

## 'The fight never left': Stolenwealth Games protesters draw on long tradition

Indigenous activists at 'Camp Freedom' on the Gold Coast take inspiration from rallies at the Games of 2006 and 1982

Jack Latimore *on the Gold Coast*

9 Apr 2018



Ruby Wharton rallies members from the Stolenwealth Games protest group in Surfers Paradise.

The Aboriginal camp protesting the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games sits at the very end of a slender finger of land known as The Spit. It's roughly 10km north of Surfers Paradise and past the opulent Gold Coast marina, the Palazzo Versace and Sheraton resorts, and the Sea World amusement park.

Within the camp at Doug Jennings park there is a kitchen, toilets and showers, and more than 100 caravans, tents and swags scattered around, but clearly delineated by cyclone-wire fencing installed at the expense of the games' organising committee. After midday, a speaker system blasts music by Indigenous artists whenever it is not being used for speeches. The mood is subdued. Fishing rods and surfboards lean against trees. Small sitting circles dot the open ground. In a cheeky nod to the constant police patrols

and the entrance gate which is locked around dark, the protest mob call it Camp Freedom.

Talk to members of the camp and you quickly come to realise they consider their protest a continuation of demonstrations during the Melbourne Commonwealth Games in 2006 and the notorious rallies that occurred around the hosting of the 1982 Games in Brisbane. But they will just as quickly remind you there is a much longer, deeper legacy of resistance in play here too.

Dale Ruska is a Goenpul Goorie from Stradbroke Island. As an original owner he is one of many nominated spokespeople for the protest group which has formed under a coalition banner of "Stolenwealth Games", a slogan initiated 12 years earlier for the Melbourne games. He says the current protest is a continuation of First Nations resistance to British colonisation of the continent.

"Ever since that time, Aboriginal people have been striving to get fair and equitable justice for our people. The protests that occurred during the Commonwealth Games in 1982 was just another point of resistance in our justice endeavours. This protest in 2018 is one more."

Another local, Pat Leavy, the president of the Yallburru community organisation, says the camp of around 150 people consists of representatives from First Nations and clan groups across Australia. She says the mob has come to join in protest because they feel governments and the general public are not listening to their diverse concerns as Indigenous disadvantage grows.

"Every protest we have, we hope to make a difference," she says. "Sometimes there are people in the community that might not agree with what we are doing, but at every major event that has come to Australia we have held a protest. It's not just about us, it's about the broader community too."

The mob's protests have drawn criticism from both white and black Australia. On day one, a sit-in blockade of the road beside the campsite delayed the games baton relay for several hours. Later that day, at Wednesday evening's opening ceremony, an action outside the stadium resulted in three of the demonstrators being arrested and charged. The action happened after a representative group of 10 were initially informed they had been provided with gratis tickets by the games committee and then were refused entry. Games officials and police liaison officers remain confused about what happened and have pledged to look into it. The three protesters charged must front the local magistrates court in late April and May.

Within the Indigenous social media sphere, long comment threads ensued throughout Wednesday and Thursday. “This is why I hate saying I’m Aboriginal because they give us good ones a bad name and it makes it harder for us to get the things in life,” posted one. In response, another Indigenous user posted: “Be proud of who you are don’t think your nothing because you are something and someone. Protests like that won’t get anywhere in talks with government.”

Meanwhile, some groups within the protest coalition condemned those taking part in the games, issuing an early statement calling “for all participating nations, athletes, artists and fans to boycott the games and to end colonial occupation and oppression in Australia as well the systemic abuse against our communities”. Some were also sceptical about the involvement of local Aboriginal people in the development of the opening ceremony and questioned the cultural consultation process involved.



*Camp Freedom at Doug Jennings Park.*

The opening ceremony became controversial after rightwing non-Indigenous politicians and commentators took exception to what they perceived as too heavy an Indigenous focus. Leader of the One Nation party, Pauline Hanson, described the 20 minutes dedicated to celebrating Australia’s Indigenous heritage as “absolutely disgusting”. This followed comments by conservative radio jock Alan Jones’ on Thursday morning in which he tweeted that the ceremony was a “disgrace” and later, while on air, described the Indigenous segments as “rubbish and an insult”.

Aboriginal man and director of the Sydney Festival, Wesley Enoch, was a segment director involved with many of the Indigenous aspects of the opening ceremony. He says multiple clans within the local Yugambeh language group were closely involved in the conceptual and creative process.

“The bulk of it was local Yugambeh groups,” he says. “There were also groups from Yarrabah [northern Queensland] and Woorabinda [central Queensland]. There were the Kurna plains mob [South Australia], Nyoongar groups from around Perth, and Larrakia mob [western tip of the Northern Territory].”

Enoch says an all-Indigenous working group guided proper cultural consultation for at least five years prior to the staging of the opening ceremony.

“I haven’t yet found a process that suited everyone uniformly in any of the things I’ve done, but the feedback I got from elders was that they were happy with it and the Indigenous working group was fantastic in supporting all the ideas,” he says.

He also argues the Indigenous presence within the stadium during the opening ceremony reflected the same resistance that was occurring outside the gates on the night.



*Ruby Wharton with her father Wayne, who was involved in the 1982 protest against the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane.*

“We were talking about cultural sovereignty, we were talking treaty discussions, we were talking visibility of our issues – these same things, just manifested in different ways,” he says. “I go back to this idea that when we think about the 1994 Commonwealth Games, when Cathy Freeman won her 400m race and then wore the Aboriginal flag around the track in her victory lap, whitefullas were saying that was terrible.”

Back in Camp Freedom, Ruby Wharton sits on a rock beside her father Wayne, who was closely involved in the 1982 Brisbane protests which led to a feverish sense of civil unrest at the time. On the paddock opposite, Indigenous police liaison officers are kicking a football with a big mob of cheerful kids. It feels far removed from the state’s brutal social oppression of the early 80s. But equally as removed from the clash at the entry gates of the arena only a couple nights before.

“It just feels like it’s my responsibility,” Ruby says when asked why she is protesting. “It’s like me upholding the family tradition, and standing strong not only for myself but other young blackfullas from all around the place. The fight has never left. We’ve always been a people that is always resisting.”