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**Strategic Considerations in the Struggle for Social Justice for Indigenous People:  
Whiteness and Blackness in the Koori Struggle for Self-Determination**

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*"Self determination is intimately related to calls for a treaty and constitutional recognition of indigenous rights. They all flow from an endeavour to regain recognition of our original rights to freedom and control of our own lives which were lost with the invasion of our lands and to gain a recognition for those rights which is secure. On a basis which is not dependent on grace or favour or welfare but in recognition of our original place and our continuing distinct cultural identity which we wish to retain."<sup>28</sup>*

*Mick Dodson*

*Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1993.*

**Introduction**

Since the early 1990s Australia has seen a boom in white support groups for Indigenous issues. Non-Koori support groups are now abundant, especially since the Mabo decision of the High Court, and the advent of the non-Koori notion of "Reconciliation". These groups embrace a myriad of political philosophies and positions. They range from the average suburban, church-based "reconciliation group", occasional community actions (Northland Secondary College campaign 1992-95), through the student and professional groups (Trade Union and student support groups), government and semi-government groups (National Committee of Reconciliation), and overtly political groups like Action for Aboriginal Rights and the Jabiluka Action Group.

Despite the plethora of such groups how is it that Koori people are today constantly asking me, "why does it often seem that some of our best white friends behave like some of our worst enemies?" I regard that as a good question, and in this essay I hope to provide some answers by way of a little examination of history and perceptions.

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission: First Report 1993,

Canberra: Aust. Govt. Publishing Service, 1993, p. 50.

At some stage of their relationship with Koori people, all non-Koori individuals and organisations are forced to confront the reality of how these issues will impact upon them. One of the greatest areas of underlying tension and dispute between Kooris and their non-Koori supporters is how these support groups and their members relate to Koori people. Often without even realising it, many non-Kooris are patronising and paternalistic in their dealings with Koori people, and thereby present themselves to Kooris as little different from those who oppose justice for Aboriginal Australians. Also, failure to properly understand the importance of "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs" to indigenous people can create tension where white supporters think they know better than the Koori community.

What are some of the specific problems that bedevil smooth relations between Indigenous political activists and their non-Koori supporters, and what is the history of this internal struggle? How can an understanding of this battle, as well as its fundamental issues and logic, help those today who feel compelled to be part of the on-going struggle for justice for Koori Australians? Do examples exist in recent times of successful attempts to forge meaningful and productive political alliances between Koori people and non-Koori supporters? If so, then how have these groups contended with the problems mentioned? In this paper I will seek to address these questions and in the process propose some basic principles for successful cooperative action by Koori and non-Koori groups.

I shall examine the historical background of the Koori struggle for Self-Determination, which has been a major issue since the birth of the modern Koori political movement early this century, and came to a head at the height of the campaign for the 1967 Referendum. In the process I hope to give the reader a greater insight into why these issues are so important to the Koori community. By examining in detail the two specific recent examples of; the Northland Secondary College campaign (1992-95) and the Jabiluka Action Group (JAG) Melbourne; I will show how different organisations have tackled the same problem of ignorance and racism in white support groups. I will then draw conclusions as to what is the best approach that non-Koori supporters might take to ensure that this problem of perception and understanding is eliminated for future generations of Australians.

Some of my more astute readers will notice that I have to a minor extent incorporated some of the arguments from my essay *The Power of Whiteness*,<sup>29</sup> but this paper is meant to address the broader issues of the 'big picture'. It nevertheless should be remembered that any dealings with Aboriginal peoples, non-Koori individuals are always functioning from a position of power. This power and assumed authority derive from white society's own construction of history and its wealth and power to enforce and perpetuate that perception. As products of that society non-Koori individuals already carry heavy cultural, social and political power into any relationship with Kooris. Given the nature of history/relations between Koori and non-Koori societies this problem continues to exist and will constitute background interference in all attempts at communication. This should be easier to comprehend when the issues examined in this paper have been considered and understood.

### A Condensed History of a Long Struggle: Self-Determination for Koori People

#### Early Days and Australian Genocide

The first thing that Anglo-Australian supporters have to face up to is that the society from which they come has a long history of entrenched, institutionalised racism. As Ruth Frankenberg says,

For the greater part of...history...arguments for the biological inferiority of people of colour represented the dominant discourse...for thinking about race. Within this discourse, race was constructed as a biological category, and the assertion of white biological superiority was used to justify economic and political inequities ranging from settler colonisation to slavery.<sup>30</sup>

Australians must come to terms with the fact that their perceptions have been shaped by their culture and its construct of time, space and history. Australian racism has manifested itself as fear and loathing of all who might be perceived as racially or culturally different (or the 'other'). But the first and longest suffering victims of White Australian racism, have been the Koori peoples. From the very first contact

<sup>29</sup> Gary Foley, "The Power of Whiteness", *Farrago* #7, July, 1998.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*, 1993, p.12.

Aboriginal peoples have been regarded as 'sub-human' and 'primitive' and the imposition of British sovereignty under the guise of *terra nullius* formalised the non-acknowledgment of Kooris as human beings.<sup>31</sup> The subsequent mass slaughter of Aborigines and the appropriation of their land without compensation a clear sign of the contempt that white settlers had for the indigenous occupants, and that contempt has been transmitted culturally from generation to generation to this day.<sup>32</sup>

From the beginning of the British invasion of Australia indigenous people were slaughtered on a grand scale. In Tasmania between 1804 and 1834, the Aboriginal population was reduced from an estimated 5000 people to just 200, which represented a 90% reduction in just 30 years. In Victoria it has been estimated that the Koori population declined by about 60% in just 15 years between 1835 and 1850<sup>33</sup> as more than 68 individual 'massacres' were perpetrated in that period. According to representative of the North West Clans of Victoria, Mr Gary Murray, of the 38 clans that lived in Victoria B.C. (Before Cook) only 24 today have living descendants.<sup>34</sup> By 1850 virtually all active resistance to the invasion had been quelled in Victoria. Census figures published in March 1857 showed only 1,768 Aborigines were left in all of that state. So comprehensive was the 'ethnic cleansing' of Australia that out of an estimated 500 language groups on mainland Australia when the British arrived, barely half that number of languages were to survive. By 1871, one correspondent, G. Carrington felt compelled to write,

We shall never possess a detailed history of this singular and gradual work of extermination - such a tale would be too horrible to read - but we have an opportunity of seeing a similar process in full work in the colony of Queensland, and when we have seen that, we shall understand the mystery of Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.<sup>35</sup>

By the middle of the 19th Century the situation for Aborigines in most parts of Australia looked very grim. Barry Morris has described it thus, 'The colonial process had reduced the Aborigines to a residual minority, but they had not been eliminated.

