

8 August 1980



Mr Foley: challenged Minister

AN ISSUE which has clouded Australian history since the first settlement confronted conference participants from the outset — the treatment of Aborigines.

Although the conference was planned as a reflection on the future, an issue of the present — Noonkanbah — developed into a rallying point for debate about Australia's treatment of the rights of minorities.

At the opening session, an Aboriginal activist, Mr Gary Foley, challenged the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Chaney, on the Noonkanbah issue.

In a statement chalked up on the blackboard of the main conference room, Mr Foley asked why the Federal Government did not invoke Commonwealth powers to prevent "the worst confrontation between black and white Australians in history".

As it happened, both Senator Chaney and Mr Foley were unable to stay for much of the conference.

But the Noonkanbah debate surfaced again in open debate which resulted in the conference overwhelmingly supporting Aboriginal land rights.

Later the same day, in an address which caught the emotions of many participants, Ms Lilla Watson spoke of the long history of denial suffered by Aborigines.

Ms Watson, a research assistant from the social work department of the University of Queensland, told the conference that Aboriginal people had been denied their place in Australia's history.

"The history that has been taught and is being taught to our children is the history and the exploits of white Australia. Whites

Aboriginal rights... in black and white

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Ms Watson: truth must be exposed

have invented many myths and told countless lies about blacks, and now blacks must be about the business of exploding those myths and exposing the truth about our history and ourselves," Ms Watson said.

"In the past, Aboriginal people were required to deny their history and affirm those European values responsible for the enslavement of our intellect — our enslavement on reserves; to their Christianity; to their education systems; in their hospitals and health clinics; in prisons and mental institutions. But still we have managed to survive despite the crippling blows of "white" Australia.

"White supremacy of the past has contributed to their arrogance of the present. So it is necessary for us to have a better knowledge of the past in order that we may understand the present and be better prepared for the future. A major response to colonial invasion by any indigenous peoples throughout the world has been guerilla warfare.

"Aboriginal people in Australia were no exception, only it has been a well-hidden factor in the written history of this country. We can no longer accept the white myths of the past that minimised the actions of our forebearers in defending our country from the first colonial invaders.

"Our ancestors fought as best they could with what arms they possessed then; and if the echoes of their struggle has not resounded in the history books of this country, then it's about time we realised the reasons for this silence.

"White Australians owe their very existence, that is their property, to the colonial system. The

battle that Aboriginal people have fought for land in Australia has had no legitimate existence in the eyes of past governments, and therefore the special quality of deeds carried out by Aborigines in the battle of ownership for their land has been deliberately ignored.

"Aboriginal resistance and guerrilla warfare bands when captured were branded as being savages, treacherous cunning animals and common criminals and not the heroes and prisoners-of-war they were recognised and legitimised as being in the eyes of Aboriginal Australia.

"White supremacy has served as the defining characteristic of colonialism wherever it has occurred throughout the world, and Aboriginal people in Australia have been defined only in relation to white people or what is white.

"In the past it has been 'white' power that has had the power of definition... through the English language, the written word, the news media, and so on. And, of course, the power of control over those resources.

"It no longer matters what whites think of blacks. The important thing for Aboriginal people is what we think and create of ourselves.

"Blacks will make sure that the 'white' lies and the racists myths will die in the communities that created them, because we can no longer live out the definitions created for us by whites.

"Blacks must redefine themselves and prepare themselves to move in the direction of the definition of Blackness that is formed in the context of Black Liberation from domination," said Ms Watson.