

## 5. 'Never forgotten'

*Pearl Gibbs (Gambanyi)*

Stephanie Gilbert

Few people can claim a political life akin to that of Pearl Gibbs. First drawing public attention in defence of other Aboriginal people in the 1920s, she only stepped away from her activist platform with her death in 1983. Her legacy lives on. Gibbs knew and worked with almost every major Aboriginal activist in 20th-century Australia. These include her mentor, William Ferguson, as well as William Cooper, Jack Patten, Margaret Tucker, Joe McGinness and Charles Perkins. She could also claim to have worked with other major rights activists, including Jessie Street, Faith Bandler, Michael Sawtell and many, many more. Her sphere of contact included prime ministers, attorneys-general, numerous members of parliament in New South Wales, waterfront and other unions, feminist groups, women's groups, and members of the media. She was the first Aboriginal woman to speak on Australian radio and the first to present a scripted radio show.<sup>1</sup>

Gibbs worked across the racial divide to draw together those who had never worked with one another. Many non-Aboriginal Australians had never considered the situation of the Indigenous people of their country until challenged by Gibbs to do so. Media accounts of Pearl Gibbs time and again confirmed her impact on the lives of Australians, whether they were from the conservative or leftist side of politics. Pearl knew and called upon Australians of all kinds, from all rungs of society.

Many stories about Pearl Gibbs describe her as 'half-caste', a label that belies her stature as one of Australia's most prolific and effective Aboriginal leaders, and a tireless worker for the Aboriginal cause. Gibbs set a benchmark for commitment and networking, using her ability to draw in allies of all persuasions as they were required. These networks included the non-Indigenous women and organisations so crucial to Gibbs' activism. At all times Gibbs represented the Aboriginal people with honour, and with her Aboriginal identity at the core of her imagining, her methods and her presence.

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Gibbs was born Pearl Mary Brown in 1901 to an Aboriginal mother, Margaret Brown, and white father, David Barry. Her older sister, Olga, was two years old at the time. In 1910, her mother married Richard (Dick) Murray, an Aboriginal man, from Brewarrina like herself.

Much of Gibbs' early schooling was undertaken in Yass. Her mother had earlier tried to enrol her in Cowra but was told no blacks were allowed there. It was at Cowra and in Yass that Gibbs had her first encounters with racial discrimination. Aboriginal children had been banned from attending the public school in Yass since 1897 so, with the other Aboriginal children, Gibbs attended the Mount Carmel Convent School run by the Sisters of Mercy. The family moved out closer to Bourke and Brewarrina in 1910 to take up work on a sheep station.<sup>2</sup>

In 1917, Pearl and Olga moved to Sydney to work as domestics – positions that may have been organised by their parents' employer. They were fortunate to gain work in the wealthy area of Potts Point. Gibbs continued to work as a maid and cook throughout the 1920s, and during those years married an English sailor. Although she and her husband later separated, the marriage produced a daughter and two sons, one of whom later joined the Australian Navy.<sup>3</sup>

Gibbs' political education grew when she met other young women and girls apprenticed as domestics by the Aborigines Protection Board. During the 1920s, Gibbs assisted a number of these young women to negotiate with the board. She was deeply concerned by their working conditions and the stories they told of being taken from their families. She decided she would make representations on their behalf to the board. It is said that she was deeply moved and remembered for a long time the reaction she got from the staff when she visited the board's offices.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1930s, with the Great Depression in full swing, Gibbs lost her job and was forced to live in the Unemployed Workers' Camp at La Perouse. After some time spent living with her mother in the camp, they moved to Nowra to work on seasonal pea-picking. During this time, Gibbs came to know and associate with Aboriginal people from Wallaga Lake. She was so angered and disgusted with the cruel and unfair practices on the Aboriginal reserve, as well as with Aborigines Protection Board policies generally, that she helped organise protests against some of the management decisions. In one instance, she undermined a community manager's order that the women only shop while he was present by encouraging them to purchase underwear. In another, she organised protests by the pea-pickers for better industrial conditions. These experiences increased her distrust of the board's officials but also created her first links to political bodies and ministers in the New South Wales Parliament, including Jack Beale, the first environment minister in a New South Wales government.<sup>5</sup>

It was in 1937, in response to a call from William (Bill) Ferguson, that Gibbs visited Sydney to help form the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA). At this point, her political and ideological development grew exponentially. Gibbs became one of the early members of the association and spent the rest of her life politically aligned with Ferguson, its leader. Her first public speech was in Sydney when the APA was created. She had accompanied Bill Ferguson and Michael Sawtell to the Domain and, after they spoke, she stood on their ladder and addressed the crowd. At a time when it was rare for women to express themselves publicly, she spoke with fluency and passion and attracted a large crowd. She later recalled: 'I shook and I shivered and the ladder was rocking... I was so fighting mad, I didn't know what to say first because there were so many things... They had to get me down on the ground and then I started.'<sup>6</sup>