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<sup>31</sup> Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner & Sarah Nuttall (eds), Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia, London: Routledge, 1996, pp 12-15.

<sup>32</sup>For an account of how this persisted in academia, see, "Studying Aborigines: Changing Canons in Anthropology and History", in Bain Attwood & John Arnold (eds.) Power, Knowledge and Aborigines, Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1992, pp. 20-31.

<sup>33</sup>Fergus Robinson and Barry York, The Black Resistance, Melbourne :Widescope, 1977, p.90.

<sup>34</sup>Gary Murray, personal interview with author, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1997.

The problem was expected to resolve itself.<sup>36</sup> In other words a new policy emerged dubbed, 'Smooth the Dying Pillow', it was based on the assumption that what was left of the Aboriginal populace would now die out. So whilst indiscriminate killings of Aborigines were to continue well into the 1930's, the widespread genocidal activity of early 'settlement' gave way to a policy of containment. This was embodied by the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909*, which established the first Australian 'concentration camps' to provide a place for the doomed race to die off.<sup>37</sup> It is also interesting to note that the first act of the new Commonwealth of Australia in 1901<sup>38</sup> was to restrict non-white immigration so, as Pat Grimshaw put it, 'Australia's spaces would be filled instead by pure white babies.'<sup>39</sup>

Social Darwinism was also a popular notion in Australia about that time, especially among the scientific community. Andrew Markus has said, 'one doesn't have to read extensively to discern that a central concern of anatomists was to establish whether Aborigines were closer to the animal than human'.<sup>40</sup> The Elder Professor of Anatomy at the University of Adelaide in 1926 said that Aborigines were, 'too low in the scale of humanity' to benefit from 'the civilising influence of Anglo Saxon rule'.<sup>41</sup>

Many eminent Australian scientists of the day were to express similar attitudes. In Victoria, as Christie notes, 'Throughout the frontier years (between 1835 and 1850) the intellectual argument that the Aborigines more closely resembled "the ourangoutangs than men" made it easier for the squatter to treat the Aborigines as subhuman, to lump them with the dingo and shoot them as a "rural pest."<sup>42</sup> Thus was Australian society's

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<sup>35</sup> G. Carrington, *Colonial Adventures and Experiences by a University Man*, London: Bell and Daldy, 1871, p.144.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Morris, *Domesticating Resistance: the Dhan-Gadi Aborigines and the Australian State*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> For a history of NSW 'reserve' system see, Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in NSW, 1770-1972*, Sydney : Allen and Unwin, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Gillian Whitlock, "White-Souled State: Across the 'South' with Lady Barker", in Kate Darian Smith et al (eds), *text, theory, space: land, literature and history in south africa and australia*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, Marlyn Lake, Anne McGrath, Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1994, pp.191-3.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Markus, "After the Outward Appearance: Scientists, administrators and politicians", *all that dirt: An Australian 1938 Monograph*, ed. Bill Gammage and Andrew Markus, Canberra: History Project Incorporated, 1982, p.86.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.86.

<sup>42</sup> M.F. Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835-86*, Sydney: Sydney University Press 1979, p.36.

justification for the terrible treatment meted out to the original inhabitants. In the face of such racism pervading society and resonating down the white generations, Koori activists and thinkers realised that the path forward was necessarily through self-reliance and Koori control of Koori affairs.

### The First Koori Organisations

The first all-Aboriginal political organisation was the Australian Aborigines League, established by William Cooper, Doug Nichols, Bill and Eric Onus and others in early 1936 in Melbourne.<sup>43</sup> 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'.<sup>44</sup> This was the first major attempt by a group of Koori political activists to try and assert control over their own destinies, although many dedicated groups emerged around then including Bill Ferguson's *Aborigines Progressive Association*.<sup>45</sup> The Australian Aborigines League never became more than a regional organisation, effectively functioning only in south-east Australia, although key members travelled far and wide throughout Australia in the 1930s to 1960s making contacts, compiling information and politically organising. 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. Such were the difficulties and obstacles that a national Aboriginal-only organisation was not achieved during that era.

### The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines & Torres Strait Islanders

It was not until the early 1960s that the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) became the only national organisation representing indigenous interests. However many Kooris had a major problem with FCAATSI because it was not an Aboriginal controlled organisation. The organisation's executive was controlled by a majority of non-Koori supporters, who, because they were essentially liberal church people and trade unionists, tended

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Markus, Blood From a Stone, Clayton: Monash Publications in History, 1986, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> VAAL, VAAL, Victims or Victors?: The Story of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1985, p. 27.

to steer the organisation on a much more conservative path than many indigenous members would have liked. Whilst FCAATSI was successful in campaigning for a 'Yes' vote in the 1967 referendum, it was during that campaign that cracks were beginning to show in the structure of the organisation.

The tensions came to a head in the aftermath of the 1967 Referendum, and by 1969, at the annual conference in Canberra a group of Koori political activists that included Kath Walker (Oojeroo Noonuckle), Bruce McGuinness, Pastors Doug Nichols and Don Brady, Denis Walker and others, called for Aboriginal control of FCAATSI. 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.<sup>46</sup>

The push by the Walkers, McGuinness et al was blocked by the greater voting strength of the non-Kooris, and led to the breakaway Indigenous-organisation, The National Tribal Council (NTC), being established. This action ultimately did not resolve the underlying problem of the apparent inability of white supporters to understand why Kooris such as Kath Walker felt so strongly about the issue of Aboriginal self-determination. FCAATSI was never to regain its influence as a result of the split and a vacuum was created, although at its 1972 conference in Alice Springs it managed to attract 350 people, predominantly Indigenous. The void was filled with the simultaneous emergence in

Fitzroy, Redfern and Brisbane of the "Black Power" political movement, which became the dominant force in Koori politics from 1972 till 1979.

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<sup>45</sup> Jack Horner, "Steadfast Pioneers", *Identity*, Vol.1No.5, July, 1972.

<sup>46</sup> Walker, Kath, "Black-White Coalition Can Work", *Origin*, 18 Sept. 1969.

