

## **A Short History of the Australian Indigenous Resistance 1950 - 1990**



*'We are our own salvation ... Our destiny is in our own hands ... We cannot leave it to churches, government, international pressures, dreams or the goodwill of others.'-----*  
Charles Perkins

**By Gary Foley**

### **Introduction**

This history is as interesting and vibrant as history can be, yet it is largely unknown to the majority of the Australian people. I would hope that the following small taste might encourage you to read other accounts and find out more for yourself.

The events and people discussed here are only a small number of those that could have been included in a more comprehensive examination and analysis of these 50 years. This history is important for you because it will help you understand that Australian history is multi-layered. There are many perspectives from which Australian history can be viewed. An understanding of some of these different perspectives will give you a broader understanding of who you are as an Australian.

Whilst the selected events discussed in this short history focus largely on the indigenous resistance in NSW, they also illustrate how events that occurred in NSW during this period ultimately had profound effects on a national level.

## Significant events in the history of NSW Aboriginal people 1950 - 1990

### 1950s - AAF and FCAATSI

In the 1950s a significant moment occurred in 1956 when NSW activist Pearl Gibbs, former Secretary of the Aborigines Progressive Association, co-founded the Australian-Aboriginal Fellowship (AAF) in Sydney with Faith Bandler, a woman of South-sea Islander descent whose father had been a kidnapped and bought to Australia as slave to work on the QLD sugar fields. Faith would later be a prominent campaigner for the 1967 Rerendum.<sup>1</sup> The AAF proved to be an important organization in NSW in the 1950s and was a vehicle for the political education and organizing abilities of a new generation of activists, including Ken Brindle. The main reason for its creation was to create a forum for a partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in NSW. As such it would campaign against State government policies of assimilation, and strive towards educating the wider community about issues affecting Aborigines.<sup>2</sup>

The AAF's first public meeting in April 1957 attracted a huge crowd that almost packed out the Sydney Town Hall. The crowd consisted mostly of non-Aboriginal people and was an indication of the vast reservoir of goodwill that existed in the white community toward Aboriginal people at that time.<sup>3</sup> Following the successful launch of the AAF, the organization became affiliated with numerous trade unions, as well as the Australian Union of Women. Ironically, such associations brought members of the AAF to the attention of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which in the 1950s was particularly concerned about Communist involvement in the Aboriginal movement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lake, M, *Faith: Faith Bandler, Gentle Activist*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Bandler, F and Fox, L (eds), *The Time Was Ripe: The Story of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship 1956-1969*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd, Sydney, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Stephens, T., "Faith Bandler: get me ASIO on the line", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 2002.

Whilst history would ultimately show that Communist infiltration and influence in the Aboriginal political movement during this era was minimal or non-existent, nevertheless at the time ASIO maintained close surveillance of such AAF activists as Faith Bandler, Ray Peckham and Pearl Gibbs. This did not deter or prevent these activists from ardently pursuing their cause of seeking justice for NSW Aboriginal people.

One of the most significant developments from the work of the AAF was the formulation and distribution of a petition for amendments to the Federal Constitution regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This petition had been developed by famous non-Aboriginal feminist Jessie Street in conjunction with Faith Bandler and Pearl Gibbs and this campaign would evolve into the successful 1967 Referendum.



*Image 1: Pearl Gibbs, 1954, by Lipman, Fairfax Photos.*

The Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship was also involved in campaigns for land rights and the improvement of living conditions for Aboriginal communities in New South Wales, as well as a successful campaign in 1962 to repeal certain sections of the *NSW Aborigines Protection Act 1909*. The AAF played an important role in the development of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) during the late 1950s and early 1960s, but by 1969 Aboriginal people were demanding a greater role in the leadership of their own organizations and the AAF, with a

predominately non-Aboriginal membership, acceded to the new way of doing things and dissolved.

In October 1957 the legendary Aboriginal activist Jack Patten died in a traffic accident in Melbourne. Patten had been one of the most important activists of his generation, and was a superb public speaker and organizer. He had been at the heart of the Cummeragunja walk-off in 1939, and was the first president of the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA). He had been a key organizer of the 1938 'Day of Mourning' protest in Sydney and he had published the first Aboriginal newspaper, the *Abo Call* in 1938.

