

Notes — Indigenous Struggle: Past, Present & Future

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NOTE: THIS DOCUMENT MENTIONS THE NAMES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE WHO ARE NOW DECEASED. IT ALSO DESCRIBES MASSACRES AND GENOCIDE, RACISM AND STATE VIOLENCE.

Two parts. First part: a history that happened 100 years ago, the emergence of the first Aboriginal organisation – a development significant to this very day.

Gary begins with a map of 'Australia B.C. (Before Cook)'. There were 500 different nations and language groups, many of which no longer exist. (Note: Gary pronounces 'Gumbayngirr' as 'Goom-barn-jer'.)

For the first 180 years, indigenous people were erased from the writing and teaching of Australian history. Invasion was not a single event, but took place region by region, year by year. In Victoria ... people sometimes ask why Aboriginal people are thinner on the ground than elsewhere. Gary brings up the massacre map – Victoria ought to be referred to as 'the killing fields of mainland Australia'.

By 1857, only 1768 Aboriginal people were left in the state after just 15 years of invasion and occupation (conservative estimates place the pre-invasion number, in 1835, at 55,000).

A quote from Barry Morris (*Domesticating Resistance: The Dhan-Gadi Aborigines and the Australian State*, 1989): 'The colonial process had reduced the Aborigines to a residual minority, but they had not been eliminated. The problem was expected to resolve itself.'

Government policies continued to be 'protectionist' or 'smooth the dying pillow' based on the belief that Aboriginal people would, as an inferior race, soon die out. 'Thus eliminating the "problem".' The same logic emerged in Aotearoa – 'land of the wrong white crowd', Gary quips – and in Canada and elsewhere. These ideas emerged out of a pseudoscience that emerged in the mid-19th Century called eugenics.

Eugenics played a key role in the assimilationist (genocidal) policies that dominated most of the 20th Century – and they continue to this day. Eugenics was an idea that emerged after *Origin of the Species* (Darwin, 1859). His cousin, Sir Francis Galton, came up with the idea of eugenics; originally associated with the upper classes of England deciding the lower classes (in England, this often meant the Irish) were inferior and needed to be controlled. Eugenics said you could breed out the unfortunate types in society and encourage the breeding of the superior, upper-class types.

Some academic at the University of Melbourne insulted Gary as a lesser person because he didn't have the magic letters 'PhD' after his name. So in his late 40s, he said *fuck you, I'll get them* – and he became a mature age student. He ended up alongside the rich kids, the children of Asian oligarchs etc. It was interesting because the first thing he realised was that a lot of the buildings he was attending lectures in were named after people he considered to be war criminals: Redmond Barry, for example, or Baldwin Spencer. Most of these exalted early Brits were advocates of eugenics.

By far the worst was Richard Berry. When Tony Birch and Gary were at UniMelb, they started a campaign to rename the Richard Berry Building. The university didn't make this change when Tony and Gary were there, but did just before Black Lives Matter – when things like this started to happen through the world.

Berry claimed that eugenics was one of the most important areas of his work. He wanted to euthanise 'the grosser types of our mental defectives'; he sought to find a correlation between head size and intelligence, and was one of the most prolific collectors of Aboriginal skulls in Australian history. While a student there, Gary found out there were still 300 Aboriginal skulls in

the Anatomy department at the University. At the time, he was the senior curator for South Eastern Australia at Melbourne Museum, and was aware that the retention of Aboriginal human remains by that stage was illegal unless you had a permit; the only person who could issue a permit at the time was the senior curator for South Eastern Australia at Melbourne Museum...! So – as a humble undergrad student – he was able to go to the Vice-Chancellor's office and point out that he could have him arrested for retaining these remains. The VC freaked out and ordered the uni to investigate; they uncovered further human remains through other departments. These were returned to the Museum and identified, and where possible, returned to their rightful people.

