

ETHNO-CENTRIC

The views expressed in this section of Ethnic Spotlight are in no way meant to be reflective of any particular ethnic group but rather the experience of the individual interviewed.

INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN GILBERT: CHAIRMAN, TREATY '88

Kevin Gilbert was born in Wiradjuri country (Condobolin) NSW in 1933. Orphaned at the age of seven, he was taken from the care of his brother and sisters and placed in an orphanage. He returned to Wiradjuri at the age of eleven where he attended school. At fourteen after obtaining a fourth class primary school education Gilbert became a rabbit trapper, seasonal worker and station hand. In 1957 he was sent to prison, where he remained for fourteen and half years.

In 1970 Gilbert wrote "The Cherry Pickers, followed in 1973 by Because White Man'll Never Do It. He followed this in 1978 with Living Black People are Legends a volume of poetry was published by Queensland University press in 1978.

Kevin is currently Chairperson of the Aboriginal Sovereign Treaty '88 Campaign.

Suzu Coleman: What were your first impressions of whites?

Kevin Gilbert: Well, my overall impression was that they had a disregard for Aboriginal people, I lived out on the Muri which was a lagoon, where many families including the Goolagoongs, Eyvon's Grandmother lived and we lived in an old hut situation and most of the work, when work was available, consisted of rabbit catching, sheep shearing and what have you, no social services, in those days, so we eked out an existence with bush tucker, and trapping and all that sort of thing and life was generally hard. When we did attend school we heard talk about equality and democracy and this type of thing which never seemed to apply to us. We didn't have running water or a dry roof over our heads and we

were excluded a lot in town so to me it was very obvious at a very early age that there was something dreadfully wrong with all these words that white men were mouthing, when it came to Blacks.

SC: When did you actually start your writing?

KG: I use to always write poetry when I was at school and during my developing years, I really started writing in prison.

SC: Which languages did you use?

KG: English was the sort of the norm for us we used to speak some of the Wiradjuri tongue, in the early days it was punishable for Aborigines to speak in their own tongues.

SC: How were you punished for that?

KG: Well at schools kids were taught that to speak in their tongue was backward you'd be stood in the corner and told that you had to speak the English tongue. In the missionary where there were mission schools, kids used to get their haircut, and stuff paint on their tongues for speaking in their own language.

SC: What did you speak at home Kevin?

KG: A mixture of both. Wiradjuri and English, more English interspersed with Wiradjuri. The old people used to sit down and converse in the language and we would be sitting around with them and they would quite often tell us what they were talking about but a lot of the language had broken down.

SC: How does your writing reflect the contemporary Aboriginal Australian situation?

KG: Most of my writing is based on the actuality of Aborigines living in the South Land and most of my writing is based on their experiences and to the experiences I feel as an Aboriginal person, we are differentiated from white society in being very much the victim we are still very much traumatised by white society in that we do still live in exile in a refugee type situation which we have grown up under and I guess my writing reflects alot of that.

SC: Do you think that Aboriginal people perceive themselves as being victims or do you think that is a

white perception?

KG: Oh no we do very much feel that we are victims of white Australia.

SC: Yes but there is a difference between knowing you are a victim and perceiving yourself as a victim.

KG: No we do see ourselves as victims, we do perceive ourselves as people who have been wronged against and people who have had our land taken by people who deliberately worked to take away our culture and people who on the other hand while doing these deeds, are very hypocritical in their talk of christianity, their talk of a multicultural society their talk of democracy and justice. We know that this does not exist for Aboriginal Australians in this country because we are black and for no other reason, and we are not able or are excluded from even proper medical facilities and even clean drinking water, because we are black.

SC: How do you cope with the way that the last two hundred years of Australia's history has been written by whites?

KG: There is always an anger at the continuing lie of "peaceable" settlement especially when we know that there were more army dispatch orders against Aborigines than against any other country in the Commonwealth, except South Africa. There were more deaths in Black Australia than those from the Crimean to the Vietnam wars something like 200,000 dead. These are facts that speak for themselves we cannot participate in a lie of peaceable settlement, can't participate in a lie that our land was terra nullius, a wasteland unoccupied.

SC: What do you think can be done to correct this situation?

KG: The Australians must first recognise what they are doing to Aboriginal people today, Aboriginal people are dying and especially young children and babies are dying because they are black because they are victims of white Australia. There is a callous indifference to Aboriginal human life in this country, the only way we can rectify that is to recognise the true position that we were sovereign owners of our own land

at the time of colonisation that we were driven from our lands, and that Australia must reorganise that and negotiate a treaty with us on a sovereign basis so that we have areas of land returned to us so that we can have a viable land base to regenerate our people and retain our culture and also in actual fact to legitimise the Australian claim of sovereignty, they have not got a legitimate sovereign state in this land because it is a burden title, they have taken it by theft and murder and that will always remain, and of course Aboriginal people after all these years have found there is a very strong surge towards refuting or at least not accepting the "dying quietly" any longer, there is a very deep anger we feel. At the moment, the greatest risk to Australia, in internal affairs is the fact of the Aboriginal problem in this country.

