

The media strategy of the Aboriginal Black Power, Land Rights and Self-Determination Movement

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Although this chapter is co-authored we have chosen to write in the first person and to refer to Gary Foley using the pronoun I for clarity, simplicity and to clearly articulate Professor Foley's place within the activist movement we are writing about.

Introduction

Aboriginal activists involved in the Black Power, Land Rights and Self-determination Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s in Australia sought to create the conditions under which Aboriginal people could determine their own futures. This meant the upending of almost 200 years of colonial oppression as well as breaking through a culture of white-supremacy, a culture conditioned by what the anthropologist William Stanner (1969) famously coined as 'the Great Australian Silence' yet regarded many Aboriginal people as systematic process of conscious and violent forgetting (Foley 2013: 19).

Referred to interchangeably as the Land Rights, Self-determination or Black Power Movement, the force of Aboriginal activism emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Australia was the response mainly of a collective of young Aboriginal men and women who were dissatisfied with the federal government's insipid uptake of the will of the populous as expressed in the 1967 Referendum as well as with the tactics and strategies of the campaigners and activists of the older generation. The 1967 Referendum campaign (which proposed the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the census and the granting of constitutional power to the Commonwealth to make laws for Aboriginal people) effectively put the question to the Australian public 'Do you believe in justice for Aboriginal people or not?' The result had been an overwhelming YES with over 90% of votes in the affirmative. Yet in the years immediately

following the referendum Aboriginal people experienced little, if no, improvement.

In fact after the referendum the material conditions of Aboriginal people living in the state of New South Wales (NSW) became worse. In response to the referendum the NSW Aboriginal Protection Board arbitrarily ceased to support Aboriginal missions and reserves, closing down the last vestiges of the Australian apartheid system. Although the end of the Protection Board days were welcomed the arbitrary and sudden nature of the closures meant that Aboriginal people previously confined to the reserves by law, who had not been allowed to seek employment off reserves and were not eligible for social welfare that other non-Aboriginal people were entitled to, struggled to find a means of subsistence. The rural recession that coincided with the closures created conditions that forced Aboriginal people into the cities in their thousands to seek employment.

It was within the context of the growth of the Aboriginal population of the inner-city Sydney suburbs of Redfern, Alexandria and Newtown, where Aboriginal people from rural NSW ended up due to the accessibility of cheap housing and the diaspora pull of a black urban community, that the Black Caucus, a small group of young Aboriginal activists emerged. Led by Paul Coe, with the mentorship of Chicka Dixon, the group included myself, Gary Williams, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey, John Newfong, Alana and Samantha Doolan, Lynn (nee Craigie) and husband Peter Thompson, Bob and Kaye Belleair, Naomi Mayers, Norma Williams and Pam Hunter (Foley 2009: 14; Goodall 1988: 338). These activists had come together motivated by their common experience of police brutality and their desire to do something to alleviate the conditions of poverty that they witnessed all around them.

In seeking to determine the best methods of social transformation the Black Caucus members trained themselves in revolutionary philosophy and investigated the decolonization strategies of other oppressed black peoples of the world. They had read George Jackson's prison letters, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, Malcolm X's autobiography, and Franz Fanon's treatises on decolonization, and were inspired by the likes of Che Guevara, Patrice

Lumumba, Ho Chi Min and Mao Tse-tung as well as the leaders of the American Indian Movement and the Black Panthers of Oakland, California.

At the same time that the Black Caucus was emerging in Sydney similar developments were taking place in Brisbane, with the emergence of a youth movement led by Denis Walker, Sam Watson and Pastor Don Brady, The Brisbane Black Panthers, and in Melbourne with a push for Aboriginal control of the Aboriginal Advancement League and the adoption of Black Power by Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza.

Events in 1970, in particular the Black Power push to ensure Aboriginal control of the only national Aboriginal organization, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), and the ensuing establishment of the National Tribal Council in response to its failure, brought key members of these activist groupings into contact with each other. The resulting loose collective of activists congregating around the political goal of self-determination to be achieved by demanding Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs is what I am referring to when I refer to the Black Power, Land Rights or Self-determination Movement.

