

A history of the media strategy of the Aboriginal Land Right, Black Power and Self-Determination Movement

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Author Bios

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Introduction

Aboriginal activists involved in the Black Power, land rights and self-determination movement in the late 1960s and 1970s in Australia sought to create the conditions under which Aboriginal people could determine their own futures. This meant the upending of almost 200 years of colonial oppression as well as breaking through a culture of white-supremacy, a culture conditioned by what the anthropologist William Stanner famously coined as 'the Great Australian Silence' which was regarded many Aboriginal people as a systematic process of conscious and violent forgetting.

Referred to interchangeably as the land-rights, self-determination or Black Power movement, the force of Aboriginal activism emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Australia consisted primarily of a loose coalition of collectives in the urban centres of Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. They were young Aboriginal men and women, described by Dr. HC Coombs as an emerging "Aboriginal intelligentsia"¹, who had been dissatisfied with the federal government's response to the 1967 Referendum as well as with the ineffective tactics and strategies of the campaigners and activists of the older generation. The 1967 Referendum campaign question essentially asked the Australian public 'Do you believe in justice for Aboriginal people or not?' The result had been an overwhelming YES with over 90% of votes in the affirmative. Yet in the years immediately following the referendum Aboriginal people experienced little, if no, improvement.

In fact after the referendum the material conditions of Aboriginal people living in NSW became worse. In response to the referendum the NSW Aboriginal Protection Board arbitrarily ceased to support Aboriginal missions and reserves, closing down the last vestiges of the Australian apartheid system. Although the end of the Protection Board (by then renamed as the Aborigines Welfare Board) was

¹ H.C. Coombs, 'Transcript of Q and A to University of Western Australia summer school' 26 January 1973 Coombs box 44 folder 369, quoted in, Rowse, Tim, *Obligated to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs Legacy in Indigenous Affairs*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 106.

welcomed, the arbitrary and sudden nature of the closures meant that Aboriginal people previously confined to the reserves by law, who had not been allowed to seek employment off reserves and were not eligible for social welfare that other non-Aboriginal people were entitled to, struggled to find a means of subsistence. A rural recession that coincided with the closures created conditions that forced Aboriginal people into the cities in their thousands to seek employment.

It was within the context of the growth of the Sydney Aboriginal population of the inner city suburbs of Redfern, Alexandria and Newtown, where Aboriginal people from rural NSW ended up due to the accessibility of cheap housing and the diaspora pull of a black urban community, that the Black Caucus, a small group of young Aboriginal activists emerged. Coordinated by Paul Coe, with the mentorship of Chicka Dixon, the group included Gary Foley, Gary Williams, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey, John Newfong, Alana and Samantha Doolan, Lynn (nee Craigie) and husband Peter Thompson, Bob and Kaye Belleair, Naomi Mayers, Norma Williams and Pam Hunter (Foley 2009: 14; Goodall 1988: 338). These activists had come together motivated by their common experience of police brutality and their desire to do something to alleviate the conditions of poverty and oppression that they perceived all around them.

In seeking to determine the best methods of social transformation the Black Caucus members informed themselves in revolutionary philosophy and investigated the decolonization strategies of other oppressed black peoples of the world. They had read Franz Fanon's treaties on decolonization, Malcolm X's auto-biography George Jackson's prison letters, and were further inspired by the work of Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Ho Chi Min and Mao Tse-tung as well as the leaders of the American Indian Movement and the Black Panthers of Oakland California.

At the same time that the Black Caucus was emerging in Sydney similar developments were taking place in Brisbane, with the emergence of a youth movement led by Denis Walker, Sam Watson and Pastor Don Brady, The Brisbane Black Panthers, and in Melbourne with a push for Aboriginal control of the Aboriginal Advancement League and the adoption of Black Power by Bruce McGuinness and Bob Maza.

Events in 1970, in particular the establishment of the National Tribal Council in response to the failure of the Black Power push to ensure Aboriginal control of the only national Aboriginal organisation, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), brought key members of these activist groupings into contact with each other. The resulting loose collective of activists congregating around the political goal of self-determination to be achieved by demanding Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs, is what we are referring to when we refer to the Black Power, land rights or self-determination movement.

The Black Power movement regarded Aboriginal Land Rights as the necessary precondition for achieving economic independence. They had concluded that economic independence, in the social context of a hegemonic culture that worshipped money, was absolutely vital if Aboriginal people were to achieve their primary goal of self-determination.

