

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: 28 years After it was Established

Interview with Isobell Coe

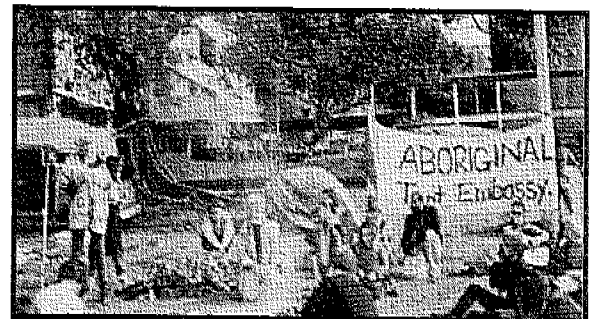
Isobell Coe, a Wiradjuri woman, is one of a number of Koories who were instrumental in the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in 1972. Since then, she has worked to maintain the longest protest site in Australia. In 1998 Coe, along with Billy Craigie, Wadjularbinna Nulyarimma and Robbie Thorpe sought an order from the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory that the crime of genocide was a recognised crime in Australian law. The application was dismissed.¹ On appeal to the Full Court of the Federal Court in *Nulyarimma v Thompson*² the court held that the crime of genocide did not form part of the common law of Australia. More recently, the applicants sought leave to appeal before the High Court. The application was refused. Isobell Coe, one of the applicants, had a brief opportunity to address the court:

Ms Coe: She (Hampel QC representing Nulyarimma) does not represent us on that issue. We have been representing ourselves. Now, I do not know why, now since we are up in the High Court, that is going to change. Now, you know, it just seems that this is just another form of the genocide that is happening right now against our people, and the legal system is a part of that genocide against our people. Now, if we cannot get any justice here, where do we go? We are desperate. Our people are dying everywhere. Just today there is a funeral. You know, we had to make a choice whether we come here or go to a funeral. Now, —there has been at least three this week... someone has to help us stop the genocide in this country against Aboriginal people. Now, if we cannot get justice here in the highest Court of this country, then I think that this Court is just a party to the genocide as well.

Gummow J: No, we will not hear that sort of thing.

Ms Coe: Now, I cannot help it but I have got to let you people know that. The whole world is coming to our country in a few weeks time and if we cannot get any justice here, we are going to take our stories out into the streets.³

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy was brought 'home' to Sydney and re-established at Victoria Park, Sydney on 14 July 2000. Its purpose is to inform the international community of the struggle of Aboriginal peoples for sovereignty and the recognition of Aboriginal law, and land rights, and the struggle against the continuing unacknowledged acts of genocide. In August the South Sydney Council sought an injunction in the Land and Environment Court to evict the Aboriginal Embassy from Victoria Park. The application was later withdrawn and the embassy remained.



The Tent Embassy as it was in the early 70s (top), and as it was from July 14 in Victoria Park. Isobell Coe can be seen with loudhailer in the far left of the frame. Images courtesy of <www.graffitihalloffame.com> and the Tent Embassy.

Irene Watson recently spoke with Isobell Coe:

Isobell Coe: We have protested in Canberra throughout the 70s, 80s and 90s and we even registered the Aboriginal Tent Embassy site in 1995 under the *Commonwealth National Heritage Act*.

The embassy was put up in 1972 by Billy Craigie, Tony Coorie, Bird Williams and Michael Anderson who came down from Redfern, and put an umbrella on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra. They maintained the site for about six months, and then the

Liberal McMahon government called a special sitting in Parliament to move legislation that would move the protestors and everyone off the lawns. The police moved in the early hours of the morning and arrested people and pulled down the tents.

The first protest was a very violent one. Aboriginal people were outnumbered by the police. We had to stand on the outside of the circle and the tent was in the middle and we had to watch the police march up line by line file by file and we thought we were all going to die here. We were prepared to die at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra that day.

After the first protest people just kept coming back and eventually we outnumbered the police, and we just kept coming back. Eventually the Liberal McMahon government was brought down. Gough Whitlam came into power, but when he was in opposition he actually came over to the Tent Embassy and sat down with us. He agreed to a number of our concerns and that was to set up all the Aboriginal organisations and national land rights was on the agenda. The only one who got the land rights, before Gough Whitlam was moved out of office, was the Northern Territory. So their land rights come out of what we achieved through the Aboriginal Embassy.