The Black Power Movement regarded Aboriginal land rights as the necessary precondition for achieving economic independence. Activists had concluded that economic independence, in the social context of a hegemonic culture that worshipped money, was absolutely vital if Aboriginal people were to achieve their primary goal of self-determination.

In assessing the practical realities of our situation when compared to other recently decolonized nations, in light of the number of Aboriginal people compared to colonial occupiers as well as the military might of the Australian colonial state, armed resistance was dismissed by the majority of activists in the Black Power movement as a viable route to self-determination (Howell 2013: 160-161). Instead the objectives of:

- raising black people's political consciousness and self-confidence, undoing the psychological damage that decades of colonial rule had wrought;
- transforming the hearts and minds of the broader Anglo-Australian public regarding the history of colonial oppression and solutions for change;
- and putting international pressure on the federal government to force political change,

were set out as revolutionary strategies (Howell 2014).

The first objective, activists determined, required letting actions speak for themselves, in that community controlled organizations such as the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) and Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern and Victorian Aboriginal Health service in Fitzroy, Melbourne, set up by Aboriginal activists engaging the Aboriginal community, were solving the problems faced by Aboriginal communities. It was Aboriginal people's experience of this community self-confidence and agency that was at the heart of positive social change. A revolution in the arts, in particular the birth of the National Black Theatre also played a vital role in this self and community, psychological and social transformation. The documentary *The Redfern Story* (ABC TV 2014) directed by Darlene Johnson is an excellent depiction of the evolution of black consciousness and the arts.

The second and third objectives, bringing the general Australian public onside regarding Aboriginal land rights and self-determination and putting international pressure on the Federal government to achieve these goals, required the transformation of the 'other', or at the very least an opening in the armour of the colonial machinery. In pursuit of both of these objectives Black Power activists set about a full-scale public relations war. The remainder of this chapter investigates the history of that public relations war. The translation of black political consciousness through the arts, in particular through the National Black Theatre, was certainly an aspect of the media strategy of the Black Power movement and thus a component of the same 'public relations war', however this chapter focuses on two other vital

components of the strategy. Firstly, the creation and uptake of the Aboriginal flag as a unifying symbol for the emerging Land Rights and Self-determination Movement and secondly, the news-media strategy of the Black Power activists in the lead-up to and during the ultimate success of the Aboriginal Embassy, a six-month long protest from January- July 1972 on the lawns of Parliament House in response to the then Prime Minister William McMahon's rejection of Aboriginal demands for Land Rights.

Birth of the Aboriginal Flag

In 1971 I was involved in an exercise that, at the time, did not seem all that significant to me, but which is today regarded as a part of history; the development and design of the internationally known emblem of the Black Power era, the red, black and yellow Aboriginal flag. My involvement came about because of a request in 1971 from the Nunga community in Adelaide to the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service to send someone to Adelaide to advise and assist in the creation of an ALS in South Australia.

During my first visit to Adelaide I had met, and been interrogated and tested by, the legendary South Australian activist matriarch Gladys Elphick and over the next week I met and worked with other leaders including Vince Copley, Ruby Hammond and others associated with the Aboriginal Community Centre in Adelaide.

It was during that visit to Adelaide that I met a young artist from the Northern Territory named Harold Thomas who was then working at the South Australia Museum, and we struck up an immediate friendship. Harold and I were on the same wavelength politically, but he was much more knowledgeable about the South Australian and Northern Territory scene than I and we spent many hours discussing the state of the world. I would return to Adelaide frequently over the next twelve months organising demonstrations and assisting where I could with the development of the new legal aid organisation. Before one particular demonstration I found myself in intense discussion with Harold Thomas over a case of Victoria Bitter beer. The discussion was one of lament that we Australian Aboriginal people did not

have a symbol that both represented our struggle and that could serve as a unifying emblem.

