

Black Power in Redfern 1968 - 1972

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Let no one say the past is dead. The past is all about us and within.
Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) 1970

Introduction

On Australia Day 1973 Dr. Herbert Cole ("Nugget") Coombs, the Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Governor of the Reserve Bank and influential Government advisor to six Australian Prime Ministers, speaking at a University of Western Australia Summer School, declared that,

The emergence of what might be called an Aboriginal intelligentsia is taking place in Redfern and other urban centres. It is a politically active intelligentsia...I think they are the most interesting group to emerge from the political point of view in the whole of the Aboriginal community in Australia.^[2]

Coombs' view was shared by many with an intimate knowledge of the indigenous political movement of the day, but it was a view apparently not shared by the predominately male, non-indigenous Australian historians who have since written about that era. The antipathy of the historical and anthropological establishment toward the urban, militant activists of Redfern, Fitzroy and South Brisbane seems equaled only by an apparent lack of knowledge of events that occurred in these effectively 'closed' communities during the late 60s and early 70s. Attendant as a natural consequence of ignorance of the defining events of these communities, is the manner in which historians have trivialized, marginalized and dismissed the achievements and historical influence of the so-called Australian Black Power Movement.

Black Power was a political movement that emerged among African-Americans in the United States in the mid-1960s. The concept sought to express a new racial consciousness, and Robert Williams, of the NAACP, was the first to put the actual term to effective use in the late 1950s.^[3] Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael also had major roles in the formation of the ideas of Black Power. Malcolm X inspired a generation of black activists throughout America and beyond, whilst Carmichael 'made Black Power more popular, largely through his use of the term while reorganizing the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) so that whites would no longer possess leadership responsibilities.'^[4] The term was catapulted into the Australian imagination when the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) under the leadership of Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza who, galvanized by the same notions as Malcolm and Stokely, 1968 invited a Caribbean activist and academic, Dr. Roosevelt Brown, to give a talk on 'Black Power' in Melbourne.^[5] The initial result was frenzied media overreaction that was closely observed by younger activists in Brisbane and Sydney, thus the term came into use by a frustrated and impatient new indigenous political generation.

For the purpose of this essay I define the 'Black Power movement' as the loose coalition of individual young indigenous activists who emerged in Redfern, Fitzroy and South Brisbane in the period immediately after Charles Perkins' 'Freedom Ride' in 1965. In this thesis I am

particularly interested in the small group of individuals involved at the core of the Redfern 'Black Power movement', which existed under a variety of tags including the 'Black Caucus'.^[6] This group themselves defined the nature of the concept of Black Power that they espoused. Roberta (then Bobbi) Sykes said Australian Black Power had its own distinct (from US) interpretation. She said it was about 'the power generated by people who seek to identify their own problems and those of the community as a whole, and who strive to take action in all possible forms to solve those problems'^[7] Paul Coe saw it as the need for Aboriginal people 'to take control both of the economical, the political and cultural resources of the people and of the land...so that they themselves have got the power to determine their own future.'^[8] Bruce McGuinness, speaking in 1969 as Director of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) had declared that Black Power 'does not necessarily involve violence' but rather was 'in essence...that black people are more likely to achieve freedom and justice...by working together as a group.'^[9] So the Australian version of Black Power, like its American counterpart, was essentially about the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms, and to seek self-determination without white interference.

I contend that Australian historians who seek to analyze events of the more recent Mabo era cannot properly comprehend the shape and state of race relations today without an understanding of the dynamics, personalities and events of the era of Black Power. The events, ideas and personalities of that era continue to resonate in the indigenous political/cultural movements of today. A growing disillusionment in black Australia today with the apparent limitations of the Native Title Act and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) mirrors a similar community disaffection with Aboriginal organisations and leadership in the late 1960s. The disaffection then resulted in indigenous communities supporting more radical forms of action advocated by the Black Power movement. Thus there are important lessons to be learned from serious study of the events of that era.

Yet, apart from Scott Robinson (*The Aboriginal Embassy 1972*, MA Thesis, ANU, 1993) and Heather Goodall (*Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*, 1996) no Australian historians seem to have made a serious attempt to examine the long-term political, social and economic factors underlying the emergence of Black Power in Redfern. Only Margaret Ann Franklin (*Black and White Australians*, 1976), Andrew Marcus^[10] and Bain Attwood^[11] seem to have shown some interest in the era, but then only relatively superficially and in the context of the wider story of the 60s and 70s. Peter Read wanders around the subject of Black Power in his biography of Charles Perkins,^[12] but because his focus is on Perkins he is deficient in his understanding of the younger generation that superseded the relatively conservative notions of Perkins. Bennett (*Aborigines and Political Power*, 1991.) and Griffiths (*Aboriginal Affairs: A Short History 1788 - 1995*, 1995) on the other hand are openly hostile to Black Power. So it is some of the gaps that exist in the work of Robinson, Goodall, Franklin, Marcus, Griffiths, Read, Attwood, Bennett et al that I seek to fill in this thesis.

In doing this I firstly have the problem facing any indigenous person in the academy trying to give an accurate account of historical events within conventional Western academic

constraints and as a linear narrative.[13] But, as Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her book *Decolonising Methodologies* has asserted,

a critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as indigenous peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to rewriting and righing our position in history...The sense of history conveyed by these approaches is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other. [14]

So this analysis of the Black Power movement in Redfern must be read in the context of an indigenous academic attempting to reconstruct our understanding of the important moments, influences, events and personalities of that period. As a participant in most of the events discussed, I have both the advantage of first hand knowledge and the disadvantage of the constraints imposed by the inherent subjectivity of such a position, not to mention the unreliability of memory. Nevertheless, I intend to provide a narrative of three of the important defining moments in the emergence of Black Power as a seminal political force in indigenous politics in Australia.

These events were; the 1970 establishment of the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service; the 1971 Springbok rugby tour; and the Aboriginal Embassy in 1972. These three events helped define the ideas, personalities, actions and alliances that formed the Redfern Black Power movement, which in turn influenced indigenous political notions and actions for more than a decade. Indeed, today as significant sections of indigenous communities become disaffected with the illusions of progress represented by the era of Mabo and the Native Title Act, many are beginning to call for a return to the political strategies and tactics of the Black Power era. Thus there is a considerable residual perception in indigenous Australia that remembers the Black Power era as a time of greater social, political and economic gains than at any time since.

In the course of a narrative of these events I challenge assumptions and interpretations of those few Australian historians and commentators who have proffered an opinion or analysis of the era. In challenging false impressions created by less detailed accounts I hope to give greater insight into the significance of the ideas and philosophies of the Black Power era, from an indigenous perspective. Furthermore, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts, 'indigenous groups have argued that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization.'[15]

Historical Background

Since the 1860s, as the Aboriginal peoples in regional areas of southeastern Australia experienced the spread of the white invasion and forcible occupation of their homelands, there can be said to have been significant resistance, both passive and active. Goodall notes that in NSW from the beginning of black/white contact 'Land was seen by its Aboriginal owners as a central factor in their experience of colonialism. Their sense of invasion, of loss and

deprivation of land was expressed clearly and unarguably'.^[16] Land continued to be at the heart of Aboriginal concerns and protest over many decades, and many disputes were conducted at a very localised level. By the 1920s a self-educated former drover who had been active in the Waterside Worker's Federation during the first World War, Fred Maynard, had set up the Australian Aboriginal Progress Association (AAPA).^[17] The AAPA, officially launched in February 1925, was the 'first Aboriginal political organisation to create formal links between communities over a wide area'.^[18] Whilst it could be argued that a strong Christian influence moderated the actions of the AAPA, a more important aspect of its history is the role it played in planting political seeds that flowered in future generations of indigenous political leaders in southeastern Australia.^[19]

One of the early all-Aboriginal political organisations was the Australian Aborigines League, established by William Cooper, Doug Nichols, Bill and Eric Onus and others in early 1936 in Melbourne.^[20] Membership was open to all Aborigines and the aims of the group were 'to gain for Aboriginal people those civil and human rights denied since occupation'.^[21] This was one of the first significant attempts by a group of Koori political activists to try and assert control over their own destinies, although other dedicated groups emerged around then including Bill Ferguson and Jack Patten's Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), founded in 1937.^[22] The Australian Aborigines League never became more than a regional organisation, effectively functioning only in south-east Australia, although key members traveled far and wide throughout Australia in the 1930s to 1960s making contacts, compiling information and politically organising. However, Patten and Ferguson joined up with William Cooper, along with Marge Tucker, Doug Nichols and Pearl Gibbs to mount the famous 1938 'Day of Mourning'. This idea, inspired by Cooper, was described by Goodall as a 'brilliantly symbolic plan...recognised as a turning point in capturing white attention'.^[23] These were difficult and tough times for Aboriginal political organisers because of the range of restrictive and discriminatory state laws that controlled the movement of indigenous people.

