

Black Power in Redfern 1968 - 1972

by Gary Foley 5th October 2001 ©

*Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.*

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) 1970¹

On Australia Day 1973 Dr. Herbert Cole ("Nugget") Coombs, the Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Governor of the Reserve Bank and influential Government advisor to six Australian Prime Ministers, speaking at a University of Western Australia Summer School, declared that,

The emergence of what might be called an Aboriginal intelligentsia is taking place in Redfern and other urban centres. It is a politically active intelligentsia...I think they are the most interesting group to emerge from the political point of view in the whole of the Aboriginal community in Australia.²

Coombs' view was shared by many with an intimate knowledge of the indigenous political movement of the day, but it was a view apparently not shared by the predominately male, non-indigenous Australian historians who have since written about that era. The antipathy of the historical and anthropological establishment toward the urban, militant activists of Redfern seems equaled only by an apparent lack of knowledge of events that occurred in these effectively 'closed' communities during the late 60s and early 70s. Attendant as a natural consequence of ignorance of the defining events of these communities, is the manner in which historians have trivialized, marginalized and dismissed the achievements and historical influence of the Australian Black Power Movement.

Black Power was a political movement that emerged among African-Americans

¹ Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), *My People*, Jacaranda Press, 1970.

² H.C. Coombs, 'Transcript of Q and A to University of Western Australia summer school' 26 January 1973 Coombs box 44 folder 369, quoted in, Rowse, Tim, *Obligated to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs Legacy in Indigenous Affairs*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 106.

in the United States in the mid-1960s. The concept sought to express a new racial consciousness - people like Robert Williams, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael played major roles in the formation of the ideas of Black Power. Malcolm X inspired a generation of black activists throughout America and beyond, whilst Carmichael "made Black Power more popular, largely through his use of the term while reorganizing the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) so that whites would no longer possess leadership responsibilities".³ The term was catapulted into the Australian imagination when the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) under the leadership of Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza who, galvanized by the same notions as Malcolm and Stokely, invited a Caribbean activist and academic, Dr. Roosevelt Brown, to give a talk on 'Black Power' in Melbourne.⁴ The initial result was frenzied media overreaction that was closely observed by younger activists in Brisbane and Sydney, thus the term came into use by a frustrated and impatient new Indigenous political generation.

In Australia the 'Black Power movement' emerged as a loose coalition of young Indigenous activists active in Redfern, Fitzroy and South Brisbane in the period immediately after Charles Perkins' 'Freedom Ride' of 1965. I am particularly interested in the small group of individuals involved at the core of the Redfern 'Black Power movement', which existed under a variety of tags including the 'Black Caucus'.⁵ This group themselves defined the nature of the concept of Black Power that they espoused. Roberta (then Bobbi) Sykes said Australian Black Power had its own distinct (from US) interpretation. She said it was about 'the power generated by people who seek to identify their own problems and those of the community as a whole, and who strive to take action in all possible

³ J.C. Albert and S.E. Albert, (eds.), *The Sixties Papers*, Praeger, 1984, p. 105. See < <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/concepts/power.html> >

⁴ See, "Victorian Aborigines Advancement League Statement on Black Power 1969" in Attwood, Bain, & Andrew Markus, 1999, p. 243.

⁵ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1996, p. 351.

forms to solve those problems'⁶ Paul Coe saw it as the need for Aboriginal people 'to take control both of the economical, the political and cultural resources of the people and of the land...so that they themselves have got the power to determine their own future.'⁷ Bruce McGuinness, speaking in 1969 as Director of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) declared Black Power 'does not necessarily involve violence' but rather was 'in essence...that black people are more likely to achieve freedom and justice...by working together as a group.'⁸ So the Australian version of Black Power, like its American counterpart, was essentially about the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms, and to seek self-determination without white interference.

Since the 1860s, as the Aboriginal peoples in regional areas of southeastern Australia experienced the spread of the white invasion and forcible occupation of their homelands, there can be said to have been significant resistance, both passive and active. Heather Goodall notes that in New South Wales from the beginning of black/white contact "Land was seen by its Aboriginal owners as a central factor in their experience of colonialism. Their sense of invasion, of loss and deprivation of land was expressed clearly and unarguably".⁹ Land continued to be at the heart of Aboriginal concerns and protest over many decades, and many disputes were conducted at a very localised level.

The indigenous political resistance of the modern era might be said to have been born with the creation of the first Aboriginal political organization, the *Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA)*, established in 1924 by Aboriginal wharf labourers Fred Maynard and Tom Lacey. Both Maynard and Lacey had been developing a political awareness through earlier involvement with African-American and West Indian sailors who had created an organization on the Sydney waterfront called the *Coloured Progressive Association*. This

⁶ Roberta (Bobbi) Sykes, in Ann Turner (ed.), *Black Power in Australia: Neville Bonner vs Bobbi Sykes*, South Yarra, Heinemann Educational, 1975, p. 10.