After a certain number of cans of VB and the consequent bravado that they bring, as well as a very lively discussion, it was decided between us that we would sit down and design one. Harold being the artist pulled out some pencils and a sketchbook and we began discussing a range of ideas. To cut a long story (not to mention drinking session) short, many cans later Harold had in front of him the now familiar red, black and yellow design, along with our interpretation of what it meant.

We both thought it was a great design, but that was pointless unless others felt the same way and would embrace it. We had a couple of flags made up to our specification and we were aware a demonstration was being planned in Adelaide for late January 1972 (just three days before the Aboriginal Embassy was erected in Canberra). We knew this because I was one of the organisers of the demonstration which was in support of a Western Australian Aboriginal prison escapee Lionel Brockman who had gone on the run with his entire family and the entire Western Australian police force was unable to find them in the outback for six months. In the process he became a minor folk hero and Bobbi Sykes had started a campaign in support of Brockman. The other organisers of the rally were local Nunga woman Ruby Hammond and the white State Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, Mr John Scott. I was scheduled to speak at the demonstration in support of Brockman and Harold and I decided it would be a good occasion to introduce his proposed Aboriginal flag to the world.

Rather than seek support of the trade unions that were co-sponsoring the rally, and because we knew we could depend on the support of Ruby Hammond, we decided we would unfurl the flag 'spontaneously' during the march. We knew our trade union 'brothers' were in reality still a politically tame lot when it came to questions such as 'Black Power' and were sure it was better to spring the flag on their members who marched with us than to alert them in advance and create unnecessary aggravation.

Thus on the 22 January 1972 the Aboriginal flag had its first public display and generated a minor flurry of interest, but otherwise remained unknown until a month later when in Sydney on 22 February a tabloid newspaper named the *Daily Mirror* published a profile of me written by journalist Guy De Brito, along with the design that I had called 'a flag for Aboriginal Australia'. This was the first major public and media appearance of the Aboriginal flag (Foley 2012: 177-180).

On reflection I believe one of the reasons I put the flag in the *Daily Mirror* article was that I was trying to manoeuvre the design into a position where the Black Power Movement couldn't ignore it. The Black Power collective was a fairly unwieldy sort of animal. Politically most of us in the Black Power Movement were basically anarchists. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and everybody else thought we were Communists but essentially we were a bunch of mad anarchists. We developed an extremely effective cohesive group where decisions ultimately were made by consensus. We were trying to do things in what we regarded as traditional Aboriginal ways of decision-making, we believed consensus was our way of doing things, we didn't have majority rule; if you had an idea you had to sit there and argue it through with a group until everybody in the group had fused whatever the original idea was into something that everybody agreed with.

In order to get anything decided in the Black Power Movement you had to convince a lot of people and get them to go along with you. In terms of the *Daily Mirror* article I believe I saw that as a good means of at least focusing the broader group's attention on the design and making ones amongst us who may not have even known about it at that time aware that it was out there. Perhaps I figured that by getting the flag into a high-profile mainstream newspaper they would at least have to take notice of it. I suppose I was hoping also to present them with a fait accompli: bang, here's your flag whether you like it or not.

Somehow or other in the course of the Aboriginal Embassy, by the time the Embassy was knocked down six months later, the flag was established. It took off like a rocket all over Australia, which in itself is a testament to the genius

of it as a piece of graphic design; it's one of the most successful pieces of graphic design in Australian history (Foley 2012: 180).

The Aboriginal flag thus become a weapon of power in a war of positions. It was a war in which the government would come to use 'any means necessary' to undermine the growing popularity and strength of Aboriginal demands for land rights as the basis of their program of control over their own destinies (Howell 2014: 67).