Just how tough it could be was demonstrated by the protracted dispute at Cummeragunja which began in 1937 and in part prompted William Cooper's disillusionment and idea for a protest at the sesqui-centenary celebrations the following year. Aboriginal residents had at first sought William Cooper's assistance over grievances with the Protection Board manager. When Cooper's moderate tactics of petitioning the NSW Protection Board failed, the community turned to former Cummeragunja resident Jack Patten who, on Friday 3rd February 1939, was arbitrarily arrested when he addressed the people on the reserve. Two thirds of the residents immediately packed up and crossed the Murray River into Victoria and thus withdrew their labour from the NSW Protection Board. This action has been described as, 'perhaps the first direct political action taken by Aboriginal people which lay outside the guideline offered by the established system'.^[24] The same author points out the vital importance the Cummeragunja strike in terms of its,

profound effect on the thinking of [the] Aboriginal people involved, despite its lack of short-term success. Former Cummeragunja residents who moved to Melbourne in the

1940s and 50s had learned a valuable lesson on the intransigence of the white bureaucracy and the possibility of direct and united Aboriginal action. These people and their sons and daughters became part of the core of activists who were to take a much more radical line in the Aboriginal movement for self-determination in the late 1960s. [25]

But in the short term, the Cummeragunja Strike had taken the wind out of the sails of most of the southeastern Aboriginal organisations which had failed, despite concerted campaigns, to win the battle of wills and despite the 'Day of Mourning', William Cooper's more conservative approach seemed discredited. It is significant that the children of the Cummeragunja exiles were among those most attracted to the more direct action tactics of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s.[26]

Goodall notes that 'political organization of all types was constrained in the conservative atmosphere of Menzies' post-war Australia.'^[27] Nevertheless, in February 1958 twenty-five people representing eight organisations, met in Adelaide and formed the first national Aboriginal organisation, The Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA). Of the twenty-five people who were at the meeting, only three (Bert Groves, Doug Nicholls and Jeff Barnes) were Aboriginal. As the organisation grew the dominance of non-indigenous people on its governing committee became entrenched, and even as it changed its name at its Easter conference in 1964, there were rumblings of Aboriginal discontent at lack of indigenous control.^[28] But in NSW the focus remained on local struggles usually over issues of land, segregation and discrimination until 1965. Then, former soccer-player and student at University of Sydney, Charles Perkins, decided to emulate similar action by the American civil rights movement as he sought to expose the level of segregation and racism rampant in NSW at the time.^[29]

In February 1965 Perkins and Reverend Ted Noffs of the Wayside Chapel organised a "Freedom Ride" with 30 white Sydney University students from the group Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA).^[30] He took SAFA on a bus ride into some of NSW's most notoriously racist country towns. They were pelted with eggs and rotten fruit when they tried to desegregate the Moree swimming pool and such was the level of violent response they encountered that the hired bus driver left the tour halfway through out of fear.^[31] But the resultant publicity resounded around the world and exposed the vicious nature of Australian racism in an unprecedented way. As Adam Shoemaker described it,

Internationally inspired, a 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, for the first time, 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. [32]

Sydney Black Power and the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service

The Freedom Ride had the effect of inspiring a young generation of Koori political activists in southeast Australia to stand up for their rights. Paul Coe and his sister Isobel had grown up on Erambie Mission in Cowra, Gary Williams and Gary Foley at Nambucca Heads, Billy and Lyn Craigie at Moree, Keith Smith at Nowra, Bob and Sol Belleair at Tweed Heads and Michael Anderson in Walgett. Lyall Munro had been inspired by the Freedom Ride when it passed through his home town, and he later said the experience enabled him to see 'the power of direct action that day in Moree.'^[33] All of these young people had then been part of the significant Aboriginal migration to the city that had occurred during the 60s. As Gale wrote in 1975,

...Aborigines continue to move out of their isolation into the mainstream of Australian city life...[they] are no longer willing to accept the lowest position in the socio-economic scale...This resurgence of Aboriginal identity has led to a change in the patterns of race relations in this country...^[34]

Whilst a few like Coe and Williams had matriculated, the majority having had a better education than their parents, had nevertheless dropped out of school very early. More often than not this was because the education system itself was perceived by Aboriginal youth as a part of the system that oppressed them. Paul Coe spoke of the 'isolation of the black kid going through the present education system' in which they were 'forced to aspire towards lower middle class values' and 'conditioned to uphold and try to keep white material values.'^[35] Furthermore, at that time school 'histories, encyclopedias and other popular works, informed by social evolutionary ideas, represented Aborigines as primitive and passive people.'^[36] Thus, these young Aboriginal immigrants from the rural areas of NSW and beyond, in part saw themselves as people who rejected the racist tenets of the 'Assimilation Policy' in the education system as it existed at that time.

Coe himself had come from Erambie mission in Cowra and a long tradition of family and tribal resistance, and as Peter Read pointed out in his book on the Wiradjuri people, A Hundred Years War,

Paul's father Les had been one of the fiercest opponents of managerial rule and his mother Agnes is the chairperson of the Wiradjuri Cultural Committee. Paul's grandfather was the third of the trio who had refused to sign its agreement to the Manager's entry regulations on Erambie Station in 1955. ^[37]

In time, like most Koori arrivals from the bush at that time, they began to congregate around the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs (FAA), a social/welfare centre established by community leaders like Charles Perkins, Ken Brindle, wharfies Chicka Dixon and Jack Hassan and boxers Roy Carrol and Teddy Rainbow. The FAA had set up premises in an old funeral parlour at 810 George Street, near Central Railway Station,^[38] and by 1968 had become the major social congregation point for the increasing number of young arrivals from the bush and more established Koori city-dwellers. It was at the social functions held by the FAA that most of the later Black Power movement met each other and began to discuss the events of the day.^[39] Many had participated in the campaign for the 1967 referendum and had respected

and supported and Charlie Perkins and Ken Brindle in the Gurindji campaign and various actions through 1967 - 69. As a result by their late teens they had developed a relatively sophisticated knowledge and understanding of politics and political methodology from old hands like Brindle, Perkins, Shirley "Mum Shirl" Smith, Faith Bandler, Bert Groves, Chicka Dixon, Dulcie Flowers and others.