Charles Perkins' "Freedom Ride" 1965

However, prior to the referendum a major event occurred that was to have a profound political effect on the Koori struggle and in part inspire major events five years later. In February 1965 a 'Freedom Ride' was organised by a young Charles Perkins and 30 white Sydney University students from the group Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA).<sup>47</sup> Perkins had 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.<sup>48</sup> 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 half-way through out of fear<sup>49</sup>. 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 which 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 which was to continue and expand in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>50</sup>

The Freedom Ride had the effect of inspiring a young generation of Koori political activists in south-east Australia to stand up for their rights. It also served as a potential role model for cooperation between Koori community activists and non-Koori supporters. Whilst some of the individual whites on the Freedom Ride became social activists and

supporters of the Koori struggle, there was no long term organisation through which meaningful contact and cooperative action might be engaged. For a short period a student support group called Abschol (raising money for scholarships for Aborigines)

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Perkins, letter to Mr. A.G. Kingsmill, Chairman, NSW Aborigines Welfare Board, 18<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1956, from Bain Attwod & Andrew Markus (eds.), The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999, p. 215.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Perkins, "Charles Perkins", in Stuart Rintoul, The Wailing: A National Black Oral History, Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1993, pp. 286-291.

<sup>49</sup> "Race Tour Bus Driver Walks Out", *Australian*, 22 Feb. 1965.



flourished on Australian university campuses, but by 1970 it was regarded by the emerging black political movement in Redfern as being too middle-class and 'wishy-washy' politically. The feelings of confusion and alienation that an earlier generation of white FCAATSI members had experienced were now replicating among the student movement, the most active non-Koori supporters at the time.

### Redfern & Fitzroy 1969 - 1972 "Black Power"

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a dynamic new indigenous political movement arose from the slums of Redfern where the black population had dramatically increased in a mass exodus from the rural reserves (concentration camps) after the 1967 Referendum. The Koori population of Redfern had risen from 2000 in 1965 to more than 20,000 by 1969, and from this dynamic 'ghetto', revelling in a new-found political and social freedom, emerged a new phase of the Koori movement under the general misnomer of the Black Power Movement. The important difference between this new younger group and the older Aboriginal leaders of the day was that the new group had a diverse range of local and overseas inspirations and influences. These included the Gurindji struggle, Perkins Freedom Ride, Malcolm X, the Black Panthers in America,<sup>51</sup> Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese struggle for independence, the African National Congress (ANC), Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Franz Fanon and Mao Zedong, to name a few.

Parallel developments in the more 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. 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

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<sup>50</sup> Shoemaker, Adam, *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929 - 1988*, St.Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989, p. 107.

<sup>51</sup> See Black Panthers of Australia Platform and Programme 1970, Riley & Ephemera Collection, State Library of Victoria, and, Townsend Simon, "Simon Townsend Talks to the Leaders of the Black Panthers", *Australian*, 5th Dec. 1971.

Press to be the equivalent to violent revolution and the establishment of black dictatorships.<sup>52</sup> 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-to-day 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.<sup>53</sup>

The Redfern/Fitzroy "Black Power" groups were also 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

The new type of Koori organisation was to be created as a result of Koori people themselves defining the needs, problems and solutions of the Koori community. Then Kooris themselves set about alleviating those problems in ways which were uniquely Koori and which ensured that the resultant organisations were controlled by the Koori community. The role of the white supporter became one of taking direction from the 'real' experts on Koori community matters, ie. Koori community members. This new form of organisation was the vanguard of the black political uprising of the early 1970s that culminated in the historic and politically brilliant Aboriginal Embassy protest of 1972.<sup>56</sup> The dramatic proliferation of Aboriginal community-controlled

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<sup>52</sup> VAAL, VAAL, Victims or Victors?: The Story of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1985, p. 89.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> "Black Power Looms Larger", *Age*, 12<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1973.

<sup>55</sup> See, Bobbi Sykes, "Black people want to control their own destiny", *Australian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1972.

<sup>56</sup> For an account of this period see, Bruce Elder, "A Black Life", *Rolling Stone*, Issue 426, Yearbook 1988.

organisations (legal services, health services, women and children's services, housing cooperatives) in that period both highlighted the political principle of self-determination espoused by Koori political activists, as well as challenged the pre-conceived notions of potential white supporters.<sup>57</sup>

### 1971 South African "Springbok" Rugby Tour

The challenge to the attitudes of anti-racist white supporters further intensified when in 1971 the Australian anti-Apartheid Movement were involved in major demonstrations against the tour of the South African Springbok rugby team. Those protests brought the Australian anti-racist movement face to face with Koori activists who were demonstrating in support of their black South African brothers and sisters. These encounters led to the Kooris posing the question, 'What were these anti-racist Australians doing about racism in their own back-yard?' White Australian "anti-racists" were confronted with the proposition that perhaps they were being racist themselves in being blind to the state of racial oppression in this country.

This directly resulted in a small variety of white individuals and groups declaring their unequivocal support for Koori self-determination and Land Rights. Consequently a series of major demonstrations were held in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide with Koori activists numbers boosted by non-Koori supporters that included the Builders Labourers Federation, Waterside Workers Federation, Anti-apartheid Movement, students from Abschol and members of the Anti-Vietnam War Coalition. These national Koori demonstrations led into the Aboriginal Embassy in 1972, who had accepted the challenge laid down by the Koori political activists.

### 1972 - The Aboriginal Embassy

On the 26th January 1972 the Prime Minister, William McMahon, made a formal response to the growing campaign of Land Rights demonstrations and declared that his government would not be granting Land Rights.<sup>58</sup> The Prime Minister's speech

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<sup>57</sup> Pam Nathan, Home Away From Home: A study of the Aboriginal Health Service in Fitzroy, Melbourne: PIT Press, 1980.

<sup>58</sup> See, Editorial, "White paper, black question", *Age*, 26<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1972.

triggered the most successful Aboriginal political protest since the invasion, the tent *Aboriginal Embassy* on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra. The *Embassy* was organised and run by the young Koori radicals from Redfern, Fitzroy and Brisbane. It stood as a symbol of Aboriginal political defiance and independence for six months until July 1972 when the McMahon government passed a law, in the middle of the night, to make the protest illegal. The next morning when Police forcibly removed the tents<sup>59</sup> (making world headlines in the process) the majority of people who stood to defend the site were non-Koori supporters from the local Canberra community.