Less than six months after Patten's death, in February 1958, the first national indigenous political organization was founded in Adelaide. The Federal Council of Aboriginal Affairs (FCAA) was created as a national voice for indigenous people, yet paradoxically at the inaugural meeting of the twenty-five people who were there, only four (Bert Groves, Doug Nicholls, Bill Onus and Jeff Barnes) were Aboriginal. As the organization grew the dominance of non-indigenous people on its governing committee became entrenched, and even as it changed its name to FCAATSI at its Easter conference in 1964, there were rumblings of Aboriginal discontent at lack of indigenous control.<sup>5</sup> Before that discontent would surface, there were two major events in the late 1960s that would have a powerful effect on the younger generation of that era.

## **1960s**

### **The Freedom Ride**

In 1965 a young Aboriginal man from the Northern Territory who had grown up in a government home, and who had become a proficient enough soccer player to have played club football in England, was by now a student at

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<sup>5</sup> Taffe, S, *Black and White Together: FCAATSI, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, 1958-1973*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2005.

Sydney University. That student, Charles Perkins,<sup>6</sup> became involved at university with a group of white students from an organization called 'Student Action For Aborigines' (SAFA). With members of SAFA, Perkins would go on a bus tour into some of the most racist country towns in northern NSW and into history.<sup>7</sup> What we know today as the '1965 *Freedom Ride*' had been inspired by the action of the same name conducted by the civil rights movement in the USA earlier that decade. In much of rural Australia at that time dispossessed, poverty stricken Aboriginal people were confronted with petty racism on the part of local business' and government instrumentalities. A not uncommon example of local council restrictions is seen in the minutes of the Moree Municipal Council minutes of December 1955,

3. *Patronage of Baths and Memorial Hall.* That no person, being a full-blooded or half-caste aboriginal of Australia, or being a person apparently having an admixture of aboriginal blood, shall use or occupy or be present in or upon, or be allowed or permitted or invited to use or occupy or be present in or upon, the premises of the Council known as the Memorial Hall or in or upon any of the buildings or places ancillary thereto, including the Supper Room, Kitchen, Servedy, Toilets and Passages AND THAT no such person as aforesaid shall use or occupy or be present in or upon, or be allowed or permitted to use or occupy or be present in or upon, the Premises of the Council known as the Bore Baths or in or upon any of the buildings or places therewith.<sup>8</sup>

Perkins and the students deliberately confronted such segregation and racism in towns like Moree, Walgett and Bowraville and not only generated riots and outrage, but also headlines around the world. Freedom Ride participant Ann Curthoys perhaps best described the result,

In the ensuing public debate, urban public knowledge of racial discrimination grew, some soul-searching went on in the country towns, racial segregation was challenged and in some cases ended, and alternative ideas of inclusion, equality, and full citizenship rights were much debated.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Read, P, *Charles Perkins: A Biography*, Viking, Ringwood, Victoria, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Curthoys, A, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> ' (Minute of the Moree Municipal Council, December 1955). Quoted in Ford, G. W. (1965). "The Student Bus." *Outlook* 9(2).

<sup>9</sup> Curthoys, A. (2002). The Freedom Ride – Its Significance Today. National Institute of the Humanities Forum, National Museum of Australia: 12.



IMAGE 2: Report on protest in Moree, NSW, 21 Feb 1965, *Sydney Daily Mirror*

The 'Freedom Ride' exposed Australian racism to the world and as such was a significant embarrassment to the Australian Government and nation. It also had the more important effect of radicalizing a new generation of activists who were teenagers when the 'Freedom Ride' passed through their towns and they saw the local white racist establishment exposed and challenged in the most powerful way. The Freedom Ride was an internationally inspired, 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 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.

There is no doubt it left a deep impression in the minds of such people as myself, Lyall Munro Jr., Billy Craigie, Michael Anderson, Lyn Thompson and Gary Williams. At the end of 1965 Charles Perkins graduated from Sydney University and took the position as manager of Sydney's *Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs*, a welfare/social organisation that became a meeting place for a new generation of young future NSW radical political activists. In the crucial period in which Perkins was with the *Foundation* the Aboriginal population of Sydney quadrupled as young Aborigines left the rural areas in

large numbers. This mass exodus was dramatically intensified with the later closure of the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board. The young Aboriginal people arriving in Sydney in the late 1960s invariably came to gravitate around the *Foundation* as it provided a social meeting place that was relatively free of police harassment. As such it became a place where some key relationships developed among the next generation of Aboriginal political activists.<sup>10</sup>