Further, they came to sense themselves as the inheritors of a long tradition of political struggle as they met and conversed with aging legends of the indigenous struggle such as Bill Onus, Jack Patton, Bert Groves and Frank Roberts. By 1968 a small discussion group emerged that at times comprised of Paul Coe, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorie, John Newfong, Alana and Samantha Doolan, Lyn Craigie and husband Peter Thompson, Bob and Kaye Belleair, Naomi Mayers, Gary Williams, Norma Williams, Pam Hunter, Isobel Coe and others.[40] This group, at the behest of Coe and Williams, began consuming all they could of the political literature of the day. Paul Coe was a strong critic of what he perceived as, '...too many white liberals running black affairs. Nothing will get done until young blacks take the initiative.'[41] To a man and woman these young Kooris had come to the city in the previous five years, and all agreed with Coe when he observed, 'In the country racism is blatant, In the city it is more subtle. But the result is the same'.[42] These sentiments and the way they were vehemently expressed by Coe resonated deeply with the other young blacks. They may not have been as articulate as Coe, but they strongly related to what he was talking about. At that time, as Roberta Sykes noted, the streets were regarded as 'our only true meeting place'.[43]

It should be remembered that this was a time of exciting social and political upheaval in Australia and the rest of the world. The late 1960s saw student rebellion in Paris, riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago and the emergence of the American Black Power movement. In both America and Australia demonstrations against the War in Vietnam brought together elements of black and white political activists. In Sydney people like Paul Coe, Gary Williams and Gary Foley were starting to encounter new people and new ideas. Goodall describes these as 'diverse groupings of young people who sometimes called themselves "New Left", but who might just as well associate themselves in Australia with the anarchist, libertarian traditions'. They were 'influenced by the anti-colonial movements in India and Africa' and writers like Franz Fanon, Jean Paul Satre and Camus.[44]

Within that context, the young disaffected Aborigines of inner city Sydney set about to raise their level of political awareness. One thing that accelerated their international awareness had been the sudden influx in the late 60s of American servicemen on R&R (Rest and Recuperation) leave in Sydney. A significant number of these were the African-American troops who some said were America's cannon fodder in Vietnam. These troops often gravitated toward the Sydney Black community in Redfern seeking solace from the prevalent white racism of Sydney. Consequently, the young indigenous activists became exposed to the latest developments in racial politics in America, and were provided by Black GI's with some of the latest in African-American political literature and music.

The young Kooris were acutely conscious of the strong sense of alienation and injustice, and the hostility toward white authority that they had in common with many of these African-American servicemen.[45] Another reason why the young Redfern activists came to focus on the USA was because at that time there was very little available in the form of good political literature for them to study. Very little being written at that time about the historical situation of Australia was of use to them because of the 'British' nature of that material.

Furthermore, only one bookshop in Sydney sold the type of material they were after. This was the Third World Bookshop, run by Bob Gould, an anarchic Sydney left wing identity. It was from Gould's bookshop that the Redfern activists began acquiring their reading matter, at first by the simple and expedient way of theft, and later when Gould agreed to provide the group with whatever books they wanted, gratis. The bulk of the relevant literature that Gould had related to the African-American political struggle, and so the Redfern activists began consuming the works of Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver and Angela Davis. But, as Goodall reminds us, it is also important to remember that in 1969 these Redfern activists 'were just as aware of the seizure of Alcatraz by Vine Deloria Jr as they were of the Panthers'...and Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee was as widely read as Soul on Ice.[46]

But, as Tatz said, 'the ambiguities in Aboriginal life would fill volumes',[47] and when the high expectations created by the 1967 referendum were dashed by government inaction, the younger activists felt a strong sense of betrayal and cynicism at the more non-confrontationist methods and tactics of the older generation. All the effort that respected political leaders like Faith Bandler, Ken Brindle, Perkins and others seemed to amount to nothing. To the impatient young firebrands who were contending on a nightly basis with confrontations with NSW police, including the notorious and brutal 21 Division, the apparent lack of progress meant more effective methods had to be considered. As Kath Walker put it at the time,

Looking back, the only major improvement has been the 93% 'Yes' vote of the referendum of May 1967; but this improvement did not benefit the black Australians though it eased the guilty conscience of white Australians in this country and overseas. It can be regarded therefore as a victory for white Australians who formed a coalition with black Australians. Black Australians must be seen as stooges for white Australians working in the interest of white Australians. [48]

Thus it seemed to the young radicals that the old style organisations that had fought the referendum campaign were ineffective, especially after the referendum had delivered so little in terms of real reforms on the ground. On the streets of Redfern young Kooris were confronted on a daily basis with the brutal reality of dealing with a racist and corrupt NSW police force. Paul Coe was motivated in his early activism by outrage at the police murder of his cousin Pat Wedge.[49] The same police killing had triggered a major controversy about the gaoling of Ken Brindle when he demanded details of the death from police, thus the young blacks from Redfern had much about which to be aggrieved, and good reason to feel that no progress was being made. As Peter Read observed,

Here was the shared experience of Aboriginality. Here was the point of intersection.

Foley was arrested at Central station about this time on a trumped up charge. Brindle was beaten up by Redfern police. Perkins was arrested in Alice Springs after he had rung up police to complain about a publican. What the Sydney Aborigines...understood intuitively...was the brutal reality of Aboriginal daily life. [50]

Furthermore, Chicka Dixon had said that he spent most of his teens in gaols but that he was 'lucky enough' to get an education in them. He said, 'It says something about Australian society when a black man has to go to gaol to get an education'.^[51] Because of the degree of daily confrontation with police in Redfern, it should be of no surprise that the young radicals came to decide that the issue of Police harassment and intimidation should be tackled.

Parallel developments in the relatively politically sophisticated Koori community in Fitzroy, Melbourne, had seen the emergence of the term "Black Power". It began when the Aborigines Advancement League's Chairman, Bob Maza, and the organisation's first Koori Director, Bruce McGuinness, invited Caribbean political activist, Dr Roosevelt Brown to a conference at the League in March 1969.^[52] Brown clashed verbally with Pastor Doug Nichols and the Melbourne media had a field day, as the official AAL history states, the clash was to 'provide the Press with the fuel for an hysterical outburst on the dangers of Black Power...(which) was interpreted by the Press to be the equivalent to violent revolution and the establishment of black dictatorships.'^[53] These ructions led to Pastor Doug Nichols resigning from the League in October 1969 and a subsequent push by the new leadership under McGuinness and Maza to remove all non-Koori members of the organisation from positions of power. This was resisted by the white supporters within the AAL, as the official AAL history records,

After fifteen years of operation, seven of them with an autonomous Aboriginal branch, one could be forgiven for wondering why the Aborigines Advancement League was not ready for black direction. It would be easy to criticise those white League members who controlled the day-today running of the organisation for not ensuring that Aborigines were able to take over the operation of the AAL, and no doubt there was at least a hint of paternalism in their unwillingness to concede that Aborigines were ready and able to take over from them. [54]

Opposition to the new notions of black assertiveness being developed came from some of the older, more conservative sections of the indigenous movement, predictably including QLD President of the assimilationist One People of Australia League (OPAL), Neville Bonner, who wrote to the Brisbane Courier Mail, 'OPAL disassociates itself from Mrs. Kath Walker's disruptive brand of Black Power, that which used solely as a disruptive tactic.'^[55] But the Redfern/Fitzroy "Black Power" groups were conscious of the "winds of change" sweeping through Africa and other parts of the colonised world and saw themselves and the Koori situation in the context of de-colonization.^[56] Consequently one of their major slogans was 'self-reliance' which meant they were dedicated to creating a new form of Koori community organisation; one which was first and foremost Aboriginal-controlled.^[57]

It was only natural that the young Koori activists would look more closely at recent events in the United States where the civil rights movement was caught up in the same cathartic process. As Max Griffiths said, 'the success of Black political activism in the USA provided a stimulus and a model for the more militant urban Aborigines'^[58] and Scott Robinson observed,

'The Black American experience was the most profound exogenous influence on Aboriginal political activism in the 1960s.'^[59] In America, black communities had become disillusioned at the pace of change under the old conservative, passive, Christian leadership of Martin Luther King and a younger generation of activists sought direct confrontation. Many historians and commentators dismiss or denigrate the effect Black Power had on Aboriginal Australia. Scott Bennett in one breath disparages Black Power for its 'stridency' and connotations of violence (connoted by whom). He then states that the Aboriginal Embassy 'seems to have been a far more effective medium for presenting the Aboriginal case than merely calling for the white-threatening Black Power.'^[60] Bennett seems oblivious to the fact that it was the Black Power movement that created and controlled the Aboriginal Embassy!