The white support groups at the Aboriginal Embassy were drawn to a large extent from those involved in the national Black Moratorium demonstrations of 1971 and were conscious of the Koori struggle's need for Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs. They accepted the concept that in order to be useful to the Koori struggle, they first needed to educate themselves and overcome their own ignorance and fears. The non-Koori supporters at the *Embassy* were a different crew to those who had been the backbone of FCAATSI. They did not seek (or were unable) to have a say in how the protest was run or the philosophy behind it. They were more aware of the need for Koori people to be determining their own destiny politically, and they were prepared to stand with Koori activists when the crunch came.

The crunch came in June 1972 when the McMahon Government decided to arbitrarily remove the tent protest that had become such a major embarrassment.<sup>60</sup> In the middle of the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> July the government passed an ordinance that made it unlawful to camp on the lawns of Parliament House. Within 24 hours ACT Police moved on the protestors and the violent scenes made TV news headlines around the world.<sup>61</sup> The consequent political fiasco resulted in the final discrediting of the McMahon Government and it was swept from office less than six months later.

It should be remembered that the only person to go to gaol as a result of the July 1972 Embassy demonstrations was a white member of the Builders Labourers Union. The main reason that the Aboriginal Embassy demonstrators managed to survive that

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<sup>59</sup> Mungo MacCallum, "Stupidity and strongarm: The shabby Canberra affair", *Sunday Review*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1972., also see, Editorial, "An Embassy of their own", *Age*, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1972.

<sup>60</sup> "Aboriginal embassy will go - Hunt", *Australian*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1972.

freezing Canberra winter of 1972 was because of the tremendous support that the Koori activists received from white supporters in that city, especially the Student Union of the ANU. It all worked so well that one would have been forgiven for thinking that things had changed for the better permanently.

### Whitlam, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) and Betrayal

Unfortunately, the bubble burst with the advent of the Whitlam Labor government in a landslide election win in December 1972, an event that ironically the Embassy demonstrations had significantly contributed to by helping destroy the credibility of the McMahon government. As Opposition Leader, Gough Whitlam had visited the Aboriginal Embassy earlier in 1972 and made specific commitments to the Koori peoples.<sup>62</sup> He was regarded from both inside and outside the Koori community as being one of black Australia's greatest white supporters.<sup>63</sup> Sadly however, from the moment he took office, he made a series of Aboriginal Affairs policy blunders that were to have serious long-term repercussions for the Koori struggle for independence and self-determination.

Whitlam appointed as his Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Gordon Bryant, who was still one of the senior FCAATSI officials that had opposed Koori control of the organisation just four years earlier. Bryant was regarded by the Koori political activists as a pedestrian, conservative Minister who very quickly alienated them by creating, on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1972, a monolithic bureaucracy, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA). The primary role of the DAA was to administer the large sums of Commonwealth monies that the Whitlam government now intended to spend on Aboriginal Affairs. The DAA when created had only three Aboriginal employees and the rest of its staff were non-Koori and disproportionately recruited from the ranks of the notorious former State Aboriginal Protection Board employees and former PNG patrol officers. Bryant and DAA nevertheless initiated Koori recruitment policies that were to have a major effect on the political movement, as Attwood and Markus observe,

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<sup>61</sup> Michelle Grattan, "Aborigines' 'embassy' down but their flag flying high", *Age*, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1972.

<sup>62</sup> "Labor 'would grant land to Aborigines'", *Age*, 9th Feb 1972

...the locus of Aboriginal politics began to shift from protest to management as many Aboriginal leaders were charged with the responsibility of implementing new policies, and so became incorporated in the task of administration, either as employees of federal government or the agencies established to deliver services to Aboriginal communities.<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately the public service agencies recruited more Kooris than the funds-starved community-controlled services could and therein is reason for the birth of the first real Aboriginal middle-class during the 1970s and 1980s. The numerically small black middle-class today along with the numerically superior white "experts" and bureaucrats comprise the greater part of the *Aboriginal industry*.

Meanwhile, in the 70s Aboriginal activists saw their hopes for a meaningful relationship with the new Labor administration dashed when the Whitlam government in its first year in office, spent \$44million on Aboriginal affairs<sup>65</sup>, consumed mostly by white administration, whilst Aboriginal community-controlled organisations were frustrated and hampered by lack of funds.

Unhappiness with the Labor administration grew rapidly,<sup>66</sup> and by the time Whitlam was dismissed in the coup of 1975 there was a general disillusionment in Koori communities all over Australia. When Malcolm Fraser took over he largely maintained the Aboriginal Affairs policies of the Labor government, which meant that the DAA continued to underfund the now 75 Aboriginal community-controlled health services.<sup>67</sup> This directly led to the creation of a new national Koori political grouping that became the vanguard of the Koori political struggle during the Fraser era.

### NAIHO

The National Aboriginal & Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO) was significant not only because it was very effective in its political campaign (in 1979 NAIHO was

<sup>63</sup> See, "Labor 'would grant land to Aborigines'", *Age*, 9<sup>th</sup> Feb 1972, and, "We will end injustice to blacks: PM", *Age*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1973.

<sup>64</sup> Attwood & Markus, 1999, p. 277.

<sup>65</sup> DAA, Annual Report 1974, Canberra: Australian Government Printer

<sup>66</sup> "The black cauldron boils over", *Age*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1974, and Michelle Grattan, "Blacks gatecrash Parliament: Boos and jeers for angry Whitlam", *Age*, 31<sup>st</sup> Oct 1974.

<sup>67</sup> Aboriginal Medical Service - A Political History : Redfern AMS 20th Anniversary Book, Sydney: Redfern AMS, 1991.

behind the establishment of the Aboriginal Information Centre in London with support committees in 10 European countries), but also because it developed new protocols through which white supporters with technical and professional skills could work for Koori organisations in a mutually respectful manner. NAIHO, as the umbrella organisation representing the interests of almost 80 community-controlled health services around Australia, needed to recruit doctors, dentists, nurses and ancillary personnel at a time when there were no Aboriginal doctors and dentists.

The extraordinary thing is that NAIHO managed to recruit non-Koori professionals who understood and appreciated why Koori community-controlled organisations needed to assert that control over all aspects of their operations, and this new relationship enabled Aboriginal people to teach medical professionals how to behave and function in the Koori community in a manner that evokes confidence among Koori patients and thereby improves the treatment they receive.