In the 1930s, Berry sponsored a Mental Deficiency Bill (Victoria, 1939) which sought to sterilise a considerable part of the population amongst whom Aboriginal people were included alongside slum dwellers, homosexuals, prostitutes, alcoholics as well as those with small heads and low IQs. At the end of WW2, that particular bill conveniently disappeared after people discovered what happened in Germany and Poland.

So – eugenics formed the basic ideology of assimilationist policies that emerged around the beginning of the 20th Century. One of the most notorious progenitors of eugenics was AO Neville, who had complete control over the lives of Aboriginal people of WA, holding the position of Chief Protector of Aborigines and Commissioner of Native Affairs. In order to attempt to prove his belief that he could 'breed out the Aborigine' in Aboriginal people – and because he had control over their fertility – he was able to conduct his own racial experiments; he wrote a book about it. (See photo, excerpted perhaps from Neville's book: titled 'three generations' ... it demonstrates Neville's racist theory of 'breeding out the Aboriginal' into what he believed to be a white person.) These experiments were being conducted elsewhere in the world – by the Nazis in Germany.

At the time of Federation, Aborigines were considered subhuman.

1901. Federation: 'Australia for the white man'.

When the Gold Rush began, there was an influx of Chinese migrants – which freaked the British out because there were not only coloured folk but hordes of them. They felt very vulnerable. They remembered how easy they thought it had been to take over Australia from Aboriginal people, and realised that with hordes of non-whites, they were susceptible to be taken over by any coloured hordes surrounding them. So subsequently, eugenics combined with racial paranoia and formed the basis for ideas about Australia needing to federate to become the last bastion of white supremacy in this part of the world (see 'The Mongolian Octopus', Philip May, *The Bulletin*, 1886).

See also: 'Is your furniture built by White or Yellow Labour?' 'White Australian pineapples.' 'White Australia Game'. Another cartoon depicts white people stabbing an Oriental with a blade labelled 'Federation'.

The first parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was opened at the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens. The Immigration Restriction Act 1901 – better known as the 'White Australia policy' – was one of its first acts.

Legislators weren't especially concerned about Aboriginal people because they assumed they would die out; they did introduce the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901. Pacific Islanders were brought as slaves to create the Queensland sugar industry; once that had been done, they no longer needed them and wanted to get rid of them. This act was designed to deport 10,000 Pacific Islanders.

Australia was born on the basis of white-supremacist ideas. 'Race' was then, and remains today, central to political, economic and social ideas and policy. Australia in its early years remained hostile to, and dismissive of, its Indigenous populace, believing that Aborigines were an inferior race destined to soon die out and thus both solve the 'problem' as well as make 'Terra Nullius' a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What did the nation's first Prime Ministers have to say about race?

- 1901–1903 ... Edmund Barton: 'The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman'
- 1903–1904 ... Alfred Deakin: 'Unity of race is an absolute essential to the unity of Australia'
- 1904 ... Chris Watson (world's first Labor Prime Minister): Supported the establishment of 'a great white democracy, a white, British-based culture that would flourish as the new Commonwealth of Australia'
- 1904–1905 ... George Reid: Supported 'the determination of the Australian people that we should have a white Australia'
- 1908–1909 ... Andrew Fisher: Advocated 'preventing the introduction of aliens to destroy the purity of the Australian people'
- 1913–1914 ... Joseph Cook: 'In the first place our objective is an Australia – white, free, federal'
- 1915–1923 ... Billy Hughes: 'Our chief plank, is of course, a White Australia. There's no compromise about that. The industrious coloured brother has to go – and remain away!'
- 1923–1929 ... Stanley Bruce: 'We intend to keep this country white and not allow its peoples to be faced with the problems ... in many parts of the world'

So in the early 1900s, Australia was a cauldron of ideas of white-supremacy, eugenics and Social Darwinism.

In 1908, into that cauldron stepped the most hated black man on the planet – Jack Johnson, the world's first Black heavyweight boxing champion.