The young Kooris of Redfern saw striking similarities in the American experience and their own communities. They began to adopt and adapt the strategies and tactics they were reading and hearing about in America. Thus when Redfern activists pondered the problem of police harassment in their own community, they were drawn to consider methods adopted by a group called the Black Panther Party of America, operating in the San Francisco suburb of Oakland, California. This was a scenario that had been predicted older activist Chicka Dixon. In 1967 he had argued for 'hostels for Aborigines because of this mass migration of teenagers from the river banks to Sydney' and pointed out that an 'explosion point was coming'. He said that, 'it's quite certain that there are going to be race riots. There is no doubt in my mind that something has got to give.'^[61]

The American Black Panther Party for Self-Defense's early program called the 'Pig Patrol' attracted the interest of the Redfern group. In the Oakland ghetto a situation existed regarding police harassment and intimidation that seemed to the Australian young radicals to be very similar to their experience in Redfern. Panther leader Huey P. Newton's response to the Oakland situation had been to research California law and ascertain that it was legal for citizens to carry firearms as long as the weapons were not concealed. Armed with this legal loophole, Newton then armed the Panther's with guns and set out to 'defend the black community'.^[62] In the US experience, this tactic of direct, armed confrontation with police resulted ultimately in the leadership of the Panthers being decimated, but this did not deter the Redfern group.

The basic Panther idea of a patrol to monitor police activity seemed to the group to be a good one. It was felt that by monitoring and keeping a record of police harassment of the community they might be able to build a solid database of information that they might then use politically to alleviate the situation. Thus the information gathering began one Saturday night in 1969 when young activists including Coe, Williams, Billy & Lyn Craigie, Foley and others began observing and collecting information on the regular police raids against the Koori pub the Empress Hotel in Redfern.^[63] About the same time the Redfern activists were developing and extending contacts with similar young indigenous groups in Melbourne and Brisbane.

At the 1968 FCAATSI Conference in Canberra, members of the Redfern group had encountered Kath and Denis Walker and Don Brady from Brisbane and Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza for the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne. Both the Victorian and QLD groups had since visited Sydney and strong friendships developed between the three groups, largely based on an almost identical political philosophy centred on indigenous Self-Determination and economic independence. The means by which this was to be achieved was through Land Rights and the method was direct confrontation. These were the ideas that bonded the different groups from a diverse range of historical circumstances together. Additionally, numerous other individuals from all parts of Australia drifted to Redfern to see what was happening. Some, like Roberta Sykes and Naomi Mayers stayed and became involved, whilst others, like Colin (Black Mac) MacDonald of South Australia and Black Allen Murawulla from Western Australia, came and absorbed and travelled on to pass the word.

Roberta Sykes remembered that she first met Denis Walker on Evelyn Scott's verandah in Townsville where he told her, 'Sydney's where the action will happen. There are many young Blacks working there...It's lots closer to Canberra, we have to put pressure on federal politicians to honour the referendum.'^[64] In Redfern, the activists monitoring of the police had resulted in increased attention from the police toward the activists. The notorious NSW Police squad, the 21 Division, originally created in the 1930s as an early form of paramilitary unit to deal with the Darlinghurst "Razor Gangs" of that era, suddenly began a presence in Redfern and the level of police harassment of the community increased. The police Crime Surveillance Unit secretly compiled a dossier on the "Black Power Group" in which detailed information on key activists was combined with the records of Aboriginal bank robbers to accentuate the implied criminality of the group. The document, which was distributed to all police stations in NSW, called on all districts to be alert for any of the people named in the dossier and that their presence and activities should be immediately reported to the central office of the Crime Surveillance Unit in Sydney.^[65] Sykes says of this period, 'the group of community activists who were in the process of setting up a range of services to the Black community had, of course, attracted the attention of ASIO and the police.'^[66]

At this time activists in Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane also reported increased police surveillance and harassment, and individual responses to this more intense attention varied. In the case of Black Power leaders Bruce McGuinness and Denis Walker, the reaction was defiance, but in the case of some, like a young Marcia Langton, the early 'heat' was too much. In Langton's own words she states,

...on learning from a newspaper article entitled 'Black Power in Brisbane' that the police Criminal Investigations Branch were searching for 'a group of radicals', I took my young son, Benjamin, and left town.'^[67]

Langton fled overseas for five years and her dramatic and abrupt departure meant that she was to miss the most exciting and dynamic era in modern indigenous history. The irony was that the Brisbane police were in fact much more interested in the Black Panther Party being formulated by Denis Walker, and which Langton had no real association with. Nevertheless, back in Redfern, within a matter of months Koori activists collected extensive evidence of

arbitrary arrests, beatings, wrongful imprisonment and other serious allegations. As Paul Coe had in the interim began his studies in Law at University of NSW; the activists enlisted the support of Professor J. H. Wooten, the conservative Dean of the Law Faculty to their cause.[68]

With the support and assistance of Professor Wooten the Redfern group set about to try and replicate the idea of shop front legal aid in Redfern. Early white lawyer recruits Eddie Newman and Peter Tobin assisted in the recruitment of solicitors and barristers willing to do volunteer work once a month or fortnight. John Russell and people from South Sydney Community Aid helped to locate and secure a vacant shop in Regent Street in the heart of the Black community. A community working bee transformed the shop into a law office and early in 1970 Australia's first free, shop-front, legal aid centre opened its doors for business.[69]

On 29 December 1970 the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. William Wentworth, announced a \$20,000 grant (and thereby formal Commonwealth recognition) for the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service, which he described as the 'first of its kind in Australia'.[70] The establishment of the Redfern ALS was to create a resurgence of pan-Aboriginal nationalism as a surge of confidence swept through the Aboriginal community in Sydney. For the first time Aboriginal people were being represented in Sydney courts and were defending charges brought against them by Police.

The Springbok Tour 1971

On 26 June 1971 the South African Springbok rugby union team arrived in Perth for the beginning of a tumultuous six week tour of Australia which would not only divide the nation on the issue of race, but would also have a profound effect on the indigenous political movement. As the South African footballers stepped off their plane in Perth, on the other side of the country the Redfern Aboriginal activists had already developed strong connections with the leaders of the Anti-Apartheid Movement(AAM). The convenors of AAM were Meredith Burgmann, Peter McGregor and Denis Freney, and all three had become friends of various members of the Redfern Black Power group.

Burgmann was to later spend time at Wattie Creek with the Gurindji's at the behest of Frank Hardy,[71] and Freney had already written many articles for the Communist Party (CPA) newspaper Tribune about the situation in Redfern and indigenous issues in general. Furthermore, as Freney points out, 'much of the planning for our activities took place at Meredith's house in Glebe'[72] which was a house also frequented by Williams, Coe and Foley, and also where the Redfern group met people such as Heather Goodall and Sekai Holland. Sekai is a Zimbabwean woman who had a profound impact on the AAM in Australia and who had been instrumental in AAM members being encouraged to take more notice of the indigenous Australian struggle. Sekai is today very prominent in Zimbabwe as an opposition

leader against Robert Mugabe. Aboriginal and Islander people in Brisbane provided protection for Sekai when Nazi activists had threatened her.[73] Freney and other members of the CPA also had close connections with some of the Redfern activists through Tribune photographer Noel Hazard teaching Foley photographic processing[74] and Builder's Labourers Federation (BLF) leaders Jack Munday, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens strong political support for the indigenous cause. Thus there were already strong links developing between the Redfern radicals and the Sydney Left.