### **FCAATSI and the 1967 Referendum**

In 1967 the national body, Federal Council for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) completed a successful national campaign for a 'Yes' vote in the famous 1967 Referendum. The idea was to change the constitution to make the Federal Government responsible for Aboriginal affairs, rather than the parochial administrations of the States, as had been the situation since Federation. It was felt that the Commonwealth would be able to deliver a standard and more compassionate administration of indigenous affairs than the notoriously negligent and racist state regimes. The concept of the referendum was imposed on the increasingly impatient younger generation by the 'elders' of FCAATSI. The young people were told to assist in the campaign for a 'Yes' vote as that would be the answer to indigenous people's ongoing oppression and marginalization.<sup>11</sup>

Then when the referendum resulted in the biggest 'Yes' vote in Australian history, the old guard of the Aboriginal movement effectively declared the battle won, but nothing really changed. In fact in southern states things got significantly worse as the NSW government repealed its Aborigines Welfare Board and withdrew administration from the 45 reserves around the state, effectively abandoning more than 20,000 Aboriginal people.<sup>12</sup>

This perceived failure of the Referendum to improve the lives of NSW Aborigines led to disillusionment and discontent on the part of the younger

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<sup>10</sup> Chili Films, *The Foundation 1963–1977*, video recording, 2002

<sup>11</sup> See Foley, G. 'Black Power in Redfern 1968 – 1972'

[http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay\\_1.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html)

<sup>12</sup> Bennett, S, 'The 1967 Referendum', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, (2), 1985, pp 26-31.

generation whose white counterparts were challenging the white political mainstream over issues to do with imperialism and neo-colonialism (Vietnam) and personal freedom. Between 1968 and 1970 at the annual FCAATSI conference in Canberra, there were a series on increasingly intense confrontations between indigenous representatives and the organizational leadership who were mostly non-indigenous. Young indigenous activists were largely from the Sydney Aboriginal community in Redfern and were arguing for 'Black control of Black Affairs', which was also being promoted as the idea of 'Black Power'.



*IMAGE 3: Bill Onus at Melbourne referendum rally – Sun Melbourne 27<sup>th</sup> May 1967*



## 1970s

### Black Power

The term Black Power had entered the Australian vernacular in 1969 when an incident occurred at the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne. The incident itself was very mild and innocuous in that it was a short talk and press conference held at the League by a West-Indian academic called Prof. Roosevelt-Brown, who happened to be an advocate of Black Power. When the AAL figurehead Pastor Doug Nicholls emotionally clashed with Roosevelt-Brown, the Australian media artificially contrived a controversy out of the incident by equating the term 'Black Power' with 'black violence and anarchy', playing on the fears of an already xenophobic Australian public. Thus the term 'black power' became synonymous with evil, in pretty much the same way Islamists are regarded today by a still xenophobic Australia.



*Image 4: Bob Maza, Patsy Kruger and Roosevelt Brown in Melbourne, 1969, ( Koori Web).*

There then began a campaign at the AAL, led by Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza to establish 'Aboriginal control' over the organization. This was in line with a new notion being developed by a new generation of indigenous political thinkers, who strongly believed that Aboriginal organizations should be controlled and operated by Aboriginal people. "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs" became the slogan of a new emerging home grown Black Power movement. The campaign at the AAL proved to be very divisive as

white supporters of the League deserted in droves, threatening the fund-raising capabilities of the organization and creating resentment on both sides.

Thus the Aboriginal political movement had split into two distinct camps in 1970 when the annual FCAATSI conference that year resulted in a confrontation between those who believed in Black Power (aboriginal control of FCAATSI) and those who believed in maintaining the status quo (mostly whites and older Aboriginal delegates). When the Black Power delegates lost the vote for Aboriginal control of FCAATSI they split and formed a new body, the National Tribal Council. But more importantly, younger activists in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide decided to develop their own ideas, methods and organizations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Redfern 1968 - 1971**