⁷ Paul Coe, in Attwood, Bain, & Andrew Markus, 1999, p.261.

⁸ Bruce McGuinness, in Attwood, Bain, & Andrew Markus, p. 243.

⁹ Heather Goodall, 1996, p. 35.

organization had hosted functions for the famous African-American boxer Jack Johnson in his visits to Australia in 1907 and 1908. Johnson was an inspirational role model for black people everywhere because of his refusal to accept the 'place' designated for a black man in the colonial mentality of the day. By 1920 both Maynard and Lacey were members of a Sydney chapter of the largest black consciousness movement in the world at that time, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association.

The AAPA established by Maynard and Lacey was clearly in part inspired by the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, (known as the 'father of Black Nationalism') and shared the motto of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, "one God, One Aim, One Destiny". The AAPA stood for self-determination, economic independence and Land Rights for Aboriginal people, and its adaptation and incorporation of the ideas of Garvey demonstrates a far higher level of political sophistication than white Australian historians have ever acknowledged. Operations of the AAPA were largely restricted to the north coast of NSW. It managed to last only four years due to intense police and Aborigines Protection Board harassment, but the AAPA nurtured the flame of resistance, embedded ideas of self-reliance and independence, and was to have a powerful influence on the next generation of NSW indigenous activists in the 1930s.¹⁰

A later all-Aboriginal political organization created was the Australian Aborigines League, established by William Cooper, Doug Nichols, Bill and Eric Onus and others in early 1936 in Melbourne.¹¹ Membership was open to all Aborigines and the aims of the group were "to gain for Aboriginal people those civil and human rights denied since occupation".¹² This was one of the first significant attempts by a group of Aboriginal political activists to try and assert control over their own destinies, although other dedicated groups emerged around then including Bill

¹⁰ John Maynard, "Fred Maynard and the AAPA: One God, One Aim, One Destiny" *Aboriginal History* 1997 Vol 23

¹¹ Andrew Markus, *Blood From a Stone*, Clayton: Monash Publications in History, 1986, p. 10.

¹² VAAL, VAAL, *Victims or Victors?: The Story of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League*, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1985, p. 27.

Ferguson and Jack Patten's Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), founded in 1937.¹³ The Australian Aborigines League never became more than a regional organisation, effectively functioning only in south-east Australia, although key members travelled far and wide throughout Australia in the 1930s to 1960s making contacts, compiling information and politically organising. However, Patten and Ferguson joined up with William Cooper, along with Marge Tucker, Doug Nichols and Pearl Gibbs to mount the famous 1938 'Day of Mourning'. This idea, inspired by Cooper, was described by Goodall as a "brilliantly symbolic plan... recognised as a turning point in capturing white attention".¹⁴ These were difficult and tough times for Aboriginal political organisers because of the range of restrictive and discriminatory state laws that controlled the movement of Indigenous people.

Just how tough it could be was demonstrated by the protracted dispute at Cummeragunja which began in 1937 and in part prompted William Cooper's disillusionment and idea for a protest at the sesqui-centenary celebrations the following year. Aboriginal residents had at first sought William Cooper's assistance over grievances with the Protection Board manager. When Cooper's moderate tactics of petitioning the NSW Protection Board failed, the community turned to former Cummeragunja resident Jack Patten who, on Friday 3rd February 1939, was arbitrarily arrested when he addressed the people on the reserve. Two thirds of the residents immediately packed up and crossed the Murray River into Victoria and thus withdrew their labour from the NSW Protection Board. This action has been described as, "perhaps the first direct political action taken by Aboriginal people which lay outside the guideline offered by the established system".¹⁵ It is significant that the children of the

¹³ Jack Horner, "Steadfast Pioneers", *Identity*, Vol.1No.5, July, 1972.

¹⁴ Heather Goodall, 1996, p. 230.

¹⁵ VAAL, VAAL, *Victims or Victors?*, 1985, p.37.

Cummeragunja exiles were among those most attracted to the more direct action tactics of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s.¹⁶

In February 1965 Perkins and Reverend Ted Noffs of the Wayside Chapel organised a "Freedom Ride" with 30 white Sydney University students from the group Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA).¹⁷ He took SAFA on a bus ride into some of NSW's most notoriously racist country towns. They were pelted with eggs and rotten fruit when they tried to desegregate the Moree swimming pool and such was the level of violent response they encountered that the hired bus driver left the tour halfway through out of fear.¹⁸ But the resultant publicity resounded around the world and exposed the vicious nature of Australian racism in an unprecedented way. As Adam Shoemaker described it,

*Internationally inspired, a product of cooperation between whites and blacks committed to the same ideals, confrontationist but non-violent, the Freedom Ride was a consciousness-raising exercise that was very effective. Awakening media interest in Aboriginal affairs was, for the first time, marshalled in favour of the Black Australian cause, to the severe embarrassment of many white townspeople in rural New South Wales. All of these elements foreshadowed a pattern of protest that was to continue and expand in the 1970s and 1980s.*¹⁹

The Freedom Ride had the effect of inspiring a young generation of Aboriginal political activists in southeast Australia to stand up for their rights. Paul Coe and his sister Isobel had grown up on Erambie Mission in Cowra, Gary Williams and myself at Nambucca Heads, Billy and Lyn Craigie at Moree, Keith Smith at Nowra, Bob and Sol Bellear at Tweed Heads and Michael Anderson in Walgett. Lyall Munro had been inspired by the Freedom Ride when it passed through his home town, and he later said the experience enabled him to see "the power of

¹⁶ Heather Goodall, 1996, p. 255.