And over the years we have just kept on coming back. Billy Craigie, he was one of the main ones — we put the Tent Embassy up and had it here outside old Parliament House and then moved it up to Capitol Hill, the site of the new Parliament House. We have moved it up to Sydney to Lady Macquarie's Chair in 1988 and we have been up to the Commonwealth Games in 1982.

IW: *What is the Aboriginal rights struggle today?*

IC: We have never ceded our sovereignty from one end of the country to the other. There has never been any treaty signed. In relation to what's happening now I think things have gotten worse. We look at the death rate of our people — it's increased. There's millions of dollars poured into the Aboriginal industry each year, and there is still nothing, you know, it doesn't get to the people. There are something like 400,000 Aboriginal people across Australia, and my arithmetic says it doesn't add up. There's something very drastically wrong there. If we all dropped dead tomorrow there would be so many people in the Aboriginal industry who would be out of jobs. We make up a big part of the health system, the welfare system, the gaol system. The tourist industry is also where they use our people without any real recognition.

Aboriginal people are still working as slave labour, under this Community Development Employment Program and it is all run by ATISC. ATISC is the main one that is out there pushing our people into CDEP. There are no real jobs, there is no real training and there is no real employment. This is in spite of twenty years ago when Vincent Lingiari led all of his people off Wave Hill because the Gurindji were fighting for proper wages and proper working conditions. It seems like we have gone backwards. Now, because this experiment of working for the dole has worked so well with Aboriginal people, they've pushed it onto the wider community.

This government is a very racist government. They have just completed this million-dollar inquiry into the stolen generations, and they try to make out there is only 10% of our people that were affected by the stolen generations. It has affected every Aboriginal family in Australia, and we are dealing with five, six, seven generations who have been taken away. John Howard won't even say sorry on behalf of his

government to the stolen generations.

But that is just a few of the things. We are continually under attack here at the Embassy. They are threatening to move us. They reckon we are an eyesore. But we say we are concerned about the eyesore that our country is turning into in this 212 years.

IW: *So what protection, if any, does the Embassy in Canberra have to remain a protest site?*

IC: The site is not safe but the Olympic Games are happening here this year and they are going to look very foolish if they try and remove us. But how they attack us is they usually hand pick one of these so-called local elders around here, the paid ones, and they usually attack us through them. Even though these people have had nothing to do with the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, in the 28 years that we have been here. One particular woman came here and wanted to welcome us here after 27 years. We replied, you are 27 years too late. Me, this is my country. The people that sent us here they are a lot older than those ones that are trying to do these things today.

The Commonwealth has dug up trespass laws as old as 1932 and 1938 to use to move the protestors. We were charged with trespassing in 1992, when we came back to the Embassy for the 20-year celebration. On the 27th January we moved into old Parliament House and occupied it. We were charged with trespassing. But it was in and out of court that quick and eventually they just threw it out of court, because they don't want any Aboriginal people charged with trespassing.

They want to have statues and more rose gardens, more walkways and an eternal flame. They have got enough of those things here now, and they waste millions and millions of dollars on these things. This statue of King George outside old Parliament House — they had a fence around it for four years and it cost them a lot of money to clean it. They have got a pond down the back — they have already wasted money in putting fountains in there. Not many people know about the waste that happens here in this parliamentary triangle. The ponds at the back of the Embassy — it's called a reflection pond — they actually pay someone to drive around late at night to hunt the ducks off the pond. That's how ridiculous it all is.

notes

1. In the Supreme Court of the ACT No SC 457 1998 ACT, *In the matter of an application for a writ of mandamus directed to Phillip R Thompson Ex parte Wadjularbinna Nulyarimma, Isobel Coe, Billy Craigie and Robbie Thorpe*.
2. *Nulyarimma v Thompson* (1999) 165 ALR 621.
3. *Nulyarimma v Thompson* (4 August 2000) High Court of Australia, Transcripts, Registry No 18 of 1999, 15, <www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/hca/transcripts/1999/c18/11.html>