In the Sydney inner city suburb of Redfern an Aboriginal community of some 25,000 people had grown since the mid-1960s saw an exodus from rural settlements and reserves to inner-city Sydney. Redfern in 1971 was the largest Aboriginal community in Australia, comprised of more than ten thousand landless refugees from the old apartheid system of the NSW Protection Board. This was an impoverished but dynamic, struggling community which developed its own social networks and entertainment. But it also attracted an undue amount of attention from the local police force, who began to conduct a protracted campaign of harassment and intimidation of the Redfern black community. Certain younger members of the community who had been radicalized by the Freedom Ride and gained political experience in the campaign for the 1967 Referendum began a discussion group that became known as the 'Black Caucus'. This group began to consume radical anti-imperialist political literature and because of contact

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<sup>13</sup> Read P. "Cheeky, insolent and anti-White: the split in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders — Easter 1970". *Aust J Politics History* 1990; 36: 73-83.

with black US soldiers in Sydney on R&R from the Vietnam war, developed a close interest in such US groups as the Black Panther Party in California.<sup>14</sup>



IMAGE 5 ;Australia's first Aboriginal Legal Service, Redfern 1971 : Foley Collection

Utilising tactics partly adopted and adapted from the US, and partly developed along indigenous philosophies, the young Redfern radicals began to create local community self-help organizations such as Australia's first free shop-front legal aid centre, the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service that opened in 1971. Community-controlled free health clinics, housing co-operatives and a Breakfast for Children program were all created in the Sydney black ghetto of Redfern within a twelve month period by the young black power activists. The early success of these self-determination ventures coincided with an intensification of street demonstrations in support of a campaign for *Land Rights*. Redfern activists such as Paul Coe began attending anti-Vietnam War demonstrations challenging the young white student radicals about their own racism and taunting them with accusations of hypocrisy.

In 1971 the Australian anti-Apartheid movement staged major demonstrations against a touring white Springbok South African rugby team, and again Coe and fellow members of the Redfern Black Caucus challenged white

<sup>14</sup> See, Foley, G., "Black Power in Redfern 1968 – 1972" Koori History Website"  
[http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay\\_1.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html)

protestors about why they were not supporting the Land Rights campaign. As luck would have it, in Sydney the South African rugby players were accommodated in a motel in Bondi Junction that was virtually next door to the Black Caucus commune where people such as Paul Coe, Gary Williams, Billy Craigie and Isobel Coe were living. Thus the Aboriginal activists opened their commune as a base for the anti-apartheid activists. It was whilst the Springbok rugby players were staying in Bondi Junction that the Black Caucus managed to be the only group in the antiapartheid collective to breach the tight security that enveloped the South Africans during the 1971 tour.



*IMAGE 6: Paul Coe and Billy Craigie – Anti-Apartheid demonstration Sydney 1971*

The Black Caucus had been approached by several former Australian rugby team players who had toured South Africa in the past and had been appalled by what they saw of the Apartheid system. These white Australian players were aware that in South Africa during the Apartheid era among white Afrikanners the thought that a black man might ever don the revered Springbok rugby jersey was abhorrent. Thus these former Australian players offered the Aboriginal activists the opportunity to unsettle the Springbok players on tour by lending them genuine Springbok football jerseys that they had been presented with on earlier tours of South Africa. The idea was that black Australian activists should don these jerseys and stand outside the

Springboks hotel. Thus, Gary Willams, Tony Coorey, Gary Foley and Billy Craigie from the Black Caucus appeared at a demonstration in front of the Springboks hotel wearing the sacred colours of the football ambassadors of Apartheid.



*IMAGE 7: Gary Foley at Anti-Apartheid demo Sydney, 1971,*

These Aboriginal activists had only arrived at the protest and they were taken by surprise when suddenly a squad of NSW Special Branch police rushed from the Springbok's motel and apprehended them. The activists were dragged into the team's motel and accused by Police of stealing the Springbok football jumpers. The police insisted that the entire Springbok team parade before the amazed activists as police asked each of the Springboks whether these jumpers had been stolen from any of them. Too late the police realized their bungle and quickly threw the activists out of the motel, but the damage had been done. Thus four members of the Black Caucus became the only anti-Apartheid demonstrators to breach the security of the Springboks headquarters in Sydney and deeply upset the visiting South Africans who were unsettled by the sight of black men wearing their revered symbol of Apartheid. And it was all made possible by bungling on the part of

NSW police who had thought the Aboriginal activists had somehow stolen the jerseys from the visiting team.<sup>15</sup>

After this, and responding to Paul Coe's earlier challenge, the large white Australian anti-apartheid movement began to organize joint demonstrations with Koori activists. These demonstrations led to a series of violent confrontations in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne, increasing mainstream community fears about a violent form of 'Black Power'. In early January 1972 a front page article in the *New York Times* reported the 'emergence of a militant black power movement among dissatisfied young Aborigines' that was said to be 'stirring Australia'. Aboriginal communities across Australia were suddenly becoming hotbeds of dissent and anger as the younger generation began to become politically active and embrace more radical ideas. The central focus of this activism was the Redfern Aboriginal community in Sydney.