Bill Ferguson and the APA's president at that time, Jack Patten, believed Gibbs was the APA member best equipped to speak to the women of Australia on matters affecting Aboriginal women and girls. Gibbs spent the next several years addressing groups where women were the dominant audience members. Her activities, however, were not restricted to these groups alone. In mid-1937, at Ferguson's request, Gibbs went to Brewarrina Aboriginal Station to investigate claims about sexual abuse of the dormitory girls. Ferguson wanted to present this and other evidence of maltreatment at a parliamentary

inquiry into the conditions of Aboriginal people in New South Wales. Although this inquiry went ahead on 17 November 1937, it was prematurely dissolved and Gibbs' evidence was never given. She did attend, however, as a representative of the Sydney Feminist Club, as she had recently struck up a friendship with fellow member Joan Kingsley-Strack through a chance invitation to a tea party Strack had hosted for Aboriginal domestic workers.<sup>7</sup>

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Australia's 1938 sesquicentenary celebrations provided the perfect opportunity for activists to draw the public's attention to the situation of Aboriginal people in Australia. William Cooper from the Victorian-based Australian Aborigines' League (AAL) proposed a Day of Mourning, which he encouraged the APA to co-organise. The Day of Mourning and Protest would coincide with the 26 January 'celebrations' but would be for Aboriginal people only. Prior to the day, the APA issued a press release, saying:

The 26th of January 1938 is not a day of rejoicing for Australia's Aborigines; it is a day of mourning. This festival of 150 years' so-called 'progress' in Australia commemorates also 150 years of misery and degradation imposed upon the original native inhabitants by the white invaders of this country.<sup>8</sup>

The Day of Mourning and Protest Conference was held at the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, Sydney after the sesquicentennial street procession. The celebrations included a re-enactment of Governor Philip's landing. Aboriginal people had been brought from Menindee and Brewarrina to take part, and were housed at the Redfern police barracks. Ironically, the barracks' horse-breaker and tracker was Helen Grosvenor's father, Ike. Helen, Gibbs, Ferguson and Jack Patten were the main organisers of the day, which centralised Gibbs' position in Australian politics. Helen fed information to Bill Ferguson about the presence of the Aboriginal people at the barracks and the plan was to persuade them to boycott the re-enactment. Ferguson, however, was unable to get to them as they were banned from receiving visitors.<sup>9</sup>

Much planning went into the Day of Mourning, including many posters and handbills sent west, north and south to as many pockets of Aboriginal people as possible, inviting them to attend. Patten travelled into the country to deliver the handbills to reserves. As history shows, the conference was attended by many great Aboriginal activists of the time, including those who had been agitating for more

than ten years for a change to the policies of the Aborigines Protection Board. A common theme ran among the speakers of the day: equality, recognition and the right to be Aboriginal people alongside the equality, responsibility and quality of being an Australian citizen. Ferguson said: 'We do not want an [A]boriginal member of Parliament. We want ordinary citizen rights, not any special rights such as that.'<sup>10</sup>

Patten said: 'We, as [A]borigines, have no reason to rejoice on Australia's 150th birthday. This land belonged to our forefathers 150 years ago, but today we are being pushed further into the background. Aborigines throughout Australia are literally being starved to death.'<sup>11</sup>

As well as the Day of Mourning's instigator, William Cooper, other notable Aboriginal people in attendance were Douglas Nicholls, former AFL footballer, and Margaret Tucker, who had been indentured under the NSW Aborigines Protection Board. Margaret had moved to Melbourne in 1925 and was associated with the Communist Party of Australia. She was not recognised widely as an activist at that time, but gained notoriety after her involvement in the Cumeroongunga strike in 1939. Margaret Tucker went on to represent Aboriginal people on the Victorian Aborigines Welfare Board.<sup>12</sup> Her contact with Gibbs remained sporadic but their concerns and personal experiences of service bound them. Later both were involved with the fight for the 1967 referendum and the project to make the documentary *Lousy little sixpence*.<sup>13</sup>

The only non-Aboriginal people in the audience that day were two members of the press, although earlier in the month Mary Montgomery Bennett, a non-Indigenous activist, had applied to attend (see Chapter 6). At the time, Bennett was a teacher at the United Aborigines Mission Station at Mount Margaret, 160 kilometres from Kalgoorlie. She was making her way to Sydney to attend the conference when she was quoted as saying 'the aim in Western Australia and the Northern Territory is to let the [A]borigines die out as quickly as possible'. She also wished to urge that throughout Australia Aboriginal people be granted the 'franchise and educational and working conditions equal to that of white citizens'.<sup>14</sup> It is unknown what she did when she learned of her inability to attend, although she had previously been in written contact with William Ferguson and William Cooper.

Shortly after the Day of Mourning Gibbs, at last, was presented with an opportunity to speak on her experiences at Brewarrina, which she

had been unable to share with the earlier parliamentary committee. Gibbs became renowned for the words she spoke as part of a delegation from the conference that met with Prime Minister Lyons. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that the Aboriginal women in the party presented their positions in an eloquent and forthright manner.<sup>15</sup> Gibbs reportedly said, 'I am more proud of my Aboriginal blood than of my white blood.'<sup>16</sup> This statement made a big impression on Mrs Lyons, who would quote it in 1966 to Gibbs' colleague Jack Horner.