An African-American, all these white nations couldn't find a white person to beat him. 26,000 people were in the audience in 1908 when Jack Johnson fought Tommy Burns in Sydney. Why is he in this story of Aboriginal history? He met these two Aboriginal wharf labourers: Fred Maynard and Tom Lacey. They'd slipped under the radar of the then-Aborigines Protection Act and were surreptitiously working on the Sydney waterfront as wharf labourers. This was surprising given the White Australia Policy in place at the time.

Around the waterfront, there was an organisation called the Coloured Progressive Organisation: African, African-American and West Indian sailors who'd slip into Sydney, work on the docks and move on. It had attracted these two men as members. At the time that Jack Johnson left Australia, the CPA organised a farewell party for him. The *Melbourne Truth* described this function as a 'Coon's Corroboree'. This was somewhat equivalent to Mohammed Ali visiting the Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy; quite an inspirational moment for a lot of Aboriginal people in Melbourne (including Gary). Maynard and Lacey continued their association with the CPA on the Sydney waterfront which in time led them to being exposed to ideas of pan-Africanism and Marcus Garvey, considered the father of contemporary black nationalism.

In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Its motto was 'One God, One Aim, One Destiny', and it pledged itself to the redemption of Africa and the emancipation of colonised people everywhere in the world. He wanted to spread these ideas around the world ... and what goes around the world? Sailors. So he set about recruiting these sailors into his organisation. He'd say, wherever your ship calls into port, set up a local branch of UNIA. By 1920, there were branches all over the world including – remarkably – in Sydney.

Maynard and Lacey were two inaugural members; they were strongly influenced by his ideas about colonised people developing their own political and economic independence. They created the AAPA – the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association. It was the first Aboriginal political organisation. It had an identical motto to Marcus Garvey's UNIA. It stood for self-reliance, economic independence and land rights.

Historians had for a long time said the AAPA was set up by white Christian missionaries; they attributed this because of the motto. It was laziness and a lie that persisted for decades before Professor John Maynard from University of Newcastle – similar academic trajectory to Gary – who wrote his PhD on the true story of his grandfather, Fred Maynard. The most radical branch of AAPA was in Nambucca Heads. Foley's great-grandfather was the secretary of the branch.

Part Two. The emergence of the Black Power movement in Redfern and South Brisbane in the late 1960s.

Gary reflects on those Aboriginal people who were active in the 60s ... 'we were all impossibly young'; 'it was probably lucky that we were so young because we were fearless'; 'we didn't seem to realise how dangerous some of the things we were doing was'.

We begin the session proper in 1965. Gary was living 'in my beautiful Gumbayngirr homelands in Nambucca Heads. Not all of my classmates grew up to be rednecks; just most of them.' (Looking at a class photo from Macksville High School, 1965, 4B – 'one little blackfulla in the class'.) As he said earlier, Aboriginal people are relatively thin on the ground in Victoria. However, where Gary comes from, Gumbayngirr land in the Nambucca Valley, 'my people managed to survive the initial invasion and occupation of our homeland relatively well compared to perhaps down this way, to the extent that by 1965, the Gumbayngirr made up almost a quarter of the local population of the three towns along the Nambucca River Valley'. Nambucca Heads, Macksville, Bowraville. 'We made up almost a quarter of the local population and yet in Macksville High School, which served the whole valley, there were only three or four Aboriginal kids in the entire high school. This illustrates the way in which Aboriginal people were still, systematically and deliberately, being denied meaningful educational opportunities. I was only at the high school because some well-intentioned white people considered me worthy of a scholarship. That's the only reason I was in that class in that school.'

Gary continues (slightly truncated here): 'During the week at this school, I could sit next to any of these people in the classroom. However on a Saturday night at the local picture theatre – the only form of entertainment available – where you'd go along and watch the latest in American cultural imperialist rubbish – I could never sit next to any of my fellow students in this class. Why? It was segregated. There was a rope across the front section; in front of it, all the bad seats, was where the Blak people had to sit. The whitefellas sat up the back in the good seats.'