The twelve months of 1971 were to be the most dramatic in recent indigenous history as a series of events and actions rocked the Australian government and significantly strengthened the emerging Black Power movement in Redfern. The tour of the South African Springboks was but one of the events of that year that impacted on the Redfern group, others included the release from gaol of Aboriginal poet, playwright and political activist Kevin Gilbert. In July 1971 the Aboriginal Medical Service of Redfern opened its doors and gave life to the political philosophies of the Black Power movement. As a self-help project, conceived, created and controlled by indigenous people, it personified the ideals of the young Redfern radicals who had created it. The Gove land rights case was handed down in the NT High Court effectively denying Aboriginal rights to land.[75] So 1971 was to be an exciting and intense year for the young radicals of Redfern.

But the greatest single event that enamoured the Sydney Left to the Redfern activists was the day Paul Coe gave a speech at the biggest of the Anti-Vietnam Moratorium rallies at the Sydney Stadium. Denis Freney described it as 'a brilliant speech, perhaps the best I've ever heard',[76] whilst Meredith Burgmann described it as the 'mother-fuckers speech'.[77] Coe criticized the protestors for being prepared to turn out en masse in support the oppressed people of all other countries but Australia. Coe said, 'You raped our women, you stole our land, you massacred our ancestors, you destroyed our culture, and now - when we refused to die out as you expected - you want to kill us with your hypocrisy...'.[78] This speech made many of the leading lights of the Sydney Left sit up and take notice of what was happening in their own backyard of Redfern and Black Australia. Freney said that Coe's speech that night represented 'the birth of black militancy', which in some ways for the white Left in Australia, it was.

On the eve of the arrival of the South African's in Australia, two events that would be of significance to indigenous Australia occurred, one of a positive nature the other negative. On 10 June one of Australia's most famous Aboriginal prisoners, Kevin Gilbert, was released after fourteen years in gaol. His art, poetry and plays had rehabilitated him in the eyes of white society, but he was to remain on license until 1976 and thus whilst becoming an important background political player was inhibited from participating in actions beyond the limits of his parole conditions.[79] In an ironic and stark contrast, in Europe at the same time in June 1971, an eminent Aboriginal tennis player, Evonne Goolagong, was asked by a SMH reporter whether she would play tennis in South Africa again since anti-apartheid demonstrators were threatening to target her. She replied, "Oh yes, if they invite me. They treat you so well over

there. They really look after you." Did she see no oppression of black people? "No, I saw no misery. I didn't really think about that. I was just playing tennis."^[80]

When the South African Springbok rugby team arrived in Sydney on 4 July 1971, the local Redfern activists were already intensively involved in the planning of actions against them. The location of Sydney motel where the Springboks were to stay had been kept secret by the authorities. But by a remarkable stroke of luck it turned out to be the Squire Inn, which was virtually next door to the communal 'Black Power' house that the Redfern activists had established in Bondi Junction to escape intense police attention in Redfern. Meredith Burgmann remembered, 'We used the place in Everleigh Street as a sort of springboard for so much of the activity for the month or so that the Springboks were in the Squire Inn'.^[81] So the Bondi Junction commune was thrown open to become a virtual headquarters of the protest vigils being maintained at the Squire Inn.

Also, a former Australian rugby player, Jim Boyce, who had played in South Africa in 1963 and had been horrified by what he had seen of the apartheid system and by 1971 was a committed anti-apartheid activist, approached the Redfern activists through Sekai Holland. Boyce had some genuine Springbok football jerseys that he provided to Paul Coe, Billy Craigie, Gary Foley, Tony Coorey and Gary Williams. He later said, 'in wearing the jerseys, I believe they made a valid point - in South Africa you would never see a black man wearing a Springbok jersey'.^[82] Indeed, on the first occasion the Kooris wore the jerseys outside the Springboks motel two of them were immediately apprehended by NSW Special Branch officers who had thought the activists had somehow stolen them from the visiting South African team. Craigie and Foley were hustled into the Squire Inn where the NSW police paraded them before a distinctly uncomfortable group of Springboks and asked from whom had the jerseys been stolen. It rapidly became apparent that the jerseys were genuine but weren't stolen, and the red-faced Special Branch officers were forced to eject Foley and Craigie from the Squire Inn. Paul Coe later told London Times correspondent Stewart Harris that,

..we were told by a plain clothes detective that the jersey we were wearing was a national symbol and that people in the hotel found it offensive that we should be dressed this way. The detective warned us to take off our jerseys or we would be charged under the NSW Summary Offences Act. ^[83]

This was one of the few occasions when security was breached during the tour and protestors were able to confront the Springboks face to face, and it was all courtesy of a mistake by NSW Special Branch. Furthermore the Australian reported that up until that point of the tour the South African rugby players had displayed indifference toward the anti-apartheid protestors, but had "showed the most obvious agitation" when "Gary Foley turned up at their Sydney motel in a South African football jersey". The newspaper went on to say that South African rugby supporters, "...revere their jersey as Australians do the Digger's slouch hat. No coloured man is permitted to wear the green and gold on a football field."^[84]

Soon after, in other moves to embarrass the South Africans, Ken Brindle, in his capacity as

secretary of the all-Aboriginal Redfern All-Blacks rugby league team, demanded that the South African Rugby Union invite his team to South Africa.^[85] Gary Williams visited the South African Airways office in Sydney and attempted to buy a ticket to Johannesburg and Gary Foley was photographed outside the Springboks hotel with a placard that read, "Pardon me for being born into a nation of racists". In Brisbane during the Springbok visit, Denis Walker's mentor Pastor Don Brady ("the Punching Pastor") held a service outside the South African's hotel, only to be subjected to a tirade of abuse in Afrikaans from the balcony.^[86] Aboriginal political activists were making great political capital out of the tour. Paul Coe said that the tour was 'the best thing that's happened for a long time because it's made Australians realise just how racist their country is.' ^[87]

One of those who was reminded was Charles Perkins who attended the Canberra game and was pelted with rubbish, called a 'Dirty nigger' , 'Black bastard' and told, 'Go back to Africa where you belong'. In a letter to the Australian Perkins bemoaned, 'I really thought that white people in this country had come closer together in the past ten years.'^[88] For another eminent indigenous Australian the Springbok tour and attention on South African race policies bought a different sort of problem. Tennis player Evonne Goolagong, who had earlier accepted 'honorary white' status to play tennis on the all-white tennis circuit in South Africa, now found herself the target of anti-Apartheid demonstrators in London as she was on the verge of her first Wimbledon win in July 1971.^[89]

Indigenous activists Kath Walker, Denis Walker, Liela Watson, Don Brady and others took a high profile role in anti-Springbok tour activities in Brisbane where eccentric, right wing Premier Jo Bjelke-Peterson had imposed a State of Emergency to protect the South African rugby visitors.^[90] Kath, Denis and Pastor Don Brady provocatively dined with poet Judith Wright at the Springbok's Brisbane hotel, whilst Leila Watson and other Brisbane activists took a leading role in Brisbane demonstrations. In Melbourne more than 200 people were arrested in what the Australian newspaper described as a 'riot' and race issues were suddenly at the forefront of political debate.^[91] In all centres the Springbok footballers played there would be a small group of indigenous people among the anti-apartheid protesters, thus attention was being drawn to the parallels between South African and Australian racial policies. At the same time bonds began to develop between black and white activists and a greater mutual understanding blossomed.