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Later in April 1938, Jack Patten, who had spent time growing up in the highly politicised camp at Salt Pan Creek near Peakhurst in south-western Sydney, had a dispute with Ferguson that led to a split in the APA. Ferguson and Gibbs ended up representing the western New South Wales communities, and Patten the coastal dwelling peoples.

Meanwhile, Gibbs continued to generate a deal of news coverage. In February 1938 she addressed the Housewives' Progressive Association, saying:

You white people awoke on Anniversary Day with a feeling of pride at what you had done during those 150 years, but did you think of the [A]borigines' broken hearts, and that for them it was a day of mourning? What has any white man or woman done in this country to help my people, the [A]borigines? The [A]borigines are now taking up the matter for themselves, and asking for citizenship. It is not ridiculous or silly for them to ask for citizenship in a country that is their own.<sup>17</sup>

This perspective of a right to citizenship led to Ferguson, Gibbs and the APA's push to create the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, formed in March. At its helm was long-term ally Michael Sawtell. Joan Kingsley-Strack (see Chapter 3) was appointed secretary. Kingsley-Strack and Gibbs had known each other since the previous year through their mutual concerns about the treatment of Aboriginal girls in service. It was Gibbs who took Kingsley-Strack to her first public protest meeting. Gibbs' involvement derived from her own history of service in the 1920s and her contact with other young women in the same situation; Strack's from wanting to assist the young women in her service and in the homes of her acquaintances. It is hard to imagine any commonality between these two women from such different spheres of Australian life, yet they shared a desire to see equality for Aboriginal people and to reduce the control of so-called experts.<sup>18</sup>

In the late 1930s the state government promised a revamped system for the management of New South Wales' Aboriginal people, and the lobbying began over who would join the new governing body, the Aborigines Welfare Board. The APA relied heavily on its allies, including left-leaning Christians, progressive feminist groups, leftist unionists and the Communist Party of Australia, to support its position. The APA's relationships with its allies were complex, especially given that Patten had different allies to Ferguson and Gibbs.<sup>19</sup> The APA advocated an end to white control of Aboriginal lives and wanted to represent Aboriginal people themselves, but it faced opposition from some anthropologists, who increasingly claimed a superior knowledge of Aboriginal issues. The anthropologists argued for their own place on the board on the grounds that they understood the traditional and cultural knowledge of the 'primitive' Aborigines. Politically, the APA could not acknowledge anthropologists' understanding of 'cultural knowledge' because this would imply they supported the idea that anthropologists should have control over Aboriginal people.

Kingsley-Strack and Gibbs, the only Aboriginal member of the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, worked for two years to get the organised women's movement to support citizenship rights as perceived by Aboriginal people and not anthropologists. Many women's groups at the time leaned towards a maternal approach to Aboriginal women, and clearly an argument for Aboriginal autonomy challenged their position. In the move towards a new Aboriginal Welfare Board, many women's groups firmly supported the role of anthropologists in the management of Aboriginal people; hence, they supported the inclusion on the board of female anthropologist Caroline Kelly, a protégé of AP Elkin. Kingsley-Strack had been one of those who supported Elkin, but after her involvement with Gibbs and the committee she came to adopt the APA's position.

It was around this time that Jessie Street came into Gibbs' political life. As president of the United Associations of Women (UAW), Street supported the nomination of Caroline Kelly. The UAW believed that Kelly fulfilled perfectly their desire to have women and anthropologists on the board.<sup>20</sup> Street became an important person in Gibbs' activism, as will be discussed later in the chapter.

Victoria Haskins has documented how Kingsley-Strack's perceptions changed from the maternalistic to the collegial as she spent more and more time working with Aboriginal activists during her time on the

committee.<sup>21</sup> In aligning herself with the call for citizenship for all Aborigines, she alienated herself, to some extent, from the women's movements she had previously been central to. Kingsley-Strack's class and connections were of benefit in the APA struggles with the board on behalf of apprentices, but she also proved useful in other ways. In 1937, she wrote to the Premier of New South Wales asking him to accept a deputation from the APA. She also wrote to the newspapers regularly:

As one who *knows* – not of the actual massacres – but the hopeless and heart-breaking degradation and slow starvation and generally ghastly treatment that has been meted out to *their* children by the so-called 'Protection' Board of N.S.W. which is and always has been a great poisonous 'fungus' which has lived and is still living upon the very life-blood of the Aborigines and half-castes in this State, I feel that I *must* say here, a little of what I intended to say in evidence, at the late 'deceased' Enquiry into the Board's administration of the affairs and funds of the 'Pampered' Aborigines!<sup>22</sup>

Gibbs' opinion was also frequently reported in the newspapers, her words illustrating her passion for the plight of Aboriginal people. Indeed, the two women appear to have been a formidable team. On 4 August 1938, Gibbs told the United Associations of Women: 'I cannot think that the government intends anything else but slow death for the Aborigines, for they are being slowly starved to death. They live from day to day on the promises of the Government.'<sup>23</sup>

