost stole that strength from me, and has forced me to fight a long arduous identity battle most of my life to reclaim that which is my birthright. And make no mistake, the colonial project is alive and well in Australia, and globally, and yet it will not take anything from my children—they will know who they are from birth, they will stand strong in their culture and they will live in their sovereignty. If I wasn't already 100% sure of this truth, I certainly am now, after having my seven-year-old son sit beside me at historic treaty consultations on our Country in Armidale earlier this year, the first to occur with Anaiwan peoples in Australia's history. Where at one point during the three-hour yarn, Naomi Moran, one of three NSW Treaty Commissioners, addressed my boy in front of everyone, letting him know how powerful it was for him to be in that room, that what we were discussing was ultimately about him, that treaty is about our future, and that he is our future. I could tell that he was taking in every word. It was a proper proud dad moment for me.

In most respects, I owe that generational change to the countless Elders and olders that fought tirelessly for justice for our people over the years. I also owe it to the courageous allies who fought beside them, people like the man that we're all here in honour of this evening, the late David Hunter.

Reconciliation, genuine life changing reconciliation, not the soft, warm and fuzzy kind, it doesn't begin with Reconciliation Action Plans, policies or politics — it begins with people, it begins with relationships, and it begins with listening.

We don't need more allies who turn up for the photo opportunity or the media release— we need accomplices. Those that are willing to stand on the front line, when politicians are coming after our rights and our children, like most state and territory governments are across Australia today, to defend our people when we are being physically attacked by white nationalists and vile neo-Nazis, as was the case at Camp Sovereignty recently, to call out and condemn racism, wherever and however it raises its ugly head—as it so often does.

When all is said and done, allyship cannot be neutral. It cannot be safe. It cannot be comfortable or convenient. Real change isn't driven by how loudly we speak, but rather by how deeply we listen, how courageously we act, and eventually, how humbly we hand it all over to the next generation.

I want to end here with a reference to the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which itself ends with an invitation to the Australian people, to "Walk with us in a movement for a better future."

It doesn't say "follow us," it doesn't say "lead us."

It says — walk with us.

Not in front. Not behind. But alongside.

And so I leave you with this question:

What would it take for you to walk with us — not in guilt, not in shame, and not as a saviour, but in truth, as an equal?

To dwell in discomfort.

To yield when necessary.

To attune your listening.

To honour acts of refusal.

To immunise yourself against disinformation.

And ultimately, to act for a better tomorrow — using truth as your roadmap.

Because our future depends on it.

Thank you for listening.