

HISTORICAL
FACT

William Cooper is best remembered in Australia for establishing National Aborigines' Day in 1940. In Israel, however, 70 commemorative trees have been planted in his honour in the Forest of Martyrs for his support of Jews during World War II. In December 1938, he led an Aboriginal deputation to the German Embassy in Melbourne to protest the Nazi attacks on Jews during *Kristallnacht* ('the Night of Broken Glass'). It was the only private protest, worldwide, against the atrocity. The German Consul refused to meet the deputation.

He was aided by John Patten, an Aboriginal boxer and journalist who established the first Aboriginal newspaper in 1938; and Pearl Gibbs, a passionate activist from Brewarrina, who would become the

first Indigenous woman to speak on Australian radio. Ferguson and Patten believed that the way forward for Aboriginal people was via full **integration** into Australian society, rather than through the segregating controls and '**colour bars**' dominating Aboriginal lives at the time.

integration where a people is able to maintain its own basic culture and have it respected, while living within and respecting the values of another culture

colour bar the denial of services or facilities to non-whites

Australia's democracy had become a 'whites-only' affair, denying Aboriginal people basic civil and human rights. For the Aboriginal people, there was nothing to celebrate that day. Rather, they declared it a Day of Mourning, and in Sydney and Melbourne vowed to gather together to register it as an important Day of Protest as well.

During the 1930s, all of the Aboriginal peoples' delegations, letters, petitions and demands had fallen on deaf ears. William Cooper's hard-won petition had not been delivered to King George. Thus, in November 1937, Cooper suggested to William Ferguson of the APA that an Aboriginal Congress be held to mark Australia Day for the first time as a 'Day of Mourning and Protest' for all Aboriginal peoples. Jack Patten travelled into the country to deliver posters and handbills to summon participants to Sydney on that day.

The New South Wales authorities had decided to re-enact their own version of the First Fleet landing to celebrate Australia Day. There were to be no convicts in evidence, for they were considered shameful. When Aboriginal people in Sydney refused to take part, the organisers

Day of Mourning and Protest, 1938

On Australia Day 1938, the nation celebrated 150 years of European settlement, development and democracy since the First Fleet's arrival in 1788. Yet this same process of settlement had ignored Aboriginal sovereignty; local development had demolished Aboriginal lands and lives; and

Activity 2.3

- 1 Identify some of the stages in the 'contact process'.
- 2 What did 'First Nation' people gain by identifying themselves as 'Aboriginal'? What did they lose (if anything)?
- 3 Assess the reason for the growth of political activity in support of civil rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the 1930s.

attempted to recruit a group of Palm Islanders from Queensland, but illness there prevented this. To fill the parts in the re-enactment, 35 Aboriginal men were then rail-roaded in from reserves at Menindie and Brewarrina to act as 'frightened savages' – their job was to run away at the sight of Captain

boycott the act of people coming together to refuse cooperation

Phillip's sailors and the British flag. Ferguson attempted to have them join the **boycott**, but they were locked away in the horse-stables yard at the Redfern police barracks overnight and Ferguson was unable to contact them. They were threatened with loss of rations if they did not cooperate in the re-enactment.

The Day of Mourning and Protest Congress was advertised as being for Aboriginal people only, and approximately 1000 attended. The only white faces in evidence were those of two newspaper reporters and two policemen at the back of the hall. The meeting was originally planned for Sydney Town Hall, but use of that venue was refused and the meeting was moved to the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street. Delegates were

told to use the back entrance. During the previous week, participants had arrived from Bateman's Bay, Dubbo, Coonabarabran, Lismore, Nowra and other areas. William Cooper, along with Margaret Tucker, an Aboriginal singer and activist, and Doug Nicholls, a former Australian rules football star and now a lay preacher, arrived by car from Melbourne.

manifesto a public statement of aims and policy

A fortnight earlier, Ferguson and Patten had sent a twelve-page **manifesto** entitled *Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights!* to the Sydney press. It pulled no punches. 'You are New Australians', it stated, 'but we are the Old Australians ... You came here only recently, and you took our land away from us by force. You have almost exterminated our people, but there are enough of us remaining to expose the humbug of your claim to be a civilised, progressive, kindly and humane nation'. These were the politics of confrontation. The speeches of the Day of Mourning and Protest continued in a similar fashion. Aboriginal people had 'refused to be pushed into the background'



Source 2.11 Aboriginal leaders deliver their addresses at the Day of Mourning and Protest, 26 January 1938. Here John Patten reads the Resolution. Tom Foster (with glass in hand), Jack Kinchela (partly obscured), Doug Nicholls and William Cooper listen on.

