

## Harold Holt's death and why the 1967 referendum failed Indigenous people

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By **Gary Foley**

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In the aftermath of the referendum, there was a belief among the younger black activists in Redfern that the commonwealth government was not interested in the result. After all, the young activists reasoned, wasn't the referendum result an overwhelming expression of support from white Australians for the idea of justice for Aboriginal people? This perception among the young Redfern radicals was a significant contributing factor in the later emergence of the Black Power movement but a key player in the events in Canberra has recently offered an alternative version of how events played out in Canberra in the immediate period after the referendum.

In his memoir *Pandora's Box*, Barrie Dexter has presented a firsthand account of details of the events and government actions that occurred in the immediate aftermath

of the 1967 referendum. Because Dexter was at the heart of the events he describes, his description is the most credible version yet published. At the time of the referendum Dexter was happily ensconced in his position in the diplomatic corps as Australian ambassador to Laos. The prime minister at the time of the referendum was Harold Holt who had assumed office just 18 months earlier on 26 January 1966 after the long serving Sir Robert Menzies had retired.

Many activists of the Black Power movement had blamed Holt for the apparent government inaction in the wake of the referendum, but Dexter's account offers a radically different picture. Dexter points out that after the referendum the federal government seemed to have been caught 'flat-footed'. This is confirmed in Ian Hancock's biography of John Gorton when he points out that the Coalition government had been more interested in the other question in the 1967 referendum that, had it been passed, would have broken the "nexus between the number of seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives".

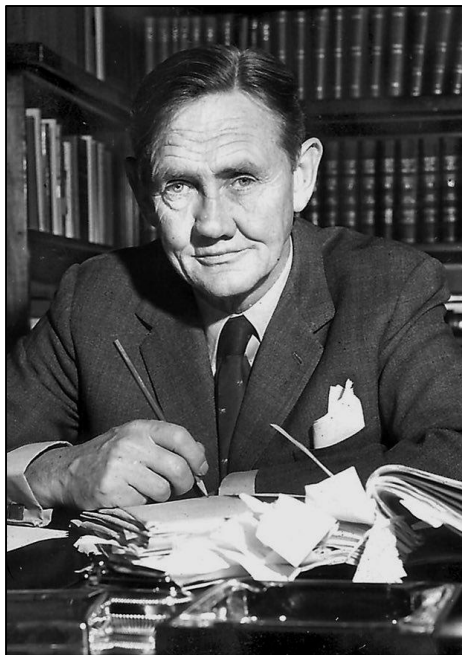
But on the successful result of the referendum's Aboriginal question, the commonwealth government's response remained confused. At a meeting of commonwealth-state ministers responsible for Aboriginal affairs held in Perth in July 1967 (two months after the referendum), the federal minister for territories, Charles Barnes, was "unable to give any indication as to how the commonwealth might use its new powers". Aboriginal activists had interpreted this as evidence that the commonwealth was reluctant to confront the states over the issue of Aboriginal rights. The fact that the prime minister's first post-referendum statement to parliament was not made until September, and even then Holt had expressed reluctance about confronting the states, also served to intensify Aboriginal suspicions.

The prime minister had also foreshadowed the creation of a special advisory body to be called the Council of Aboriginal Affairs (CAA), which would be administered by a secretariat to be called the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (OAA). The council would be a three-man committee (all white) and by November 1967 the government had only announced that economist Dr HC (Nugget) Coombs would be the chairperson.

Meanwhile, during November Barrie Dexter was on a trip home to Canberra accompanying the prime minister of Laos when he was approached by the head of the Department of External (now Foreign) Affairs, Sir Lawrence McIntyre, who said that prime minister Holt would like to know if Dexter was interested in accepting a position on the newly formed council. McIntyre told Dexter that the council would “advise the Prime Minister direct and would be given substantial power; the Office would serve the Council and operate largely independently within the Prime Minister’s Office”.

Dexter was reluctant to leave the diplomatic corps, but when he met Holt in Melbourne a few days later, Dexter indicated that he was willing to accept the position on the basis that it was simply a three to five year secondment from the Department of External Affairs. Holt had apparently selected Dexter on the basis of having been impressed with him when they met on an official trip to Laos earlier in 1967, rather than any knowledge of Aboriginal matters.