During the split of the APA and the fight over the following two years until the new Aborigines Welfare Board was established, Gibbs and Kingsley-Strack fought for the representation of Aboriginal people and for their citizenship rights. The APA spent much time talking to its supporters and attempting to recruit more. During this time Gibbs addressed the International Women's Day conference of the Housewives' Association, the School of Modern Writers, the Fellowship of Australian Writers, and the Radiant Health Club, to name a few. In one instance, Gibbs and Strack went to a gathering of the Oxford Group, which opposed the Hitler movement in Europe. Here, according to Jack Horner, 'people could find their own peaceful answers to perplexity through their candid exchange of good, earnest, anxious and dedicated wishes'.<sup>24</sup> After dinner, the group gathered and, after a general discussion, listened to Gibbs. She described life on government reserves, including the managers that came with them. She described the poverty and the living conditions that led to



influenza, trachoma or venereal disease. Gibbs' audience was appalled at what they heard and ashamed that this was happening in their own backyard.<sup>25</sup> Once again, she had passionately drawn Australia's attention to the plight of Aboriginal people.

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On 30 July 1938, the state conference of the APA was held in Dubbo. It had been called by Bill Ferguson in response to the politicking of Jack Patten in Sydney, who had become 'president' of his own faction at a meeting held at La Perouse the previous Easter. Ferguson was duly elected president at the Dubbo conference and Gibbs its secretary. They decided to make their base in Dubbo and passed the requisite motions through the floor. Yet Gibbs' position in the organisation soon brought its own complications. She was a woman to speak her mind with clarity, sometimes anger and certainly always passion. In 1939 she made some comments to Australia's new Attorney-General, RG Menzies, that raised the ire of Ferguson. Discussing capital punishment in the New South Wales penal code, Gibbs argued that Aboriginal people struggled with the concept of capital punishment because having been taught that God always forgives, their notions of personal restraint were dulled. Although the APA was opposed to capital punishment, Ferguson argued against Gibbs' position in what became known as the *Dubbo Dispatch*, saying that Gibbs had no right to represent her views as the APA's position on Aboriginal people and capital punishment.<sup>26</sup>

In 1939, the APA discovered that the new Aborigines Welfare Board wouldn't include Aboriginal people. In reaction, Michael Sawtell and Pearl Gibbs announced that the APA would run three of its members for parliamentary seats in the next election, with Gibbs standing in Parramatta. Via the *Dubbo Dispatch*, Ferguson contradicted this statement, arguing no decisions would be made about this idea before the next APA conference, scheduled for March. Jaded by Ferguson's rebukes and the lack of support for the cause, Gibbs chose to move back to the South Coast. Ferguson continued to garner support in western New South Wales, with a trip to Moree where he created a branch of the APA on 30 March 1939.<sup>27</sup>

After the new Aborigines Welfare Board legislation was passed in May 1940, Joan Kingsley-Strack resigned as secretary of the APA, disheartened by the lack of progress. The Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship continued its work on the proposal to get Aboriginal representation for a number of years after her resignation. Ferguson continued to lead the APA in Dubbo.

In 1941, Gibbs moved to Port Kembla. She was presented with the opportunity to broadcast a speech through 2WL in Wollongong, in which she eloquently addressed the issue of Aboriginal citizenship:<sup>28</sup>

It is the first time in the history of Australia that an Aboriginal woman has broadcast an appeal for her people. I am more than happy to be that woman... My people have had 153 years of the white man's and white woman's cruelty and injustice and unchristian treatment imposed upon us... Our girls and boys are exploited ruthlessly. They are apprenticed out by the Aborigines Welfare Board at the shocking wage of a shilling to three and six per week pocket money and from two and six to six shillings per week is paid into a trust fund at the end of four years. This is done from 14 years to the age of 18. At the end of four years a girl would, with pocket money and money from the trust, have earned 60 pounds and a boy 90 pounds. Many girls have great difficulty in getting their trust money. Others say they have never been paid. Girls arrive home with white babies. I do not know of one case where the Aborigines Welfare Board has taken steps to compel the white father to support his child. The child has to grow up as an unwanted member of an apparently unwanted race. Aboriginal girls are no less human than my white sisters... The bad housing, poor water supply, appalling sanitary conditions and the lack of right food, together with unsympathetic managers, make life not worth living for my unfortunate people... Please remember, we don't want your pity, but practical help. This you can do by writing to the Hon. Chief Secretary Mr Baddeley, MLA, Parliament House, Sydney, and ask that our claims be granted as soon as possible... Remember we, the Aboriginal people are the creditors. Do not let it be said of you that we have asked in vain. Will my appeal for practical humanity be in vain? I leave the answer to each and every one of you.<sup>29</sup>

On 25 January 1941, at a meeting of the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship called by Michael Sawtell, Gibbs welcomed the opportunity to speak with Mr Doug Nicholls, 'the leading Aborigine of Victoria'.<sup>30</sup> In that meeting, she argued that the land had been stolen from Aboriginal people and that sacred grounds had been desecrated and destroyed but Aboriginal people had received nothing in return.<sup>31</sup> Also at the meeting was the Archdeacon RBS Hammond, president of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, secretary of the Howard League for Prison Reform and secretary of the Official Labor Party (a splinter group of Labor opposed to the policies of Jack Lang). A resolution was passed:

...that this Public Meeting of good Australian Citizens urges all other good Australians to support in their various ways, the granting of full citizenship rights and status to the Aborigines. We also urge all Australian governments to do their duty in helping the Aborigines to fit themselves for citizenship, especially in the matter of education.<sup>32</sup>

While Gibbs had ceased to be secretary of the APA, she had not slowed in her never-ending activism.

