

EASTER 1970 AND THE ORIGINS OF THE NATIONAL TRIBAL COUNCIL:

A Personal View

by A. Barrie Pittock.

PART I : The Issues

The thirteenth annual Conference of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders was held in Canberra at Easter 1970. It proved to be a traumatic experience for many individuals who attended, and indeed for the Aboriginal advancement movement. In order to get some understanding of what happened, the events at Easter need to be put in a much wider context. This personal account is written in an attempt to do that, rather than to attach blame or otherwise deepen or widen the split which occurred.

At issue was one main question. Had the time come for Aborigines and Islanders to decide for themselves the directions, policies, and leadership which they would follow in the future?

Two main viewpoints emerged. One was that Aboriginal advancement in the past was the result largely of articulate Aborigines and Islanders working together with non-Aborigines, who through their greater skill, political insights, and organisational know-how could get across what was in the Aboriginal interest. According to this view FCAATSI ought to remain an organisation in which white experience and insights and white leadership would continue to play a vital policy-making role.

The other view was that one of the main tasks of the Aboriginal advancement movement in the past has been to foster Aboriginal leadership and initiative, and that in this FCAATSI had succeeded to the point where Aborigines and Islanders could now decide their own policies and find their own leaders. According to this view an element of paternalism attached to voluntary organisations which presumed to speak on behalf of Aborigines and Islanders while insisting on white leadership, white votes, and the possibility of white control. They pointed to the charges of paternalism levelled by FCAATSI at Governments and Missions which had failed to grant Aborigines control of their own communities, and asked whether FCAATSI should not be setting an example in its own internal structure.

Perhaps it was fore-seeable, and even inevitable, that these views would clash bitterly and divisively, just as they have done in the movement for Negro advancement in the United States.

Both in the United States and in Australia, one side sees an immediate and obvious community of interest between racial minority groups and a liberal-humanitarian or socialist-working class movement in the dominant society. According to this view racial and cultural group differences are of minor significance and the interests of both groups are best served by an immediate and continuing coalition aiming at the fusion of the two groups, or their assimilation, in some more humanitarian or socialist state which the coalition will bring into being.

The other side places greater emphasis on the different racial and cultural group experiences and identities. It emphasises the need for the minority group to build up its own pride, leadership, traditions, and strength based on its own experience and condition. It claims that, with rare exceptions, only minority group members have experienced and felt what it means to be borne into and raised as members of such a minority. Consequently, it maintains, no matter what theoretical commitment and understanding white people may have, they cannot in general be relied to speak for black people. Coalitions must therefore be based, not on some philosophical common ground such as liberal-humanitarianism or socialism, which not all blacks share anyway, but on a pragmatic judgement as to common interests, based on the ability of black people to come or go as equal partners in the coalition.

According to this view, coalition must be based on a real black power base which gives bargaining power and independence of action to the black cause. Black advancement should not be tied to the policies, politics, or fortunes of any single white group, be they Governments, Churches, Parties or Unions.

None of these groups in white society have consistently stood for the black interest in the past, and there is little reason to believe they will in the future.

Given such a background, what hope was there of maintaining unity in the face of a growing demand for Aboriginal and Islander control of FCAATSI?

Naively perhaps, I thought there was hope. I thought that the FCAATSI leadership had long been exposed to such ideas, both from within and from overseas sources. I thought that my own support for Aboriginal and Islander leadership and control had long been clear, and apparently favourably received. Furthermore, I thought that the Executive members of FCAATSI, at least, would have understood the issues and their importance, and been prepared to discuss them amicably. I would have thought that they were sufficiently in touch to have known that there was strong Aboriginal and Islander support for change in the constitutional structure of FCAATSI.

In my little book "Toward a Multi-Racial Society", published in January 1969 by the Society of Friends, and widely circulated by FCAATSI, I discussed and interpreted the "Black Power" idea in an Australian context. In it I wrote that "Our task ---- is not to oppose group differences or legitimate group power, ie, power which does not place one group in a position of dominance or privilege with respect to another ---- but to gain the free, non-violent, and voluntary acceptance by the white power structure of the legitimacy and value of a sharing of power with black people".

