

Activity 2.8

- 1 In what ways did Australian society and local or state governments adopt racial segregation as a policy or practice into the 1960s?
- 2 How did African Americans and Australian Aboriginal people meet and interact during World War II?
- 3 Identify the ways in which the US Civil Rights Movement impacted on Australian history during the 1960s.

reserves and missions, where virtually all their basic human rights, such as freedom of movement, labour rights, custodial rights over children, legal rights and property rights, were taken away.

Aboriginal people in many remote regions, particularly in the northern parts of Australia, came directly into contact with African Americans who served in the US military depots there during World War II. More African-American troops served in Australia than elsewhere. Aboriginal peoples were drawn to the African-American soldiers due to their common experience of racism. They learned of their parallel struggles, and the Aboriginal people learned of the campaigns and successes of the NAACP in the United States. This showed the Australians that movements were occurring, with some success, in other parts of the world.

The rise of direct action in the American South after 1955 was widely reported in the Australian press, on radio and by the new medium of television. It inspired young activists, particularly university students, to emulate the methods of non-violent civil disobedience that the Civil Rights Movement employed. This was first used in the demonstrations mounted by the Association of Immigration Reform and Student Action against the 1958 *Migration Act*, which had extended the

life of the White Australia Policy. It would also be used in the youth campaigns against the Vietnam War and military **conscription**.

Inspired by the 'Freedom Rides' of the US Civil Rights Movement, in early 1965 students from Sydney University embarked on their own 'Freedom Ride' to de-segregate racist facilities in several New South Wales rural

towns. They were tutored on the tactics of civil disobedience by a former US civil rights activist; and, as their bus left Sydney, a visiting group of African-American gospel performers sang the civil rights anthem, *We Shall Overcome*.

By the following year, word of African-American unrest in the United States had spread across the Northern Territory cattle stations. The Council for Aboriginal Rights demanded equal pay for equal work, improved accommodation, basic human respect for Aboriginal workers and an end to racist language. This campaign led to a walk-out by the Gurindji people from the vast Wave Hill and Newcastle Waters cattle stations, and a sit-down (rather than a 'sit-in') at Wattie Creek (Daguragu). A new phase in Australia's civil and land rights struggle had begun.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights and freedoms in Australia from 1965



The Australian Freedom Rides, 1965

In May 1964, about 2000 university students demonstrated outside the US Consulate in Sydney against racial segregation in the American South. In response, commentators and the media questioned

conscription the process of mandatory participation in war

fringe camps Aboriginal campsites, restricted to the margins or fringes of townships and regions

what the protesters knew of segregation in their *own* society: what they knew of the **fringe camps**, or of the refusal of clubs, swimming pools, picture theatres, schools, cafes, hotels and other public facilities in Australian country towns either to serve Aboriginal people or to allow them unrestricted access.

Aboriginal activists had for decades known intimately about the terrible living conditions in fringe camps and the 'colour bars' in the towns. William Ferguson and Jack Kinchela had toured outback reserves and townships in New South Wales as early as February 1939. They reported on shocking conditions at Tuncaster, outside Lismore; at Kempsey, where the hospital and cinema were segregated; and at Moree, which they regarded as 'the worst town in NSW for European prejudice'. Similar 'fact-finding' missions to Walgett and Bega were made by members of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in 1957. The students demonstrating

at the US Consulate in 1964, however, had not previously been activists for local concerns, and were prompted to find out more.

In February 1965, 34 students set out together on a bus from Sydney University to investigate for themselves the treatment of Indigenous peoples in the main country towns of New South Wales. Their journey was modelled on the US Freedom Rides, and they proposed to use the non-violent, direct action methods of Martin Luther King Jr's followers to attempt to influence segregation where they found it. Their 2300 kilometre journey would take them as far west as Walgett and as far north as Warwick, which was actually in the south of Queensland. They would also visit coastal townships from Ballina to Newcastle on the return journey. All but two of the group of students were white, but they were led by Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, an **Arernte** man studying Arts at Sydney University after playing soccer internationally.

Perkins was President of Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA). He was vibrant, highly articulate and enraged by the 'ugly picture of prejudice' he had already witnessed at 'notorious trouble-spots' in rural New South Wales. For the others, the ride itself would be a sharp learning curve.

Travelling through several towns including Katoomba, Bathurst and Wellington, the students made an overnight stop at Dubbo before proceeding on to Gulargambone. On the way, the students gathered information on the impoverished life of Indigenous people at such sites as Namina reserve, and on racist behaviour generally. At Walgett, they conducted a picket line, holding

placards outside the segregated RSL Club, where Aboriginal servicemen were only allowed inside on Anzac Day. A partly curious, partly hostile crowd gathered, as some young local Aboriginal people joined the protesters. After being evicted that night from the church hall, the freedom riders found their bus being run off the road by a truck driven by hostile white townspeople. Angry confrontations resulted. The incidents were featured in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, gaining widespread national attention.



Source 2.18 The route taken on the first Australian Freedom Ride, 12–26 February 1965

Arernte Aboriginal native of the Central Australia/Alice Springs region

placard a sign or poster

HISTORICAL
FACT

In 2005, students from Central Coast High School in New South Wales re-traced the steps of the 1965 freedom riders, revisiting 13 communities to encourage debate on reconciliation. They found that racial discrimination and sub-standard housing still existed in many areas.

Activity 2.9

- 1 Retrace the steps of the 1965 Freedom Ride on the map in Source 2.18, noting activities in the various centres visited.
- 2 Develop a class debate on the benefits or otherwise of the Freedom Ride campaign.
- 3 Can you name any present-day campaigns combating racial or cultural prejudice? What effect are these campaigns having?

At the town of Moree, the protesters were beaten and pelted with eggs and other rubbish by a large white mob as they tried to de-segregate the swimming pool. The hospital, memorial hall, hotels, taxi service and even the cemetery were similarly segregated in Moree. The towns of Boggabilla and Bowraville were also found to be 'riddled with prejudice'. The protesters picketed the pool at Kempsey, leading to its de-segregation within weeks, in early March.

Opinion was divided over whether the students had conducted a positive publicity campaign, or merely acted as 'troublemakers'. A barrage of national and international attention, however, had been drawn to a set of serious, ongoing problems, and Charles Perkins had emerged as a leading Aboriginal spokesperson.

Later, smaller Freedom Rides were made to Coonamble, Dareton, Boggabilla, Walgett, Wee Waa, Moree and Bowraville, encouraging local Aboriginal people to begin mounting their own civil rights campaigns to de-segregate cinemas, shops and hotels, and to continue to fight for more humane living conditions.



Source 2.19 Charles Perkins with Aboriginal youths swimming at the segregated Moree swimming pool c. 1965