¹⁷ Charles Perkins, letter to Mr. A.G. Kingsmill, Chairman, NSW Aborigines Welfare Board, 18th Jan. 1956, from Bain Attwood & Andrew Markus, 1999, p. 215.

¹⁸ "Race Tour Bus Driver Walks Out", *Australian*, 22 Feb. 1965.

¹⁹ Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929 - 1988*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989, p. 107.

direct action that day in Moree.”²⁰ All of these young people had then been part of the significant Aboriginal migration to the city that had occurred during the 60s. As Gale wrote in 1975,

...Aborigines continue to move out of their isolation into the mainstream of Australian city life...[they] are no longer willing to accept the lowest position in the socio-economic scale...This resurgence of Aboriginal identity has led to a change in the patterns of race relations in this country...²¹

In time, like most Aboriginal arrivals from the bush at that time, they began to congregate around the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs (FAA), a social/welfare centre established by community leaders like Charles Perkins, Ken Brindle, wharfies; Chicka Dixon and Jack Hassan and boxers; Roy Carrol and Teddy Rainbow. The FAA had set up premises in an old funeral parlour at 810 George Street, near Central Railway Station,²² and by 1968 had become the major social congregation point for the increasing number of young arrivals from the bush and more established Aboriginal city-dwellers. It was at the social functions held by the FAA that most of the later Black Power movement met each other and began to discuss the events of the day.²³

Further, they came to sense themselves as the inheritors of a long tradition of political struggle as they became familiar with stories of the legends of the Indigenous struggle such as Bill Onus, Jack Patton, Bert Groves and Frank Roberts. By 1968 a small discussion group emerged that at times comprised of Paul Coe, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorie, John Newfong, Alana and Samantha Doolan, Lyn Craigie and husband Peter Thompson, Bob and Kaye Belleair, Naomi Mayers, Gary Williams, Norma Williams, Pam Hunter, Isobel Coe and others.²⁴ This loose collective, at the behest of Coe and Williams, began

²⁰ Lyall Munro, interview on 'Broadband', ABC Radio, 20 February 1978.

²¹ Fay Gale, and Alison Brookman, *Race Relations in Australia-The Aborigines*, Sydney, McGraw-Hill, 1975, p. 32.

²² Peter Read, *Charles Perkins: A Biography*, Ringwood, Penguin, 2001, pp. 93 -100.

²³ G. Foley, "A Black Life", *Rolling Stone*, Issue 426 - Yearbook, 1988.

²⁴ Heather Goodall, 1996, p. 338.

consuming all they could of the political literature of the day. Paul Coe was a strong critic of what he perceived as, "...too many white liberals running black affairs. Nothing will get done until young blacks take the initiative."²⁵ To a man and woman these young Kooris had come to the city in the previous five years, and all agreed with Coe when he observed, "In the country racism is blatant, In the city it is more subtle. But the result is the same."²⁶ These sentiments and the way they were vehemently expressed by Coe resonated deeply with the other young blacks. They may not have been as articulate as Coe, but they strongly related to what he was talking about.

It should be remembered that this was a time of exciting social and political upheaval in Australia and the rest of the world. The late 1960s saw student rebellion in Paris, riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago and the emergence of the American Black Power movement. In both America and Australia demonstrations against the War in Vietnam brought together elements of black and white political activists. In Sydney people like Paul Coe, Gary Williams and myself were starting to encounter new people and new ideas. Goodall describes these as "diverse groupings of young people who sometimes called themselves 'New Left', but who might just as well associate themselves in Australia with the anarchist, libertarian traditions". They were "influenced by the anti-colonial movements in India and Africa" and writers like Franz Fanon, Jean Paul Satre and Albert Camus.²⁷

Within that context, the young disaffected Aborigines of inner city Sydney set about to raise their level of political awareness. One thing that accelerated their international awareness had been the sudden influx in the late 60s of American servicemen on Rest and Recuperation leave in Sydney. A significant number of these were the African-American troops who some said were America's cannon

²⁵ "Introducing Paul Coe", *The Australian*, 23 December 1970.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Roberta Sykes in Ann Turner (ed.) *Black Power in Australia: Neville Bonner vs Bobbi Sykes*, South Yarra, Heinemann Educational, 1975, p. 21.

fodder in Vietnam. These troops often gravitated toward the Sydney Black community in Redfern seeking solace from the prevalent white racism of Sydney. Consequently, the young indigenous activists became exposed to the latest developments in racial politics in America, and were provided by Black GI's with some of the latest in African-American political literature and music.