Activity 2.4

- 1 Why have many Aboriginal people seen Australia Day as a day of deep regret?
- 2 **a** How was the idea for a Day of Mourning and Protest developed?
b How was it organised?
- 3 In contrast to the Day of Mourning and Protest, how did white citizens mark the 150th anniversary of European settlement?
- 4 **a** Who were the speakers at the Day of Mourning and Protest Congress, and what did they say?
b What were the outcomes of the event?

and, stated Jack Patten, had 'decided to make ourselves heard'. 'We are not chickens – we are eagles,' Doug Nicholls added. A resolution was unanimously passed calling for 'full citizenship status and equality within the community'.

Since 1938, Aboriginal people and their supporters have continued to mount counter-demonstrations against the white celebration of Australia Day. For example, on Australia Day of 1988, the bicentennial year, more than 50 000 protesters marched in solidarity through Sydney. The Day of Mourning and Protest has now become known as 'Invasion Day' or 'Survival Day'.

Strikes and walk-outs (1936–49)

The Day of Mourning protesters had expressed themselves using strong and forceful words. At the same time, there were other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists who were prepared

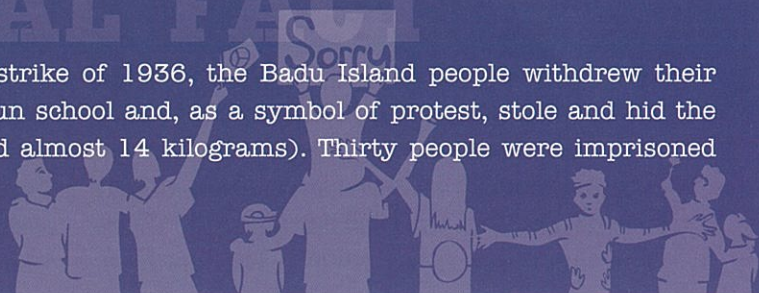
to match such words with deeds. A year after the Sydney protest, the residents of Cummeragunja reserve on the Murray River went on strike. There had been unrest for some time over bad living conditions and the tyrannical behaviour of white superintendent A.J. McQuiggan, who bashed inmates and withheld food rations as punishment. After Jack Patten, a former resident, visited and gave a rousing speech on Aboriginal rights in February 1939 (for which he was arrested), the Yorta Yorta staged a walk-out from the settlement.

Three years earlier, in January 1936, up to 400 Torres Strait Islanders working in the pearl-shell trade had also gone on strike. They represented 70 per cent of the local workforce in one of the world's richest pearling industries. They demanded control over their own wages, as well as an end to evening curfews and the permit system that controlled their freedom of movement between islands.

The strike began at Murray, Darnley and Stephens Islands among the Meriam people

HISTORICAL FACT

During the Torres Strait strike of 1936, the Badu Island people withdrew their children from the white-run school and, as a symbol of protest, stole and hid the school bell (which weighed almost 14 kilograms). Thirty people were imprisoned for the offence.





Source 2.24 Australian mainstream newspapers escalated fears of a Black Power Movement in Australia in 1971

self-determination the power to determine one's own political destiny and control one's own affairs

self-determination. In Redfern, Fitzroy and South Brisbane, it led to the formation of the first free legal aid services, community controlled health clinics, housing cooperatives, child-care and pre-school programs, Indigenous theatre and dance troupes, and surveillance of white police patrols.

The actions of the young also caused older Aboriginal activists to take stock. In Canberra in 1970, Aboriginal members of the Federal Council of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) finally confronted long-term white control of their organisation. Those supporting 'Black Control of Black Affairs' broke away to form the National Tribal Council. Aboriginal organisations were now moving back into Aboriginal hands, just as they had been when they were first established in the inter-war years.