If ever there was a case for legitimate group power to be exercised, according to my definition of it, then FCAATSI was it. My booklet received nothing but praise from members of FCAATSI. To me at least the message was clear. It is no use writing a lot of fine theories unless one is sufficiently committed to do something about them. I for one had to act.

PART II : Prelude to Crisis

In June 1969 Mrs. Kath Walker, Aboriginal poet and an Executive member of FCAATSI, returned from a World Council of Churches "Consultation on Racism" in London, full of a new sense of the urgency of black Australians taking the lead in advancing their own cause.

At the July FCAATSI Executive Meeting Kath reported on her experience and presented copies of a paper called "Coalition of Black and White Australians" to Executive members. In this paper she clearly presented the case for an Aboriginal controlled organisation, and the question of an all-Aboriginal vote was discussed later in that Executive Meeting in relation to the 1970 Annual Conference.

Looking back on recent events, Kath's paper of July 1969 was almost prophetic, although at the time it evidently received little serious attention.

In part she said: "If black Australians are to become masters of their own destiny, white Australians must recognise them as being capable of formulating their own policy of advancement. Prior to the white invasion of this country, history tells us black Australians had a high standard of moral and social pattern behaviours.

White Australians must understand that 'what is good' for them does not necessarily follow as being 'good' for black Australians. Coalitions cannot work effectively nor can they be sustained on the moral, friendly or sentimental conscience of white behaviour patterns."

Further on, in more prophetic vein, she said:

"Paternalistic attitudes can only perpetuate paternalistic relationships because white Australians persist in fooling themselves that they "are doing for black Australians". They refuse to believe that black Australians can "do" for themselves. The shock of black Australians deciding their own policies demoralises white Australians who have brain-washed themselves into believing in their own superiority.

Black Australians, they argue, are inferior beings who cannot make their own decisions. When black Australian reformers take a staunch, militant stand, white Australians become frightened and confused. They object to being displaced by black reformers and immediately excuse their frustration by accusing the black reformers of being bitter, cheeky, insolent and anti-white.

By refusing to see the true situation or to accept it, the white Australian withdraws and causes tensions between black and white. He pleads for a togetherness which is impossible until black Australians formulate their own policies of advancement. Black reformers know they must unite their own people and allow them to elect their own councillors to speak and negotiate on their own behalf. Only then will black and white Australians be able to form a coalition and work together for the good of both sides."

She went on:

"White 'goodwill' is a shaky foundation on which to build. White Australians, if they choose can withdraw the 'goodwill' and black Australians can then be back where they started and have gained nothing for themselves. Black Australians must strengthen themselves into a solid, determined, fighting unit and dictate their own terms for their own advancement. They must define what is best for their own advancement and then they can determine where white Australians can be of assistance. Unless they take this line, black Australians will always be cast in a beggar's role, with a second-class status."

Finally, and at some length, she went on to define the proper role of whites in Aboriginal affairs:

"Where white Australians sincerely wish to assist there are definite, much needed roles they can play. Three roles stand out. They are:-
(1) Educative, (2) Organisational, (3) Supportive."

She concluded:

"There is no reason why white lawyers cannot defend black Australians in courts. There is no reason why white Australians cannot support black organisations. This then is the supportive role white Australians can play.

Only when black and white Australians can accept each other as co-equal partners who identify their goals as politically and economically similar can there be a healthy coalition. Black and white Australians can work side by side provided they set up, recognise and respect each other's sets of values. Then, and only then, can black and white work together in full balance and respectful harmony for a bigger and better Australia for all Australians."