Image 8: Notorious Black Power Headline –The Australian 1971

<sup>15</sup> Harris, S., *Political football : the Springbok tour of Australia, 1971*, Melbourne : Gold Star Publications, 1972.

## 1972 The Aboriginal Embassy

Such was the impact of major demonstrations orchestrated by the Black Power movement and the extensive media coverage, both local and overseas, as well as the handing down of the Gove Land Rights case, that it compelled the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon, to make a major policy statement on Aboriginal Land Rights. Mr. McMahon decided to make this important Prime Ministerial statement on the symbolically powerful and politically contentious day known as 'Australia Day', a day known to indigenous peoples as 'Invasion Day'.

Mr. McMahon's statement essentially rejected Aboriginal political demands and denied the right of Aboriginal people to land. McMahon's words triggered widespread outrage in indigenous communities nationwide. On the night of 26<sup>th</sup> January 1972 the Black Caucus in Redfern dispatched a group of four young men, Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bert Williams and Tony Coorey to Canberra to set up a protest on the lawns of Parliament House.

The idea of the protest was originally simply to stage a small demonstration and be arrested. The hope was that the media would take photos before the men were dragged away. This would make the point that Aboriginal people were rejecting the McMahon Australia Day statement, and would hopefully keep media interest high until a major demonstration organized for that weekend. But this plan would go spectacularly wrong, to the pleasant surprise of everyone but the McMahon Government.

The young Redfern activists duly arrived on the lawns of Parliament and set up a beach umbrella with the sign 'Aboriginal Embassy'. This was the idea of Tony Coorey, a poet, who said,

'The PM's statement has effectively declared us aliens in our own land. If so, we should have an embassy like all the other aliens'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See, Foley, G., "Black Power in Redfern 1968 – 1972" Koori History Website"  
[http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay\\_1.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_1.html)



*IMAGE 9: Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bert Williams, Tony Coorey, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1972,*

When the ACT Police arrived, they informed the protestors that there seemed to be no law to prevent them camping. The group was told by police that if they only had eleven tents they could not be moved. If they had twelve tents they could be deemed a camping area and evicted. To the amazement of the activists, and everyone else, they had accidentally discovered a loophole in ACT laws whereby it was not actually illegal to camp on the lawns of Parliament House.

The next day the campers installed a proper tent to serve as the 'office' of the Aboriginal Embassy and in front of the tent placed a letterbox on top of a pole. The following day mail started to be delivered. The Embassy rapidly became the most popular new tourist attraction in the national capital. The protest rapidly became a great success, enjoying broad community support to an extent rarely seen in indigenous affairs. This was in part due to the larrikin appeal of a protest that snubbed the authorities and was simultaneously



peaceful and highly creative, and also due to the extensive publicity it received both nationally and internationally.



IMAGE 10: Early Aboriginal Tent embassy, Canberra., 1972

Television crews from more than thirty countries filmed and broadcast stories about the Embassy and the situation of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Among the international media that covered the *Embassy* were, 'The Guardian, the New York Times, Le Figaro, Time magazine, the Israeli Post, and Le Monde.' As well as 'papers as far afield as Manila, Norway, Tokyo, Beijing, New Delhi, Jamaica, and Malaysia. With that sort of local and international media coverage it very quickly became apparent that the *Embassy* protest was becoming a major political embarrassment for the McMahon Government.