Furthermore, only one bookshop in Sydney sold the type of material they were after. This was the Third World Bookshop, run by Bob Gould, a Sydney left wing identity. It was from Gould's bookshop that the Redfern activists began acquiring their reading matter, at first by the simple and expedient way of theft, and later when Gould agreed to provide the group with whatever books they wanted, gratis. The bulk of the relevant literature that Gould had related to the African-American political struggle, and so the Redfern activists began consuming the works of Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Davis. But, as Heather Goodall reminds us, it is also important to remember that in 1969 these Redfern activists "were just as aware of the seizure of Alcatraz by Vine Deloria Jr as they were of the Panthers...and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* was as widely read as *Soul on Ice*."²⁸

The campaign for a yes vote in the 1967 Referendum, which allowed Aboriginal people to be counted in the Australian census and removed the race powers regulation in the Australian Constitution raised expectations for change in Indigenous affairs in Australia – hopes which were subsequently dashed by government inaction. The younger activists felt a strong sense of betrayal and cynicism at the more non-confrontationist methods and tactics of the older generation: All the effort that respected political leaders like Faith Bandler, Ken Brindle, Perkins and others seemed to amount to nothing. To the impatient young firebrands who were contending on a nightly basis with confrontations with NSW police the apparent lack of progress meant more effective methods had to be considered. As Kath Walker put it at the time,

²⁸ G. Foley, "A Black Life", *Rolling Stone*, Issue 426 - Yearbook, 1988.

Looking back, the only major improvement has been the 93% 'Yes' vote of the referendum of May 1967; but this improvement did not benefit the black Australians though it eased the guilty conscience of white Australians in this country and overseas.²⁹

Thus it seemed to the young radicals that the old style organisations that had fought the referendum campaign were ineffective, especially after the referendum had delivered so little in terms of real reforms on the ground. On the streets of Redfern young Aboriginals were confronted on a daily basis with the brutal reality of dealing with a racist and corrupt NSW police force. Paul Coe was motivated in his early activism by outrage at the police murder of his cousin Pat Wedge.³⁰ The same police killing had triggered a major controversy about the jailing of Ken Brindle when he demanded details of the death from police, thus the young blacks from Redfern had much about which to be aggrieved, and good reason to feel that no progress was being made. As Peter Read observed,

Here was the shared experience of Aboriginality. Here was the point of intersection. Foley was arrested at Central station about this time on a trumped up charge. Brindle was beaten up by Redfern police. Perkins was arrested in Alice Springs after he had rung up police to complain about a publican. What the Sydney Aborigines...understood intuitively...was the brutal reality of Aboriginal daily life.³¹

Because of the degree of daily confrontation with police in Redfern, it should be of no surprise that the young radicals came to decide that the issue of Police harassment and intimidation should be tackled. The young Aboriginal people of Redfern saw striking similarities in the American experience and their own communities. They began to adopt and adapt the strategies and tactics they were reading and hearing about in America. Thus when Redfern activists pondered the problem of police harassment in their own community, they were drawn to consider methods adopted by a group called the Black Panther Party of America, operating in the San Francisco suburb of Oakland, California. This was

²⁹ Walker, Kath, "Black-White Coalition Can Work", *Origin*, 18 Sept. 1969.

³⁰ Meredith Burgmann, "Old radicals never die, they just get nostalgic", *Farrago*, Volume 80, edition 7, October 2001, p. 24.

³¹ Peter Read, 2001, pp. 132 -133.

a scenario that had been predicted older activist Chicka Dixon. In 1967 he had argued for “hostels for Aborigines because of this mass migration of teenagers from the river banks to Sydney” and pointed out that an “explosion point was coming”. He said that, “it's quite certain that there are going to be race riots. There is no doubt in my mind that something has got to give.”³²

The American Black Panther Party for Self-Defense's early program called the “Pig Patrol” attracted the interest of the Redfern group. In the Oakland ghetto a situation existed regarding police harassment and intimidation that seemed to the Australian young radicals to be very similar to their experience in Redfern. Panther leader Huey P. Newton's response to the Oakland situation had been to research California law and ascertain that it was legal for citizens to carry firearms as long as the weapons were not concealed. Armed with this legal loophole, Newton then armed the Panther's with guns and set out to “defend the black community”.³³ In the US experience, this tactic of direct, armed confrontation with police resulted ultimately in the leadership of the Panthers being decimated, but this did not deter the Redfern group.