The fact that Holt was setting up the Council and Office of Aboriginal Affairs within the Prime Minister’s Office where they would have direct access, is in itself an indication that Holt was preparing to take the referendum result very seriously. Holt confided to Dexter that he was “surprised” at the strength of the vote in the referendum which indicated, “a feeling that the Government should do something about the situation of the Aborigines and that, ‘their plight was very distressing’”.



*John Gorton, who became Australia’s prime minister after the disappearance of Harold Holt in 1967.*

Holt also told Dexter that he would personally, as prime minister, be responsible for Aboriginal affairs and would use his authority to push through the necessary policies for reform. He said that to facilitate this he was appointing a small, three person committee to advise him and that Coombs had been chosen because he was a “financial whiz”, and anthropologist Bill Stanner because of his expertise on Aboriginals. Dexter was chosen because Holt required a person who “knew their way backwards through the public service, and who would not squeal when they were kicked”.

Coombs, who at that point was governor of the Reserve Bank, had initially been reluctant to accept the position of chair of the council, and it was only after Holt had given him strong assurances that he was genuine about reform for both Aboriginal affairs and the arts that Coombs accepted. The third member of the council was Professor Bill Stanner, who was then with the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University and was regarded by Holt as being an “expert” on Aboriginal peoples. Stanner had also been reluctant to accept, but after receiving reassurances from Holt, he said that what ultimately convinced him was the prospect of a novel combination of five things – a somewhat independent body, statutory responsibilities, direct touch with parliament, the possibility (because of the referendum) of support by the commonwealth’s over-riding power of legislation, and a path to the prime minister in case of need. This seemed to him to offer an unprecedented chance to do things which would make a real difference to the state of Aboriginal life throughout Australia, not just in commonwealth territories.

This shows that all three men who would form the Council for Aboriginal Affairs genuinely believed that Holt was serious about doing something to change the circumstances of Aboriginal people; otherwise they would not have accepted their appointments. Whilst Barrie Dexter was very much a civil servant, the other two men were known for their strongly independent opinions and suspicion of government machinations, even though both had been associated with government for many years. On 2 November 1967, some six months after the referendum and just 45 days before his death, Holt announced in parliament the new arrangements and the names of all members of the new Council for Aboriginal Affairs. Over the next four weeks Dexter, as administrative head of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, worked feverishly on the task of establishing a mini government department from scratch. In looking for staff for the

new office Dexter (possibly because neither he nor Coombs knew anything about Aboriginal affairs) looked to the Department of Territories and recruited two former patrol officers on the basis of their knowledge of Aboriginal peoples. One of these men was Frank Moy, a controversial former NT Director of Native Affairs who was responsible for the suppression of the famous 1951 Darwin Aboriginal workers' strike and who was certainly no friend of the Aboriginal people.

But the overall mood at the Office of Aboriginal Affairs leading in to December 1967 was very positive, as all members were confident that under the new arrangements they would be able to implement some major policy changes with the full backing of Holt.

These revelations by Dexter have revealed a previously unknown or unacknowledged commitment on the part of Holt to make a genuine attempt to improve the situation of Aboriginal people. Because of the circumstances of Holt's death just a month later, historians have paid little attention to what Holt's actions and intent in Aboriginal affairs really were. Dexter's account is the only credible first-hand version of what Holt's thinking was, and as such it reveals a very different story to the interpretations of not just the black activists of the time, but also the few historians who have ever examined this moment in history.

When Holt went on his fateful swim on 17 December 1967, all hopes that the referendum would result in positive change drowned with him.

The incoming prime minister, John Gorton, was a very different person to Holt when it came to Aboriginal matters. The first that members of the council knew of the change in attitude came within weeks of Holt's death and Gorton's elevation, when Dexter suddenly found that the previous high level of cooperation from departmental heads in the public service was evaporating. Then word came that the Office of Aboriginal Affairs would no longer be part of the Prime Minister's Department and would be downgraded in status and staff. Dexter found that he was only allocated six positions to staff the OAA with, which was completely inadequate. Furthermore, Gorton was refusing to meet with the council which led to Coombs writing a letter to the PM on 12

February 1968 seeking clarification on a range of matters including the access promised by Holt and the status of the OAA.