The most important development occurred in February when the then Leader of the Opposition, Gough Whitlam visited the Embassy and was challenged by Paul Coe about ALP Aboriginal Affairs policy which, Coe asserted, was little different from the position of the McMahon Government. Whitlam's response was to change ALP policy to support Land Rights for Aboriginal

people. This was a significant moment in Australian history and would directly result in 1976 in the Northern Territory Land Rights Act.<sup>17</sup>



*Image 11: Tent Embassy meeting (with Parliament House in the background),*

This all proved too much for the McMahon Government, which had been extremely embarrassed and flummoxed by the Campers on their lawn. So McMahon moved in May 1972 to create a new law making it illegal to camp on the lawns of Parliament. That law became reality on the morning of 20<sup>th</sup> July 1972 when the *Trespass on Commonwealth Lands Ordinance* was gazetted. Within twenty minutes of the new ordinance coming into effect, ACT police moved on the Embassy and forcibly removed the tents in the midst of a brawl in which nine protestors were arrested and many more injured.

The televised images of the forced removal of the Embassy were shown around the nation and around the world, to the further embarrassment of the McMahon Government. Three days later more than two thousand Indigenous people and their supporters marched on Parliament House and re-erected the Embassy. They linked arms around the tent forming a solid wall of people and defied the police to take it down. In the following melee many were

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<sup>17</sup> Burgmann, V, *Power and Protest: Movements for Change in Australian Society*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993.

injured and eighteen people were arrested. Again the violent scenes were broadcast around the world and a week later more than three thousand people marched on Parliament and set up the Embassy again. <sup>18</sup>



*Image 12: Police and Aboriginal activists confront each other at Aboriginal Embassy 1972*

This time when they believed they were confronted by overwhelming force in the form of ACT Police backed up by two contingents from the NSW Police Riot Squad and several busloads of soldiers from the Royal Military College at Duntroon, the leaders of the demonstration (conscious of the numerous elderly and children in their ranks) decided to seize the high moral ground and claim victory by peacefully allowing the police to remove the tents from over the heads of a token delegation. This generated TV news footage that enabled the Embassy campers to claim a 'moral victory' and further undermine the image and standing of the McMahon Government. These events directly contributed to the rapid demise of the McMahon administration which six months later in December 1972 was voted out of office in one of the biggest political landslides in Australian history when Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, Scott, 'The Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 1972', MA thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1993.



*Image 13: Tent Embassy Gathering before the Apology, 2008, NLA collection*

## The Whitlam Era

The *Aboriginal Embassy* protest of 1972 saw the beginning of more than a decade of high profile indigenous protest actions that placed questions of Land Rights, Sovereignty, and self-determination firmly on the national political agenda. It also created a greater international awareness of the local Indigenous struggle for justice. Thus Indigenous people in Australia had high expectations when Gough Whitlam was elected Prime Minister of a Labor Government in December 1972. The Whitlam government's two major indigenous policy initiatives were the establishment of the first national, elected Indigenous representative body, the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC), and framing the 1976 *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory)*, which was later passed by the Fraser Liberal Government.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Whitlam, E.G. *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1985.



*Image 14: Gough Whitlam gave the Gurindji people their victory, NLA collection*

However, despite Whitlam establishing some limited reforms in the area of Aboriginal affairs, his tenure as PM was cut short in 1975 when his government was dismissed. Indigenous political activists now had to again deal with a conservative Liberal government in Canberra with Malcolm Fraser as Prime Minister. Fraser initially proved to be a more progressive Liberal Prime Minister than Billy McMahon. Before their dismissal, Gough Whitlam's Labor Government had drafted the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory)* which would allow Aboriginal people in the NT to seek land grants in freehold title. It was to the credit of the incoming Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser that he ultimately passed this legislation (with minor amendments) in 1976. But Fraser's conservative government very quickly came into conflict with Aboriginal groups, especially the increasing political clout of the Aboriginal community-controlled organizations.

The Aboriginal community-controlled organizations were the self-help groups established by the Black Power movement, which had strong Aboriginal community support because Aboriginal people saw these organizations as 'belonging' to them. Because these organizations, such as free legal aid centres, free health clinics, housing co-operatives and breakfast for children programmes, had been established by Aboriginal people in the community,

for the community, then the community strongly supported them. To the Black Power activists this was Self-Determination in action.<sup>20</sup>

This led to the Aboriginal political movement seeking greater international links and political support. The National Aboriginal & Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO), which was the national body representing more than 100 independent community-controlled health centres around Australia, set up an 'information centre' in London and began organizing support for Aboriginal Rights all over Europe.