'This is more than halfway through the 20th Century; 64 years after the White Australia Policy was created and established. It is well and truly functioning. You won't see any non-Anglo people in that class except me. That's the sort of Australia that I grew up in; not only was it very white; the kids in the class didn't themselves Australians, they thought of themselves as British.'

Within months of this (portrait) photograph (of Perkins) being taken, that all changed – because of Charles Perkins. He was about to graduate at Sydney University ... many people believe he was the first Aboriginal university graduate in Australia (in 1965). By comparison; the first Native American graduate was in the 1850s. The first Canadian First Nations graduate was in the 1840s. The first African-American graduate was even earlier. The first Maori graduate was a good hundred years before the first Aboriginal university graduate. Which again illustrates the extent to which Aboriginal people were still, more than halfway through the 20th Century, being systematically denied educational opportunities.

Charlie Perkins was not the first university graduate; the first Aboriginal university graduate in Australia was a Gumbayngirr woman. The second was Charlie Perkins. Both graduated a good hundred years after other Indigenous peoples in comparable parts of the world to Australia.

Around the time of this photo, Perkins took up the idea that landed in Australia around 1961, the Freedom Rides, occurred. He decided it was time to have one in Australia. He rounded up Student Action for Aborigines (at Sydney University) and they decided to take a bus trip to the north of NSW – into some of the most notoriously racist areas of the state at the time – and challenge the bigots, the racism in those towns. They put a big sign on the side of the bus, which was sure to attract every Nazi and white supremacist on the way.

They travelled up north, across to the coast and back down. Wellington, Walgett, Moree, Bowraville, Kempsey, Tenterfield, Grafton, Dubbo, Gulgambone, Newcastle, Taree. Everywhere they went, young Aboriginal people were watching; for many it was the first time they'd ever seen an Aboriginal person stand up against bigots, local KKK, and walk away alive. It had a very powerful impact.

In 1966, Gary had a year to go in high school. He was going well; he was a smart kid. The headmaster called him up, and the headmaster said: *Foley, don't come back next year.* He said: *we don't want your kind here.* Gary was expelled. In doing so, he severely effected his self-esteem, self-confidence but worst of all, destroyed his belief in education to the point where it was 30 years before somebody at the University of Melbourne insulted him enough to make him think that he could do it.

He could've done it from the beginning. Could he have done it early, he could have taken advantage of the free education that Whitlam gave! Instead, he ended up with a huge HECS debt.

As soon as he was expelled, he thought: *fuck this, I'm getting out of this little racist arsehole of a town, I'm going to the big smoke – Sydney.* As soon as he got to Sydney, he discovered the traditional welcome to Sydney for young blackfullas from the bush; a welcome provided by the NSW constabulary. In 1967, at the Regent St Police Station (near Central station) ... he was grabbed by a couple of thug cops who gave him a good flogging in that building. 'It really pissed me off.'

The older people at Redfern encouraged young people to get involved in the campaign for a referendum, saying 'if we can get a yes vote it'll really change things for our people'. Faith Bandler was one of them, and she was a big influence. (Gary plays a video of clips from Faith Bandler, talking about state laws being inconsistent; thus needing to change the federal constitution.) The 1967 Referendum is still to this date the biggest 'yes' vote in Australian history; in excess of 90% of the voting population voted this way. Yet despite it, nothing changed. 'It failed to change anything.'

To speak about the recent (Voice to Parliament) referendum, Gary predicted it would get a 'no' vote. All you needed was a little understanding of recent history. If you did, you'd know that after the great success of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy movement in 1972 ... we saw the beginnings of the white backlash.

The white backlash took many forms over the years. It was Pauline Hanson and One Nation ... then it was 40 years of history and culture wars. In the 1970s, for the first time, a small number of Australian historians began to write about the Aboriginal experience of Australian history, which prompted an almost immediate backlash in academia and the Murdoch press – which then resulted in 40 years of arguments about whether massacres happened or not. Keith Windschuttle and co – a whole culture war.