By the time the South African rugby team left Australia, the product of the Redfern group's high profile involvement in the anti-apartheid demonstrations was a desire to keep up the momentum and now confront issues of race in Australia's back yard. On 22nd July 1971 the Sydney Morning Herald reported that British anti-apartheid activist Peter Hain (today a Minister in the British Government) had called for 'immediate international action' to 'put pressure on the Australian government to improve the Aborigines status in society'.^[92] Ironically, one month later Yvonne Goolagong arrived back home after winning Wimbledon and was given a motorcade through the streets of Sydney. Beside the front-page SMH report of her triumphant return was a report from America on the death of US black

activist George Jackson in a prison shoot-out at San Quentin.^[93] It was a bizarre juxtaposition reflecting the schizophrenic nature of Australian race relations at that moment in history.

Then, in December 1971, just months after the departure of the springboks, members of the anti-apartheid movement, in conjunction with the Gurindji Campaign called for a march against racism and left the organising of the march to the Redfern Black Power group.^[94] In the subsequent march, outside the old Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in George Street, police attacked the marchers and in the subsequent melee, among those arrested was Laurie Aarons, secretary of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). This raised insinuations of Communist influence on the Aboriginal movement, but it should be remembered that Communist writer Denis Freney always said that he wondered just who was using who when it came to the Redfern radicals constant demands for resources and support.^[95] Nevertheless, the scene was now set for the Black Power group's greatest coup.

The Aboriginal Embassy 1972

In the wake of the demonstrations in Sydney the Redfern activists began seriously linking up with like-minded groups in other southeastern states. Gary Foley was invited to Adelaide to assist in the establishment of an ALS and whilst staying at the home of Australia's first Communist QC, Elliot Johnston, he met a young Northern Territory artist named Harold Thomas. They became friends and in the course of helping to organise a Land Rights rally in Adelaide they collaborated in the design of a new symbol for the Aboriginal movement. When Foley took Thomas' design back to the eastern states it quickly gained acceptance and became the most recognizable symbol of indigenous Australia today, the Aboriginal Flag. Further demonstrations followed in Brisbane and Sydney and Melbourne. The resultant publicity made it seem as though Aborigines were revolting in four states, and with the Gurindji struggle and land battles at Lake Tyers in Victoria and Yirrikala in the Northern Territory, a hapless Prime Minister William McMahon dithered in formulating a response.

Whilst the Prime Minister vacillated the external political pressure increased with the Australian newspaper in an editorial titled 'Aboriginals a problem' demanded 'imagination and leadership' on the issue and stated, 'the time is well overdue for Australia to be brought into the Seventies'.^[96] Also during January indigenous activists continued to grab front-page headlines with 'Black Power activist' Michael Anderson confronting Evonne Goolagong at Kooyong,^[97] and on the 19th January Denis Walker announced in Brisbane that he had formed the first Black Panther Party in Australia.^[98]

Eventually a hapless, besieged Prime Minister decided to make his major policy statement on Aboriginal Affairs on the 25th January, the day before the national day. To make his statement so close to what the indigenous people regard as Invasion Day was to be seen as a very provocative move, and it was inevitable that regardless of what he had to say the Black Power movement would, in the inimitable words of Denis Walker, 'deliver some sort of

consequence!'^[99]

In his statement, which was titled, *Australian Aboriginals - Commonwealth Policy and Achievements*, Prime Minister McMahon stated,

When the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory decided on April 22 last year that Australian law did not recognise Aboriginal title to land in Australia, the Government decided to review its policy relating to the Aboriginal people and their aspirations.^[100]

He indirectly acknowledged the political campaign of the radicals by referring to the , changing conditions in the seventies and a greater awareness of Aboriginal wishes' which had 'made necessary a restatement' of government policy.^[101] He said the resultant review had decided to 'create general purpose leases' rather than a system of Land Rights through granting of freehold title, as had been demanded by both northern and southern indigenous activists. He also announced that the Government would appropriate \$5 million for the purchase of land for Aboriginal communities and 'would contemplate' a further \$2million in each of the next four years. He said that mining would be permitted to continue on Aboriginal lands. As Adelaide activist Ruby Hammond pointed out, 'undoubtedly the government hoped that Aboriginal people would welcome this statement, but they had failed to understand many of the needs of the Aborigines and the intensity of their feelings'.^[102]

The 'consequence' alluded to by Denis Walker was swift in coming. Indigenous leaders meeting in Sydney that night were outraged at what they regarded as stonewalling. By that time the core of the Redfern group comprised of Paul Coe and sister Isobel from Cowra, brilliant QLD writer and theorist John Newfong, Bob, Kaye and Sol Belleair, Tony Coorie from Lismore, Alana and Samantha Doolan from Townsville, Gary Williams and Gary Foley from Nambucca, Lyn Craigie and her brother Billy from Moree. As Goodall noted, 'all these activists came from communities scarred by the loss of their lands'.^[103] Gathering at first at Lyn and Peter Thompson's Darlinghurst flat, they discussed ideas on how they should respond to the Government's statement. One of the group's mentors, Chicka Dixon, was keen on replicating the Native American's takeover of Alcatraz. He urged that they take over Pinchgut Island (Fort Dennison) in Sydney harbour. 'Not just take it over, defend it!', he said, because the when the Indians had taken over Alcatraz they had placed their peoples plight into 'the eyes of the world'.^[104] Ultimately however, a decision was made to confront the Federal Government on its own ground. So they dispatched four young men to Canberra. They were Billy Craigie, Tony Coorie, Michael Anderson, and Bertie Williams and were driven by a Communist Party photographer, Noel Hazard.^[105] Their general instructions were to set up a protest and 'hold the fort until a major demonstration could be organised',^[106] the idea being to at least be seen to be mounting an 'immediate response' to McMahon.

Upon arrival in Canberra early on the morning of 27th January 1972 the Koori men pitched a beach umbrella on the lawns outside Parliament House and proclaimed the site the office of the "Aboriginal Embassy". They declared that Prime Minister McMahon's statement the day before had effectively relegated indigenous people to the status of 'aliens in our own land',

thus as aliens 'we would have an embassy of our own.'^[107] One which in its form as a set of tents would physically reflect the typical housing of Aborigines in Australia today, and one which would be strategically placed under the noses of Australian politicians across the road in Parliament House'.^[108] Normally such an audacious project would have lasted as long as it took the ACT Police to arrive, but by a sheer stroke of luck this group of activists had accidentally discovered a loophole in ACT ordinances regarding camping in Canberra. It seemed that there was in fact no ordinance that prevented camping on the lawns of Parliament House as long as there were less than twelve tents. As long as the newly established "Embassy" compound consisted of eleven tents or less, there was nothing the ACT Police to do to remove the protest group.^[109]

The inability for the Government to remove this embarrassing protest from in front of their Parliament House captured the imagination of not just indigenous Australia. Within days the site had established an office tent and installed a letterbox in front. Two days later the PMG began delivering the mail. Tourist bus operators became aware of the new attraction in town and began bringing their busloads of tourists to the "Aboriginal Embassy" before escorting them across the road to Parliament House. The Koori activists would solicit donations and distribute educational literature about their cause. Local residents of Canberra would bring food and blankets and invite Embassy staff into their homes for showers and dinner. Students at the nearby Australian National University opened their union building for support activities and the mass media began to display great interest. The Aboriginal Embassy very quickly became the most successful protest venture yet launched by the Aboriginal political movement.