*Image 15: Gary Foley and Bruce McGuinness, Founders of The 1978 London Aboriginal Information Centre – source: Foley Collection*

In keeping with the tactic of embarrassing the Australian Government in the international political arena, Aboriginal activists organized major demonstrations at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982. These demonstrations saw hundreds of Aboriginal people arrested on numerous occasions as the State Government had implemented anti-demonstration laws that made it illegal for more than three people to gather in public in Brisbane for the duration of the Games.<sup>21</sup> The resultant mass arrests made headlines around the world and proved an extreme embarrassment for the

<sup>20</sup> Foley, G., "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.

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1980s/82games/gamesdx.html>

Federal Government of Malcolm Fraser, who was until then enjoying a positive image from his efforts to assist in negotiating a peaceful settlement to racial problems in Rhodesia.



*Image 16: Commonwealth Games Protest, Brisbane, 26 Sept 1982, Courier Mail*

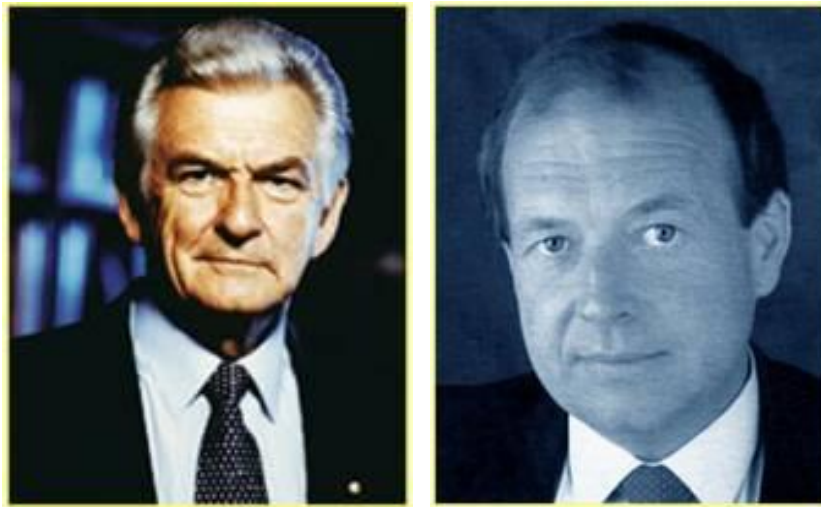
Thus as the 1980s began the Fraser Government in Canberra continued to be in conflict with Aboriginal peoples aspirations for self-determination and economic independence. The Aboriginal political movement was strong and effective and had strong support nationally among white Australians. It looked likely that the Labor Party would win the next federal election and the ALP Aboriginal policy promised 'national, uniform Land Rights legislation' that would give Aboriginal people freehold title to their homelands. Aboriginal activists were full of confidence for what might happen in the next decade.

## **1980s**

### **PM Hawke and the End of Land Rights**

In 1983 a Labor Government returned to Canberra with former Trade Union leader Bob Hawke as Prime Minister. Hawke had come to power apparently strongly committed to granting Aboriginal people 'Land Rights' in the form of 'national, uniform Land Rights legislation', utilizing Commonwealth Government powers gained in the 1967 referendum. The promised legislation

would, according to Hawke, be 'along the lines of the federal 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) that enabled Aboriginal people to gain land in freehold title, and State Government opposition would be overridden by federal legislation. The Hawke Government's commitment to Aboriginal Land Rights came at the end of a decade of effective peaceful and creative protest actions by the Aboriginal political movement, and Hawke was initially praised by Aboriginal activists.



*Image 17: PM Bob Hawke and WA Premier Brian Bourke – The men who killed Land Rights*

However, in a matter of months Hawke did a political backflip when he reversed his position on Land Rights after an intense, racially charged, multi-million dollar advertising campaign mounted by vested interests in the mining and pastoral industries. The final nail in the coffin of freehold title land rights came after a meeting between PM Hawke and the Labor Premier of Western Australia Brian Bourke who was acting as an advocate of the powerful WA mining lobby.<sup>22</sup> (Bourke would some years later be exposed as a corrupt politician who ultimately was gaoled for his corrupt activities, but would continue to be an ALP powerbroker for decades to come) After Hawke met with Bourke, the Prime Minister revoked his earlier strong statements on Aboriginal Land Rights and instead claimed that mining interests were the 'national interest' and would be protected. This instantly incurred the wrath of

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<sup>22</sup> Quentin Beresford , *The Godfather: The Life of Brian Burke*. Allen & Unwin, 2008.



the Aboriginal community where activists declared that they would mount major protests at the forthcoming 1988 Australian Bicentennial celebrations.