In September 1969, the Aborigines Advancement League of Victoria, which is the dominant Aboriginal advancement organisation in Victoria, issued a public statement which was adopted at its annual meeting, endorsing and explaining the principle of "Black Power" in an Australian context. After referring to the successful "take-over" of a session of the 1969 Easter conference of FCAATSI by the Aboriginal delegates as one example, it went on to say:

"The League exists for the benefit of Aboriginal people. Its Aboriginal members are in a position to tell the League what it should be and do to best serve the interests of the Aboriginal people. Its non-Aboriginal members will stand back while those decisions are being made, and will work to put them into effect in collaboration with the Aboriginal members."

This statement, and a later bid for Aboriginal control of the AAL, received a great deal of publicity and was reported in detail to the FCAATSI Executive. By February 1970 the transition to Aboriginal control of the AAL was complete.

Commenting on these developments in a letter to the General Secretary of FCAATSI, on 16 October 1969, I wrote: "--- the mood in Melbourne --- suggests to me that Aborigines may well seek to assume a more dominant role on the Executive of FCAATSI next Easter, and that we ought to think seriously of allowing this to happen as smoothly as possible. We need of course to get

across, if we can, that there is still a place for the non-Aboriginal worker who can act as a sort of 'translator' of Aborigines to non-Aborigines, and vice-versa ----."

Meanwhile FCAATSI took up a strong suggestion from its Trade Union Convenor, Mr. John Baker, that it hold a day conference on the theme of "Autonomy and Self-Government for Aborigines and Islanders". This was held in Sydney early in November.

There were many speakers, and most spoke in terms of Aboriginal and Islander autonomy and self-government on the missions and settlements of Northern and Western Australia. However not all speakers confined themselves to such "safe" and distant targets. One non-Aboriginal speaker said that Aborigines must build their own power base because "White Australia is not going to do it for them", and the President of the Aborigines Advancement League of Victoria, Mr. Bob Maza, spoke eloquently in favour of Black Power, with extensive references to the League's own statement and its problems in implementing this in its own structure.

Having been asked by the organisers to sum up the Conference, I spoke of "a new role for Aborigines, directing policy and administration in voluntary organisations, missions, and government settlements" and went on to say, rather pointedly and explicitly, "Voluntary organisations are the obvious and natural place to start, and in any case they are the most vulnerable to an Aboriginal bid for power, if also the place with least power." These comments were made to an audience of FCAATSI officers and affiliates, including trade unionists, and my summing up was later published for all to read in 'Origin' (11 Dec. 1969). It was received with acclamation, and to this day has drawn no unfavourable comment from FCAATSI members.

Immediately following the day Conference in November, FCAATSI Executive again discussed the question as to whether only Aborigines should vote at Easter. It decided, with some dissent from Victorian and Queensland delegates, that the procedure "should remain as it is now". Nevertheless the theme for Easter was chosen to be "Aboriginal Power: Rights and Advancement", which in the light of the previous day's Conference seemed to be opening the door for change.

At about this time a new organisation having only Aborigines and Islanders as voting members was formed in Brisbane. Significantly, it adopted the following statement of its position:

"We stand for self-reliance. We hope for aid both morally and financially, but cannot depend on it. We depend on our own efforts, on the united stance of our own people."

It called itself the "Brisbane Aboriginal and Islanders Tribal Council", and informed the General Secretary of FCAATSI that it "will not affiliate with FCAATSI unless the voting rights be vested in the Aboriginal and Islander people, and them only."

The development in Brisbane, and the Victorian situation, led me to ask the FCAATSI Executive, meeting in Sydney in January, to consider again the question of voting rights. In a telephone conversation from Melbourne I emphasised that the AAL members in Victoria favoured Aboriginal control of FCAATSI. Specifically, I asked the Sydney-based Executive to consider whether it would be right to alter the Constitution of FCAATSI in favour of either an Aboriginal-only vote at Conference or an all-Aboriginal Executive.

Given that background, and having received no definite response from Sydney regarding my suggested Constitutional amendments, I put them formally in writing to the then General Secretary, and they were circulated by him to all affiliated six weeks before the Easter Conference, as required by the Constitution.

ask
Mami

A1

PART III : The Amendments

My proposed amendments to the FCAATSI Constitution dealt with both membership of the Executive and voting rights at the Annual Conference.