In assessing the practical realities of their situation when compared to other recently decolonised nations, in light of the number of Aboriginal people compared to colonial occupiers as well as the military might of the Australian colonial state, armed resistance was dismissed by the Black Power movement as a viable route to self-determination (Howell 2013, p.160-1). Instead the objectives of:

- raising black people's political consciousness and self-confidence, undoing the psychological damage that decades of colonial rule had wrought;
- transforming the hearts and minds of the broader Anglo-Australian public regarding the history of colonial oppression and solutions for change; and
- putting international pressure on the federal government to force political change,

were set out as revolutionary strategies (Howell 2013).

Black Power - raising black political consciousness

The first objective, activists determined, required letting actions speak for themselves, in that community controlled organisations such as the Aboriginal Legal Service and Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern and Victorian Aboriginal Health service in Fitzroy, set up by Aboriginal activists engaging the Aboriginal community, were addressing some of the problems faced by Aboriginal communities. It was Aboriginal people's experience of this community self-confidence and agency that was at the heart of positive social change.

A revolution in the arts, in particular the birth of the National Black Theatre also played a vital role in this self and community psychological and social transformation. The national Black Theatre (NBT) could be said to be the cultural wing of the Black Power movement.

The National Black Theatre emerged out of Redfern in 1972 as an all-Aboriginal theatre company that told stories written by Aboriginal people about Aboriginal experience to counter mainstream representations. The origin of the National Black Theatre lay in a visit by a five-member delegation of black Australian activists to the United States of America in August 1970 by members of the Aboriginal Advancement League, Bruce McGuinness, Bob Maza, Patsy Kruger, Jack Davis and Sol Bellear. The delegation had three primary objectives: to put their case for Aboriginal Land Rights to the United Nations Assembly in New York; to attend the Pan-African Congress in Atlanta Georgia and to embark on a study tour of the United States, which would include visiting Harlem to study the Black Panthers' self-help programs (*Northcote Leader*, 2 August 1970).

In Harlem Bob Maza spent time with the National Black Theatre. Maza had been particularly interested in the way that the Panther's were engaging the arts as an aspect of their self empowerment strategy and was impressed by the Theatre's 'hard-hitting' political approach (Foley 2012b; Casey 2004: 40-41). As a result Maza resolved to take black theatre in Australia in a similarly hard-hitting political direction. In the short documentary *Black Redfern* (Foley and Watson 1974) when asked about the philosophy of the National Black Theatre Maza replied:

We must bring about awareness of who we are through identification with our past history.... We've never heard about people like Uniapon, Dundully or Pengully now these were very famous black people and you know it is part of the Australian history. It should be given to all people, but more particularly to black people because it's part of their history, to enable them to find out where they are from. We are ... the spearhead of the cultural renaissance that is taking place in Australia.

The second and third objectives, bringing the general Australian public onside regarding Aboriginal land rights and self-determination, and putting international pressure on the Federal government to achieve these goals, required the transformation of the “other”, or at the very least an opening in the armour of the colonial machinery. In pursuit of both of these objectives Black Power activists set about a full-scale public relations war. The remainder of this chapter traces the history of that public relations war. In particular we investigate the creation and uptake the Aboriginal flag as a unifying symbol for the emerging land rights and self-determination movement as well as the news media strategy of the Black Power movement in the ultimate success of the Aboriginal Embassy in 1972.

Birth of the Aboriginal Flag

In 1971 Gary Foley was involved in an exercise that, at the time, did not seem all that significant to him, but which is today regarded as a part of history; the development and design of the internationally known emblem of the Black Power era, the red, black and yellow Aboriginal flag. His involvement came about because of a request in 1971 from the Nunga community in Adelaide to the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service to send someone to Adelaide to advise and assist in the creation of an ALS in South Australia. The request had come from Vince Copley, and others associated with the Aboriginal Community Centre in Adelaide, and Redfern ALS decided to dispatch Foley because he had earlier conducted a similar exercise in Bourke in NSW, but also because neither Coe nor Gary Williams were available to travel to Adelaide.

Upon my arrival in Adelaide, Foley was met at the airport by a very elderly Aboriginal lady and her equally elderly partner. He was informed by her that he would be staying at her place, which was not exactly what he was expecting when he left Sydney. After all, Foley was a very young, opinionated, hard drinking, foul-mouthed Black Power man from Redfern, and hanging around with little old ladies was not his cup of tea at that point in his life.

