

When Sydney University students, in Orientation Week 1964, demonstrated outside the U.S. Consulate for Negro civil rights, some people said, 'What about our civil rights problem here in Australia? Why don't you do something about the Aborigines?' They took this to heart. A demonstration was organised outside Parliament House, then a lecture on Aboriginal civil rights. A group of students decided to form an organisation specifically for Aboriginal rights, and invited participation from every University political and religious club. Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) was the result, with Charles Perkins, one of the first Abschol students in Sydney, as Chairman. SAFA is now an independent club, determined not to be a 'political front' for anybody.

In February 1965, SAFA sent a busload of students for two weeks to investigate Aboriginal conditions in some of the country towns of northern New South Wales, and carry out protest action. On their return, OUTLOOK interviewed some of them:

Charles Perkins, 29, Arts 111, Chairman of SAFA

Jim Spiegelman, 19, Arts 111, tour executive and co-secretary of SAFA

Patricia Healy, 20, Arts 111, member of the tour executive

Patrick Dawson, 19, Arts 11, investigating individual cases of discrimination

John Butterworth, 20, General Science 111, investigating education.

The questions are asked by G.W. Ford, lecturer in Economics at the University of NSW. Then in the US on a Fulbright scholarship, Bill Ford went on the Freedom Ride to Jackson, Mississippi.

What was SAFA aiming to do on the tour?

Spigelman: In discussions beforehand, we thought that short-term student action should try to draw attention to Aboriginal problems in housing, education and so on. This became our prime aim. Second, we should try to integrate as many facilities as we could by student action. And third, we aimed to get the Aborigines interested in standing up for themselves, and opposing segregated facilities.

How did you raise the money to get the tour under way?

Healy: We held several lunchtime concerts - a lot of the 'folkies' gave their services free- and a monster concert at the Paddington Town Hall. Quite a few people gave us money. Everyone who went on the bus trip put in ten pounds. On the trip, it was amazing and cheering that we kept getting letters from people we'd never heard of wishing us luck and sending money as well.

What about these lectures and briefings you had before the trip?

Dawson: I went to all except one. We had one by the head of the Social Work Department, who told us about doing a sociological survey - how to approach people.

Perkins: I think we learned quite a lot from these seminars. You couldn't perhaps weigh it up - this plus that equals the other ..

Spigelman: The important thing about the seminars - especially those from Alan Duncan on the location of Aborigines in settlements, reserves, towns, etc. and from Mrs. Pam

Bessley on the anthropological aspects - is that we all learned something we didn't know about before. This undoubtedly helped us in the arguments we had in the towns we came to, but we still had to play it by ear on the tour.

Charles, how about the organisation? the sub-committees?

Perkins: We always had a general meeting if there were any committees to be set up. We had demonstration committees, catering committees and so on. It was on a very organised level and everybody fulfilled whatever office they had. On the tour we had medical students and teachers' college students who looked into hygiene and education.

~~John~~ How did you feel as the bus moved out of the University into the distance?

Spigelman: At the outset, I think we set off rather as if we were on a two-weeks' holiday. A lot of us were thinking about what we would see, what we could achieve - but very few of us expressed our opinions at that stage.

Dawson: I disagree. We weren't going on a holiday. We were all rather wary of what was happening - and rather lonely. We were going out very individually. I was rather lonely.

Perkins: Actually, I was quite frightened: I thought that anything could happen, and that we could get involved in all sorts of very difficult situations. None of us had done anything like this before

Butterworth: I was primarily interested in what we would find out there. I'd lived at Moree for a while - my

relatives live at Moree. I'd seen how the Aborigines were treated there, and I was interested to see what we would come up against in the country towns, because I knew of the attitude of the white people. I wanted to see their living conditions for myself; I'd only glimpsed the reserve and heard about it And of course, there was a fair amount of excitement about going round New South Wales, as well.

Healy Most of us knew the Aborigines lived in shocking conditions, but none quite knew what to expect; we were doubtful about the whole thing.

Spigelman: At the outset we were not yet a unit - and didn't become one till Wellington.

Healy: Many of us thought we might be involved in a lot more violence than we were - though we were involved in enough. We thought we ^{might face} ~~were going to get into~~ all sorts of trouble, police and so on. We were ~~rather being~~ ^{ready} ~~restless young students,~~ ^{difficulties & them} ~~prepared to face any~~ ^{overcome them}

Dawson: I remember at the beginning that I would hear 'We shall overcome' and be shouted down: we weren't Americans! By the end of the trip we dramatised the situation and began to feel we were martyrs.

Many people expected - and I think the press expected were looking for this - that when you came into the towns there would be Aboriginal resentment that you were stirring up trouble. What was your reaction, Charles, and how did the Aborigines treat you?

Perkins† I was quite suprised. I expected a fair amount of support, seventy per cent or so, from the Aborigines, but I think we got ninety-eight per cent. A few people were reluctant to help us and apprehensive about who we were and what we were doing; and then a few others wanted to preserve the status quo and were afraid we wou'd upset the few privileges they had gained. But on the whole, I think we won support.

Butterworth: This has been proved since by the Aborigines themselves, in towns we've been to, carrying on with demonstrations, and so on. In Bowraville they decided to boycott the theatre.