Furthermore, NAIHO promoted the idea that paramedic Koori Health Workers were the key people in Aboriginal health. As the 'middle-person' between the community and the white medico, and equipped with specific paramedical skills, the Koori Health Worker was (like the Chinese counterpart that was the inspiration, the Barefoot Doctor) as important a component in an effective health care delivery system as the white doctor.<sup>68</sup> For white medical professionals to work in a context like this took a quantum leap in understanding in the early seventies, but numerous remarkable people like Dr. Bill Roberts, and Professor Fred Hollows did accept the challenge and helped Kooris educate a whole new generation of medical professionals.<sup>69</sup>

The underlying fundamental concept developed by Koori people that enabled this was the simple proposition that white people need to dispense with their pre-conceived notions and learn the truth about their own history and the nature of their own society. To then become a servant of the community and develop a meaningful understanding of and relationship with the community enabled white health workers to become more

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<sup>68</sup>Gary Foley, "V.A.H.S. Health Worker Education Prog: A Black Success Story", *Aboriginal Medical Service Newsletter* - Redfern AMS, Jan 1983.

<sup>69</sup> See, The Royal Australian College of Ophthalmologists, National Trachoma & Eye Health Program, Sydney: RACA, 1980.

effective in their work. As Pam Nathan, in her study of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) found,

In the VAHS health care program, Aboriginal cultural characteristics have received positive recognition and there is a relationship between the delivery of health care and the values which the Aboriginal community shares. The coordination of activities incorporates health in a community context and interpersonal bonds are emphasised and used. Health care, it is believed, must be generated and delivered by people who exist 'within the heart of the community'. In this process, the white professional staff are sources of advice and expertise and the Aboriginal staff and local residents are the decision makers.<sup>70</sup>

This resulted in the first positive improvements in the health statistics of many Aboriginal communities in which these new clinics were operating, thus clearly emphasising the importance of developing the correct relationship between black and white.

Not all non-Aboriginal people who worked for Aboriginal community-controlled organisations were able to comprehend and/or cope with the new conditions Kooris were demanding for their dealings with non-Koori supporters. These people either left Aboriginal Affairs or went to work for government or less-enlightened and less politically sophisticated Aboriginal groups. At this stage all state and Federal government departments seemed to be establishing *Indigenous units*, primarily for the purpose of attracting some of the large amounts of Aboriginal affairs monies that were 'up for grabs'. Most of these units were staffed mainly with non-indigenous people with a couple of token Kooris, as Leslie Wanganeen discovered was still the case when she was head of the Aboriginal Employment Unit in Adelaide in the late 1980s,

Lesley thought the non-Aboriginal staff had racist attitudes, although they did not recognise it in themselves. They had difficulty in accepting decisions made by an Aboriginal officer for white people. They saw reconciliation only in terms of Aborigines accepting European values and standards. The idea of giving serious consideration to the different values of Aborigines, or regarding them as possibly superior, never occurred to them.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Nathan, 1980, p. 124.

<sup>71</sup> Margaret Forte, *Flight of an Eagle: The dreaming of Ruby Hammond*. Kent Town, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1995, pp. 318-319.



Indeed, a new class of whites with the same old attitudes emerged; most of whom were employed in government departments or private white agencies in what was fast becoming an 'Aboriginal industry'.

### The Hawke/Keating Labor Governments & the Beginnings of the *Aboriginal Industry*

In 1983 the Hawke Labor Government came to power and unequivocally promised the Aboriginal peoples 'national, uniform Land Rights legislation'. This promised legislation was to be modelled on the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act 1975* under which claimants were granted *freehold title*. By this time the annual federal budget for Aboriginal Affairs had reached \$263million<sup>72</sup> with little apparent change in the appalling health statistics, incarceration rates, deaths in custody, environmental health problems etc. About the same time as he declared that, "No Australian child would live in poverty by 1990", Bob Hawke also dramatically increased the Commonwealth budget allocation for Aboriginal Affairs to \$353.million per annum.<sup>73</sup> The immediate effect of this was to give birth proper to what was originally called by Koori activists, "The Aboriginal Gravy Train", and what today is called by some, "The Aboriginal Industry".

Under the Hawke/Keating Labor administrations the number of non-Aboriginal people working in Koori-funded jobs multiplied dramatically. These people were involved in a wide variety of positions ranging from cleaners and labourers, through social workers, teachers, community "advisers", public servants, advertising agency personnel and business people, but they generally seemed to have at least one thing in common, very few had ever met an Aboriginal person. The other thing they had in common was that they collectively seemed to consume the greater part of Commonwealth monies that had been allocated to *Aboriginal Affairs*. Consequently during the Labor years, not only was a vast amount of money was spent with little change in the social and economic problems of Koori communities, but also those communities were suddenly overrun by an army of instant white experts who were not interested in the views of Kooris.

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<sup>72</sup> Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Aboriginal Statistics 1985, Canberra: Australian Govt Publishing Service, 1986, p. 49.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

This army of white experts and job-seekers was soon provided with plenty of employment opportunities when the Hawke government, fearful of Aboriginal reaction at the looming 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations (dubbed by irreverent Koori activists as "The Masturbation of a Nation"), foreshadowed the creation two bodies that his government thought might divert Koori attention.

The Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which in reality was the old, despised DAA under a new name was described by the respected H.C. "Nugget" Coombs as, 'predominantly an organisation of white society to impose management methods on to the Aboriginal community'.<sup>74</sup> The new organisation was quickly dubbed by Koori wits, "Aborigines Talking Shit In Canberra". When ATSIC was finally imposed on Aboriginal people in 1989 it became a major dispenser of Aboriginal monies into the white economy, and a major vehicle for employment opportunities for non-Kooris.<sup>75</sup> Koori historian Wayne Atkinson says that it is alleged that 'at least two thirds of moneys allocated for Koori and Islander empowerment and self determination is absorbed by ATSIC in administrative costs, consultancy fees and payments to a whole range of so called experts...the majority of whom are non-Koori'<sup>76</sup>. Whilst white politicians and bureaucrats defend the system, Atkinson counters,

What they fail to acknowledge is the amount of moneys designated for Koori and Islander needs that are being channelled through ATSIC and Koori and Islander organisations to the so-called expert industry...Moneys are siphoned off from two levels and under this arrangement communities only get a small portion of those funds that are designated for their needs.<sup>77</sup>

One does not have to look far for evidence of what Atkinson was talking about, as an examination of DAA and ATSIC annual reports reveals some interesting information about use and cost of consultants over a ten year period. In its last year of operation in 1988-89 the DAA used a mere 43 consultants at a total cost of \$1.25million, but almost ten years later in 1996-97 its replacement body ATSIC hires 581 consultants at a cost of \$22.2million. This represents an increase on 1988-89 of 2034%. Furthermore, between 1993 and 1997 ATSIC spent more than \$49million on internal

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<sup>74</sup> Nugget Coombs, *Age*, 26<sup>th</sup> Aug. 1995.

