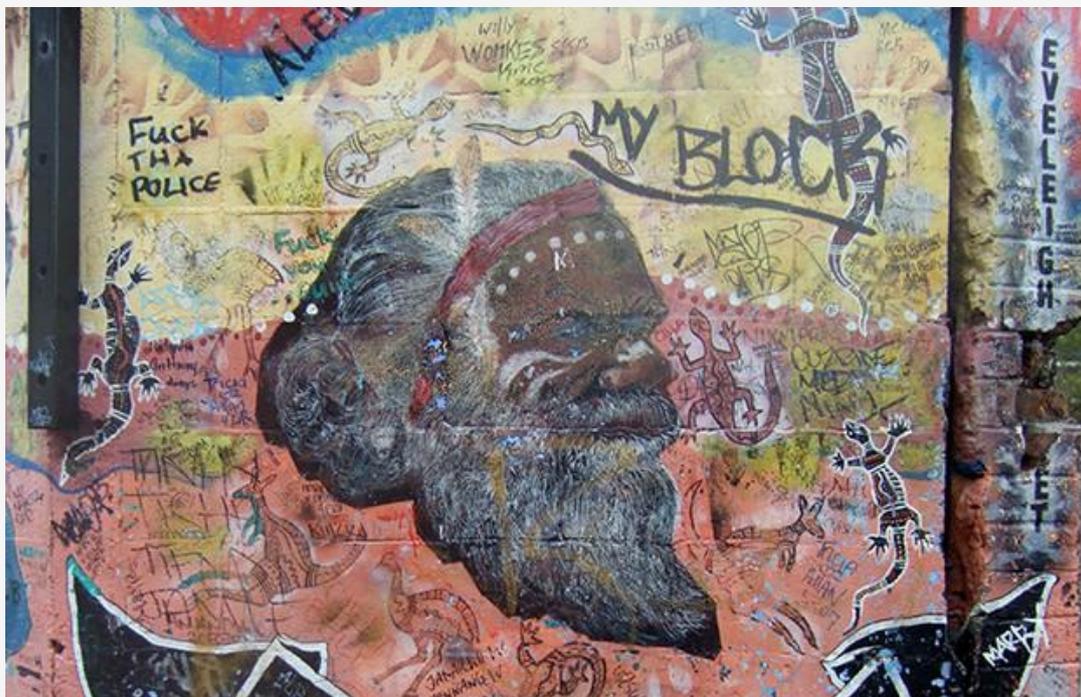


Honi Soit

‘The long haul’

By Justin Pen on July 6, 2014

• **The Redfern Tent Embassy is not just fighting for affordable housing, but Aboriginal autonomy and self-determination, writes Justin Pen.**



Two years after the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was raised on the lawns of Parliament House, a storm destroyed the encampment.

The embassy, which started with four Aboriginal activists in 1972, had swelled to over 70 protestors at the time of the storm. Re-established in October 1974, the group has weathered more than four decades of political change, demanding the recognition of Aboriginal legal title and land rights, the preservation of sacred sites, and economic justice from successive governments. On May 26, coinciding with National Sorry Day – and 40 years after that vicious storm in Canberra – another lot of tents were pitched in Sydney’s inner west.

The Block sits wedged between Redfern Station and Eveleigh Street. It’s a sparse green oval resting on a grey concrete slope. On first glance it’s as unassuming and ordinary as its

namesake would suggest. But the tents have only catalysed the political discontent and community activism that has boiled below the suburb's surface for years.

"We're here for the long haul," says Lyall Munro, a Kamilaroi man and veteran political activist, referring to the dozen or so tents propped up along the hill. We're sitting by an open fire on a bitterly cold overcast day in June. The Redfern Tent Embassy, which celebrated its four week anniversary that very day, sprang up in opposition to the \$7m Pemulwuy Project proposed by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC).

The AHC website contends the project will "redevelop the land into a mixed used site" with "affordable housing for 62 families, a gymnasium, commercial and retail space, a gallery, student accommodation for 154, a childcare space for 60 children". Wiradjuri Elder and embassy organiser Jenny Munro, however, is skeptical of the project's capacity to deliver affordable housing for Aboriginal people. "The commercial development is guaranteed, money for the student accommodation is guaranteed [but there is] no money, no answer for where the money for Aboriginal Housing will come from," she said.

While private investors have fully backed the construction of student housing and commercial and retail space, the AHC has not managed to raise a cent for the affordable housing it has pledged to build. The government has also expressed it will not back the project. "Federal funding... is not for construction but rather operational costs, once the properties are built and filled with eligible tenants," Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion told SBS' *Living Black*.

AHC CEO Michael "Mickie" Mundine is the man behind the development. His dogged belief that the government will fund the development of affordable housing, subsequent to commercial construction, has put him at odds with many in the community.

"It's very hard to get money for affordable housing," Mundine told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in early June. "No bank in Australia will give money for affordable housing." However, within a fortnight his position had hardened; his commitment to the project's low socioeconomic accommodation had wavered further. "We gotta run [the AHC] like a business... If we just build affordable housing, we will fail," Mickie told *Living Black* on June 30.

Friends of Lyall and Jenny and former Redfern residents sit around the fire with us and point to nearby Eveleigh Street and Vine Street, where their homes once stood several decades ago. "Three generations of Aboriginal people have been waiting for housing for over 35 years," Lyall says. "Not one house has been built since Mick took over."

The Redfern diaspora has left Indigenous residents scattered across neighboring suburbs like Alexandria and Waterloo, with even more pushed out to Campbelltown, Mt Druitt and Liverpool.

Jenny estimates around 15,000 Aboriginal people were spread out across greater western Sydney.

Government statistics underscore this sorry story. In 1968, the first year Indigenous people were counted in the census, 35,000 Aboriginal residents lived in the area. By 2011, this figure had dwindled to fewer than 300. Lyall tells me that number has only shrunk since.

But Redfern remains a significant and richly historied site for Aboriginal people. “It was the first piece of land that we were able to get back in our struggle for recognition for Aboriginal rights to our own land, on our own country,” Jenny says. Its otherwise inner-city ordinariness masks scars of persecution and resistance.

Securing The Block was the first step in a huge boon to the urban land rights campaign, the first parcel of land to be held “freehold” in the country – purchased with the aid of a Whitlam government grant and owned and managed by the AHC since 1972. The Aboriginal Housing Association’s –incorporated a year later and renamed the Aboriginal Housing Commission – then-stated purpose was “to purchase all 68 houses on The Block to be renovated and rented by Koori people for Koori people.”

From its inception, The Block has endured hostility from white Australians. The year it was bought back, a loose assemblage of mostly-white tenants formed the South Sydney Residents Protection Movement. They circulated a petition, which read in part: “We want the Aboriginal ghetto stopped now – for if allowed to continue it will spread like the plague throughout the entire South Sydney area.”

Despite these protestations, a constellation of autonomous, Aboriginal-run services formed around The Block, including the now-nationwide Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Medical Service, and the Black Theatre.

Mickie started out as a painter at the AHC in 1975 before becoming CEO in the mid-1980s, an office he has held since. His tenure has been rife with controversy.

“We can stop you, this is private land, it’s not Aboriginal land, it’s not,” Mickie said in heated dispute two days after the embassy had been erected. The confrontation, recorded and shared by independent news site *The Stringer*, reveals much about The Block’s tumultuous, internal politics.

Jenny and others have alleged the AHC’s membership rolls have been tampered with for over two decades. A day has passed since my first chat with Lyall. Jenny, Lyall and a colleague of

mine are huddled within the embassy's sturdiest dwelling, a necessary bulwark against the elements. The bitter cold is now flanked by biting winds.

"He started a war of attrition against old people, which lasted for more than 10 years, breaking their toilets and bathrooms and not repairing them", Jenny says. Tenants, who refused to continue paying rent, would be thrown out of their homes. The bulldozers were then called and the residence demolished. "I refused to pay rent and I was evicted. Me and my family of six children."

"Their voice is conspicuous by their absence." Lyall repeats this phrase often, in response to my inquiries regarding the institutional support the Embassy has received from governmental bodies. Redfern's Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), National Black Theatre and countless national organisations all receive the same curt response.

The ALS started out in the 1960s as a network of Aboriginal people who acted as informal legal observers – then known as a "vigilance group" – who would photograph and record police misconduct.

Under an arbitrarily imposed 9:30 pm curfew, Indigenous residents were frequently arrested for staying out after dark. Without the capacity to afford adequate legal representation, most "offenders" were harangued into pleading guilty for the troika of charges still used to subjugate Aboriginal communities today: drunkenness, offensive behavior and offensive language.

In 1970, the ALS morphed into a legal representation body. By 1972 the Whitlam government pledged to fund all Aboriginal legal representation, leading to a massive increase in civil cases pursued by Indigenous people. The ALS, like The Block itself, quickly asserted itself as another face of Aboriginal self-determination. It proliferated under federal funding, with branches sprouting up in remote NSW and the rest of Australia.

In 1976 the Fraser Liberal Government ceased limitless federal funding and, perhaps more viciously, prevented the ALS from conducting its various welfare campaigns. Its civil litigation arms were hacked off in the 1980s. The first year of the Howard government saw ALS's parent body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, lose a further \$400m. The Abbott government's cuts to ALS earlier this year follow on from decades of funding attacks. This long history of cuts may partially explain Lyall's assessment that the ALS lacks teeth.

This year's budget terminated the ALS' throughcare program: a dedicated service which sought to tackle the perpetual rates of recidivism that impact incarcerated Indigenous people. The program cost half a million dollars. For context: that's half the amount the Coalition has pledged to give the Australian Ballet School.