And then comes Native Title ... immediately, the Australian mining industry pours tens of millions of dollars into racist, vicious campaigns slandering Aboriginal Australians. After those decades of anti-Aboriginal propaganda ... some shonky pseudo-Aboriginal academics and members of the 'Blak bourgeoisie' – 'there wasn't one in the 60s, but by the 80s and 90s usually in academia, there was' – decide to have a referendum. 'Any fucking idiot could tell you that this was destined for complete failure. Both her [Marcia Langton] and her mate Noel Pearson [ought] to go away and never to be heard from ever again because they proved how little they knew about history – which we're still seeing the effects of. We've seen this in the past couple of days at Anzac Day ceremonies with white supremacists. I digress!'

1967–68. By the time Gary got to Sydney, Perkins had created the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs – sort of a welfare organisation, but it became an important meeting place for young Aboriginal people arriving from rural areas. They were for the first time meeting other Aboriginal people from other parts of the country and were able for the first time to share their experiences. They'd put dances on weekend evenings, and they were a good opportunity to meet other young folks – and to share experiences and knowledge.

1969. Perhaps sensing the mood, the NSW Government arbitrarily and suddenly closed down the old apartheid system that had existed for about 80 years. In doing so, closing down the so-called reserves (concentration camps) around the state, they pulled the rug out from under 50,000 Aboriginal people around the state. That resulted in a mass exodus from rural areas into the city.

In 1966, when Gary had moved to Redfern, the Aboriginal population was about 1500 people; the slums, the only place where Aboriginal people coming in from the bush could get any accommodation. Within three years, the population had gone from about 1500 to nearly 35,000 people. It was and remains to this day the biggest Aboriginal community that's ever existed in the history of Australia. What virtually everyone in that community had in common was poverty, and being brutalised and intimidated by cops on the street.

So – the term 'black power' enters the Australian political language. The great Black Power scare at the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League in Northcote, near Westgarth station. (Gary shows a slide of Bob Maza, AAL Chairperson, and Bruce McGuinness, AAL director.) They invited Dr Roosevelt Brown to do a talk at the League on 28th August 1969. He was talking about the importance of all colonised people of the world to strive toward their own political and economic independence. It was a small gathering. However: the Australian media decided to sensationalise the whole thing, which scared the shit out of genteel white people in Melbourne. Suddenly, it was on the agenda.

Meanwhile in Redfern (and we see a photo of Sol Bellear with an impressive afro) ... a Black Power Movement emerges.

It largely comes about because of:

- Freedom Ride
- Contacts between Redfern activists and Black US soldiers on leave from Vietnam War
- Police harassment of Black activists in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane
- African-American political literature (Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Angela Davis et al)
- Contact between young Indigenous activists and African and Pacific activists studying in Australian universities
- Anger over the failure of the 1967 referendum to bring immediate change

US soldiers on leave brought Black African literature and personal accounts of what was happening back home. They were able to talk first hand with Aboriginal activists about some of the events there – some also knew people in the Black Panther Party and all the other organisations that Aboriginal Black Power activists were interested to learn more about.

Young Aboriginal people also wanted to do things about cops harassing them in Redfern. They looked around the world; particularly at the Black Panther programmes in Oakland, California in the US – breakfast for kids, and so on. They saw this as almost identical to what was happening to them, so they stole and adapted some of these ideas for Redfern. 'If we're going to counter the cops, we're going to have to mount a counter-spying operation on the cops. What were they doing? Who were they arresting? Where were they taking them?' They got bashed more than once along the way but they soon had gathered enough information about police activities that they could think about acting.

They knew Professor [Hal] Wootten, Dean of the Law School at UNSW, through Paul Coe. So after a period of collection, they brought this information to Professor Wootten and asked him to read and consider it. He was 'a conservative old bastard and found it difficult to believe it was happening'. They joked that he should come to Redfern and see for himself – but then he said yes.