But Foley had been taught by his grandmother to always be respectful to older people, so he was gracious whilst at the same time harbouring a deep inner desire to escape and hit the Carrington Hotel which he had heard was the Adelaide equivalent of Redfern's Big E (Empress Hotel). But it was not to be as this old lady drove him direct to her place and immediately upon arrival put the kettle on as she told him in no uncertain terms how much she deplored the way young people drank so much alcohol. Foley cursed Coe and Williams for not being here instead of him.

However, it very soon became apparent to Foley that he was in the presence of a formidable activist of extraordinary toughness and wisdom. He spent half the night in

a wonderful, tea soaked conversation as the legendary South Australian activist matriarch Gladys Elphick interrogated him about the ideas and philosophies of the Black Power movement and told him amazing stories of her long career of political activism. The next morning Foley had the distinct feeling that he had been subjected to some sort of test the night before, and he was pleased to realise that he apparently had passed that test, as well as having his political knowledge and awareness considerably broadened. He would remain close friends with 'Aunty Glad' for the rest of her life, and he still regards her as one of the important, seminal influences on his life.²

Thus Foley connected with the Nunga community in Adelaide and over the next week or so, during the day he met and worked with the leaders of the community, including Gladys, Vince Copley, Ruby Hammond and others, and during the evenings he managed to get in multiple visits to the Carrington Hotel and meet numerous other Aboriginal people who came from all over South Australia and people from the NT and WA as well. Many of those he met were young people who had heard of the Black Power movement and activities in Redfern and were keen to discuss these ideas with someone from the Sydney scene.

It was also good for Foley as it both expanded his horizons and the contacts he was developing with like-minded young blacks all over the country. These connections were helped along by people from SA who had been in Redfern earlier, such as Colin McDonald, and by links between people such as Vince Copley, Les Nayda and Gordon Briscoe (Redfern ALS field officer) who had both grown up in the same white foster institution as Charles Perkins.

It was during that visit to Adelaide that Foley met a young artist from the Northern Territory who had also been in the same institution as Copley, Briscoe and Perkins. His name was Harold Thomas and he was then working at the SA Museum, and Foley struck up an immediate friendship with him. It seemed to Foley that Harold and he were on the same wavelength politically, but Thomas was much more knowledgeable about the SA and NT scene and they spent many hours discussing the state of the world. Foley also would visit the museum where he worked and it was there that Foley first developed an interest in the politics and history of museums and their unsavoury pasts regarding Aboriginal peoples.

Foley found Adelaide a pleasant city and the local black community was much smaller than Redfern but very vibrant and dynamic as people from remote communities mingled with the city blacks. He would return to Adelaide frequently over the next twelve months organising demonstrations and assisting where he could with the development of the new legal aid organisation. After one particular demonstration Foley found himself in intense discussion with Harold in which they both lamented that the newly emerging Land Rights movement did not have a symbol that both represented their struggle and that might as a unifying emblem.

After a certain number of cans of VB and the consequent bravado that they bring, as well as a very lively discussion, Foley and Thomas was decided that they would sit down and design one. Harold being the artist pulled out some pencils and a

² For more on Adelaide and Gladys Elphick, see Forte, Margaret, and Wakefield Press. *Flight of an Eagle: The Dreaming of Ruby Hammond*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1995.

sketchbook and they began discussing a range of ideas. To cut a long story (not to mention drinking session) short, many cans later Harold come up with the now familiar red, black and yellow design, along with an interpretation of what it meant.

Both Thomas and Foley thought it was a great design, but that was pointless unless others felt the same way and would embrace it. Harold Thomas subsequently first flew the Aboriginal flag in Adelaide on *National Aborigines Day* in Victoria Square in Adelaide on 12 July 1971. Thus the Aboriginal flag had its first public display and generated a minor flurry of interest, but otherwise remained unknown some months later when in Sydney the tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Mirror* published a profile of Foley written by journalist Gus De Brito, along with the design that he had called 'a flag for Aboriginal Australia'. This was the first major public and media appearance of the Aboriginal flag

Foley believed one of the reasons he put the flag in the *Daily Mirror* article was that he was trying to manoeuvre the design into a position where the Black Power Movement couldn't ignore it. The Black Power collective was a fairly unwieldy sort of animal. Politically most in the Black Power Movement were basically anarchists. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and everybody else thought they were Communists but essentially in Foley's opinion they were a bunch of anarchists. "We developed an extremely effective cohesive group where decisions ultimately were made by consensus. We were trying to do things in what we regarded as traditional Aboriginal ways of decision-making, we believed consensus was our way of doing things, we didn't have majority rule; if you had an idea you had to sit there and argue it through with a group until everybody in the group had fused whatever the original idea was into something that everybody agreed with."