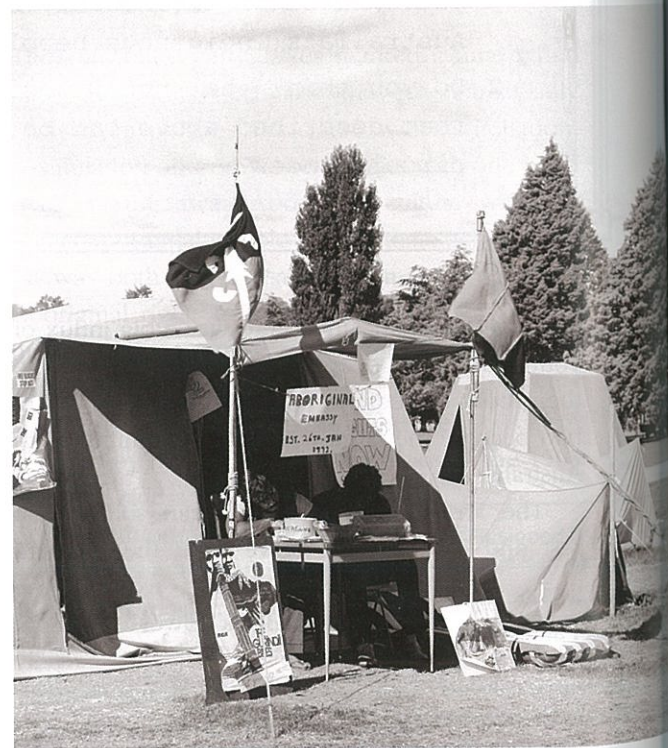
The Aboriginal Tent Embassy

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy began as a single beach umbrella. In his Australia Day address, delivered on 25 January 1972, Prime Minister William McMahon announced that land rights would not be granted in the Northern Territory. At 1.00 a.m. on Australia Day, Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Coorey

from the Redfern Black Caucus established the 'Aboriginal Embassy' by pitching an umbrella on the lawn in front of the then Parliament House. They reasoned that Prime Minister McMahon's statement had made them 'aliens' in their own land, 'so, like other aliens, we need an embassy'. The following day, the first tents were erected and by February an Aboriginal flag of black, green and red was flown at the tent site. A petition outlining a five-point plan for land rights was delivered to Parliament early that month. By July, the original flag was replaced by the black, red and yellow Aboriginal flag that we know today – it was designed by Harold Thomas and first unfurled in Adelaide during 1971.

The Federal Government was disturbed by the Embassy's existence and appearance, claiming that it reflected **separate development**. Yet it continued to stand due to an understanding that the Parliament House lawns could be used for peaceful assembly. But there was

separate development a policy developed during Apartheid in South Africa, whereby different racial groups within in the same country were governed by separate administrations



Source 2.25 The Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972 [NAA: A7973, INT1205/3]



Source 2.26 Federal police remove tents and bedding from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 20 July 1972

disagreement over whether people could camp indefinitely there. Soon a new Trespass Ordinance allowed 60 police to move in on the six Embassy tents on 20 July and dismantle them amid tumultuous scenes, where eight protesters were arrested. Three days later, an attempt by more than 200 demonstrators to re-establish the tents led to one of the most violent confrontations in Canberra's history. The activists were manhandled by police and 18 more arrested. A week later, 2000 people marched to Parliament House and symbolically re-erected the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, as it came to be known.

Though condemned by opponents as 'unsightly' and 'squalid', the Tent Embassy received enormous attention from the global media and rapidly emerged as a powerful symbol of 'Black Power' and Aboriginal sovereignty. As Embassy spokesperson John Newfong stated in May 1972, 'If people think this is an eyesore, well, this is the way it is on government settlements'. It became a gathering point for Aboriginal protests, press

statements, marches, petitions and parliamentary sit-ins. Gough Whitlam announced Labor's new land rights policy after a visit there in early 1972. From time to time, other Aboriginal embassies and 'consulates' have also been organised in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane, as well as in Sydney at Mrs Macquarie's Chair during the 1988 bicentennial celebrations.

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy would move location a number of times from 1972 to 1992. It would be demolished and rebuilt, blown down in a storm and even firebombed several times, but it has never gone away. From 1992 until today, it has had a permanent and controversial existence on the lawns of Old Parliament House, near where it was first established. In April 1995 it was registered on the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission as the only site nationally recognised to represent the ongoing political struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is now the longest surviving protest site in the world.