Regarding the Executive it said that it "shall consist of the following, ALL OF WHOM SHALL BE OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINE OR ISLAND DESCENT; etc. ---", but then went on to add "IN ADDITION THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MAY CO-OPT, AS NON-VOTING CONSULTANTS, ANY PERSONS, IRRESPECTIVE OF RACIAL DESCENT, WHOM IT CONSIDERS QUALIFIED TO HELP AND ADVISE IT UPON REQUEST."

On voting rights it added to the Constitution the following paragraph: "ONLY INDIVIDUALS OF AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL OR ISLAND DESCENT MAY EXERCISE THE VOTE AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING. VOTING RIGHTS ARE DISTRIBUTED AS FOLLOWS: ----" and then it went on to retain the existing voting rights and strengths of affiliated organisations.

Arising out of the same background of experience in Victoria and elsewhere, the National Director of Abschol, Mr. Tony Lawson, independently, and unknown to me, moved another motion having the same general effect on voting rights, except that it did not retain the existing affiliated organisation voting rights.

When it became clear that the two motions overlapped I conferred with some senior Abschol members, and it was decided to drop the Abschol motion in preference to mine as this would cause the minimum disruption to FCAATSI by preserving the voting rights and strengths of affiliates.

We took the view that no organisation really active and concerned in Aboriginal affairs would have great difficulty in finding Aborigines or Islanders willing and able to represent them. In view of increasing union activity amongst Aborigines and Islanders we thought this would particularly favour the Trade Unions.

It has been asked why I rather than an Aborigine moved the Constitutional amendment. Mainly I believe because it seemed to me then that such a motion would be less liable to be interpreted as "anti-white" if it came from a white person. It seemed to me important to get across the idea that such a move had white support and was intended to strengthen a genuine coalition between the races. I hoped to make it clear that white people were still wanted and still willing to work in the field of Aboriginal advancement, and that this was possible without whites deciding "what is good for Aborigines".

During February Mr. John Baker, the FCAATSI Trade Union Convenor, visited a number of states, including Victoria. Unfortunately I was away on holidays when he was in Melbourne, however those whom he met in Melbourne gave me the impression that he was not particularly concerned about the Constitutional question, and at no time before the Conference did he contact me about it.

Nevertheless, as is revealed by the minutes of the FCAATSI Executive meeting in Sydney on 16th March 1970 which were not circulated until Easter, John Baker reported that the Victorian Government is subsidising bus loads of Aborigines from Melbourne to FCAATSI Conference. Victorians believe that it is very serious. They failed to break up FCAATSI. Victorian and Commonwealth Governments are arranging this in order to eliminate Federal Council. The week before the Annual General Meeting of the Rights Council in Queensland had instructed the Tribal Council to smash FCAATSI."

However confused the "English" of that minute, it is clear that John Baker believed or purported to believe that the whole idea of Aboriginal control was a wicked Government sponsored plot. It is apparent from the subsequent attitude of most of the members of the Executive and the statements of many trade unionists and others at Conference, that this view was accepted by many in Sydney and by many trade unionists. The only subsidy which was offered for buses was for 40 Victorian Aborigines sponsored by the Secondary Students Aboriginal Affairs Fund (SSAAF), which is a non-governmental organisation active in Victorian secondary schools. As a result of the "misinterpretation"

of SSAAF's generosity in helping Aborigines to attend the FCAATSI Conference, SSAAF found it necessary to issue a denial. In Origin (2 April 1970) they stated "All these Aboriginal people were from Victoria - mainly because we are a Victorian organisation ---. We were certainly not trying to make the Conference unrepresentative of the bulk of the black people in Australia. Our 40 did not change the voting power of Victorian organisations - they simply meant more voices would be heard in discussion: surely a good thing."