In order to get anything decided in the Black Power Movement you had to convince a lot of people and get them to go along with you. In terms of the *Daily Mirror* article Foley saw that as a good means of at least focusing the broader group's attention on the design and making ones amongst the Black Power collective who may not have even known about it at that time aware that it was out there.

Somehow or other in the course of the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy, by the time the Embassy was knocked down after six months, the flag was established. It took off like a rocket all over Australia, which in itself was a testament to the genius of it as a piece of graphic design; it's one of the most successful pieces of graphic design in Australian history.

The Aboriginal flag thus become a weapon of power in a war of positions. It was a war in which the government would come to use 'any means necessary' to undermine the growing popularity and strength of Aboriginal demands for land rights as the basis of their program of control over their own destinies.

Black Power news-media strategy

Gary Foley had been taught the art of media engagement by the two legends of the Aboriginal movement Faith Bandler and John Newfong who had both lead the successful FCATTSI campaign.

Faith Bandler had taught Gary how to use the old hand duplicating machines to mass produce pamphlets (Foley Footscray Park 2010). But it was the Aboriginal journalist, John Newfong, media mastermind behind the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and its Minister for Communications, who had been Gary's greatest inspiration and who had taught him how to work the 'media machine' (Foley in EH Fieldnotes March-April 2009).

John Newfong was the Australian equivalent of a cross between James Baldwin and Oscar Wilde. John Newfong was singularly the most brilliant Aboriginal writer there has ever been to this day. He was the first Aboriginal professional journalist in Australia, he wrote for *The Australian*, for *The Bulletin*, *The Age*, *the Sydney Morning Herald*; he was one of the best journalists in Australia. He was a brilliant writer. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of a lot of things but some of the things that used to amuse me, for some reason he had this encyclopedic interest in many of the traditional royal families of Africa. It wasn't unusual for John to turn up at the Aboriginal Embassy with a bona fide African princess, Princess somebody or rather, who was a diplomat for the one of the newly independent African countries.

Through John Newfong Gary came to understand the importance of keeping up to date with the latest technology as well as the importance of cultivating relationships with journalists.... the need to ensure that media releases are delivered to the press as quickly as possible and the targeting of journalists who would be most favourable to the position of the story as well as the importance of manifesting a presence in the media through stories that would satisfy the media's preference for drama, spectacle and tumult.

The introduction of the technology of the telex machine had been revolutionary for the Black Power public relations campaign. Prior to the telex the best available technology was the hand operated duplicating machines. This would require the operator to type up the stencil and wind the reel to print out copies one at a time which would then need to be placed in envelopes and posted to individual media outlets. The next advance came when an electric duplicating machine sped up the process but the distributing was still slow and labour intensive. Then the advent of the telexmachine allowed the collective to distribute multiple media releases at once and each could be directed straight to the preferred journalist. The impact of this quick-fire distribution method was enormous. In addition to learning the practical aspects of how to run a media campaign Black Power activists also cultivated the skills of gaining and sustaining media attention.

Black Power drew power from its positioning on the precipice of possibility engaging colonial fear to invoke a sense of the imminence of change. On 5 December 1971 Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Australian* published a double page article with the headline BLACK POWER COMES TO AUSTRALIA. It carried the subtitle: 'We only have a small supply of explosives left at present and thought we'd save it for something important'. A prominent photo of four 'Black Power field marshals' with their fists raised in the well-recognised Black Power salute covered half a page. The field marshals were named as 'Gary Foley, Denis Walker, Billy Craigie and an 'unidentified field marshal'' (Gary Williams).