In 1942, Gibbs contributed a series of well-received articles to the *Nowra Leader* discussing the 1940 legislation. Aboriginal representation on the Aborigines Welfare Board was finally approved in 1943 and on 25 August 1944 Ferguson became one of two Aboriginal appointees. In 1944 the Post-war Reconstruction and Democratic Rights referendum proposed to alter Commonwealth powers in a number of areas, one of which was authority over 'the people of Aboriginal race'. The federal government wanted to take over responsibility for Aboriginal affairs, which currently resided with the states. Many Aboriginal people and their supporters believed this was the only clear path to civil rights for Indigenous Australians. To the dismay of Gibbs and others on the citizenship committee, the referendum was lost. Ferguson believed this to be a sure sign of the ignorance of a large number of the Australian people about those of other heritages.<sup>33</sup>

Gibbs remained on the South Coast with her parents until the end of the Second World War. During that time, her stepfather passed away. It is unclear in which year Gibbs moved to Dubbo with her widowed mother and sister. Some reports claim it was 1945, although in 1949 she wrote a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* addressed from Port Kembla, in which she discussed the restriction of liquor to Aborigines:

We are taking an equal part in the community life and are thoroughly welcomed, accepted, and liked by the white residents. It seems that someone has suddenly decided that we are to be treated different from, and inferior to, our white brothers, as persons having no rights whatever. We realize that the State and Federal Governments' policy of assimilation is biologically sound, but we fail to see how it can be a success if we who have assimilated ourselves into the social and economic life are to be deprived of civil rights. Those of us who have acquired education have been taught that democracy has a Christian basis, on moral standards of honesty, unselfishness, and love. We claim that these standards of democracy do not apply where we Aborigines are concerned. Signed Pearl Gibbs, Secretary, Aborigines' Advancement Association.<sup>34</sup>

When Gibbs and her family arrived in Dubbo, they stayed with the Fergusons and then the Carneys, where the first Aborigines Progressive Association executive meeting had been held in 1937. Gibbs became re-encharmed with the Ferguson goal and began to work with him again. She focused some of her attention on establishing a Dubbo branch of the Australian Aborigines' League (AAL) and served as vice president. This organisation for the first time linked Aboriginal bodies across state boundaries.<sup>35</sup>

In 1950 Ferguson died, and his seat on the Aborigines Welfare Board was taken up by Herbert (Bert) Groves. Despite the death of this APA stalwart and mentor, Gibbs pushed the organisation to continue its work. The writer and activist Len Fox said of Gibbs at that time:

She persisted in every way she knew. She wrote to the papers – she had a scrapbook jammed with scores of these impassioned pleas for her people's rights – she spoke out, she interviewed people, she worried people, she annoyed people, she became a damned nuisance. She persisted and still persisted.<sup>36</sup>

Gibbs served as secretary of the Dubbo APA until it lapsed later in the 1950s. The post-war years were difficult times for Aboriginal people as prejudice and lack of employment continued to have an impact on family and community life. Gibbs remained focused on Ferguson's goals, which had become so much her own, and continued to run many social activities, like dances, to raise funds for the visits she made to the Aboriginal communities in western New South Wales. The networks she had established earlier in her activism strengthened throughout this time.<sup>37</sup>

Gibbs was widely envied for her networking and organisational skills. For example, in September 1949 she successfully managed the quick organisation of a going away gathering for the renowned Aboriginal tenor Harold Blair, who was on his way to North America to study. The gathering was held at the Palms Hall, La Perouse.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, the struggle for citizenship continued. The Council for Aboriginal Rights was created in 1951 in Melbourne and established a presence in Dubbo in 1953. Under its banner, Gibbs was again in contact with the powers that be, showing her incredible ability to pull in the contacts she needed. She instigated discussions, for instance, about whether the *National Service Act 1951* (Cth) included the obligatory service of Aboriginal people. Through her local member and the relevant minister, as secretary of the Council for Aboriginal

Rights she was able to confirm that Aboriginal people were not required to perform either national service or the training.

In 1953, she wrote to the acting premier to inquire whether Aboriginal people were, in fact, able to be served in cafes and other places. He responded that 'if any business person or concern refused to see good to or provide service of accommodation for an [A]borigine, the latter would have the same rights of redress as any other member of the community might have in similar circumstances'.<sup>39</sup> In eliciting a response like this from a minister, Gibbs continued to chip away at the structures that supported discrimination.

When the Sydney branch of the Council for Aboriginal Rights held a conference on 4-5 March 1953, Gibbs was one of the main speakers. Again, she reaffirmed her goals of citizenship rights and equal representation on the Aborigines Welfare Board.<sup>40</sup> The following year she moved closer to this goal when she became the only woman ever elected to the board.