The use of the term 'embassy' as well as the call for Aboriginal Land Rights and recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty created disquiet in the McMahon Government. The Minister for Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, Peter Howson described it as 'a disturbing undertone...The term implied a sovereign state and cut across the Government's expressed objection to separate development and was kindred to apartheid.'^[110] Another reaction from some in the white community was to describe the protest as an 'eyesore', to which Embassy official John Newfong responded, 'If people think this is an eyesore, well it is the way it is on government settlements.'^[111] But the overall response from the general community seemed to the activists to be very positive, and this encouraged the groups now involved at the Embassy (which included representatives from Brisbane, Melbourne and NSW south coast communities) to become bolder in their approach.

On the 2nd February the Embassy staff, to emphasize the sense of alienation the Embassy represented, as well as underlining their assertions of Aboriginal sovereignty, set about designing and flying their own flag. The first flag that flew on the tents was a black, green, red and black pennant, and by April it was joined by another 'comprising of a spear laid across a red and black background with four crescents looking inward to symbolize the black rights struggle from the four corners of Australia'.^[112] Three days later in another move to formalise its proclaimed status the Embassy issued a five point plan for land rights. This plan called for

Aboriginal control of the Northern Territory, legal title to all existing reserve lands and settlements through out Australia and minimum compensation of at least six billion dollars and a percentage of the gross national product for lands alienated.[113] These demands strongly reflected the general philosophy of the Black Power group that now controlled the Embassy. This group included John Newfong, Billy Harrison, Billy Craigie, Chicka Dixon, Gary Williams, Paul Coe, Gary Foley, Bruce McGuinness, Lyn Thompson, Isobel Coe, Ambrose Golden-Brown, Choc Moore, Brian Marshall and Alan Sharpley, and a constantly changing stream of visiting activists from all states.

So strong was the support being expressed in both black and white Australia for the Embassy protest that the Leader of the Federal Opposition, Mr. Gough Whitlam, felt compelled to pay a formal visit to the tents. In early February, when the Embassy had only been in existence for less than a fortnight, Whitlam met with Embassy officials and discussed matters raised in the Embassy demands. After the meeting he declared that a Labor Government would 'absolutely reverse' the McMahon Government policy on land rights, introduce a civil rights bill, overrule state laws that discriminated against Aborigines and would provide free legal aid for Aborigines.[114] This was clearly a major and significant breakthrough for the Black Power activists who were the core of the tent Embassy protest action. Two weeks later when Embassy based indigenous demonstrators invaded the public gallery during question time, the Age's correspondent, Michelle Grattan noted that 'It was an occasion for stressing "blackness" because the protestors were 'making a symbolic stand against all the injustices they felt at the hands of white society'.[115]

Three months later in April the Embassy had grown to consist of six tents. Spokesperson Ambrose Golden-Brown was able to boast, 'We've achieved recognition, just by being here...We haven't made the Government change its policy, but we've succeeded in embarrassing it, and we've made people think about the Aboriginal cause'.[116] The Government responded by the Minister for the Interior, Ralph Hunt, announcing the Government's intention to introduce a new ordinance that would make it an offence to camp on unleased Commonwealth land within the city.[117] Federal Opposition spokesperson Kep Enderby in turn declared, 'The Aborigines are exercising one of the most fundamental rights recognised by British law. This is the right of peaceful assembly for the purpose of communicating a political point of view and informing the Parliament of a grievance they claim to have'.[118] The next day thirty Federal Labor parliamentarians promise to take 'physical action' to prevent the forced removal of the tent Embassy, and the stage was set for a Government vs Aboriginal Embassy confrontation.

On July 20 whilst parliament was in recess, the Government gazetted the amended Trespass on Commonwealth Lands Ordinance. Immediately after its gazettal almost 100 ACT police, without warning, forcibly removed the tent Embassy and arrested eight people including two prominent members of the Sydney Black Power group, Roberta Sykes and Gary Foley.[119] When the scenes of police violently removing the tents were aired on television that night it provoked a strong response in both black and white communities. Whilst Liberal party

indigenous Senator Neville Bonner warned of 'an upsurge of Black Power violence in Australia'.^[120] The Melbourne Age worried, 'the risk is that in demolishing one symbol, the Government might have established violence as a new symbol of black-white relationships'.^[121] It quickly became apparent that the McMahon government had seriously miscalculated the extent of support that the Black Power group had amassed with its Embassy protest.

Three days later hundreds of indigenous activists descended on Canberra and held a demonstration on the site of the Embassy. The demonstration was addressed by Black Power activists Gary Williams, Len Watson, Michael Anderson, Chicka Dixon, Paul Coe, Roberta Sykes, Shirley Smith and Denis Walker. London Times correspondent Stewart Harris was to later observe that these speakers 'spoke thousands of words on an historic occasion and none, or very few, were reported in the Australian press'.^[122] The demonstrators then attempted to re-erect the tent Embassy only to be confronted by hundreds of police. The resulting altercation saw wild scenes as Aborigines and police fought a pitched battle on the lawns of Parliament House that resulted in eighteen people being arrested and many injured (including Paul Coe). Chicka Dixon was to describe it as 'the most violent event' he had ever witnessed, and Gary Foley called it the 'most violent confrontation in the history of Canberra'.^[123] Again violent scenes on television provoked outrage in many indigenous communities and the Black Power group called for another, bigger demonstration for July 30. Embassy representatives sought a meeting with Interior Minister Hunt but he refused to see them, so they then called on the Prime Minister to intervene to 'prevent a national black crisis including bloodshed and possible deaths'.^[124]

On 30 July more than two thousand indigenous people and their supporters staged the biggest land rights demonstration in the history of Canberra. The government had prepared for the occasion by cancelling all police leave in the ACT, enlisted the aid of the NSW Police riot squad and was even said to have the Royal Military College on alert in case needed.^[125] During an intense standoff between hundreds of police and thousands of protestors, Embassy and other indigenous leaders conferred and decided that, to avert serious injury to the many young and older people in the crowd, they would passively allow the police to walk in and remove the tents. The indigenous activists regarded the action as 'a great moral victory' for the movement, and it certainly represented the political high point for the advocates of Black Power. Even Faith Bandler of FCAATSI, who had in 1969-70 fought Black Power attempts to 'aboriginalise' her organisation, now came out and said that the Government action against the Embassy had 'brought everybody together and strengthened ties between the black people'.^[126]

By now the universally bad publicity that the Government had attracted over the Embassy affair led the government to urgently convene a national conference of hand picked indigenous representatives in Canberra. Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mr. Howson dismissed media allegations that the conference was 'staged' and that the 66 indigenous representatives were chosen because of their more 'moderate' stance. He said the group was the 'true'

representatives of 'all Aborigines'.^[127] It was therefore very unfortunate for Mr. Howson when the conference voted to give tent Embassy representatives full speaking and voting rights and passed a motion calling for the Embassy to be re-established.^[128] The fiasco for the Government continued when four weeks later the full bench of the ACT Supreme Court declared the Trespass on Commonwealth Lands Ordinance was invalid because it had not been introduced in the proper manner. Immediately the Embassy was re-erected whilst the Government rushed through retrospective legislation to restore the ordinance, but was further embarrassed when prominent QLD Liberal Senator Jim Killen crossed the floor to vote with the opposition and called for all charges against Embassy demonstrators to be dropped.^[129]

By the end of 1972 as a Federal election campaign got under way the McMahon Government's reputation and credibility on indigenous affairs was in tatters. Secretary of the conservative Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines & Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), Faith Bandler, spoke for all when she said, 'We've never been involved in party politics before but we've no alternative. Getting rid of the McMahon government is the goal of everyone now - it's a priority, even over land rights.'^[130] As the 1972 federal election campaign began Gough Whitlam declared in his policy speech, 'Australia's treatment of her Aboriginal people will be the thing upon which the rest of the world will judge Australia and Australians - not just now but in the greater perspective of history.'^[131]