So they invited him to the Empire Pub, 'one of the roughest pubs in Sydney', instructing him to *please come dressed casual*. He turned up in a cummerbund. They had to get a couple of people to keep an eye on him because 'we didn't want any of the blackfullas rolling him'. Sure enough, the cops came in and started grabbing and brutalising and arresting people. Suddenly, Wootten gets up and runs toward the cops and tries to intervene. But they tell him to stop, sit and not get arrested himself.

After a week, Wootten asked: what do we do? And they said *you're the man of the law ... you tell us!*

They came up with an example of legal aid, but he said it couldn't be done here. Only six weeks later, they opened the first Aboriginal legal service in Australia.

Black Power Movement influences and inspirations: Aboriginal resistance fighters.

A slide shows names and pictures of Jack Patton, Bill Onus, Pearl Gibbs, Don Brady, Gladys Elphick, Dooley Bin Bin and Vincent Lingiari.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X was the second political awakening of Gary Foley. He also recommends Frantz Fanon to anyone who wants to understand colonialism. And James Baldwin, George Jackson, Vine Deloria Jr (*Indians & Anthropologists*).

Foley's also a fan of Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh. Patrice Lumumba, Nelson Mandela. They got to meet a lot of future South African leaders, because they were studying in Australian universities. And they loved the Black Panther Party. The BPP's imagery was created by Emory Douglas (Minister for Culture), whom Gary got to meet in 2009.

They were also really big into the American Indian Movement: Russell Means, Dennis Banks, John Trudell.

Paul Coe was the charismatic leader of the Redfern Black Power Collective.

The Black Power movement stood for Land Rights (land as economic base), Self-Determination (Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs), and Economic and Political Independence (Aboriginal sovereignty).

They created the first shopfront Aboriginal Legal Service (in Redfern, 1971). They also introduced the concept of legal aid to the Australian continent. Whitlam gave legal aid to Australia as well as free uni; but Hawke took it all away.

Within the first three months of the legal aid, Mum Shirl summoned young activists to create the first Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern, too, also in 1971. 'This community has enormous health problems. Why can't we set up a free shopfront medical service like we set up the legal service?' So they called a meeting. A mad, pipe-smoking, mountain-climbing communist eye doctor called Fred Hollows showed up. Mum Shirl asked: why can't we open this? Hollows told her 50 reasons why it couldn't be done. But mere months later, they opened the first Aboriginal Medical Service in Australia.

Gary Foley took a photo of a dozen kids posing in front of the new service – 'to show who it was for'. The sad thing is that within 20 years, most of those kids were dead. When he turned 50, the life expectancy for an Aboriginal man was about 46. Now he's about to turn 75, the average life expectancy is 71.

1969–1972. The Aboriginal Children's Breakfast programme in Redfern addressed kids going to school with no breakfast – which affected their concentration, behaviour and ability to learn. They borrowed a mobile kitchen from the Wayside Chapel kitchen in Kings Cross. All the Blak kids turned up with their poor white friends! So they fed them too. The men started it, and the women stood back watching; eventually they said *alright, piss off*, and they took it over. It became the Murawina Centre in Chippendale. Gary shows us a 1972 ABC news report about the services. The British-accented reporter describes Aboriginal activists: '... certain that they've been hardly done by, and rather aggressive ...'

Influenced by Harlem Black Theatre, which he had visited in 1970, Bob Maza set up National Black Theatre company in 1972 in Redfern. Foley was involved. They did a show called *Basically Black* at Nimrod Theatre. Afterwards, the ABC approached and said they were interested in doing a series based on the stage show. They produced a pilot. The ABC were so horrified by what they came up with that not only did they not proceed with the series; they did not touch Blak comedy again for another 40 years.