In the article journalist Simon Townsend reported the emergence of the Australian Black Panther Party a party Townsend declared that was ‘Dedicated to Violence’, promoted violence as ‘the only means left to force change’ and that was commitment to violence as a means of focusing both national and international attention on the plight of Aboriginal people. The article claimed that the party was responsible for ‘smashing the front window of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney and for daubing a statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park, Sydney, in land rights slogans’ and reported one Black Panther as having said, “The only reason we didn’t blow old Captain Cook up was that we only have a small supply of explosives at present and we thought we’d save it for something more important. With planned strategic violence, bombing if necessary, assassination if necessary – we’ll get land rights 20 years faster.” Townsend also reported that the group planned to train a select group of activists in urban guerrilla tactics and the use of explosives as well as their intention to be ‘ready to move in a month’ at which point ‘all hell will break loose’.

In February 1972 a special news broadcast, *Black Mood*, aired on the ABC. It focussed on the rising black consciousness in Australia and described Black Power activists as ‘in a hurry, certain that they’ve been badly done by and rather aggressive.’ When asked to explain what was meant by Black Power, Foley responded, ‘If we have to go about violent means of getting the power to control our own destinies then we will; we’re quite prepared to.’ ‘But is it realistic for such a small minority as Aborigines are to talk about violence?’ the presenter asked

Realistic or not, I think you’ve got to face up to the fact that if the Aboriginal situation does not change very rapidly in this country what we’re going to see is more or less a spontaneous violence coming out. At the moment the violence that is happening is a very controlled and organised ... but as things get worse we’re going to see people ... hitting out spontaneously and that’s when we’re going to see things get really bad. (Foley in *Black Mood* ABC 1972)

The news feature concluded with the host’s summation that ‘on the evidence ... black militancy is not likely to go away. If anything it will increase’.

There was perhaps a tension between the approaches of different black power activists, but there is also a tension between fact and fiction, between present and possibility, a predictive and performative element that was strategically harnessed to be a force for motivating social change. Members of the Black Power movement utilised this possibility, this moment in time, to illuminate the urgency of their calls. There may very well have been the tremor of violence afoot, frustrations that had built up over centuries of subjugation, but even if there was no such seismic trembling, the Black Power movement knew that a ‘big black community... made the white fellas nervous’ and they had decided to exploit that ‘wave of hysteria’ (Foley Uni SA 2010; Foley in ‘Protest march for aborigines’ *The Advertiser*, 15 January 1972).

A key method advanced in media discourse and by government to discredit the Black Power movement was to portray the activists involved as urban militants. Explicitly such representations of Black Power stated that as urban militants Black Power activists were just a small group of Aboriginal people and were therefore unrepresentative of Aboriginal opinion generally (Monday Conference 1972; Black

Mood 1972; Goodall 2008: 402). Yet implicitly the classification of Black Power as urban and militant attempted to represent Black Power as fraudulent. This operated at two levels: firstly, militancy was considered by the coloniser as a characteristic foreign to 'the Aborigine' and secondly their position as 'urban' was evidence for the coloniser that they were assimilated and therefore not really Aboriginal at all. In the communist party newspaper *Tribune*, Bruce McGuinness aimed to counter such representations of Black Power as both unrepresentative and as fraudulent, announcing to the reporter that militancy, as an 'aggressively political' strategy of 'defence and not offence', existed well beyond the Brisbane Black Panthers:

We have seen areas like Wattie Creek, Roper River (where they threw all the whites off), Cunnamulla ... and the Purfleet reserve near Tareet in New South Wales where Aboriginal people have bluntly said they would take up guns if necessary to prevent people touching their land. (Davies, *Tribune* 1-7 February 1972)

Yet the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest, a six month long protest on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra that began as a media stunt, was about to disrupt this representation of the Black Power movement once and for all. The Aboriginal Embassy was to become the most disarming event yet in the Black Power movement's media strategy and in their war of positions demonstrating to the nation and to the world that Aboriginal people from all over Australia supported demands for Aboriginal land rights and self-determination.

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy

Nineteen seventy-one witnessed the escalation in frequency and numbers attending Aboriginal land rights demonstrations. Black Power activists had joined the Gurindji in street demonstrations demanding return of their land. Anti-apartheid demonstrators challenged by Black Power activists to look at the situation in their own backyard had taken up the call and Justice Blackburn's decision in the Gove Land Rights case, handed down in April 1971, had resulted in public outcry motivating even more people to take to the streets demanding Aboriginal land rights.

Then Prime Minister, William ('Billy') McMahon, compelled by the growing prominence of Aboriginal demands for land, decided to make a major government statement on Aboriginal land rights. Provocatively the McMahon government chose the 26 January 1971 to announce its new policy. The 26th January, known to most Australians as Australia Day, celebrates the arrival of the British First Fleet in Australia. It is a particularly controversial date in the Australian calendar as for Aboriginal people and their allies national celebration of this date represents celebration of the invasion of Aboriginal lands and attempted genocide of Aboriginal people by the British and Australian Governments.