<sup>75</sup> Gary Foley, "ATSIC - House of Cards", *Age*, July 1995.

<sup>76</sup> Wayne Atkinson, Essay, Koori Self Determination in Victoria: Reality or Myth, 19<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1996.

consultancies,<sup>78</sup> and that is only a fraction of the total sum spent by state and federal agencies in that period. These were among numerous reasons that ATSIC lost credibility with Koori communities many years ago.

The second Hawke government diversion was the non-Koori notion of “Reconciliation”, embodied in a government appointed *National Committee of Reconciliation*. This committee, originally chaired by former Catholic priest Pat Dodson, was to spawn literally hundreds of local *Reconciliation* committees of which some members felt impelled to do “more” “for” Aboriginal people, thus triggering a new wave of missionaries and job-seekers.

The other significant event of the Labor years was the High Court’s Mabo decision<sup>79</sup> which overnight transformed a very successful political struggle led for most of this century by Koori people, into a legal question that took Kooris politically backwards 25 years and placed white lawyers in the driving seat. Attwood and Markus point out,

It soon became apparent however, that it was Aboriginal communities in remote Australia, rather than those peoples who had been most dispossessed by colonisation, which were most likely to gain under the native title regime...<sup>80</sup>

Thus 13 years after Hawke promised Kooris “uniform, national land rights legislation” and “freehold title”, the Aboriginal peoples ended up with the most inferior form of land tenure under British law, “Native title”. Koori peoples again ended up being the unwitting justification for a vast army of white people to be employed to “assist” them with their problems, at a time when Koori unemployment was at record levels.

By the time the Keating Government left office in 1995 the Federal budget for Aboriginal Affairs was more than \$1, 250million per annum, and in the 13 years they were in office more than \$10,000million had been spent with little result.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> All figures from DAA & ATSIC, *Annual Reports*, 1988 -1997.

<sup>79</sup> *Mabo and Orr v Queensland* (1992) High Court of Australia, CLR

<sup>80</sup> Attwood & Markus, 1999, p. 280.

<sup>81</sup> DAA & ATSIC Annual Reports, 1982 - 1995.

### Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

Of the vast sums of money wasted by Labor, \$50million went on a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which could only be described as a bonanza for the (white) legal profession, and which did nothing to change Aboriginal incarceration rates nor, initially, deaths in custody rates. Indeed, in a bizarre decision in Victoria, the first two groups to receive Federal funding as a result of the Royal Commission findings were the Victoria Police and Victorian Prison Officers each of which received about \$300,000. These grants were used for “educational” programs to “sensitise” Police and prison officers about Indigenous issues, and they could not be regarded as too successful given that not long after Victoria police shot and killed a mentally disturbed Koori woman in St. Kilda.

Furthermore, the Royal Commission also inadvertently focussed attention on the group of non-Kooris who, as a profession, have financially benefited on a grand scale from Federal Aboriginal Affairs funding. I refer, of course, to the legal profession which has come across a veritable gold mine since the *Mabo* decision with its myriad of spin-off litigation which seems destined to go on for a couple of decades yet. In Victoria, it is said that the body set up by the Commonwealth to administer Native Title claims has managed to spend \$9million in 4 years without a single successful claim being lodged, nor a single genealogy being completed. A considerable part of the \$9million appears to have been consumed by payments to members of the legal profession. Too often since the *Mabo* decision indigenous issues seem to have become merely a conduit for money from the Federal Aboriginal Affairs budget to the legal profession.

### The *Aboriginal Industry* and its implications for Self-Determination

As I write these words it is my current calculation that the amount of money spent by Federal and state governments on Aboriginal affairs since 1973 is between \$15 - \$23 billion.<sup>82</sup> It is safe to say that today the general social indicators (health, housing, employment, imprisonment, deaths in custody rates) of Indigenous peoples in

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<sup>82</sup> From figures obtained in DAA & ATSIC Annual Reports, 1974-1997

Australia are not much different from what they were 20 years ago and in some instances worse. Therefore it seems reasonable and understandable that some people might argue that there is an *Aboriginal industry*. Is it really surprising then that some of the less sophisticated might conclude that all these billions of dollars are going to the blacks? And isn't it fairly silly to respond to such ignorance by saying, "It's racist to say that"? Yet, it is perfectly obvious to all but fools that there is an *industry* functioning here.

What supporters need to do is to face the facts that profiting from Aboriginal suffering has indeed become an industry, and what they should be doing is making sure they personally are not one of those who are receiving a financial benefit from Aboriginal affairs.

The Aboriginal people are clearly not the ones who financially benefit from that industry, in fact it almost seems at times that the industry is dependent upon the perpetuation of Koori poverty and dispossession.<sup>83</sup> Which is all the more reason you need to look in the mirror and tell yourself you are not one of those who do benefit. Those who do realise that they are in a morally questionable position might hopefully do something about it. Until the question of the *Aboriginal industry* is resolved Aboriginal peoples shall remain a long way from victory in their quest for Land Rights, justice, economic independence and self-determination.

### Two Examples of Black /White Political Cooperation in the 1990s

Now that the reader has some idea of the history of the struggle by Koori peoples to exercise control over their own organisations and campaigns it is time to examine two recent examples of Koori/non-Koori cooperation. These examples differ from each other in that, the first was a coalition of Kooris and non-Kooris who were thrown together suddenly by circumstance and fought a successful battle against the Kennett government, and the other is a white support group that functions under general Koori direction and control. The first example is that of :-

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<sup>83</sup> See Gary Foley, "White Myths Damage Our Souls", *Age*, 21st July 1993.

a) Northland Secondary College Campaign 1992-95

In 1992 the newly elected Kennett government in Victoria made a decision to close 300 schools in the state. Among the schools earmarked for closure was Northland Secondary College, in the poor, working class Melbourne suburb of East Preston. It was a school that had been used as a "dumping ground" for the difficult and disadvantaged in the Victorian Education system. Nevertheless in the years prior to 1992, a dedicated group of parents, students, teachers and community leaders had developed a unique "whole school" program designed to improve students self-esteem and combat issues such as racism and intolerance in the school environment.