Gorton never bothered to reply to Coombs's letter and instead, on 28 February 1968, announced that whilst the OAA would remain as part of the Prime Minister's Department, he was appointing the then minister for social services, WC Wentworth as the minister in charge of Aboriginal affairs. This move effectively short-circuited the promised direct access to the PM as promised by Holt.

It also meant that the council now had as their minister one of the most controversial and unpredictable politicians then in parliament. Wentworth, known as Billy, was notorious for his eccentricity, anti-communist fervour and his self-proclaimed expertise on all matters Aboriginal.

The Council for Aboriginal Affairs ultimately found that Wentworth was completely disinterested in their views and on the rare occasions he would meet with them, he would spend most of those meetings expounding his own views on Aboriginal affairs, as well as his concerns that Aboriginal people might be manipulated by communists into thinking they were oppressed.

Such was the farcical nature of the relationship between the CAA and its minister, that council members were reduced to sitting around bewildered and cracking jokes after tumultuous meetings with him. On one occasion, Bill Stanner, not famous for his wit, was heard to declare of Wentworth, "he would mount his charger and ride off in all directions at once".

John Gorton's biographer Ian Hancock, in a chapter aptly titled Gorton is very different to Harold Holt, described Gorton as "both an innovator and a conservative" in his approach to Aboriginal affairs. Hancock presents Gorton's appointment of Wentworth as a positive move, emphasising the call by Wentworth to "excise" eight square kilometres from the pastoral lease of Lord Vestey to give to the Gurindji as a "social experiment". The subsequent villains, according to Hancock are the undoubted strong opponents of this move, especially the Country Party, the NT Cattle Producers Association and the Australian Woolgrowers and Graziers Council. Gorton's strong

commitment to both the White Australia policy and the policy of assimilation for Aborigines are mentioned only in passing, but these are hardly the signs of an “innovator” as suggested by Hancock.

The next three years would prove disastrous for Aboriginal affairs insofar as the Gorton administration proved to be completely disinterested in the situation of Aboriginal people. Barrie Dexter noted, “No doubt the prime minister’s lack of interest and sympathy reflected itself in the non-cooperative, unfriendly and even hostile attitude of his department toward the OAA and the council.” This may have been disastrous for Dexter and those on the CAA, but it was this very inaction on the part of the federal government that fanned the flames of discontent in urban Aboriginal communities.

The great irony is that the urban activists like myself had believed it was the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, created by Holt that was to blame for government inaction. However, Barrie Dexter’s memoirs reveal that the real blame rests with Gorton, who dishonoured commitments and undertakings given to Dexter, Coombs and Stanner before the setting up of the CAA. Such was Coombs’s disillusionment with Gorton that 15 years later he wrote,

*Unfortunately Gorton’s image of Australian society, like that of many of his compatriots, had no place for Aborigines as such. He saw no justification or need for special policies to help them and the idea that Aborigines had valid rights to land based on traditional title was to him wholly unacceptable.*

In a bizarre twist of history, John Gorton has in the long term been perceived as a sympathiser of Aboriginal issues purely on the basis that he attended an Aboriginal debutante ball at the Sydney Town Hall in 1968. The widespread positive publicity Gorton attracted from that single event has obscured his basic hostility and indifference to Aboriginal issues whilst he was prime minister.

By comparison, the circumstances of Harold Holt’s sudden death have historically deflected attention from his efforts in Aboriginal affairs in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 referendum. This is unfortunate because it is Holt, rather than Gorton, who deserves recognition for at least trying to live up to Australian voters’ expectations for justice for Aboriginal Australia as they had expressed in the 1967 referendum.

- *This is an updated and edited extract from Gary Foley's PhD thesis: An Autobiographical Narrative of the Black Power Movement and the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy*