

Save our Site: The story of the campaign to save the Australian Hall, site of the 1938 Aboriginal Day of Mourning and Protest

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On 26 January 1938 a group of brave Aboriginal men and women met at the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, during the celebrations to mark the 150 years of white occupation. Over 100 Aborigines from across the country were present that day, to hear speeches from delegates and to endorse the Manifesto prepared by John Patten and William Ferguson, who condemned the city's sesquicentenary celebrations, declaring it rather a 'day of mourning' for Aboriginal people. This was a momentous event in Aboriginal history. It was the first national gathering of Aboriginal people; a turning point marking a united stand for justice and equality.

For two months before the Conference our civil rights leaders moved around the countryside rallying support on church missions and Aboriginal Reserves. Posters advertising the event were distributed around the Aboriginal communities. Many could not move off the Reserves due to government restrictions and lack of finance, but support was received from many communities, even from South and Western Australia.

One matter of critical importance at the meeting was the grinding oppression of the Aboriginal Protection Board, and the need for Australia to recognize Aboriginal people as equal under the law. (This point would not to be redressed for another thirty years!)

Land rights, citizenship rights, education, health, housing and the removal of children from Reserves, were also on

the agenda. This list of demands, boldly put, were to shape the future direction of Aboriginal politics in this country. The significance of this event should not be underestimated. It became the stimulus that fired later civil rights activist, to fight and win the battle to have the Aboriginal Protection Board abolished. This led to the great advances made by the Aboriginal Civil rights movement later in the 1960's and 70's.

The original Ten Point Plan formed by the delegates on that day, was presented to the Prime Minister, Mr Joseph Lyons on 31 January 1938. This document was to form the basis of the constitutional amendments, later considered and endorsed by the Australian population in the 1967 Referendum.

In the weeks prior to the Conference William Ferguson and Jack Patten worked on a 12-page document 'Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights', listing the specific grievances which were to be presented at the Conference. The pamphlet was sent out to the press in all States and it appeared in some leading newspapers.

Among the speakers at the Conference were Jack Patten, William Ferguson, Tom Foster, Pearl Gibbs, Bert Groves, Tom Peckam, Mrs Ardler, Jack Johnson and Mr Connolly. William Cooper, Margaret Tucker and Doug Nicholls spoke as representatives from Victoria. Letters and telegrams of support came in from communities around the country. These were read out to the assembled group; some coming from Queensland and South Australia and others from Western Australia.

Elections were held for the committee of the Aborigines Progressive Association. The elected Executive included Jack Patten (President), Helen Grosvenor (Secretary), William Ferguson (Organizing Secretary) and Jack Kinsela (Treasurer). Helen Grosvenor took detailed notes as a written record of this important event. These were

later printed in the *Abo Call*, the Aboriginal newspaper prepared by Jack Patten, which folded later that year after printing six editions.

After the meeting some of the group went to La Perouse, where Pearl Gibbs had prepared several memorial wreaths. These were floated out to sea in a symbolic gesture of mourning for the oppression and defeat of the Aboriginal nations which had began 150 years before.

The Australian Hall Building, constructed in 1912, had always been associated with minority groups. It began as a German club and hostel for young workers and later was bought by the Knights of the Southern Cross, a Catholic lay group, who used it for similar purposes. Aboriginal dances and meetings were also held there. Later it was bought by the Cypriot community in Sydney and renamed the Cyprus Hellenic Club. The hall itself has had a varied history as a dance hall, live theatre and more recently a cinema.

The Australian Hall was rediscovered, almost by chance in 1994, when a determined student from the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Gisele Mesnage, who in writing about the Day of Mourning and Protest, went in search of the historic site. She discovered the Australian Hall still standing, (operating as the Mandolin Cinema), tucked safely away at 150-152 Elizabeth Street, Sydney.

Once the hall was identified, a small group, led by Ms Mesnage and the Aboriginal student Esme Beaupark, set about researching the history of 'the building', with a view to conserving it at all costs. This was the beginning of the long campaign to save the historic building. They formed the Aboriginal History Committee (AHC) with office space in the Jumbunna CAISER at UTS, and soon gained support for their efforts from many other Aboriginal groups. They had no idea of the six-year 'struggle' that lay ahead.