About two weeks before Easter it became clear to me from reports filtering back from Sydney that John Baker and others on the Executive were apparently opposed to my proposed amendments. On 18 March, ie, nearly five weeks after circulation of my motion and only one week before Conference I received my first direct reaction from any Sydney based Executive member. It was a telegram from Mr. Barry Cohen, MHR giving notice of an amendment which in my view was a substantially different motion, or at best a severe compromise, which I could not imagine would satisfy the Brisbane Tribal Council nor the Victorian Aborigines.

I replied at length that "I see a definite and important place for whites, for politicians, unionists, churchmen, and others in FCAATSI and alongside their coloured brethren, but I think the time has come for them to gracefully bow out from running the show, either through their votes at Conference or on the Executive". I concluded by saying that possibly some Executive members "feel that somehow they are being rejected or that the progress being made to involve the trade unions is being threatened. If they voice strong opposition I think this may happen. If they face up to and accept a new role I am sure they will welcome and find a continuing and useful role. My role, at least, is to maintain a black-white coalition by standing alongside the new emerging "black" leadership rather than to oppose it.

At this stage it seemed to me that misunderstandings might still be cleared up by the circulation of a personal explanation of the reasons for my motion. Accordingly, with the help of Abschol, such an explanation was posted to all those affiliates, Executive members and other individuals for whom we had addresses. This explanation was, in my view and that of others I consulted in Melbourne, moderate and conciliatory. It paid tribute to the past services of white Australians such as Gordon Bryant, Stan Davey and Jack Horner and of non-Aboriginal affiliates such as the NSW Teachers Federation and Abschol. It stated that "FCAATSI exists to help, represent, and speak for Aborigines and Islanders, not to decide what is good for 'them'", and that it stands "for the right of Aborigines and Islanders to speak for themselves, determine their own future, and to be free of paternalism".

It asked what would Governments, Missions, the press and the public think of FCAATSI if "we do not practice what we preach". It went on to emphasise and explain the role I saw for sympathetic whites in FCAATSI, listening, learning, advising, supporting, and going out to reform white society, but not controlling Aborigines and Islanders, nor FCAATSI staff.

I conceded that "some traditional Christians and Socialists will no doubt be worried that the equality and brotherhood of man is being questioned, or that the unity of the working classes is being broken. 'People with such objections,' I went on, 'have yet to face up to the 'otherness' of other people, and the right of others to choose and determine their own destinies and identities".

In conclusion I said that "whatever our differences --- the task of Aboriginal and Islander development remains to unite us. We must all avoid bitterness, ^{extremism} ~~extremism~~ and misrepresentation of our opponents. I hope we can respect our differences on this issue and maintain the unity of FCAATSI".

As a result of the distribution of this personal explanation, which probably did not reach most people until the Monday or Tuesday before Easter, I received one telephone call from Mr. Barry Cohen, MHR and a special delivery letter from Mrs. Faith Bandler. Neither were convinced.

PART IV : A Traumatic Conference

FCAATSI's Easter Conference itself was traumatic, exhausting, and highly emotional. Most of it is public knowledge and would be impossibly tedious to report it in detail here. Instead I will give the barest outline of events as I saw them.

Firstly, I soon became aware that various individuals on Executive were deeply and emotionally involved. More than one expressed personal bitterness towards me, and it was clear that rational discussion with these individuals was next to impossible.

By all reports the all Aboriginal session on the Friday was deeply divided although a majority clearly supported the Constitutional amendment. Here the large number of Victorian Aborigines present created a problem in some people's minds, and state rivalries became an issue which confused and bedevilled thinking on the real issue of Aboriginal control throughout the remainder of the Conference.

A report of the decision from the All-Aboriginal session to the concurrent all-white session led to an immediate strong attack on the motion by the Senior Vice-President, Mr. Gordon Bryant, MHR. I could not let that go unchallenged, and a short but vigorous debate followed.

Later on the Friday night an Aboriginal move to make the Constitutional amendment the first item on the agenda for Saturday was defeated after a debate which was cut short by the need to prepare for a scheduled protest march to Parliament House.