The effectiveness of this program had attracted the biggest enrolment of Koori students at any metropolitan secondary school, and Northlands S.C. was regarded as the most successful Koori education program in south eastern Australia. This was even though at Northland Koori students made up only 10% of the student population. Nevertheless, the school had received high praise (but little help) from the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner, who said that Northland had been acknowledged 'as a school so successful in helping children realise their potential that Aboriginal parents from across Australia have begun enrolling their children there'<sup>84</sup>, and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody praised the school as an 'innovative way of accommodating the special needs of Aboriginal students'<sup>85</sup>

When the Kennett Government made the decision to close Northland S.C.,<sup>86</sup> the entire school community was shocked. Mr Kennett declared that Northland students could enrol at other schools, but that entirely missed the point. Northland had been THE alternative for most of the Koori and non-Koori students and if it was closed then these kids literally had nowhere else to go. Consequently, on the night of the announcement of closure, a spontaneous community meeting was held in the school hall, where the real diversity of the Northland S.C. community was revealed. Amidst the outraged throng were Kooris, working-class whites, and a variety of older and

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Tickner, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, quoted in "Closure a clear breach- Tickner", *Herald-Sun*, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1992.

<sup>85</sup> Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report, Volume 4, 33.1.120, 1991, pp. 335.

newer migrant communities, as well as the mandatory smattering of Trotskyite groups, selling newspapers and trying to agitate the masses.

In that meeting the Koori community leaders who had children at the school were among the most outraged, but they also had a wide range of experience in organising political actions as well as a wealth of experience in handling media. Thus an unusual alliance was born whereby non-Koori Australians had come together with Kooris in a situation where they had a mutual problem, and the non-Kooris accepted the leadership of the Kooris because of their greater experience. This was an unprecedented situation in the history of the Koori struggle and led to a greater understanding and appreciation of Koori values and methods by others at the school. The deciding factor in Koori leadership of the campaign came when it was realised that the only salvation of the school was through an Equal Opportunity Board action seeking a finding that the closure constituted an act of discrimination against the Koori students of the school.<sup>87</sup>

During the intense, see-sawing, 3-year legal battle that ensued, many non-Koori parents and teachers at the school came to regard Kooris in a different way and vice versa. A new respect and regard developed which heightened as White parents came to hear for the first time about the problems and history of the Koori families at the school. In addition, the toughness of the battle they fought together against an intransigent Premier also brought them closer together. For almost a year a small committed group of Koori and non-Koori parents, educators, volunteer teachers and community helpers ran a "Mobile Rebel School" in a cricket ground dressing shed at the back of the Northcote public swimming pool.<sup>88</sup> The ultimate legal success of the Koori students meant that the school was re-opened and that those who benefited most from that victory was the 90% of the students who were non-Koori.

The Northland Secondary College campaign was significant because it saw an unlikely alliance of poor whites, blacks and migrants forge a strong and disciplined enough team to deliver the first ever defeat of the Kennett government. The strength

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<sup>86</sup> Letter from Geoff Spring, Director DSE to Raffaella Galati-Brown, Principal, Northland SC, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 1992, in Northland Papers, Foley Collection.

<sup>87</sup> Tim Pegler, "Schools ask board for an order to stop closure", *Age*, 18<sup>th</sup> Dec 1992.

of that alliance was centred on the strong bonds of understanding and mutual respect that developed between the Kooris and the non-Kooris in the course of their struggle. It was an important moment in Australian history because this was living proof that the supposedly racist Australian working class could work together with Kooris on specific issues of mutual interest.

It should also be noted however, that the usual middle-class supporters of Aboriginal causes in Melbourne stayed away in droves from the Northland campaign. Even groups who the Northland coalition thought would help instead shunned them. This included the education unions and trade union movement generally, the state and Federal Labor Party (despite the fact that Labor was still in power Federally at the time, and the Deputy-Prime Minister, Brian Howe, was the local federal member), church groups and even the *National Committee of Reconciliation*, which sent Pat Dodson and Ron Wilson on a token visit but nothing more. The reason behind this seemed to Northland people to be that these groups felt distinctly uncomfortable with an alliance of working class people and Koori community people. Thus class raised its ugly head.

The Premier declared on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1994 that the three year battle had become, 'a crucial test of his government's right to govern, a test he was determined to win'.<sup>89</sup> Six weeks later, on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1995 the Full Bench of the Supreme Court of Victoria finally ended the battle for Northland by ordering the Kennett government to re-open the school. The three year battle had been at huge social and economic cost to those who fought it (on the government side alone almost \$3.5million had been spent), but on another level a greater understanding had been achieved among the Koori and non-Koori parents and students. This made the Northland campaign a much more valuable, meaningful and tangible exercise in reconciliation than all the empty, government sponsored, official Reconciliation Committee projects.

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<sup>88</sup> Rosemary West, "Under pressure but ready to make a stand", *Age*, 5<sup>th</sup> Sept 1994.

<sup>89</sup> Darrin Farrant and Joanne Painter, "Premier: school a critical battle", *Age*, 16<sup>th</sup> Dec 1994.



b) Jabiluka Action Group (Melbourne) 1998-99

The Melbourne *Jabiluka Action Group* (JAG) is worthy of mention in this paper because of an interesting internal struggle that has been going on throughout 1999. The Jabiluka Action Group had functioned until the end of 1998 as a loose coalition of environmental groups, socialist and other left groups, women's groups, Kooris and others. The group had declared its support for the Mirrar Aboriginal people of Jabiru in their battle to oppose the proposed Jabiluka Uranium mine on their land, and had conducted a wide variety of actions to draw public attention to the issue and to confront the mining companies responsible. JAG Melbourne derived a great deal of its public credibility from the endorsement it received from the Mirrar people's organisation, the Gundjehmi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC).

So it was with some concern that Melbourne JAG received the news late in 1989 that the GAC and Mirrar people sought a greater say in the daily operations of JAG and ultimately direct control over its finances and actions. To this extent GAC appointed a local Koori community person as their personal representative to monitor and guide JAG operations in Melbourne. This announcement created some consternation among the many different groups who comprise JAG, with some arguing that it was 'racist' for Kooris to insist on this course (ignoring the fact that JAG claimed to be a 'support group' for the Mirrar people). Others however were much more understanding and accepting of the Mirrar's call, and argued that this was a positive development in the history of JAG. Debate continued over many months including during the major blockade of the mining site at Jabiluka during early 1999. Eventually the Mirrar tired of what they regarded as prevarication and dis-endorsed Melbourne JAG, as well as several other groups in Sydney and Brisbane.