IMAGE 18: Bicentennial Protest 1988 march with banners, Sydney, Gary Foley collection

Given the effectiveness of the 1982 Brisbane Commonwealth Games demonstrations, the Hawke Government was understandably nervous about the prospect of indigenous anger being expressed during the Bicentennial year. The Hawke government decided that it would be necessary to offer some items of appeasement to Aboriginal anger and announced several significant reforms to that end. The first was a major reform of the old, hated Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) which was given some minor cosmetic changes, along with attaching a component of elected 'representatives, and a new name, ATSIC. Because this ill-conceived organization was cobbled together in a climate of political expediency it was destined to fail, which it ultimately would more than a decade later in spectacular fashion whilst its cynical architects would blame Aboriginal people for its demise.<sup>23</sup>

Another Hawke government initiative that would have long term divisive effect was the creation, by an act of parliament, of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). The government at that time wanted to deflect public

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Sullivan, *All Things to All People: ATSIC and Australia's international obligation to uphold indigenous self-determination*, in Patrick Sullivan (Ed.), *Shooting the Banker: Essays on ATSIC and Self-Determination*, North Australia Research Unit, ANU, Darwin, 1996. See also: *ATSIC: Flaws in the Machine*. [http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay\\_4.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essay_4.html)

attention from Hawke's backflip on Land Rights and defuse the resultant Aboriginal community anger. So, to get everyone talking about something else they had pulled the reconciliation rabbit out of the hat. The problem was, as Aboriginal activists pointed out, that this notion of reconciliation was not an issue that had emerged spontaneously from either the Indigenous or non-Indigenous communities, and was certainly not on the Indigenous political agenda.

It must be remembered that reconciliation, both as a concept and official national committee, was in the beginning an idea that came from white bureaucrats and politicians. The establishment of a formal and ongoing reconciliation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians had been the final recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. In response, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established under the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991 with the unanimous support of Federal Parliament.

Thus a Royal Commission that cost \$50million and was established by the Hawke government spawned yet another government-sponsored agency, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). The Hawke government was more than happy to create the Council because it diverted community attention from the miserable failure of the Royal Commission as well as the back down by Hawke on his 1983 promise of 'national uniform Land Rights legislation modelled on the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1974'.

Thus the issue and debate about reconciliation would divert and divide debate for the next two decades and beyond.

Unfortunately for the Hawke Government, these attempts to re-direct Aboriginal energies away from Bicentennial protest failed spectacularly when the biggest assembly of Aboriginal people in 50,000 years of Australian history was held peacefully in central Sydney in the heart of the Bicentennial celebrations. Two hundred years after the invasion the survivors of the

original Australians declared to the world that “We Have Survived” and that the struggle for justice continued.

### **Conclusion**

The international interest in the Australian indigenous struggle for justice, generated largely by the activists at the 1972 *Aboriginal Embassy* action, has continued to bedevil and embarrass subsequent Australian government’s attempts to downplay the issue in international forums. The *Embassy* should be regarded as the apex of the indigenous peoples struggle for justice in the twentieth century, and the moment that the world realized that Australia’s indigenous population had not all ‘died out’ as the assimilationist Australian Government propaganda had claimed, but rather had developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a highly sophisticated resistance struggle.

From 1972 until the 1990s this Indigenous political movement dominated debate on issues of race relations and justice in Australia, and it was not until the Mabo High Court decision and the subsequent and deeply flawed *Native Title Act*, as well as the advent of the extremely conservative Liberal Government of John Howard that the pendulum began to swing the other way. But ultimately the intense focus on indigenous affairs in Australia today can be traced back to the period between 1970 and 1972 when small groups of younger generation Aboriginal people educated themselves politically, and developed a movement that changed the course of Australian history. It is due to the efforts of this small anarchistic collective of activists largely operating in the growing urban slums of Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide, that Australia was forced to finally pay attention to the problems, needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal community. Whether, the ideas of the Black Power movement failed, or were ultimately subverted by the same class of bureaucrats and politicians who subverted the intent of the 1967 referendum, will be a matter of ongoing historic debate.

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