

## PAUL BRIGGS AO

Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*

Yorta Yorta man Paul Briggs (AO) grew up on the banks of the Dungala (Murray River) at Cummeragunja. Inspired by a long line of Yorta Yorta leaders, including Sir Douglas Nicholls and William Cooper, Paul has been at the forefront of advocating for Aboriginal people's rights and advancement since the early 1970s. For over half a century, Paul has been a driving force for change, within his local community as well as advocating for Indigenous self-determination at the highest levels of government. His lifetime of activism and advocacy has resulted in practical and positive changes for Indigenous communities. Paul has also played a major role in reconciliation through his leadership and commitment to an inclusive and respectful Australian society.

Paul's lifetime of activism began when at age 19, Sir Douglas Nicholls, pioneering activist, footballer, pastor, and governor, found him a job at the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in Melbourne. At the time, career opportunities and career aspirations were limited for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Paul soon exhibited leadership qualities and a deep commitment to First Nation's self-determination. After a period working for the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Paul went on to establish a number of critical institutions including the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and the First Nations Australian Credit Union, the first Indigenous credit union offering national access to financial services.

Paul has held many leadership positions, but he is perhaps most well-known for his role as the founding president of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club (RFNC), a position he held until 2022. The club emerged from Paul's recognition of the vital role sport plays in Indigenous communities. Paul was an exceptional athlete. A brilliant footballer, he played 500 games in regional Victoria and was renowned for his remarkable skill, speed and outstanding goal sense. Following in the footsteps of other Yorta Yorta football legends, including his father, Les Briggs, Paul has used sport as a mechanism to break down racial barriers and engage with the wider community.

RFNC's ethos is built on the Spirit of the Invincibles, a team of Yorta Yorta champions who lived on the Cummeragunja Mission and overcame incredible barriers to become an unbeatable team. Paul led a 15-year campaign for RFNC to be admitted into the wider Central Goulburn Football League. In 1998, on the centenary of the first Grand Final win by the 'Invincibles', the RFNC senior men's football team won the premiership, replicating the remarkable achievements of their forebears.

Today RFNC is a vibrant hub for social change in the Goulburn Valley and an example of how Paul has used sport to improve social, cultural and economic outcomes for Indigenous people. The club continues to build on Paul's vision by offering a range of community programs alongside the football and netball teams, including homework clubs, driver education courses and health programs. RFNC has also inspired five club members to undertake a PhD at the University of Melbourne.

Paul Briggs has been central to the University of Melbourne's Goulburn Murray Partnership, initially through the establishment of the Academy of Sport Health and Education (ASHE) in 2004. A partnership between RFNC and the University, ASHE is now in its 20th year and the result of Paul's collaboration with then VC Glyn Davis. Starting with six students, ASHE is now a thriving education program offering VCE and TAFE qualifications, supporting young Indigenous people through their transition to employment or further education.

In 2005 Paul became the first Indigenous man to join the Council of the University of Melbourne in its 150-year history. Most recently, Paul has been instrumental in the establishment of the Munarra Centre for Regional Excellence, a partnership between University of Melbourne, Munarra Limited, RFNC, and the Kaiela Institute. The Centre will be an Indigenous-led pathways-based education facility for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students – the first of its kind in Australia.

Paul's outstanding contribution over five decades has been widely acknowledged. His many awards include the Jack Titus award, given by the AFL for outstanding service to football and the Medal of the Order of Australia (2001). In 2024 Paul received an Order of Australia for his distinguished service to the Indigenous community.

Paul Briggs is recommended for the award of the Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) in recognition of a lifetime of community leadership and advocacy that has amplified the positive cultural and economic contribution of Yorta Yorta and First Nations people of the Goulburn Murray region, lifted First Nations aspirations and expectations, strengthened Indigenous cultural identity, and promoted the economic independence and social inclusion of Indigenous people in the Goulburn Murray community and beyond.