This action brought the debate in Melbourne JAG to a head, and after several tumultuous meetings the group accepted the Mirrar peoples conditions for re-endorsement, which were:-

- 1) Through Melbourne GAC representative Mirrar would assume control over day to day operations of JAG.

- 2) Through Melbourne GAC representative would have final say over all JAG expenditure.
- 3) All actions proposed by JAG would need Mirrar approval.
- 4) JAG would focus more in their campaign on the indigenous issues of Land Rights, sovereignty, self-determination and economic independence as they relate to the Mirrar.
- 5) JAG would focus more on raising funds for Mirrar.
- 6) JAG members would educate themselves more about the local indigenous land struggle and providing support and assistance to those local Koori groups.

After much debate the Melbourne JAG have made great progress in coming to terms with all the above requirements of the Mirrar. Ironically some are learning for the first time the history of the local area where they grew up and are now more conscious of local Koori political issues. This has helped broaden their understanding of general Koori peoples issues and in turn has increased their commitment to both the Jabiluka cause and issues of social justice in general. This has all been precipitated by a group of Aboriginal people two thousand miles away who challenged these young Melbournians understanding of what they were doing with the Jabiluka Action Group.

The Melbourne JAG today look forward to the anticipated re-endorsement from the Mirrar people, and as they do the Melbourne representative of GAC believes that they are a much more focussed and dedicated group of non-Koori supporters than they were before. So, without even realising it members of JAG in 1999 are in the process of an identical struggle that occurred among their counterparts at the Aborigines Advancement League thirty years before in 1969.

Is it any wonder that long term Koori activists get frustrated at having the re-invent the wheel for each new generation of non-Koori supporters?

## Conclusion

Since the beginning of the invasion of Australia to this very day there have always been non-Koori people who either felt disturbed by, or totally outraged by the treatment meted out to Australia's indigenous peoples. The problem for the Indigenous political movements has always been how to harness that support in a productive and meaningful way that could be of mutual benefit. As this essay has shown, it has not always been easy and nor indeed does it seem any easier today. Even among our most ardent supporters today there lurks an appalling degree of ignorance about history and Koori people, with even those who think they "know" being blinkered by either the traditional understanding of 'history' or the post-Hawke/Keating false history.

It is important therefore that the first thing a supporter of the Koori struggle must do is to shake off the myths of both the Right and the Left and to hear the alternative versions of history and memory that the Koori community offers. In putting yourself through such a process of self-education you should come to understand the tenuous nature of what is called history anyway. It is a question of understanding that Koori perceptions of space, time and meaning, necessarily conflict with the linear approach to history by the west. So too do our understandings of your political structures and institutions conflict with your perceptions, but you must understand our historical experience with those entities is what shapes our attitude toward them. In other words, if you are a member of a mainstream political party in Australia, then don't come to me pretending that your party can, or will, be of any real help to Aboriginal peoples quest for Land Rights and economic independence. If anything, this essay should have shown why Koori people distrust all political parties.

If you can begin to understand Koori peoples experience and encounters with the multitude of discourses that constitute non-Aboriginal Australia, then you can begin to see why it is so important for us to maintain our cultural and political integrity in our quest for justice. For the greater part of the last 200 years Koori peoples were denied control over their own destinies, both personally and collectively. It was only in the late 1960s that the chains began to loosen, but even to this day white society on many levels attempts to control and regulate the lives of Koori communities. These

days more often than not the control is exercised through monies that are expended and the comprehensive conditions that are applied to the "grants".<sup>90</sup> This is the reason many independent-minded Koori groups refuse government funding, which in turn is why non-Koori support groups have an important role to play in supporting and assisting these Koori groups.

If you are a white supporter who objects to the sentiments expressed in this paper, or you have no concern for what Kooris think, then please feel free to go work for ATSIC, or any of the many government indigenous units, where you will find numerous employment opportunities (no experience or knowledge necessary) and become a card-carrying member of the *Aboriginal industry*.

On the other hand if you are the opposite type of person, then join a support group and take one step at a time, learning as you go. Make sure, however, that the group you join is one that genuinely supports Koori control of Koori affairs, and is in some way affiliated with, or taking guidance from, the local Koori traditional owners and/or local Koori community. In the meantime, explore the history I have outlined in this brief paper, as a greater understanding of these and associated historical events and personalities can only enhance not only your understanding of Koori peoples and Australian history, but also a better knowledge of your own society and thus yourself. As Ruth Frankenberg said, 'Analysing the construction of whiteness is important as a means of reconceptualising the grounds on which white activists participate in anti-racist work.'<sup>91</sup>

This paper will not change the historical problems I have described, but I hope at best it has alerted you to another level of what you call history, and in doing so hopefully stimulated you to know more. A desire to know more can only be constructive because in the process of informing yourself you will discover the extraordinary level of ignorance and fear that exists even within your own immediate family and/or close circle of friends regarding indigenous issues. I hope that this realisation would then motivate you to challenge those attitudes among those close to you, because then you

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<sup>90</sup>The standard ATSIC "conditions of grant" form, which must be signed before any monies are available, is today on average about 40 pages long.

<sup>91</sup> Frankenberg, 1993, p.242.

will begin to realise how deeply entrenched negative attitudes can be, and how difficult it is to overcome misconceptions, stereotypes and prejudice. This experience can only enhance your appreciation of the generations of struggle by Koori activists to counter the same problem.

Finally, you should come to the understanding that the real problem that confronts indigenous peoples is one which exists in the white community. Racism is only a problem that can be overcome by people who are part of the community in which it festers. By definition, the problem of white racism should be the primary focus of white support groups. Therefore the ultimate message of this paper is that rather than seeking to come into our communities and 'help' us, you have a much more important role in your own community. You should be daily challenging the ignorance and fear that constitute the greatest obstacle to Koori self-determination and independence. We can solve our own internal community problems, therefore it is up to you to change your society, not ours.

For those willing to accept this challenge and try, I salute you and wish you well.

The end  
9437 words  
Gary Foley  
19<sup>th</sup> June 1999

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