Black Power news media strategy

I had been taught the art of media engagement as a teenager during the final years of the successful decade long FCAATSI constitutional referendum campaign by two legends of the Aboriginal movement Faith Bandler and John Newfong. It was the Aboriginal journalist, John Newfong, who was the media mastermind behind the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and its Minister for Communications, and it was he who taught me how to work the 'media machine'. John Newfong was the Australian equivalent of a cross between James Baldwin and Oscar Wilde. He was singularly the most brilliant Aboriginal writer there has ever been to this day. He was the first Aboriginal professional journalist in Australia, writing for *The Australian*, for *The Bulletin*, *The Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*; he was one of the best journalists in Australia.

Through John Newfong I came to understand the importance of keeping up to date with the latest technology as well as the importance of cultivating relationships with journalists. He taught me the need to ensure that media releases are delivered to the press as quickly as possible and the targeting of journalists who would be most favourable to the position of the story as well as the importance of manifesting a presence in the media through stories that would satisfy the media's preference for drama, spectacle and tumult.

The introduction of the technology of the telex machine had been revolutionary for the Black Power public relations campaign. Prior to the telex the best available technology was the print and stencil machine. This would

require the operator to cut out the stencil and wind the reel to print out copies one at a time which would then need to be placed in envelopes and posted to individual media outlets. The telex allowed the collective to distribute ten media releases at once and each could be directed straight to the preferred journalist. The impact of this quick-fire distribution method was enormous. In addition to learning the practical aspects of how to run a media campaign through activists such as Faith Bandler and John Newfong, Black Power activists also learnt to cultivate the skills of gaining and sustaining media attention.

We were aware that the news media would be drawn to report on events that were dramatic and visually striking. In this context Black Power drew power from the image of Black Power that the African-American movement in the USA had created. As a result of news media coverage of the Black Power movement in the USA in particular coverage of the Black Panthers, Black Power had come to represent black militancy and black violence in the minds of the majority of Australians. Aboriginal activists involved in the Black Power movement in Australia utilised this fear of the other to position itself on the precipice of possibility engaging colonial fear to invoke a sense of the imminence of change. Drawing on the Black Power aesthetic Aboriginal Black Power activists took on the 'Afro', black leather jackets, dark sunglasses, black berets and clenched fists, as an assertion that 'black is beautiful' and in acknowledgement of the shared oppression they faced as coloured peoples of the world (Lothian 2007: 23). However the Black Power image also operated to bolster the movement as spectacle and thus as newsworthy.

On 5 December 1971 Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Australian* published a double page article with the headline BLACK POWER COMES TO AUSTRALIA. It carried the subtitle: 'We only have a small supply of explosives left at present and thought we'd save it for something important'. A prominent photo of four 'Black Power field marshals' with their fists raised in the well-recognized Black Power salute covered half a page. Journalist Simon Townsend reported the emergence of the Australian Black Panther Party, which he declared was 'Dedicated to Violence', promoted violence as 'the only means left to force change', and was committed to violence as a means of focusing both national

and international attention on the plight of Aboriginal people. The article claimed that the party was responsible for 'smashing the front window of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney and for daubing a statute of Captain Cook in Hyde Park, Sydney, in land rights slogans' and reported one Black Panther as having said:

The only reason we didn't blow old Captain Cook up was that we only have a small supply of explosives at present and we thought we'd save it for something more important. With planned strategic violence, bombing if necessary, assassination if necessary – we'll get land rights 20 years faster.

Townsend also reported that the group planned to train a select group of activists in urban guerrilla tactics and the use of explosives as well as their intention to be 'ready to move in a month' at which point 'all hell will break loose'.

In February 1972 a special news broadcast, *Black Mood*, aired on the ABC. It focussed on the rising black consciousness in Australia and described Black Power activists as 'rather aggressive.' As an interviewee in the broadcast, I was asked to explain what was meant by Black Power, and responded, 'If we have to go about violent means of getting the power to control our own destinies then we will; we're quite prepared to.' 'But is it realistic for such a small minority as Aborigines are to talk about violence?' the presenter asked. 'Realistic or not, I think you've got to face up to the fact that if the Aboriginal situation does not change very rapidly in this country what we're going to see is more or less a spontaneous violence coming out' I replied. The news feature concluded with the host's summation that 'on the evidence ... black militancy is not likely to go away. If anything it will increase'.