The basic Panther idea of a patrol to monitor police activity seemed to the group to be a good one. It was felt that by monitoring and keeping a record of police harassment of the community they might be able to build a solid database of information that they might then use politically to alleviate the situation. Thus the information gathering began one Saturday night in 1969 when young activists including Coe, Williams, Billy & Lyn Craigie, myself and others began observing and collecting information on the regular police raids against the Aboriginal pub the Empress Hotel in Redfern.³⁴

³² Chicka Dixon, "Chicka Dixon", in Colin Tatz, (ed.), *Black Viewpoints: The Aboriginal Experience*, Sydney, Australia & New Zealand Book Co., 1975, p. 34.

³³ Jim Haskins, *Power to the People: The Rise and Fall of the Black Panther Party*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

The activists monitoring of the police had resulted in increased attention from the police toward the activists. The notorious NSW Police squad, the 21 Division, originally created in the 1930s as an early form of paramilitary unit to deal with the Darlinghurst "Razor Gangs" of that era, suddenly began a presence in Redfern and the level of police harassment of the community increased. The police Crime Surveillance Unit secretly compiled a dossier on the "Black Power Group" in which detailed information on key activists was combined with the records of Aboriginal bank robbers to accentuate the implied criminality of the group. The document, which was distributed to all police stations in NSW, called on all districts to be alert for any of the people named in the dossier and that their presence and activities should be immediately reported to the central office of the Crime Surveillance Unit in Sydney.³⁵

Within a matter of months Aboriginal activists collected extensive evidence of arbitrary arrests, beatings, wrongful imprisonment and other serious allegations. As Paul Coe had in the interim began his studies in Law at University of NSW; the activists enlisted the support of Professor J. H. Wooten, the conservative Dean of the Law Faculty to their cause.³⁶ With the support and assistance of Professor Wooten the Redfern group set about to try and replicate the idea of shop front legal aid in Redfern. Early white lawyer recruits Eddie Newman and Peter Tobin assisted in the recruitment of solicitors and barristers willing to do volunteer work once a month or fortnight. John Russell and people from South Sydney Community Aid helped to locate and secure a vacant shop in Regent Street in the heart of the Black community. A community working bee transformed the shop into a law office and early in 1970 Australia's first free, shop-front, legal aid centre opened its doors for business.³⁷

On 29 December 1970 the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. William Wentworth,

³⁵] "Black Power Group", NSW Police Crime Surveillance Unit document 1972, in Foley Collection, Melbourne.

³⁶ M. Langton, "Marcia Lynne Langton", *Murawina*, Sydney: Doubleday, 1993, p. 164.

³⁷ G. Foley, "A Black Life", *Rolling Stone*, Issue 426 - Yearbook, 1988.

announced a \$20,000 grant (and thereby formal Commonwealth recognition) for the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service, which he described as the “first of its kind in Australia”.^[70] The establishment of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service was to create a resurgence of pan-Aboriginal nationalism as a surge of confidence swept through the Aboriginal community in Sydney. For the first time Aboriginal people were being represented in Sydney courts and were defending charges brought against them by Police.

The Springbok Tour 1971

1971 was a dramatic year in recent indigenous history as a series of events and actions rocked the Australian government and significantly strengthened the emerging Black Power movement in Redfern. The tour of the South African Springboks was but one of the events of that year that impacted on the Redfern group, others included the release from jail of Aboriginal poet, playwright and political activist Kevin Gilbert. In July 1971 the Aboriginal Medical Service of Redfern opened its doors and gave life to the political philosophies of the Black Power movement. As a self-help project, conceived, created and controlled by Indigenous people, it personified the ideals of the young Redfern radicals who had created it. The Gove land rights case was handed down in the Northern Territory High Court effectively denying Aboriginal rights to land.³⁸ So 1971 was to be an exciting and intense year for the young radicals of Redfern.

But the greatest single event that enamoured the Sydney Left to the Redfern activists was the day Paul Coe gave a speech at the biggest of the Anti-Vietnam Moratorium rallies at the Sydney Stadium. Communist Party member Denis Freney described it as “a brilliant speech, perhaps the best I've ever heard”,³⁹ whilst labour activist Meredith Burgmann described it as the “mother-fucker

³⁸ See, Heather Goodall, 1996, p. 337.

³⁹ Ibid., p.267.

speech”.⁴⁰ Coe criticized the protestors for being prepared to turn out *en masse* in support the oppressed people of all other countries but Australia. Coe said, “You raped our women, you stole our land, you massacred our ancestors, you destroyed our culture, and now - when we refused to die out as you expected - you want to kill us with your hypocrisy...”.⁴¹ This speech made many of the leading lights of the Sydney Left sit up and take notice of what was happening in their own backyard of Redfern and Black Australia. Freney said that Coe's speech that night represented “the birth of black militancy”, which in some ways for the white Left in Australia, it was.

When the South African Springbok rugby team arrived in Sydney on 4 July 1971, the local Redfern activists were already intensively involved in the planning of actions against them. The location of Sydney motel where the Springboks were to stay had been kept secret by the authorities. But by a remarkable stroke of luck it turned out to be the Squire Inn, which was virtually next door to the communal “Black Power” house that the Redfern activists had established in Bondi Junction to escape intense police attention in Redfern.