In Brisbane, an even more radical branch of the Black Power Movement emerged: the Australian Black Panther Party (Denis Walker).

1971. A year of significant change. Liberal Party member Neville Bonner becomes the first Aboriginal member of Federal Parliament; ironically an extremely conservative member of the Libs of Queensland, put in place by Joh Bjelke-Peterson (look him up if you don't know of him).

The Gove Land Rights case reaffirmed 'Terra Nullius'. Vincent Lingiari came south to meet with Black Power activists. Lin Onus set up a land rights claim in Sherbrooke Forest – but was firebombed by neo-Nazis.

Also in this year, the Aboriginal flag was designed in Adelaide by Aboriginal artist Harold Thomas. It came about after a demonstration in Adelaide. Harold was a mate of Gary's; they took a couple of slabs of VB back to his house and lamented that what they regarded as an emerging pan-Aboriginal movement didn't have a unifying symbol. They decided to do something about it. Harold 'whipped out his art stuff' and started trying some designs. In the original version, the black represented the people, the red represented the land (ochre) and the line where they met was symbolic of the close relationship between the people and the land. And overlooking them, the yellow was the sun, Giver of Life. 'You now know – most people don't – that this is a *two slab flag!*'

The Black Power movement was on the run; 'Aboriginal rights leader declares war on whites'. When Rupert Murdoch first created the *Australian*, it was rabidly pro-Aboriginal land rights. It wasn't until Whitlam got in that Murdoch did his abrupt turn to the right, where he has ended up to this day.

In Darwin, members of the Larrakia people blockaded for Land Rights, in the main street of Darwin. NT rednecks always said 'their' Aboriginal people weren't militant like the others ... so they were shocked by this blockade. Perhaps even more surprisingly, Gwalwa Daraniki received a letter of support and a major donation from a certain Keith Windschuttle.

Still in 1971, there was the South African Springbok rugby tour. Apartheid surprised Aboriginal activists that there were Australians who called themselves anti-racists. Paul Coe asked, how are you protesting racism halfway around the world instead of marching with them in support of Aboriginal land rights? The anti-racist people to their credit took this proposition seriously and started coming to Land Rights demonstrations, making them much bigger, better and more impactful.

Gary discusses Simon Townsend, who wrote 'Black Power comes to Australia' for the *Australian*; before becoming a journalist, he was a renowned conscientious objector. They'd moved the Black Panthers to Bondi Junction to avoid the Redfern cops. Townsend shouted them beers at the pub in Bondi Junction, and they told him all about their work. At some point, he gets up and goes to leave – he has to write the article up. Billy Craigie keeps Townsend by bullshitting: 'Don't go yet, Simon ... we haven't told you about the explosives'. So Townsend shouted another round while they spun a bullshit yarn. But the real effect of that article – that got ASIO interested. 'And by the way, all you have to do is wait 30 years before those files are returned to the National Archives.'

Gary didn't know about this at the time, but his advice is to think sartorially: so that in 30 years' time, you aren't 'dressed like a dag' in those photos.

Still in 1971: Billy McMahon is PM, 'a tragic little man, vertically challenged with a high pitched voice'. In 1972, on January 26, he made a statement on Land Rights – saying he was never going to grant them. The timing was guaranteed to get an instant reaction on the most politically sensitive day of the calendar for Aboriginal people.

That night, Aboriginal activists in Redfern sent four activists to Canberra to protest with a Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House. Billie Craigie, Bert Williams, Michael Anderson and Tony Coorey went down, expecting to take a photo before the cops arrived and arrested them; they'd spend the night in the cells and get bailed out and taken home the next day.

Instead, the police found there didn't seem to be a law preventing you from camping on the lawns outside Parliament House. But you could only put 11 structures here. If you put 12 there, they'd deem it a camping area and move you. The officer delivering this news then got in his car and drove away. It was an accidental loophole in ACT law – so the next day, they brought a better tent in.