SC: Well its the white problem, not the Aboriginal problem ...

KG: Quite right.

SC: What do you perceive as the difference between white and black health care in this country?

KG: I spent a number of years in prison, and anger was always directed at callousness towards Aboriginal people prisoners in this country. Even though they have bad conditions, in that they are degraded and that they are actually tortured by cold and other conditions they have a much better living standard and facilities than Aboriginal people, on the outside who are not guilty in any way, for example prisoners have hot water and cold running water they have electricity they have warm blankets they have warm shelter they have a medical clinic they can go to if they have any problems, Aboriginal people on the outside do not have clinics in the outback area they can't even get to medical attention because they don't have four wheel drives, the living conditions are awful, some of the people live in old car bodies for instance, a DAA survey a few years ago that was surveying the homeless, said that anyone living in bark shelters under tarpaulins or in car bodies were not to be regarded as homeless, now how

homeless can you get before you move these people? These conditions are worse than the kampong or village conditions in South Africa. One of the reasons why it hasn't been brought to the notice of white Australians is that first some of our conditions are worse than those which prevail in South Africa and that we lack the numbers the only difference is under the guise of democracy all that entrenched bureaucratic racism goes on.

SC: How do you think this could be rectified for example the Hepatitis B epidemic and trachoma in Aboriginal children?

KG: The only way that can be rectified is that we have to have a land base returned to us and we can establish our own economic basis with compensation on a scale that will allow us to put in medical clinics and run essential programs.

SC: What about immunisation programs by the Government?

KG: The Flying Doctor service has attacked the Government for doing nothing the Government finally put in a 2 million dollar program for the whole of Australia, in 1987. \$2 million sounds alot but when the Government gives \$5m to one Catholic school, \$3m for an AIDS awareness program, \$9m for lawns on Parliament house and \$1.5m for the Tall Ships Program and you break it down to Wilcannia where there is a 75-80% incidence of hepeticis B, there is, in reality, \$22,000 to set up a inoculation program and the program is only to service the new born and the young babies, meaning any children above that and adults are left with the risk of infection, that is the sort of indifference, and priorities reflected by white Australia.

SC: What are the differences in educational programs? For example how are settlement programs for NESB Australians viewed by Aboriginal Australians?

KG: Without raising any racist issues, we see Australia's Governments dealing with the ethnic groups as trying to buy for itself an image of establishing and being part of a multiuctlural society. We

see it as each successive Government trying to buy the ethnic vote we've also seen that the big influx of the ethnic community has stopped the red neck almost South African trend or idiology of the previous white Australians, very obvious in the 1940's, we've seen a change for the better with the ethnic influence but we do regret the fact that in the ethnic community most of the people have known oppression in their own lands that they had to leave, but they have grown fat with the white Australians, like maggots feeding on the carcass of Black Australia. They do nothing, even at the voting level to try and stop the terrible conditions that Aboriginal people live in. They make no representation back to their own Governments, there is very little discussion at all in regard to the Aboriginal position even though we know that privately when I talk to ethnic people that there is a flow of humanity and sympathy but for some reason whether it is political or what, we don't know, they just totally seem to ignore this very human problem and we are very disappointed and we lack respect for them on those grounds, they have not fulfilled their responsibility in this land, if it is to be multicultural, surely it has to include Aboriginal people as a form of basic justice. We say we want a treaty to recognise our status as people.

SC: Why do you think Aboriginal Australians die in detention?

KG: There are a number of reasons, over 30,000 South Africans have migrated to Australia, we have seen a hardening of attitudes in Australia, we believe that a number of those South Africans are employed in the Police Force in Queensland.

SC: Is that a fact Kevin?

KG: That's a fact, and we also feel that Aboriginal people have been victimised so long that there is nothing for them to do except drink and the final result of that is committing suicide in jail. However we feel that there is more than just a committing of suicide in this, we believe that there is a "helping hand", we can't help that we feel

very strongly about it. First it is against Aboriginal custom, the Aboriginal way. In fact I would go so far as to say that at least 50% are murders.

SC: What do you think can be done about this situation?

KG: There must be a Royal Commission that is the first step.

SC: Does this situation remind you of other world situations?

KG: I feel that it is very similar to the South African situation, I feel it is getting worse, I know very well that Aboriginal Australia is going to be very volatile in 1988, I feel that Black Australia will explode in white Australia's face in 1988, I can't ignore that as a spokesman on Aboriginal matters it is my job to warn people that this is coming this is the feeling of what is going to happen.

SC: What do you think is the white attitude to these and other matters, you have mentioned the health situation, that there is a callous indifference, and to blacks dying in detention, what visible protests do you see from whites about these issues?

KG: There are a lot of Australians who support Aborigines, and the Aboriginal demand for rights and human rights especially in a lot of the churches but those with a hardened attitude, a lot of them are frightened.