There was perhaps a tension between the approaches of different Black Power activists, but there is also a tension between fact and fiction, between present and possibility, a predictive and performative element that was strategically harnessed to be a force for motivating social change. Members of the Black Power Movement utilised this possibility, this moment in time, to illuminate the urgency of their calls. There may very well have been the tremor of violence afoot, frustrations that had built up over centuries of subjugation, but even if there was no such seismic trembling, the Black Power activists

knew that a big black community made the white fellas nervous and they had decided to exploit that wave of hysteria.

A key method advanced in media discourse and by government to discredit the Black Power movement was to portray the activists involved as urban militants. Explicitly such representations of Black Power stated that as urban militants Black Power activists were just a small group of Aboriginal people and were therefore unrepresentative of Aboriginal opinion generally (Goodall 2008: 402). Yet implicitly the classification of Black Power as urban and militant attempted to represent Black Power as fraudulent. This operated at two levels: firstly, militancy was considered by the colonizer as a characteristic foreign to 'the Aborigine' and secondly their position as 'urban' was evidence for the colonizer that they were assimilated and therefore not really Aboriginal at all. In the communist party newspaper *Tribune* 1-7 February 1972, Bruce McGuinness aimed to counter such representations of Black Power as both unrepresentative and as fraudulent, announcing to the reporter that militancy, as an 'aggressively political' strategy of 'defence and not offence', existed well beyond the Brisbane Black Panthers:

We have seen areas like Wattie Creek, Roper River (where they threw all the whites off), Cunnamulla ... and the Purfleet reserve near Tareet in New South Wales where Aboriginal people have bluntly said they would take up guns if necessary to prevent people touching their land.

Yet the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest, a six-month long protest on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra that began as a media stunt, was about to disrupt this representation of the Black Power movement once and for all. The Aboriginal Embassy was to become the most disarming event yet in the Black Power movement's media strategy and in their war of positions demonstrating to the nation and to the world that Aboriginal people from all over Australia supported demands for Aboriginal land rights and self-determination.

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy

1971 witnessed the escalation in frequency and numbers attending Aboriginal land rights demonstrations. Black Power activists had joined the Gurindji in street demonstrations in Sydney. Anti-apartheid demonstrators challenged by Black Power activists to look at the situation in their own backyard had taken up the call and Justice Blackburn's decision in the Gove Land Rights case, handed down in April 1971, had resulted in public outcry motivating even more people to take to the streets demanding Aboriginal land rights.

Then Prime Minister, William ('Billy') McMahon, compelled by the growing prominence of Aboriginal demands for land, decided to make a major government statement on Aboriginal land rights. Provocatively the McMahon government chose 26 January 1971 to announce its new policy. 26 January, known to most Australians as Australia Day, celebrates the arrival of the First Fleet in Australia. It is a particularly controversial date in the Australian calendar as for Aboriginal people and their allies national celebration of this date represents celebration of the invasion of Aboriginal lands and the attempted genocide of Aboriginal people by the British and Australian Governments.

The McMahon Government, rather than making a progressive statement on Aboriginal land rights, offered a new type of lease to some Aboriginal people based on a series of restrictive conditions. Essentially the McMahon Government had announced that it would never grant land rights to Aboriginal people. The statement was considered by Aboriginal activists in the Black Power Movement as particularly provocative considering the decision to make such a statement on 26 January.

