

The decline of the Aboriginal protest movement

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By Michael Mansell

There was a time when Gary Foley's call to hit the streets ran a chill down your back. When Paul Coe told us we were a sovereign people, not a minority, we all believed him. And when Marcia Langton addressed a rally against the backdrop of colourful Aboriginal flags of protest, her denunciation of racism against Aboriginal people stirred us to a rage. That was all in the past. Now the streets are silent. The rage seems to have subsided.

There is still plenty to protest about. Domination of Aborigines by whites is as institutionalised now as ever it was. The Yorta Yorta were told that they have no land rights. Aboriginal customary laws are still ignored.

Our response is remarkable. Prime Minister John Howard's government watered down native title. He refused to apologise to the stolen generations, was cool to reconciliation and his ministers openly call for a welfare response to Aboriginal issues.

Foley, Coe and Langton would have been outraged and rallied the Aboriginal nation. Now, the Cape York leadership, on hands and knees, begs Howard to stay on so we can be further neglected by his policies. What went wrong?

It seems to have begun in the late 1980s. Aboriginal demands were not just for land and self-determination. Greater access to education and jobs in the public service were also part of the black movement's platform. The problem was that those who marched in the streets because they had nothing to lose, now had jobs and access to universities, and did not want to risk losing the gains. The Aboriginal protest movement had lost many from its ranks.

The political base remained among the hundreds of Aboriginal legal and health services, land councils and other community organisations. These loose-knit localised bodies fed into national grassroots structures like National Aboriginal Child Care, the Federation of Land Councils and National Aboriginal Legal Services. The local political base became national, and gradually international, with Shorty O'Neill, Paul Coe and Burnum Burnum informing the world of the Aboriginal plight.

Federal governments turned their attention to what they perceived as an uncontrollable political movement. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was installed. Sold on the grounds it represented a new, fully funded and independent national Aboriginal and Islander body, the then Labor federal government committed to listen to the voice of ATSIC. In one fell swoop, the government undermined the community structures, depoliticised Aboriginal affairs and reconstituted black aggression as an advisory body.

ATSIC could never have filled the void of political leadership. It was too close to government. ATSIC was preoccupied with its monopoly of Aboriginal funding. ATSIC was starved of the talented people in the community organisations, who chose to stay on rather than enter ATSIC, for to do so would have jeopardised the local organisations' ability to survive.

By the time the Mabo ruling came along in 1992 the writing was on the wall, but none saw it. National community groups had disappeared and ATSIC, totally engrossed in administration, had no idea what to do. It took a national meeting at Eva Valley in 1993 to organise a political group to represent Aborigines. It should have been obvious this procedure was too costly and cumbersome to be relied on all the time.

When Howard brought the conservative agenda to prominence in 1996, Aboriginal affairs was targeted by the Coalition for open hostility. Reconciliation chair Pat Dodson was moved on, as was his brother Mick from the Social Justice Commission. Lois O'Donohue was replaced as ATSIC head and, after Noel Pearson called the Howard crew "racist scum", he too was shown the door. This was the cleanout of perceived ALP cronies, and the message was firmly picked up by a nervous ATSIC which, in order to save its own neck, began sacrificing Aboriginal organisations. Who would now represent Aborigines?

Now, minister Wilson Tuckey can seemingly move at will against the Aboriginal tent embassy in Canberra. The greatest symbol of Aboriginal resistance, and a reminder to Australian governments of the ugly side to its years of neglect, is again under threat. ATSIC's response was to grant funds to a Brisbane conglomerate to review the tent embassy.

It is true that more jobs, better education, better housing and, at long last, a reduction in the number of deaths in custody, are real advances. But there is more to it than that. In fact, while Aborigines can say we have advanced socially, the same cannot be said for our political or economic development. Even our analytical skills have dropped. The more Aborigines enter the parliaments, the stronger is Australia's claim to legitimacy. And with legitimacy flows Aboriginal subservience. And the improved access has not produced a single activist! The universities tend to spit out "programmed" Aborigines.

Aboriginal organisations are now run by technicians, not activists. Where once funding was "compensation", it is now readily taken as "public" monies. Popularity has replaced political direction. No longer is strategy based on Aboriginal rights but on how to impress middle Australia. This has allowed the Aboriginal protest movement to be captured, harnessed and driven wherever public opinion takes it. Having lost all sense of political independence, we resort to blaming community people for getting the dole for free as the source of our woes.

Showing signs of resistance, making a stand and establishing a reform agenda are part and parcel of Aboriginal political development. Yet we have to rely on Cathy Freeman, proudly holding her people's flag aloft against all protocols, to symbolise our rejection of having to be Jacky-Jacky Australians. The single, most dynamic young Aboriginal leader, Murandoo Yanner, has been sidelined by white law.

Poor old ATSIC. When the minister split ATSIC's functions in two there was nary a whimper from the highly paid ATSIC commissioners. Now that Philip Ruddock is picking off ATSIC's leaders, ATSIC is silent. Not a protest. Not a sign of resistance. If ATSIC cannot show some sign of activism then it is time for the body to go, and something better put in its place.

We are shadows of what Joe McGuiness, Kevin Gilbert and Oodgeroo (Kath Walker) once epitomised. Indigenous television shies away from politics. ATSIC subsidised the multi-million dollar AFL to display Aboriginal culture at its games. Aboriginal leaders want us to be good Australians. The better we imitate white people, the more successful we are seen to

be. If Charles Perkins were alive to repeat his 1960s Freedom Rides, he would mostly likely be condemned by his own people for upsetting the apple cart.

Where once the Australian flag was seen by the Aboriginal protest movement as representing white domination, now ATSIC proudly displays it beside the Indigenous flag. The Aboriginal flag that symbolised the black struggle lost much of its meaning when it was officially recognised under white law.

Suddenly, the Aboriginal movement had become acceptable.

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