Also, a former Australian rugby player, Jim Boyce, who had played in South Africa in 1963 and had been horrified by what he had seen of the apartheid system and by 1971 was a committed anti-apartheid activist, approached the Redfern activists. Boyce had some genuine Springbok football jerseys that he provided to Paul Coe, Billy Craigie, Gary Foley, Tony Coorey and Gary Williams. He later said, “in wearing the jerseys, I believe they made a valid point - in South Africa you would never see a black man wearing a Springbok jersey.”⁴² Indeed, on the first occasion the Koori wore the jerseys outside the Springboks motel two of them were immediately apprehended by NSW Special Branch officers who had thought the activists had somehow stolen them from the visiting South

⁴⁰ Meredith Burgmann, *Farrago*, 2001, p. 24.

⁴¹ Heather Goodall, 1996, p.267.

⁴² Jim Boyce, "Jim Boyce", in O'Donnell, P. and Simons, L. (eds.) *Australians Against Racism: Testimonies from the anti-apartheid movement in Australia*, Annandale: Pluto Press, 1995, pp. 24-25.

African team. Craigie and Foley were hustled into the Squire Inn where the NSW police paraded them before a distinctly uncomfortable group of Springboks and asked from whom had the jerseys been stolen. It rapidly became apparent that the jerseys were genuine but weren't stolen, and the red-faced Special Branch officers were forced to eject Foley and Craigie from the Squire Inn.

This was one of the few occasions when security was breached during the tour and protestors were able to confront the Springboks face to face, and it was all courtesy of a mistake by NSW Special Branch. Furthermore the Australian reported that up until that point of the tour the South African rugby players had displayed indifference toward the anti-apartheid protestors, but had "showed the most obvious agitation" when "Gary Foley turned up at their Sydney motel in a South African football jersey. The newspaper went on to say that South African rugby supporters,....revere their jersey as Australians do the Digger's slouch hat. No coloured man is permitted to wear the green and gold on a football field."⁴³

By the time the South African rugby team left Australia, the product of the Redfern group's high profile involvement in the anti-apartheid demonstrations was a desire to keep up the momentum and now confront issues of race in Australia's back yard. On 22nd July 1971 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that British anti-apartheid activist Peter had called for "immediate international action" to "put pressure on the Australian government to improve the Aborigines status in society".⁴⁴

The Aboriginal Embassy 1972

In the wake of the demonstrations in Sydney the Redfern activists began seriously linking up with like-minded groups in other southeastern states. I was invited to Adelaide to assist in the establishment of an Aboriginal Legal Service and whilst staying at the home of Australia's first Communist QC, Elliot Johnston,

⁴³ Dare, Tim, "The Day the Police Stole the Initiative", *The Australian*, 12 July 1971, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Chris Pritchard, "Action sought on Aborigines", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 July 1971.

met a young Northern Territory artist named Harold Thomas. We became friends and in the course of helping to organise a Land Rights rally in Adelaide and collaborated in the design of a new symbol for the Aboriginal movement. When I took Thomas' design back to the eastern states it quickly gained acceptance and became the most recognizable symbol of indigenous Australia today: the Aboriginal Flag. Further demonstrations followed in Brisbane and Sydney and Melbourne. The resultant publicity made it seem as though Aborigines were revolting in four states.

Eventually a hapless Prime Minister William McMahon decided to make his major policy statement on Aboriginal Affairs on the 25th January, the day before the national day. To make his statement so close to what the Indigenous people regard as Invasion Day was to be seen as a very provocative move, and it was inevitable that regardless of what he had to say the Black Power movement would, in the inimitable words of Denis Walker, “deliver some sort of consequence!”⁴⁵

The “consequence” alluded to by Denis Walker was swift in coming. Indigenous leaders meeting in Sydney that night were outraged at what they regarded as stonewalling. By that time the core of the Redfern group discussed ideas on how they should respond to the Government's statement. Ultimately a decision was made to confront the Federal Government on its own ground. So they dispatched four young men to Canberra: Billy Craigie, Tony Coorie, Michael Anderson, and Bertie Williams with a Communist Party photographer, Noel Hazard as their driver.⁴⁶

Upon arrival in Canberra early on the morning of 27th January 1972 the Koori men pitched a beach umbrella on the lawns outside Parliament House and proclaimed the site the office of the "Aboriginal Embassy". They declared that

⁴⁵ Denis Walker, quoted in *Ningla-Ana*, Dir. A. Cavadini, 90min. B&W, 1972.

⁴⁶ Chicka Dixon, Transcript of First in Line Programme, 22 August 1989.