There were two positions on the board for Indigenous Australians: one for 'full-blood' Aboriginal people and the other, which Gibbs filled, for 'mixed-blood' Aboriginal people. The 'full-blood' position had been vacant for five years prior to Gibbs' appointment. The 1947 census had put the number of remaining 'full-bloods' at 900.<sup>41</sup>

Gibbs' appointment was welcomed by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. She received letters from across the state and the breadth of political persuasion, often espousing the same paternalism she had fought against for so long. Dr J Wearn, a dental surgeon of Sydney, wrote to Gibbs offering his congratulations, saying that he had worked in the far west children's health scheme for 25 years and he had a 'full blooded girl Ella Wanaweena with us at home. She has worked with us for years'.<sup>42</sup> Dr E Kent-Hughes from Armidale also offered his congratulations, arguing 'reserves should be kept for those who cannot manage to live unaided'.<sup>43</sup> Gibbs responded to each of these letters but the contents of her replies are unknown.

Gibbs' contacts with women's groups also continued, with the League of Women Voters inviting her to an end of year party as the guest of honour upon her appointment to the board.<sup>44</sup>

Gibbs aimed through her appointment to work on better lives for Aboriginal people but found her ability to influence major decisions was severely limited. She felt many decisions were made in the public bar, where, as an Aboriginal woman, she was unable to go. Added to

those restrictions, she was still denied access to the very communities she wanted to represent. She was not invited to go with officers to the missions, and her own financial position was difficult. She was still living in Dubbo at the time and caring for her mother, by then a woman of 80. Gibbs managed to fulfil her responsibilities to the board while living on a widow's pension, although she did receive a daily allowance, and conveyance costs were covered by the board. She was nevertheless extremely frustrated by the limitations placed on her ability to help her people, and resigned in 1957. She summed it up neatly a couple of years later when she said: 'Aborigines want more than Board reports... They want action, not words.'<sup>45</sup>

A large part of the problem faced by Aboriginal people, Gibbs believed, was racism itself. With that in mind, in March 1956 she encouraged a new player into the field. Faith Bandler, the daughter of a South Sea Islander brought from Vanuatu to work on the Queensland canefields, became a founder of an organisation designed on similar lines to the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, known as the Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship (AAF). Its aims were to have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people work together on equal terms for the betterment of both, including the repeal of discriminatory laws. While Bandler would play a central role in Aboriginal politics both at state and federal level for the next 12 years, Len Fox describes Gibbs as the main influence in the founding of the fellowship. He says she was so committed that she attended all the meetings, deputations, demonstrations and conferences she could get to.<sup>46</sup>

Back in 1951, Bandler had attended, along with other Australian delegates, the World Youth Festival. In that group of delegates was Ray Peckham, who later played a major part in the Aboriginal rights movement. Standing on the dock to see them off was Pearl Gibbs, who had earlier introduced them to each other.

Gibbs encouraged Bandler to draw on her many contacts to the benefit of the fellowship. It was the beginning of a working relationship that reached its pinnacle in 1967 with the successful referendum. They could not have known, when they brought together about 12 concerned people in March 1956 to organise an initial meeting the following July, that the AAF would become the force it did in Aboriginal affairs over the next 13 years. It led to the nationalising of Aboriginal interests as never before.

Central to the AAF was the ability to draw in all manner of people. The group first met at the home of poets Muir Holburn and Marg Pizer, and then at the flat of Gibbs' friend, the feminist and unionist

Lucy Woodcock.<sup>47</sup> The first public meeting of the AAF was held in the United Associations of Women's rooms in Market Street, Sydney. Although Gibbs put a lot of work into the creation of the AAF, Bert Groves was voted in as president, with Gibbs as vice president and Bandler as secretary. Early members of the Aborigines Progressive Association also became foundation members. Gibbs resigned from the vice-presidency after 12 months but continued to be an active member. She went back on to the executive in 1961. In 1962, both Bert Groves and Pearl Gibbs were voted into life membership of the AAF.<sup>48</sup> The AAF ceased its work in 1969. Bert Groves passed on late the following year.

Initially, the AAF believed its role was 'to assist, defend, and promote the Aboriginal cause'.<sup>49</sup> It sought to 'foster greater social and economic opportunities'.<sup>50</sup> However, it was also integral to the 1967 achievement of citizenship rights. Historian Sue Taffe identifies three campaigns during the 1950s and 1960s that led to success in the 1967 referendum.<sup>51</sup> She describes them as the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship campaign for a referendum in 1957, the national petition campaign in 1962-63, and the 'yes' vote in 1967. Bandler also sees the campaign as having being fought over a 10-year stretch.