Tony Coorey was the poet in the Black Power movement. He came up with the embassy idea. The PM's statement deemed them aliens; if we're going to be deemed aliens in our own land, we're going to have an embassy like all the other aliens.

So for six months: they kept only 11 tents.

They stuck a letterbox out, and the mail started being delivered by the postmaster general three days later.

It quickly became a tourist attraction. Activists would conduct public forums about Land Rights for tourists on the lawn. It was only five years after the referendum, so there was still interest. People from all walks of life would turn up and have meaningful dialogues. (In a newspaper clipping, an Aboriginal marshal kicks a white lady off the lawn.)

In February 1972, opposition leader Gough Whitlam speaks at Aboriginal Embassy. He said, at the end of this year there's an election. Just vote for Labor and you'll be sweet. Paul Coe interrupts: the Government across the road's policy is assimilation, a bipartisan policy for 70 years. You know as well as I do that assimilation equals genocide, because the desired end result is there would be no Aborigines. Whitlam took it to heart and changed the policy of the ALP. He thus ended the bipartisan approach of at least 70 years. He made this clear in a 1972 election speech announcing a policy to give Aboriginal people land rights.

'Admirable words, but unfortunately yet another broken promise.'

McMahon meanwhile moves to get rid of the Embassy. Within minutes of the legislation plugging the 11 tent loophole, the police moved in. It caught the activists by surprise. It was the 20th July, 1972. They let them take 10 tents away, but said that if you take the final tent, the office tent, then 'it'll be on'. Faith Bandler stood there with them protecting the last tent; she was very conservative and she was not young, but she stood with them all the same.

But – the police moved. There was a big brawl. The police knocked Gary Foley out. But the press images went around, and blackfullas everywhere – even WA – jumped into their cars and headed to Canberra. A couple of thousand turned up, re-erected the tent and defied the police to take it down.

'Another word of advice: it's not always a good idea to defy the police to do something because invariably they will.'

Three days later, 23 July 1972. The police move in again. Not armed, not armoured, no tasers, pepper spray, batons, guns ... 'think about what they look like nowadays. That's the extent to which Australian police have been militarised in just 50 years.' (We see footage of these confrontations, some of which appears in *Ningla A-Na*, a documentary about the Tent Embassy, currently available on free-to-air streaming.) There's another large brawl and 18 activists are arrested. This spells more bad headlines for McMahon.

Another week later – 30 July – 3000 Aboriginal people turn up and re-erect the tent. This time, every member of the then-ACT police (now the AFP) was on duty that day in front of Parliament House. There were also two squads from the NSW Police Riot Squad, hidden behind APH. And the cadets from Royal Military College at Duntroon were there too.

So the activists had a meeting amongst themselves. 'We came here six months ago just to get a photo taken. We've achieved a lot more than we imagined. Do we really want to have another brawl?' They negotiated with the cops and said they'll allow them to take their tent and they'll form a symbolic passageway but keep their moral victory.

The police take the tent.

The historical significance of the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy:

- Brought an end to the era of Assimilation
- Put Aboriginal Affairs on national political agenda
- Made the world aware of the struggle for justice in Australia
- Prompted major government policy change in 1970s
- Helped bring an end to 23 years of conservative government

However – Whitlam sold them out in the end. Gary forgives Whitlam 'a bit' for being knocked off the job before he could finish what he was doing. The CIA did it!

3CR air an hour-long package of excerpts of the talk on Monday Breakfast, 28 April 2025, with full recordings of parts one and two promised.

Further reading:

- '[A Short History of the Australian Indigenous Resistance 1950–1990](#)' by Gary Foley in *Workers Bush Telegraph*, January 2010
- [Native Title is Not Land Rights!](#) by Tony Birch, Jacqui Katona and Gary Foley (Common Room Editions, July 2023)
- [The Koori History Website](#) by Gary Foley

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Notes prepared by CDMS; every effort has been made to accurately quote or paraphrase facts as presented by Professor Foley.