On Saturday the debate on the Constitution was not resumed until mid-afternoon. It continued until well into the evening. I think it can fairly be said that speakers for and against were given roughly equal time. Those for the Constitutional change were mainly Aborigines and Islanders from Victoria and Queensland, who spoke eloquently in favour of allowing Aborigines and Islanders to assume the leadership role. They claimed that Aborigines and Islanders were ready, willing and able to do this, and asked their white friends to gracefully step down in favour of "black" leaders and to forego their right to vote so that Aborigines and Islanders could know that FCAATSI was truly their organisation.

On the other hand, those opposing the motion consisted of a number of Aboriginal and Islander Executive members and in the main trade union representatives, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Their main argument seemed to be that trade union participation and support was, for traditional or other internal reasons, impossible unless the trade unions could vote. For reasons I never heard satisfactorily explained, they did not seem to think that Aborigines or Islanders could be found to represent the trade unions. A variety of other 'reasons' for opposing the change were mentioned by various speakers. These included lack of time for trade unions to consider the matter (although it was first discussed in the presence of FCAATSI's trade union convenor as long ago as the July 1969 Executive meeting), an alleged pro-Government plot to split FCAATSI (despite the militant pro-Aboriginal record of the prime movers of the motion, myself and Abschol), and the red herring of a newly discovered need for proportional representation of the Aboriginal populations of the states.

A particularly unfortunate piece of double-thinking arose in the form of an allegation that if the motion went through, the all-Aboriginal and Islander Executive would then accept Government money and thereby become a 'tame-cat' organisation. This was raised by several Executive members none of whom had the fair-mindedness to add that the FCAATSI Executive had already accepted large sums of money from the Commonwealth Government to pay the fares and accommodation expenses of Aborigines and Islanders to this and other FCAATSI Conferences and had asked without reason for the Government to pay secretarial expenses.

Apparently as long as whites remained on the Executive FCAATSI would not be corrupted by accepting Government money, but woe betide the day when Aborigines accept Government money - without white supervision!

The effect of such a debate was again and again to underline the paternalistic attitude of some white delegates, and thus to harden the feeling among those Aborigines and Islanders supporting an all-black vote. Compromise clearly became impossible and unacceptable by the end of Saturday's debate. The case for an all-black vote had been put eloquently, and with moderation, but had left many delegates unmoved. All that remained was for a counting of heads.

Perhaps this is where I failed. As a Quaker I am dedicated to non-violence and reconciliation. Perhaps it was still possible to compromise.

However my view then was that there was not enough time left to quieten the emotions and allow reason to prevail. What was necessary was to ensure that the division was not on racial lines. As many whites as possible had to be persuaded to stand with the emerging black leadership.

The Annual General Meeting, on the Sunday Afternoon, was a complete and utter shambles. Perhaps emotional exhaustion was largely responsible. Whatever the reason, and it could have been deliberate delaying tactics designed to frustrate and postpone the amendment until a 'more opportune' occasion, the election of office-bearers was held prior to the vote on the Constitutional amendment.

This meant that both sides nominated candidates from the floor to most Executive positions, and a protracted balloting procedure, for which the returning officer seemed unprepared, was carried out.

At last, about 5 pm, the time came for the final debate on the Constitutional amendment. The debate was brief - I spoke in favour and Pastor Frank Roberts (whom I greatly respect) spoke against. By this time a number of delegates had already left. When the vote came the returning officer and the chairman then made two questionable rulings. One was that the Constitution required a two thirds majority of registered delegates, rather than of delegates present in the hall (it actually reads "by a two thirds vote of delegates present at the A.G.M.") The other was that the count should be of actual numbers of delegates rather than of the number of votes to which they were entitled (various affiliated bodies have different numbers of votes).

Whatever the proper rulings ought to have been, everyone was so exhausted and fed-up that no-one bothered to fight the rulings, and the vote was counted. The officially recorded vote was 48 - 48, although there was so much confusion in the hall that this may not have been accurate. It was certainly not a two-thirds majority, however, so the Constitutional amendment was lost.