One individual also integral to the cause was Lady Jessie Street. The AAF became involved with Street through Faith Bandler's friendship with her. Jessie Street had been living in London, and on her return to Sydney contacted Bandler. She had been pushing for the plight of Aboriginal people to be presented to the United Nations but was hampered by being based in London and denied entry to the United States of America, which housed the headquarters of United Nations. It was Street who drafted the original petition calling for a referendum and asked Bandler to present it to the AAF. She believed that more could be done from within Australia by a national interest group. Lady Jessie Street became a patron of the AAF, along with Dame Mary Gilmore. At this point Street and Gibbs established a unique relationship bonded by a belief that women legitimately had a place in politics. Bandler argues that it was these two women who provided the impetus which led to success in 1967.<sup>52</sup>

Street's petition calling for a referendum was presented to an audience of around 1500 people at the Sydney Town Hall in April 1957. The audience included hundreds of Aboriginal people brought together through Gibbs' extensive contacts. Harold Blair entertained the audience and Doug Nicholls chaired the meeting. Although many journalists attended the event, there was no press or radio coverage.

The following year saw another landmark in Aboriginal politics. In February 1958, 12 representatives from all the mainland states gathered in Adelaide at the Federal Conference of Aboriginal Organisations to discuss the formation of a national representative group, which they called the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement. This new group articulated its goal as 'helping the Aboriginal people of Australia become self-reliant, self-supporting members of the community'.<sup>53</sup> Bert Groves, President of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, attended from Sydney, thus entwining the fellowship's political agenda with that of the Federal Council. The AAF had already collected around 10 000 signatures from people supporting a call for a referendum to change the constitution. Leslie Haylen, Member for Parkes, presented this petition to the federal parliament on 14 May 1967.

The 1960 meeting of the Federal Council, held in Newport, Sydney at the Workers Educational Association summer school site, featured an amazing mixture of people, including members of parliament Gough Whitlam, Gordon Bryant and Don Dunstan; Dr Charles Duguid; members of the Aborigines Welfare Board; and Aboriginal delegates from around the country, including Gibbs. When they next met, in 1961, delegates adopted the resolution: 'We must abolish apartheid in our own country before the next Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference or we could find ourselves in the same position as South Africa found itself at this year's conference.'<sup>54</sup> Pearl Gibbs also attended that conference. Once again, she was able to contribute to the history of Aboriginal activism in Australia. Joe McGinness, who passed on in 2003, attended and became the president of FCAA at that conference. He would remain so until the end of FCAATSI in 1978. The conference was also attended by Charlie (Lester) Leon, who was president of the AAF for many years.<sup>55</sup>

In 1962, the Aborigines Progressive Association was again reignited into existence. Bert Groves was voted in as president by a new generation of activists that included Charles Perkins and Chicka Dixon. This served to join earlier activists with the new order. Bert Groves, Charlie Leon and Pearl Gibbs also served as links between activists and the advancement organisations.

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After Gibbs resigned from the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1957 she established the first hostel in New South Wales designed to serve the needs of rural Aborigines requiring hospital treatment. Based in



Dubbo near the hospital, the hostel was established through funds Gibbs had secured from the Sydney branch of the Waterside Workers Union and, later, through the Aborigines Welfare Board. The board employed her as the warden of the hostel, although this never curbed her activism, even against the board itself. After the hostel closed, she was allowed to stay on as a tenant by the Aboriginal Lands Trust of New South Wales, who managed the premises at that time. It is unclear when her mother passed away, although it is known that she was still alive in 1966, aged over 90, when Jack Horner, a fellow member of the AAF and FCAA, visited Gibbs. Gibbs herself lived in that hostel at Bembrose Lane, North Dubbo until her death.

Before the 1965 Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship conference Gibbs, along with Ken Brindle and Ray Peckham, travelled through the north-west of New South Wales encouraging Aboriginal people to attend. She was aged 60. She would remain active as long as her health allowed her. Even when restricted to life in Dubbo, she kept her finger on the Australian political pulse. Heather Goodall, who collected stories from Gibbs in 1981, recalls that whenever Gibbs talked about her earlier work her passion showed. Speaking about the hiring out of young girls she said: 'The girls were told not to mix with Aboriginal people, sent to strange places, separated from all their relations. And they wholly and solely belonged to whoever employed them – and I call that slavery!'<sup>56</sup>

Jack Horner describes Gibbs' public statements as veering between careful criticisms and pure vitriol. 'She was never guilty of flattery,' he says. In her private life, though, she tended to more gentle, her jocular, penetrating discussions including the encouragement of younger Aboriginal people in their political development. She 'taught us not to admit defeat', Jack says.<sup>57</sup>

To the very end, Gibbs agitated for better conditions for Aboriginal people. Her last newspaper interview was in late January 1983, just three months before her death. Again, she spoke her mind about the place of Aboriginal people in Australia:

Pearl believes land rights for Aborigines is one of the answers to the problems facing the black and white communities. 'Something must be done,' she said. 'There's no good saying: "Give Australia back to the Aborigines." That's not the answer. Certain portions of land should be returned to Aborigines. It will be many years before we get land rights and for states like NSW there will be a tough time ahead.'<sup>58</sup>