The McMahon Government, rather than making a progressive statement on Aboriginal land rights, offered a new type of lease to some Aboriginal people based on a series of restrictive conditions. Essentially the McMahon Government had announced that it would never grant land rights to Aboriginal people. The statement was considered by Aboriginal activists in the Black Power movement as particularly provocative considering the decision to make such a statement on the 26th January.

Members of the Sydney Black Power collective, the Black Caucus, decided to respond to the statement by sending a deputation of four Aboriginal activists to Parliament house to protest. The aim was to get a photo of the protest in the paper the following day so that people would be aware that the Black Power movement rejected the Government's position absolutely. What ensued was a six month long occupation by Aboriginal activists of the lawns of Parliament house by the Aboriginal Embassy. The story of the Aboriginal Embassy is told elsewhere, in particular in *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*, Foley, Schaap and Howell eds, (Routledge 2014) and in Gary's PhD, *An Autobiographical history of the Aboriginal Embassy and the Black Power Movement* (2013). What is important for this retelling is that in setting up an Embassy the Aboriginal activists illuminated that the McMahon Governments policy made Aboriginal people aliens in their own land. As a camp, a series of tents, the Aboriginal Embassy also highlighted the poverty in which Aboriginal people were forced to live as well as the provisional nature of land lease rather than land rights. Importantly the protest was non-violent. It had struck a chord with the larrikin streak in many Australians and public seemed to be amused by the inability of the authorities to do anything about it.

Aboriginal Embassy's Minister of Communication, John Newfong ran the Embassy's media campaign. Newfong, along with journalists such as Stewart Harris of the *London Times* and Michelle Grattan of the *Age* ensured that the analysis and critique of Government policy by Aboriginal activists of the Embassy continued to be heard in mainstream news-media. The Aboriginal Embassy protest featured in news media coverage in over 70 countries bringing both the conditions under which Aboriginal people were forced to live and the demands of Aboriginal people for Land Rights and self-determination to an international audience.

Embarrassed and humiliated the McMahon Government sought to remove the Aboriginal Embassy by the only means it could. It rapidly passed new laws in the middle of the night making it illegal to camp on the lawns of Parliament House. These laws then legalised police removal of the protest.

Police attempted to dismantle the Embassy on both the xx and xx June. On the first occasion police took protestors by surprise and a strategic decision was made to protect the office tent. Demonstrators decided that if police tried to take the office tent they would resist. Media coverage of the melee that followed caused large numbers of Aboriginal people and their supporters from all over the country to converge on Canberra in the days that followed so that by the time the police tried to dismantle the tents for the second time there were over 3,000 people there to defend them.

On both occasions news-media coverage of Aboriginal activists' struggle to maintain a legitimate protest against enormous numbers of Federal and NSW police troops, in particular footage of the police violence used against demonstrators to remove what had previously been a legal protest, made ordinary Australians aware of the nature and extent of the violence the state considered legitimate to use against Aboriginal people.

Six months after the moral victory claimed by the Aboriginal activists July 1971, a Labor Government came to power on a policy platform that promised "Land Rights for Aborigines".

Conclusion – Who won the war?

The media strategy of the Black Power movement, particularly at the Aboriginal Embassy, had achieved a revolution. It had made the world aware of the injustices Aboriginal people were suffering. It had brought an end to 23 consecutive years of conservative rule, ended the bi-partisan policy of assimilation and had thus officially ended the policy that had been regarded as a policy of genocide. Moreover in playing a significant role in the demise of the McMahon government and in causing the Labor party to change its policy on Aboriginal land rights, it achieved Government commitment to Aboriginal land rights as well as the promise of Aboriginal rights to minerals on and under Aboriginal land and it had made the way possible for a new era of self-determination.

Eventually however the public relations war over Aboriginal land rights was won by mining and pastoral industry lobby groups with a multi-million dollar propaganda campaign against Aboriginal land rights. Decades later we are still witnessing the dire backlash against Aboriginal people that that campaign wrought. In a recent interview I was asked if we had won the battle but lost the war and I had tentatively answered yes.

We changed the world but we took our eye off the ball and the world changed back.... But of course the war isn't over yet.

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