Members of the Sydney Black Power collective, the Black Caucus, decided to respond to the statement by sending a deputation of four Aboriginal activists to Parliament house to protest. The aim was to get a photo of the protest in the paper the following day so that people would be aware that the Black Power movement rejected the Government's position absolutely. What ensued was a six-month long occupation by Aboriginal activists of the lawns of Parliament house by the Aboriginal Embassy. The story of the Aboriginal Embassy is told in detail elsewhere, in particular in *The Aboriginal Tent*

Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State, G. Foley, Schaap and Howell eds (Routledge 2014) and in my PhD, *An Autobiographical history of the Aboriginal Embassy and the Black Power Movement* (Foley 2013). What is important for this retelling is that in setting up an Embassy the Aboriginal activists illuminated that the McMahon Government's policy made Aboriginal people aliens in their own land. As a camp, a series of tents, the Aboriginal Embassy also highlighted the poverty in which Aboriginal people were forced to live as well as the provisional nature of land leases rather than Land Rights. It was the perfect media spectacle.

Importantly the protest was non-violent. It had struck a chord with the rebel sensibility that Australian's call *a larrikin streak*, in many Australians and public seemed to be amused by the inability of the authorities to do anything about it. Aboriginal Embassy's Minister of Communication, John Newfong ran the Embassy's media campaign. Newfong, along with journalists such as Stewart Harris and Michelle Grattan, ensured that the analysis and critique of Government policy by Aboriginal activists of the Embassy continued to be heard in mainstream news-media. The Aboriginal Embassy protest featured in news media coverage in over 70 countries bringing both the conditions under which Aboriginal people were forced to live and the demands of Aboriginal people for Land Rights and self-determination to an international audience.

Embarrassed and humiliated the McMahon Government sought to remove the Aboriginal Embassy by the only means it could. It rapidly passed new laws in the middle of the night making it illegal to camp on the lawns of Parliament House. These laws then legalized police removal of the protest.

Police then attempted to dismantle the Embassy on both 20 July and 23 July. On the first occasion police took protestors by surprise and a strategic decision was made to protect the office tent. Demonstrators decided that if police tried to take the office tent they would resist. Media coverage of the melee that followed caused large numbers of Aboriginal people and their supporters from all over the country to converge on Canberra in the days that

followed so that by the time the police tried to dismantle the tents for the second time there were over 3,000 people there to defend them.

On both occasions news media coverage of Aboriginal activists' struggle to maintain a legitimate protest against enormous numbers of Federal and NSW police troops, in particular footage of the police violence used against demonstrators to remove what had previously been a legal non-violent protest, made ordinary Australians aware of the nature and extent of the violence the state considered legitimate to use against Aboriginal people (Robinson 1994: 58; Dexter 2015: 236).

As police were set to remove the protest site for a third time on 30 July, key organizers came together and, rather than risk the lives of the many young and old who had gathered from all over Australia in support of demands for Land Rights, decided that they would let police remove the tent but that they would claim the moral victory. They knew that the event of the Embassy had turned the tide of public opinion absolutely in their favour and that in orchestrating a theatrical dismantling of the tents by police and claiming the moral victory would only further cement public opinion.

Six months later the Whitlam Labor Government came to power on a policy platform that promised 'Land Rights for Aborigines'.

Conclusion – Who won the war?

The media strategy of the Black Power movement, particularly at the Aboriginal Embassy, had achieved a revolution. It had made the world aware of the injustices Aboriginal people were suffering. It had brought an end to 23 consecutive years of conservative rule, ended the bi-partisan policy of assimilation and had thus officially ended the policy of genocide. Moreover in playing a significant role in the demise of the McMahon government and in causing the Labor party to change its policy on Aboriginal land rights, it achieved Government commitment to Aboriginal land rights as well as the promise of Aboriginal rights to minerals on and under Aboriginal land, and it had made the way possible for a new era of self-determination.

The public relations battle over Aboriginal Land Rights was, however, eventually won by mining and pastoral industry lobby groups with a multi-million dollar propaganda campaign against Aboriginal Land Rights. Decades later we are still witnessing the dire backlash against Aboriginal people that that campaign wrought.

In a recent interview I was asked if we had won the battle but lost the war and I tentatively answered yes.

We changed the world but we took our eye off the ball and the world changed back... But of course the war isn't over yet.

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