Pearl Gibbs passed away on 28 April 1983, aged 81, ending a life of influence inconceivable in its greatness. Her achievements were many and included the ability to bring people from everywhere and every walk of life to fight for the rights of Aboriginal people. She lived reconciliation before it was ever conceived of as part of Australia's political life. At all times her thinking remained influenced by and loyal to her mentor Bill Ferguson and her absolute passion and commitment to her Aboriginality. Gibbs was central to Aboriginal activism, a great intellect, teacher and colleague. In his tribute to her, Kevin Gilbert wrote: 'Throughout history, wherever there has been massacre, genocide, deprivation of human right – wherever tyranny ruled – the human spirit objected, often rising to heroic proportion. One such spirit was Pearl Gibbs...she held one course: justice, humanity, honour within this country.'<sup>59</sup>

Goodall leaves us with a message from Gibbs for the future: 'I don't think colour or creed makes much difference. Let us put in our time for human rights and let us live toward that... This is what I want people to remember.'<sup>60</sup>

#### Notes

1. Horner 1994, p. 117.
2. Horner 1994; Goodall 1983.
3. Goodall 1988a, p. 211.
4. Horner 1974; Horner 1983; Goodall 1988a.
5. Horner 1983.
6. Goodall 1983, p. 21.
7. Horner 1994, p. 106; Haskins 1998a.
8. Patten & Ferguson, p. 3.
9. Horner & Langton.
10. 'Aborigines Day of Mourning: emphatic protests', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 1938, p. 6.
11. 'Aborigines Day of Mourning', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 1938, p. 6.
12. Horner 1994, p. 64.
13. Jones 2000.
14. 'Treatment of the Aborigines: missionary school-teacher's protest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 January 1938, p. 6.
15. 'Report of the Lyons deputation', *Daily Telegraph*, 1 February 1938, p. 17.
16. Horner 1994, p. 70.
17. 'Treatment of the Aborigines', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February 1938, p. 20.
18. Haskins 1998a.
19. Goodall 1986.

20. Haskins 1998a.
21. Haskins 1998a.
22. Joan Kingsley-Strack, letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 1938, in 'The life and times of Bill Ferguson, 1965-1970', MS 4112, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.
23. The *Sun*, 4 August 1938, quoted in 'The life and times of Bill Ferguson, 1965-1970', MS 4112, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.
24. Horner 1974, p. 111.
25. Horner 1974.
26. Horner 1974, p. 82.
27. Horner 1974.
28. Full text appears in Gilbert 1983, pp. 13-17
29. Gilbert 1983, pp. 7-8.
30. Michael Sawtell, Chairman, the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, calling for a meeting upon the need for Aboriginal citizenship on 25 January 1941 at 3.00 p.m., Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers 1941+, MSAcc01/35, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
31. Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, 'Report of meeting', Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers 1941+, MSAcc01/35, National Library of Australia, Canberra, p. 2.
32. Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, Joan Kingsley-Strack Papers 1941+, MSAcc01/35, National Library of Australia, Canberra, p. 4.
33. Horner 1994, p. 133.
34. Pearl Gibbs, 'Aborigines' rights', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 1949, p. 2.
35. Horner 1983, p. 16.
36. Fox 1983, p. 41.
37. Horner 1983.
38. Horner 1994, p. 171.
39. G Kelly to CG Robertson, 25 June 1953, Pearl Gibbs Collection, MLmss 6922 1 (8), Mitchell Library, Sydney.
40. Horner 1983, p. 17.
41. 'New board member: first woman elected', *Dawn*, 1 July 1954, p. 18.
42. Dr J Wearn to Pearl Gibbs, 26 August 1954, Pearl Gibbs Collection, MLmss 6922 1 (8), Mitchell Library, Sydney.
43. Dr E Kent-Hughes to Pearl Gibbs, 17 August 1954, Pearl Gibbs Collection, MLmss 6922 1 (8), Mitchell Library, Sydney.
44. Honourable Secretary Booker to P Gibbs, 26 November 1954, 'Invitation from League of Women Voters of New South Wales to end-of-year party as guest of honour', Pearl Gibbs Collection, MLmss 6922 1 (8), Mitchell Library, Sydney.
45. Quoted in Bandler 1989, p. 7; Horner 1983.
46. Fox, p. 43.
47. Marilyn Lake, 'Radical daughters', *Age*, 8 March 2001, p. 1-2.

48. Bandler & Fox; Horner 1983.
49. Bandler & Fox 1983, p. 33.
50. Bandler & Fox 1983, p. 34.
51. Taffe 2001, p. 1-7.
52. Lake 2001, pp. 272-73; Bandler 1989, p. 72.
53. Taffe 2001, p. 10.
54. 'Protest on racial policy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1961, p. 6. South Africa was forced to withdraw from the Commonwealth after the prime ministers' conference in question.
55. Bandler & Fox.
56. Goodall 1983, p. 21.
57. Horner 1983, p. 19.
58. Heather Jeffrey, 'Pearl has been breaking down 20th century's racial barriers', *Dubbo Weekend Liberal*, 29-30 January 1983, p. 82, Pearl Gibbs Collection, MLmss 6922 1 (8), Mitchell Library, Sydney.
59. Gilbert 1983, p. 6.
60. Goodall 1983, pp. 21-22.