Immediately chaos ensued. Pastor Doug Nicholls and Mrs. Kath Walker called those, both white and black, who supported the Constitutional amendment to gather on one side of the hall. There it was immediately resolved to form an interim body controlled by Aborigines and Islanders which later became the National Tribal Council.

PART V : The National Tribal Council

After the defeat of the Constitutional amendment the FCAATSI Annual Meeting was adjourned indefinitely amidst scenes of utter confusion. FCAATSI's Conference, with its chosen theme of "Aboriginal Power", had indeed spent nearly all its time debating that subject. If it failed to achieve much it was because of determined opposition to Aboriginal power by many of the delegates.

The 'defeated' Aborigines and Islanders however, wasted no time in setting up a black-controlled body. That evening a group of about forty Aborigines and Islanders, with a number of their white supporters, met to elect a National Executive Tribal Council, adopt an interim Constitution, and discuss future action.

Out of that meeting emerged a new spirit and sense of Aboriginal pride.

The Aborigines and Islanders agreed to refer to their white friends as 'Gubboriginals', an honourable word coined from 'gubb' (white person) and 'Aboriginal'. Later in the meeting they conferred the honourable title of 'Bapu Mamus' (from the Aboriginal word 'bapu' - father, and the Islander word 'mamus' - chief) on Pastor Doug Nicholls, one of the co-founders of FCAATSI and a long-time leader of his people. This was done in a dignified and traditional laying on of hands ceremony which had the effect of further cementing group feeling and pride. Here was concrete evidence that the new organisation was truly Aboriginal rather than a white man's organisation.

The interim Constitution of the National Tribal Council provides for two categories of membership. Any Aboriginal or Islander is eligible for full membership and any other person prepared to adhere to the Constitution may become an advisory member. Organisations of any colour are eligible to affiliate with the Council provided they are willing to uphold its Constitution. Full members only are eligible to vote, on the "one man one vote" basis.

Management of the Council is vested in an Executive Tribal Council consisting of seven State Tribal Councillors and seven National Tribal Councillors responsible for such fields of action as education, employment, finance, health, housing, land rights and legislation, and legal aid. Individuals with special skills, other than Aborigines and Islanders, may be elected to the Executive Tribal Council in a non-voting capacity.

Mrs. Kath Walker was elected National Chairman, and Stuart Murray, John Newfong and Dennis Walker as State Tribal Councillors for Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland respectively. Others elected included Chicka Dixon (finance), Reuben Kelly (education), Doug Nicholls (legal aid), Mrs. Pat Ochwell (housing), Fred Gesha (employment), and Barrie Pittock (land rights and legislation).

The date of the Annual General Meeting was set as the first weekend in September, and the Monday following that weekend declared to be an Aboriginal National Day. At a later meeting it was decided that the National Tribal Council's interim headquarters would be in Melbourne, where the Aborigines Advancement League has offered its support. The first Annual Conference will be held in Melbourne in September 1970. The Annual Conference is to be held in different states or territories in rotation.

Further relations between the National Tribal Council and FCAATSI have yet to be fully worked out. At Easter a number of individuals who supported the all-black voting amendment were elected to Executive positions on FCAATSI, including Mr. John Newfong, who was elected to the full-time paid position of General Secretary of FCAATSI. However several of these people resigned after the amendment was lost on grounds such as not being able to serve two masters. Nevertheless some Tribal Council supporters, notably John Newfong and myself, decided to remain on the Executive of FCAATSI for as long as they could see any hope of reconciliation and co-operation between the two bodies.

A joint ad hoc committee consisting of three representatives from each body was created late on the Easter Sunday night with a view to consultations on the differences between the two organisations. To date little progress has been made.

Largely through the efforts of John Newfong in Sydney, FCAATSI and the NTC did co-operate to some extent in relation to the Cook Bi-Centenary Protests. However co-operation and hospitality from other FCAATSI Executive personnel in Sydney was minimal (to say the least).