Spigelman: There was an interesting case here. Mr. Raymond, the theatre owner, asked an Aborigine to carry his films down to the theatre for him, and the Aborigine said, 'What will you pay me?' He replied, 'I'll give you a free ticket to the pictures.' 'I'm not allowed to go to the pictures', was the Aborigine's reaction, "and anyway, I don't want to go'...

Butterworth: People have said that the children we took to the ~~swim~~ swimming pools in Moree and Kempsey didn't know what they were going for. This isn't so; the children knew what they were going for - it was explained to them beforehand. And in Moree, after we left the first time, the children were planning to go back there the next night and sit outside the door waiting to get in.

Dawson: The Aborigines seemed to realise our sympathies

were with them. In Walgett they supported us in times of violence. At Moree they stood around, and I'm pretty sure this was in case somebody might try to bash us - and they would come in on our side.

Spigelman: There's no doubt we were helped considerably by having Charles along on the trip.

HEALY: Another thing was the publicity. As we got further on the tour, they had heard more about us - they became even more willing to help us.

Spigelman: In Walgett, early in the tour before the big blurb of publicity, there were various arguments going on outside the RSL Club. At/^{first}the Aborigines were standing in a group just behind the students or just sitting there; but after about half an hour or an hour they all started joining in the arguments and sticking up for themselves.

One of the problems the American students faced going into the Deep South was that the old people - white and negro - couldn't at first accustom themselves to youth taking the lead. Did you notice any dichotomy between the younger and the older Aborigines?

Spigelman: In Walgett, I know a lot of the young kids were sticking up for themselves much more openly than the oldies.

Dawson: I don't think the older people resented us, though.

Butterworth: It's the same as with white people - the older people tend to be complacent and accept the situation.

Healy: The older people were more suspicious of us because they've had anthropologists and God knows what running

Butterworth: But the older people were aware of the situation. They hadn't accepted it so much that they weren't aware that they were in a depressed condition and that something was wrong.

Healy: Yes, they were aware; but they were just a little suspicious of our motives at the time.

Charles, did you strike any 'Uncle Toms' up there?

Perkins: Oh yes, there were definitely a few scattered here and there. We have them in the city as well, you know; Aborigines in a fairly privileged position who want to retain whatever small privileges they have and don't want to upset anything.

Having gone into these areas, how did you yourselves feel, seeing the conditions under which the Aborigines live?

Healy: First, complete numbness and shock. You know before you go roughly what you are going to face, but you simply don't realise until you get there and see for yourself. Take the houses they live in. I could hardly believe it when I first saw it. And yet when you see more and more of it you become almost blasé in the end. As Charlie has often said, you come to differentiate between 'good-class' shacks and 'bad-class' shacks ...But when it first hits you, you're almost numb from shock: that in a country like Australia where you've been told so often there's no discrimination, there's such blatant discrimination in practically every country town you come to.

Dawson: It's social discrimination. And also, the

discrimination strikes you as being thorough-going; in every aspect of the Aborigines' life it's shown up. But it isn't always 'blatant'.

Healy: At least everyone accepts it; all the people in the towns accepted it as just the status quo.

Dawson: Is it racial prejudice, or just the attitude of the white community towards a less affluent class?

Spigelman: I think class prejudice is involved. Discussion often shows some sort of racial overtone. It's not quite the out-and-out racial segregation stuff you might find in the Deep South, though there would be individual instances; but the general attitude is to treat Aborigines as a lower class group.

Dawson: Until we've taken away their depressed economic position and made them economically as well-off as the white community, we can't be sure it's not social discrimination. If there still is discrimination after this, it's racial discrimination, since there's no other reason for it.

Butterworth: Even so, I don't know which is worse - racial prejudice or just apathy. At least when you've got racial prejudice it's out in the open ... As a matter of fact, I was quite pleasantly surprised by the education part of it. The Education Department seemed to be doing a pretty good job. Except on one point: that it still had some Aboriginal schools. It was quite obvious that children in primary schools were getting together pretty well. It was in secondary schools that they were parting and ~~xxx~~ causing class or racial consciousness, whichever it might have been. I think this was because of the general attitude of the

townspeople. You can't expect children to accept one another when they're together in school but separated in the swimming pool and the theatre.

Spigelman: One chap in Lismore told me he wouldn't continue at secondary school because there were no other Aborigines at the school and he didn't want to go on alone.

Butterwoth: Other factors ~~xxxx~~ come in here, we found. Not only discrimination by white people, but also the fact that the Aborigines are wary of white people.

Perkins: In a few cases, it was definitely out-and-out racial discrimination. For instance, they debarred me from the pool at Kempsey on the basis of racial origin - this wasn't social discrimination. At Moree, it was much the same. It's on the books; it's got Aborigines specifically as a race. At the theatre in Bowraville, it was race again; it was Aborigines that were barred, not lower-class Aborigines. Yet in some other towns, it tended towards class distinction and class discrimination.

Spigelman: We don't know how much of the discrimination is racial; and we won't know until we've removed the basis for every other rationalisation.

Butterwoth: It's these overt discriminatory incidents we've got to get rid of first. While children must assume there's something wrong with or inferior about the Aboriginal child, because they know he's not unhealthy - they play with him at school and yet they're not allowed to sit with him in the theatre or go with him to the swimming pool.