During the last months of the McMahon government the Redfern Black Power group intensified their propaganda war by establishing the National Black Theatre Company, run by one of the fathers of Australian Black Power Bob Maza. As they produced and performed their legendary political revue *Basically Black*^[132] another Black Power stalwart, Chicka Dixon, prepared to lead an Aboriginal peoples' delegation on a visit to the People's Republic of China.^[133] The National Black Theatre production played a highly successful sold-out season at Sydney's Nimrod Theatre, receiving rave reviews and establishing black theatre as a viable proposition. On the night of the final performance the cast, crew and audience gathered in the theatre foyer to party and watch the results of the Federal election come in on specially installed TV sets. Thus many members of the Sydney Black Power group watched as the McMahon government (and twenty-two years of conservative rule) lost the election to a Labor landslide.^[134]

Ruby Hammond's biographer Margaret Forte summed up the Aboriginal Embassy protest when she described it as 'imaginative, ingenious and highly successful',^[135] and even Attwood and Markus conceded it 'brilliantly symbolized Aborigines sense of being foreigners in their own land.'^[136] In 1972 legendary political correspondent for the Age, Michelle Grattan, wrote that the Embassy had 'caught the imagination of Australians and focussed attention all over the world on the plight and problems of the Aborigines...one thing the embassy has done is to make the whole Aboriginal question very much a live political issue.'^[137] Gough Whitlam has said that the Aboriginal Embassy played a 'significant role' in the 'final destabilization of the McMahon Government' and thus had helped change the course of Australian history.^[138] Heather Goodall observed that the Embassy 'had flung onto the public stage the

powerful idea of land rights. Land had been the underlying current for so long in Aboriginal politics, but it had not until then reached the wider public debate.^[139] But at the end of the day, the Aboriginal Embassy had its greatest impact and most enduring effect by influencing the moderates in the broader indigenous political struggle. Legendary Redfern matriarch Shirley "Mum Shirl" Smith said of her experience at the tent embassy, 'If I was going to think of a sign along the road that marked for me the beginning of militant Black Power politics, that sign would have printed on it - Aboriginal Embassy.'^[140]

A Brief Historiography: Aborigines and the Black Power Era

In 1976 Margaret Ann Franklin pointed out that, 'according to recorded history, one whole continent, Australia, did not exist until the seventeenth century. But the continent's inhabitants did not know this and so went on existing just the same outside history'.^[141] History itself, as an academic discipline, has only formally existed in Australian academies since the early twentieth century, and yet in 1912 the *Cambridge History of the Australian Colonies* stated that, 'Aborigines have had no influence on Australian history'.^[142] The first academic appointment in Australian history did not occur until 1948 'with European and British history remaining the core of university studies until the 1960s'.^[143]

One of the first significant changes occurred with publication of C.D. Rowley's 'seminal and mammoth trilogy' *Aboriginal policy and Practice (1970-71)*. This passionate condemnation of the treatment of indigenous people inspired a new generation of non-indigenous historians to explore themes relevant to the contemporary condition of Aboriginal and Islander peoples.^[144] Nevertheless as late as 1973 one of Rowley's protégé's, Henry Reynolds, felt compelled to say, 'Aborigines are the fringe dwellers of Australian historiography'.^[145] Stanner had, aptly described the absence of indigenous histories and indigenous people in Australian history as, 'The Great Silence'. He contended that 'inattention on such a scale, cannot possibly be explained by "absent-mindedness"'.^[146] Rowley observed,

The progress of the Aboriginal from tribesman to inmate has been a special feature of colonial administration and of white settlement in Australia. Some of the reasons have been humane, but institutions have also been a method of settling or deferring political and moral issues such as those related to rights arising from prior occupation of the land.^[147]

It might therefore be said that the prevalent silence of historians assisted the process of national denial that enabled the Australian legal and parliamentary institutions to delude themselves about terra nullius for two hundred years. Consequently, it might be argued that history and its sister discipline anthropology have become complicit in the anti-Aboriginal policies of the Australian State and have had a vested interest in the distortion and diminution of indigenous perceptions of the history of the Australian social and political landscape.

However, the work of historians such as Reynolds and especially Russell Ward provide a contrast with the broader silence. Ward, coming from a social history perspective, was the first historian to refer to Aborigines with a capital 'A'. Broome notes that Ward, in his 1982 revised

edition *Australia Since the Coming of Man*, 'posed Aborigines as victims of "vicious racism" on the frontier, dupes of Batman, and people deprived of welfare rights by the early Commonwealth. Yet Ward also presented them as activists in the Tent Embassy of 1972.' But despite the supposedly 'progressive' stance taken by historians such as Rowley, Ward, Reynolds et al, others like Scott Bennett would have us believe that, '...the [Black Power] movement never managed to take firm root in Australia.'^[149]

Bennett basically dismisses the 'Black Power' phase of the indigenous political movement and claims that the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy was a more effective means of protest. In stating such he demonstrates a lack of understanding about the people and circumstances that created the Aboriginal Embassy action. Indeed, much of Bennett's book, *Aborigines and Political Power* can be said to be a superficial analysis from what some might regard as the dubious perspective of the political scientist. The complexity of the subject and the limited, narrow scope of the biased observer conspire with cross-cultural non-comprehension to create false impressions. But these otherwise inconsequential observations often become embedded in popular culture to misinform the wider society about some of the truths about their own past and present history. Hence the need for what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls the 'reclaiming of history.'

Conclusion

It can be said that the era I have written about in this thesis is one that to the greater extent has been ignored by Australian historians who tend to gloss over or superficially analyze its important in recent history. As stated earlier, many historians and commentators dismiss or denigrate the effect Black Power had on Aboriginal Australia. Scott Bennett disparaged Black Power for its 'stridency' and connotations of violence and says, 'the movement never managed to take firm roots in Australia'. Given today most of the old Black Power nationalists are held in the highest regard by a "new" generation of Aboriginal leaders like Aden Ridgeway, and that the issues brought to prominence by the Black Power movement remain front page issues today, it is impossible to accept Bennett's assertion. Margaret Ann Franklin in her book *Black and White Australians* regards the Black Power Movement as merely its more dramatic manifestations like Roosevelt Brown's visit and Denis Walker's made-for-media Black Panther Party. She thereby completely ignores the Redfern community where Black Power gained its greatest following and had its biggest local impact.^[150] Humphrey McQueen at least acknowledged that 'today Aboriginal organisations are now run by indigenous people themselves and not by white sympathisers, as had been the case before Black Power struck in the mid-1960s.'^[151]

Otherwise superficiality seems the order of the day when it comes to academic historical accounts of the Black Power movement, and until that problem is addressed we cannot begin to understand the profound effect it had on both black and white Australia. Nor can we properly analyze or understand events, actions and ideas in contemporary indigenous

communities unless we are aware of the way in which these communities perceive their own histories. In indigenous communities memories of the Black Power era and the events at the Aboriginal Embassy are vivid and strong and span across generations, whereas in white Australia these same events are almost completely unremembered. The official history of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League states that the Aboriginal Embassy and the Black Power era 'marked the entrenchment of a new and uncompromising stance in Aboriginal politics where any reversion to paternalistic white direction of Aboriginal affairs would not be acceptable.'^[152] 'These Black Power mythologies influence the way indigenous people politically and culturally deal with white Australia, yet virtually no-one in white academia seems interested in knowing about how and why they might. White Australia will never understand or begin to know the deep historical alienation and frustration that people in indigenous communities feel, they can only begin to understand when they begin to comprehend our history. Yet the history of indigenous communities over the past forty years has been all but ignored by mainstream Australian historians.

In writing this far from comprehensive narrative about these significant moments in modern indigenous (and thereby Australian) history, I have made but a very humble attempt to begin the long and arduous process of overcoming that ignorance and disinterest. Much more needs to be done.

Gary Foley
5th October 2001.

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