On May 7th telegrams were sent from Sydney, with the names of six full or co-opted members of the FCAATSI Executive appended, recommending to other Executive members "that the General Secretary's wage be discontinued from this day 7th May until terms of employment of the General Secretary be drawn up at the next Executive Meeting to be held 18th May."

Understandably, this prompted John Newfong to write a rather strong letter to Executive members. Unfortunately perhaps, it included some personal references to some of the signatories to the telegram, and at the Executive meeting on 18th May the Sydney-based Executive members demanded that Mr. Newfong withdraw his reply to the telegram. Mr. Newfong in turn demanded that the telegram be withdrawn, and when this was refused he tendered his resignation, which was accepted.

It seems clear that, whatever the pretext, the basic issue was Mr. Newfong's sympathy with the NTC. The uncompromising, and indeed ruthless, position taken by the Sydney-based Executive of FCAATSI made it clear that they do not want reconciliation or compromise.

In these circumstances it seemed pointless for me to continue trying to work within FCAATSI, and indeed wasteful of my time and energy.

The position of the National Tribal Council is quite clear. It insists on Aboriginal and Islander control but is willing to co-operate with, and receive help from, any body willing to do so without strings. The motto of the Brisbane Tribal Council holds good nationally: "We stand for self reliance. We hope for aid both morally and financially, but cannot be dependent on it. We depend on our own efforts, on the united stance of our own people."

With such a stand, co-operation with FCAATSI or any of its affiliates is perfectly possible, but the NTC will not be dictated to by any organisation, be it church, union, political party or government.

It has been suggested by many observers that NTC and FCAATSI both have their place and value in the continuing field of Aboriginal advancement. However the essential difference between the two bodies is that it is still possible for non-Aboriginal interests to divert or use FCAATSI, and through it Aborigines themselves, for non-Aboriginal political, religious or other ends. Should this happen, FCAATSI would become a liability rather than an asset to the Aboriginal cause.

There is an interesting parallel between the National Tribal Council and the various American Indian Tribal Councils and Maori nationalist movement. In New Zealand the Ratana Movement, which is entirely Maori, has maintained its independence and integrity, and yet been able to enter a political alliance with the New Zealand Labour Party and achieve a great deal in New Zealand Parliament.

American Indians have always had their own independent voice. Often their greatest enemies have been the paternalistic 'do-gooding' white voluntary organisations seeking to convert or assimilate them, and sure that know 'what is best for the Indians'.

The Easter Conference of FCAATSI showed that a lot of white Australians, often sincere and dedicated, believe they know what is best for Aborigines better than Aborigines themselves. For the sake of Aboriginal advancement let us hope they will listen more closely in future and think again.

The National Tribal Council wants, needs and welcomes genuine friends and allies, but not people who attach conditions to their friendship or who believe they have the right to dictate 'solutions' to other peoples problems.

Some critics of the NTC claim that the interests of Aborigines and Islanders in the North will be neglected. These critics equate the NTC with the interests of 'city' Aborigines in Victoria and other highly urbanised areas. The truth however is that these 'city' Aborigines are increasingly anxious to relate to their tribal past and increasingly concerned that Aborigines and Islanders in the North should not be dispossessed of their land and culture. So-called 'city' Aborigines have learnt from bitter experience what it means to lose their economic independence and cultural traditions. This makes them uniquely qualified to 'get across' to their Northern cousins just what is at stake and how the process of disinheritance must be resisted in the North.

Aboriginal pride and Aboriginal unity are powerful weapons, and far less dangerous to Aboriginal interests than paternalistic white do-goodies of whatever political colour.

In the past, for understandable reasons of distance, cost, and lack of articulation, FCAATSI has never had more than token participation and representation from the North (with the notable exception of North Queensland), and FCAATSI leadership has come pre-dominantly from 'city' Aborigines. The NTC hopes that by stressing Aboriginal initiative, pride, and responsibility, it can build up grass-roots participation in the North. It hopes for whole support and help, but it is not dependent on it.