SC: What are they frightened of?

KG: I think they are frightened of violence, that Aboriginal people will fence off the lands, they are frightened that Aboriginal people will claim their backyard, this is not the case at all. We must remember that most white Australians are coming from a background of ignorance, ignorance breeds prejudice and that they have never been shown not only what the conditions of Aboriginal people are, but they have never been asked the question why those conditions prevail and have prevailed for so long. There are causative factors and one of the simplest ways to describe that is to say that we were forced into, and have been forced to grow up under, a refugee type situation in refugee

camps, the impoverishment is almost in the area of human dereliction of duty. A lot of Aboriginal people have never enjoyed a day of good health, so how in the hell can we get up and work? So we can change the conditions under which we live. This is what a lot of white Australians expect us to do, get up to be able to go to work from 8 till 5 everyday, common sense tells you, because of the racism in the country, the work is not available for a start. Even if it were made available tomorrow the majority of Aboriginal people haven't got the energy that comes with reasonable food and health and medical attention. They simply do not have the energy to carry that out. So for quite a long time there needs to be community organisations or development and also health programs so that people can at least become active again and to feel good, to be healthy to have one good day.

SC: Given that Aboriginal people now find themselves in this particular state, what do you think would be the most constructive way of changing white attitudes towards Blacks?

KG: The most constructive way is to have a media awareness program, just show true documentaries to show the true situation, I would like to see a "Gilbert's inside true Australia", showing Black Australia in a series. Then we must change the status of Aboriginal Australians that is from being refugees in their own land to where we are recognised as people in our own land, with ownership rights, with property rights and the psychological difference alone from the constant state of the impoverished victim, the positive attitudes there alone will start doing things. Once we do and there is no doubt in my mind we will, force a treaty, then we can set about laying the corner stones for justice for everyone in this land and a treaty will affect for instance land management it will stop rivers being closed off to everyone, it will make various changes to the environment, and environmental management and these are all good healthy things that Australia is capable of. We must also remember

too that there are over 7,000 new births here in the Aboriginal community so if we are to remain as victims on the social benefits level, will be a drain on the Australian economy, not to mention the political problems, Australia is just not going to be able to handle it so we must look to the next two hundred years and to the future.

SC: Are there any positive things that have happened between whites and Aboriginal Australians?

KG: Yes, the most positive thing that has happened between Aboriginal and white Australians is at last the realisation that we have always been a people, that we held prior possession of this land, that our human rights have been abused, that many Australians are coming in to support a treaty. This has been the most positive development in the last two hundred years.

SC: What do you see the role of ethnic communities being in Aboriginal Australia?

KG: We see the role of all people in Australia especially the ethnic communities of making representation within their own communities and to the Government in their countries of origin for the recognition of Aboriginal people as a people, to support us in our call for a treaty, to do what they can to educate at appropriate levels, of the true situation of Aboriginal Australians, that would be a pretty healthy start. We do call upon them especially at this time to support Treaty '88.

SC: Given that several of the issues you have raised know no ethnicity, do you think that there are common goals between what are two marginal groups in society?

KG: I think the common goal is to make sure that people have, that all people have, an enshrined entitlement to health, health facilities, that enshrined in law is a definite ban against racism, and victimisation of people because of their ethnic group and that everyone in this land not only has the right to live in this land but that they have a responsibility to earn their living.

SC: Can you see any common disadvantages that ethnic communities

and Aborigines share?

KG: Yes I think that in Australia one of the greatest disadvantages is racism, we also see this applying to a lot of the ethnic groups.

SC: Do you think that contact and solidarity on certain issues between Aboriginal Australians and ethnic Australians is important?

KG: I feel that it is a must, we must have this contact and this communication because this country has to be free of racism, free of oppression. Most ethnic communities have suffered oppression at least they can help to eradicate similar oppression in this land and we can have a society that has equality, justice and freedom. That in fact all of those sweet sounding words are obtainable in this country for all of us and that we must all share in that and benefit. In order to benefit, we must all work for it.

SC: Kevin given that in the past there has been hesitation on both sides between ethnic communities and Aboriginal communities to get together, how can we overcome this and work together?

KG: I think first the Aboriginal community must see a sincere input from the ethnic groups. It is not because we have lacked the initiative of making approaches. We have made approaches to the ethnic communities and for whatever reason political or just a lack of understanding there has been a reluctance there. So we feel that a lot of the ethnic communities have just been happy to join with white Australia in plundering the benefits from our land to live off the resources of our land, and try to ignore the responsibility to the people who actually own the land.

SC: What do you think is a realistic description of race relations in this country at the moment?

KG: We are between black and white, including the ethnic communities in that, we are in an irretrievable position regarding confrontation, I hold out a tentative hope that it can be avoided, I don't hold out much hope I must say, and unless we can gain understanding across the board Australia is going to be a land where

Treaty '88 Campaign

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