

Les Collins

As told to Jude Abbs

I was born and raised in Cherbourg and was influenced by many people — in particular my grandparents and parents. They told me of some of their experiences but not all — which I was to find out later in life when I lived in far north Queensland for some 11 years. When I recall my growing-up days on Cherbourg, though, I recall the way they were treated by authorities, particularly by the white superintendent who had absolute power. When I came down to Brisbane as a teenager, one of the things I did was go to Trittons to buy a stereo on hire purchase. I was asked whether I was an Aborigine and upon saying “Yes” was told that I had to get permission from the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA), as it was known in those days, to enter into a hire purchase agreement. I was 16 and an apprentice carpenter at the time. This seemed wrong to me as Des (the son of the white family I was staying with at the time) was able to buy things he wanted without having to get permission from the government.



Land rights march

Eva Bacon Collection, courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland

In 1969, I went to Sydney, basically to check it out and see what was there. It was there that my interest in getting involved in the Aboriginal struggle grew. In 1970 I returned to Brisbane, started a band and played at the Open Doors Club, 64 Turbot Street. We played Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Goori folk, and particularly youth, could go there and not be harassed. We had some really good times there, which I guess is evidenced by the fact that up to 400 people would turn up on a given night — uni students too.

In that same period, the Brisbane Tribal Council was taking a lead role in the struggle for Aboriginal peoples' rights. This is when I met up with Kawunji (Uncle Don Brady), Don Davidson, Steve Mam, Dennis Walker and Sam Watson. We had long and in-depth discussions about our rights, land rights, self-determination, our basic human rights, the inequalities Aboriginal people endured, and ways to address those concerns. We were at a loss to know why Australians generally were living 20+ years longer than us, given the advances in medicine and the services that were available (well ... in Brisbane anyway). One thing we discovered was that the state Health Department did not even keep data on Aboriginal people. How then, we asked, were they ever going to know what Aboriginal people were suffering from?

This discussion gave rise to the Brisbane chapter of the Black Panthers and the birth of some survival programs, as we called them back then. Those programs were services such as the Legal Service, Health Service and Housing Service. Other related programs and activities were developed, including the Black Theatre Company, Yelanji Pre-School, Emergency Child Care Service and the Pig-Patrols. Crucially though, we wanted to be able to exercise self-determination — make decisions for ourselves, take control and responsibility for our lives and address the injustices and suffering that was the Aboriginal experience.

One of the strategies (tactics, as we referred to them back then) was demonstrations. There were lots of occasions when we hit the streets. Two of the most memorable were in 1972 — both culminated in confrontations with the Queensland police outside the DAIA Office in George Street and the other in Adelaide Street as we were about to enter King George Square. In the early 1970s, we staged many demos — largely around land rights, the then Queensland *Aboriginal Act* and the *Torres Strait Islander Act*. We called this the 'Smash the Acts Campaign'. I also had some involvement in the 1982 Commonwealth Games demonstrations.