“Hipsters take over Aboriginal Redfern”, reported the *Australian Financial Review* in May this year, with rent in the area soaring to rates of \$1,200 a week. The Pemulwuy Project succeeds a long line of gentrification campaigns targeting Redfern and surrounding suburbs, which started – officially, at least – ten years earlier under the direction of then NSW Energy and Utilities Minister Frank Sartor. The state’s bipartisan approach to rid Redfern of its Aboriginal residents, intentionally or incidentally, has certainly proved successful.

Gentrification, Bec Dean writes, is not exclusively the remit of real estate agents and property developers. It is intimately “concerned with disappearance and social displacement”. Her essay, “There Goes the Neighbourhood” gives its title to an eponymous collection of writing on Redfern, which explores the politics of gentrification and the Aboriginal rights movement. The compilation highlights the political, social and cultural dimensions of the unyielding advance of the Pemulwuy Project.

Certainly, the problems facing The Block’s protestors resonate throughout the Aboriginal community. Of the camp’s five grandmothers, two have endured pneumonia and another, a stroke. The anecdotal evidence is terrifying, but so is the national picture. 2013 figures from the ABS indicate the mortality rate of Indigenous people is over twice that of the non-Indigenous. The rate of deaths caused by diseases of the circulatory system – including heart attacks and strokes – is nearly double the non-Indigenous population.

My conversations with Jenny and Lyall are quick to sprawl, spanning national politics and internal divisions within the Indigenous movement. It’s only natural, given the Tent Embassy concerns far more than a parcel of land in Redfern.

We talk about the Northern Territory Intervention. Jenny and Lyall both assert the program is part and prelude to widespread, vicious attacks against Aboriginal people. “White Australia, still cannot, to this day accept that there is still another law in this country,” Jenny says, “a law that they’ve tried to suppress, repress, extinguish for 240 years.”

Both are also particularly scathing of the Aboriginal political class that Mickie has aligned himself with – the likes of Aboriginal lawyer and academic Noel Pearson and Indigenous Advisory Council Chairman Warren Mundine.

Noel, Warren and Mickie are members of what Jenny has dubbed the “middle-class” and what Lyall calls the “black bourgeoisie”. It is in this company that Mickie’s belligerence towards the Redfern Tent Embassy no longer appears so brazen or aberrant. Figures like Pearson and Mundine, after all, had endorsed the Northern Territory intervention, led by the Howard government in 2007 (supported by and then continued under Labor).

Five years later, Victoria Grieves, a Warrimay woman and ARC Indigenous Research Fellow of Sydney University, described Pearson as an Aboriginal Leader “invented by white interests”.

Today, similar criticisms are levelled at Mickie: a man considered legitimate by federal politicians and policymakers, but resented and rejected by the Aboriginal community.

To thwart the AHC's proposed development the Redfern Tent Embassy has called on students and supporters to stand with the embassy on July 6 and 7. A Facebook event, "Blockade the Block" has attracted over half a thousand attendees. Student leaders, too, have lent their support to the Redfern Tent Embassy. National Union of Students NSW Indigenous Officer Kyol Blakeney said the AHC's stance on the issue was a "betrayal and a sellout" to the Aboriginal community.

"The construction at The Block was promised to be affordable Indigenous accommodation," Students' Representative Council President Jennifer Light said. She labelled plans to use for it any other purpose, "disgusting". Though the University of Sydney Union (USU) has yet to "sit down and discuss" an "official position on the construction of student housing on the Block," USU President Tara Waniganayaka said "four to six Board Directors [had] expressed interest in attending".

SRC Welfare Officer (Student Housing) Brendan Wylie called plans to construct non-Indigenous student housing a "subversion" of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy's original intent for The Block. "The allure of profits can never be allowed to degrade the sovereignty of The Block and the dignity of those who rightfully call it home," he said.

Today, Redfern is remembered either as a violent and degenerate slum or the site of former Prime Minister Paul Keating's stirring speech in 1992. For conservatives, drugs, violence and social delinquency spring to the fore at any mention of the suburb. Mainstream progressives, meanwhile, celebrate Keating's Redfern Park Speech, in which the then Prime Minister declared: "We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice."

Neither recollection, however, captures the suburb's powerful history as a site of Aboriginal resistance and self-determination. The Block is far more than a symbol of crime and controversy or white Australian regret. It's provided accommodation, community and dignity to tens of thousands Aboriginal people since the 1970s – and innumerable more, for 40,000 years before that. While gentrification projects over the last ten years have pushed Aboriginal residents out to more affordable areas, the Redfern Tent Embassy represents a forceful pushback.

For Jenny, the challenges facing The Block are indicative of a broader struggle for Aboriginal self-determination, resistance and recovery. "We've lived under a system where we've had an alien law forced upon us for 240 years and still they don't understand that basic premise," she

says. “We do have our basic system of law, it’s the oldest on this planet, we will not sell out our culture and our law to whoever or whatever white people tell us is more prevalent.”