Prime Minister McMahon's statement the day before had effectively relegated Indigenous people to the status of "aliens in our own land", thus as aliens "we would have an embassy of our own."⁴⁷ One which in its form as a set of tents would physically reflect the typical housing of Aborigines in Australia today, and one which would be strategically placed under the noses of Australian politicians across the road in Parliament House".[108] Normally such an audacious project would have lasted as long as it took the ACT Police to arrive, but by a sheer stroke of luck this group of activists had accidentally discovered a loophole in ACT ordinances regarding camping in Canberra. It seemed that there was in fact no ordinance that prevented camping on the lawns of Parliament House as long as there were less than twelve tents. As long as the newly established "Embassy" compound consisted of eleven tents or less, there was nothing the ACT Police to do to remove the protest group.[109]

The inability for the Government to remove this embarrassing protest from in front of their Parliament House captured the imagination of not just Indigenous Australia. Within days the site had established an office tent and installed a letterbox in front. Tourist bus operators became aware of the new attraction in town and began bringing their busloads of tourists to the "Aboriginal Embassy" before escorting them across the road to Parliament House. The Koori activists would solicit donations and distribute educational literature about their cause. Local residents of Canberra would bring food and blankets and invite Embassy staff into their homes for showers and dinner. Students at the nearby Australian National University opened their union building for support activities and the mass media began to display great interest. The Aboriginal Embassy very quickly became the most successful protest venture yet launched by the Aboriginal political movement.

So strong was the support being expressed in both black and white Australia for

⁴⁷ Gary Foley, in *The Australian*, 10 February 1972.

the Embassy protest that the Leader of the Federal Opposition, Mr. Gough Whitlam, felt compelled to pay a formal visit. In early February, when the Embassy had only been in existence for less than a fortnight, Whitlam met with Embassy officials and discussed matters raised in the Embassy demands. After the meeting he declared that a Labor Government would 'absolutely reverse' the McMahon Government policy on land rights, introduce a civil rights bill, overrule state laws that discriminated against Aborigines and would provide free legal aid for Aborigines.⁴⁸ This was clearly a major and significant breakthrough for the Black Power activists who were the core of the tent Embassy protest action. Two weeks later when Embassy based indigenous demonstrators invaded the public gallery during question time, the Age's correspondent, Michelle Grattan noted that "It was an occasion for stressing 'blackness' because the protestors were making a symbolic stand against all the injustices they felt at the hands of white society".⁴⁹

Three months later in April the Embassy had grown to consist of six tents. Spokesperson Ambrose Golden-Brown was able to boast, "We've achieved recognition, just by being here...We haven't made the Government change its policy, but we've succeeded in embarrassing it, and we've made people think about the Aboriginal cause".⁵⁰ The Government responded by the Minister for the Interior, Ralph Hunt, announcing the Government's intention to introduce a new ordinance that would make it an offence to camp on unleased Commonwealth land within the city.⁵¹ The next day thirty Federal Labor parliamentarians promise to take "physical action" to prevent the forced removal of the tent Embassy, and the stage was set for a Government vs Aboriginal Embassy confrontation.

On July 20 whilst parliament was in recess, the Government gazetted the amended Trespass on Commonwealth Lands Ordinance. Immediately after

⁴⁸ The Age, 10 February 1972.

⁴⁹ Michelle Grattan, *The Age*, 23 February 1972.

⁵⁰ *The Australian*, 29 April 1972.

⁵¹ *Canberra News*, 11 May 1972, and *The Age*, 12 May 1972.

almost 100 ACT police, without warning, forcibly removed the tent Embassy and arrested eight people including two prominent members of the Sydney Black Power group, Roberta Sykes and myself.⁵² When the scenes of police violently removing the tents were aired on television that night it provoked a strong response in both black and white communities. Whilst Liberal party Indigenous Senator Neville Bonner warned of “an upsurge of Black Power violence in Australia”,⁵³ the *Melbourne Age* worried, “the risk is that in demolishing one symbol, the Government might have established violence as a new symbol of black-white relationships.”⁵⁴ It quickly became apparent that the McMahon government had seriously miscalculated the extent of support that the Black Power group had amassed with its Embassy protest.

Three days later hundreds of indigenous activists descended on Canberra and held a demonstration on the site of the Embassy. The demonstration was addressed by Black Power activists Gary Williams, Len Watson, Michael Anderson, Chicka Dixon, Paul Coe, Roberta Sykes, Shirley Smith and Denis Walker. The demonstrators then attempted to re-erect the tent Embassy only to be confronted by hundreds of police. The resulting altercation saw wild scenes as Aborigines and police fought a pitched battle on the lawns of Parliament House that resulted in eighteen people being arrested and many injured. Again violent scenes on television provoked outrage in many Indigenous communities and the Black Power group called for another, bigger demonstration for July 30. Embassy representatives sought a meeting with Interior Minister Hunt but he refused to see them, so they then called on the Prime Minister to intervene to “prevent a national black crisis including bloodshed and possible deaths.”⁵⁵

On 30 July more than two thousand indigenous people and their supporters staged the biggest land rights demonstration in the history of Canberra. The

⁵² *The Age*, 21 July 1972

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Stewart Harris, *The Age*, 29 July 1972.

⁵⁵ *The Age*, 28 July 1972.

government had prepared for the occasion by cancelling all police leave in the ACT, enlisted the aid of the NSW Police riot squad and was even said to have the Royal Military College on alert in case needed.⁵⁶ During an intense standoff between hundreds of police and thousands of protestors, Embassy and other indigenous leaders conferred and decided that, to avert serious injury to the many young and older people in the crowd, they would passively allow the police to walk in and remove the tents. The indigenous activists regarded the action as “a great moral victory” for the movement.

By now the universally bad publicity that the Government had attracted over the Embassy affair lead the government to urgently convene a national conference of hand picked Indigenous representatives in Canberra. Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mr. Howson dismissed media allegations that the conference was “staged” and that the 66 indigenous representatives were chosen because of their more “moderate” stance. He said the group was the “true” representatives of “all Aborigines”.⁵⁷ It was therefore very unfortunate for Mr. Howson when the conference voted to give tent Embassy representatives full speaking and voting rights and passed a motion calling for the Embassy to be re-established.⁵⁸ The fiasco for the Government continued when four weeks later the full bench of the Australian Capital Territory Supreme Court declared the Trespass on Commonwealth Lands Ordinance was invalid because it had not been introduced in the proper manner. Immediately the Embassy was re-erected whilst the Government rushed through retrospective legislation to restore the ordinance, but was further embarrassed when prominent Queensland Liberal Senator Jim Killen crossed the floor to vote with the opposition and called for all charges against Embassy demonstrators to be dropped.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Gary Foley, "Whiteness and Blackness in the Koori Struggle for Self-Determination: Strategic Considerations in the Struggle for Social Justice for Indigenous People", *Just Policy No. 19/20*, September 2000, p.80.

⁵⁷ *Canberra Times*, 11 August 1972.

⁵⁸ *The Age*, 15 August 1972.

⁵⁹ *Canberra Times*, 13 September 1972, and *The Age*, 13 September 1972

By the end of 1972 as a Federal election campaign got under way the McMahon Government's reputation and credibility on Indigenous affairs was in tatters. Secretary of the conservative Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines & Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), Faith Bandler, spoke for all when she said, "We've never been involved in party politics before but we've no alternative. Getting rid of the McMahon government is the goal of everyone now - it's a priority, even over land rights."⁶⁰ As the 1972 federal election campaign began Gough Whitlam declared in his policy speech, "Australia's treatment of her Aboriginal people will be the thing upon which the rest of the world will judge Australia and Australians - not just now but in the greater perspective of history."⁶¹

During the last months of the McMahon government the Redfern Black Power group intensified their propaganda war by establishing the National Black Theatre Company, run by one of the fathers of Australian Black Power Bob Maza. As they produced and performed their legendary political revue *Basically Black*⁶² another Black Power stalwart, Chicka Dixon, prepared to lead an Aboriginal peoples' delegation on a visit to the People's Republic of China.⁶³ The National Black Theatre production played a highly successful sold-out season at Sydney's Nimrod Theatre, receiving rave reviews and establishing black theatre as a viable proposition. On the night of the final performance the cast, crew and audience gathered in the theatre foyer to party and watch the results of the Federal election come in on specially installed TV sets. Thus many members of the Sydney Black Power group watched as the McMahon government (and twenty-two years of conservative rule) lost the election to a Labor landslide.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *The Bulletin*, 5 August 1972.

⁶¹ E.G. Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1985, p. 466.

⁶² Bryce Fraser & Ann Atkinson (eds.) *People of Australia: key events in population, society, the environment*, Sydney: The Macquarie Library, 1998, pp. 17-18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ G. Foley, "A Black Life", *Rolling Stone*, Issue 426 - Yearbook, 1988.

It can be said that the era I have written about is one that to the greater extent has been ignored by Australian historians who tend to gloss over or superficially analyze its important in recent history. As stated earlier, many historians and commentators dismiss or denigrate the effect Black Power had on Aboriginal Australia. Scott Bennett disparaged Black Power for its “stridency” and connotations of violence and says, “the movement never managed to take firm roots in Australia”. Given today most of the old Black Power nationalists are held in the highest regard by a "new" generation of Aboriginal leaders like Aden Ridgeway, and that the issues brought to prominence by the Black Power movement remain front page issues today, it is impossible to accept Bennett's assertion.

In Indigenous communities memories of the Black Power era and the events at the Aboriginal Embassy are vivid and strong and span across generations, whereas in white Australia these same events are almost completely unremembered. White Australia will never understand or begin to know the deep historical alienation and frustration that people in Indigenous communities feel, they can only begin to understand when they begin to comprehend our history. Yet the history of Indigenous communities over the past forty years has been all but ignored by mainstream Australian historians.

In writing this far from comprehensive narrative about these significant moments in modern Indigenous (and thereby Australian) history, I have made but a very humble attempt to begin the long and arduous process of overcoming that ignorance and disinterest. Much more needs to be done.

Gary Foley

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