In 1995, the AHC applied to the State Government for a Permanent Conservation Order (PCO) to be placed on the building protecting it from possible development and/or demolition. Only an Interim Order was granted, leaving the historic site vulnerable to the rush of high-rise development sweeping across Sydney at the time.

Letters, submissions and petitions were sent to the politicians of the day; rallies and interviews were held to raise public awareness of the campaign issues. This led to a Commission of Inquiry in May 1995, led by Chief Commissioner William Simpson. It was convened to assess the heritage values of the building and the results were unequivocal. The mass of historic evidence, verbal testament and passionate statements of support from leading Aboriginal and community figures, resulted in the positive recommendation for a PCO to be placed on the entire building, then known as the Cyprus Hellenic Club.

The celebrations were short lived, however, as the then Minister for Planning, Craig Knowles, added several Exemptions to the PCO which left the Australian Hall section unprotected once more

The media campaign began in earnest! Defeat was never contemplated by the small group of volunteers involved in the day to day struggle. Interviews on radio, official media reports and good media coverage of the rallies and marches got the message across to the wider community. Public support for 'Aboriginal Issues' was also growing: the tide was changing, slowly.

At a National Forum, held in July 1996 at the Sydney college of TAFE, over 100 delegates from across the country met to discuss the future of the AHC and an Executive was elected for the newly formed National Aboriginal History and Heritage Council (NAHHC).

The elected committee included Jenny Munro (Chairperson), Tony McAvoy (Secretary) and Doreen Kelly (Treasurer).

The NAHHC Constitution was written and the Council was incorporated as an Association later in 1996; Aboriginal members were to have full voting rights, non-Aboriginal people joining as associate members only. This enabled the NAHHC to obtain free legal support through the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC), which proved invaluable in the ongoing struggles against State Government policies.

In May 1996, the Australian Hall was listed on the Register of the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission in Canberra. During 1996-7, the NAHHC kept up their campaign holding heritage events in the Australian Hall, printing posters and distributing thousands of postcards addressed to Bob Carr, Premier of NSW.

However in March 1997, the owners of the building submitted a Development Application (DA) for a high rise tower to go up on the site. This would involve the demolition of the Australian Hall. The NAHHC mobilized support, holding further marches and rallies. Hundreds of members and supporters submitted written objections to the DA.

On 7 July, on the eve of the decision, an all-night vigil was held outside the Hall. The next day, members of the NAHHC and descendants of the Ferguson and Patten families addressed the Heritage Council telling them of their pride in those who had fought for Aboriginal justice and their heart-felt desire to keep the site for future generations of Aboriginal people. But as is often the case, politics does not always reflect community interest. The final Government decision, issued on October 1997, went in favour of the multi-million dollar development. With

the aid of PIAC, the NAHHC immediately began to look at the possibilities of a legal battle against the State Government decision.

The NAHHC organised a 60th Anniversary march for the 26 January 1998, to commemorate the 1938 Day of Mourning and Protest, and the years of struggle to save the site. Over 1000 people joined the march to pledge their support.

This involved a re-enactment of the events of that special day back in 1938, beginning with a march from the Town Hall to the Australian Hall. Access to the Hall was denied, but the meeting was set up on the back of a donated truck. Original speeches were read by the descendants of our 1938 heroes and a New Ten Point Plan was presented to the meeting. This document outlined the demands for future reconciliation and justice and extracts were later published in leading newspapers.

Prime Minister John Howard had formulated his own Ten Point Plan. The irony of that choice of title is evident in the content, for it did not address any of the vital issues listed by the NAHHC in 1998. Sadly, few of the original 1938 demands have been met today.

In March 1998, the then Minister for Planning, Craig Knowles, issued a statement confirming the redevelopment of the building, but due to an error of procedure, the NAHHC were able to take Legal Action in the Courts against the State Government and the decision was reversed. Determination and vigilance finally won the day! In May 1999, the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Frank Sartor, hosted a victory party in the Town Hall to celebrate the success of the campaign and to thank all those who had supported the NAHHC along the way.

The Australian Hall Building was later purchased with finances from the Indigenous Land Fund and placed into

a Trust, to be administered by the newly formed Metropolitan Aboriginal Association in Sydney. Restoration work has taken our historic hall back to its early 1938 form. For Aboriginal people it is a landmark building, the first in Australia to be declared an Aboriginal Heritage Site.