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## An open letter to the next generation

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I am not Australia's imagined Aboriginal, nor its Indigenous. I do not identify as an Australian citizen: I am a sovereign *Plangermairreenner* from *Meenamatta* Country in north-east Tasmania. My people are *Pakana* and *Palawa*. I was born on Flinders Island in 1942, and my parents were both from Cape Barren Island where many of our families survived the impacts of colonisation and dominance. This was an Aboriginal mission under the *Cape Barren Island Reserve Act* (1912), designed to control all aspects of our families' lives.

Our Aboriginal political history in Tasmania began in the 1880s on the frontier, demanding justice for Aboriginal issues. There are too many Aboriginal leaders over the 232 years of colonial invasion and dominance for me to name and a few of the latter year leaders are still around and politically active. Michael Mansell is in my view the best political and strategic thinker to emerge in the National Aboriginal Movement.

Other Aboriginal activists from the 1970s and 80s include Heather Sculthorpe, her sisters June Sculthorpe and Kerry Randriamahefa, Aunty Ida West, Morgan Mansell, Brian Mansell. On the mainland are Gary Foley, Billy Craigie, Paul Coe, Michael Anderson, Robert Thorpe, Marjorie Thorpe, Bob Maza, Peter Yu, John Christopherson, Shortii O'Neil, Oodgeroo, Denis Walker, Sam Watson and many others.

In 1969 I became involved in Aboriginal politics and protested with university students in support of the Gurindji walk off from the cattle station at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory. It was a national protest and I became aware of the Commonwealth's definition of Aboriginal. Although the Tasmanian Government didn't recognise our community as being Aboriginal at the time, the new definition opened the way for Tasmanian Aborigines to apply for Commonwealth funds.

I soon applied and succeeded through the Aboriginal Loans Commission to buy a fishing boat, influencing others to do likewise. My brother, and a few other Aborigines living on Flinders Island soon succeeded in getting loans for fishing boats. New Tasmanian Aboriginal organisations were established to represent local Aboriginal community groups in the regions, north, south, and north-west coast, it allowed governments to use these organisations to divide us by favouring one over another organisation.

The Tasmanian Government were soon seeking Commonwealth funding to assimilate Aborigines living on Cape Barren Island, and some Aboriginal families were forced to leave the island, or else have their children taken from them. Nevertheless, the Tasmanian Government held that Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct, and that this community were simply welfare problems to be assimilated into mainstream society.

But we had an edge from the Commonwealth's acknowledgement of us under its definition of Aboriginal – being of Aboriginal descent, recognised and identifying as Aboriginal – and we made the most of it to further our cause.

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC) began as the Aboriginal Information Service after a meeting with Commonwealth ministers at the Trades and Labour Council Hall in Launceston in 1972. I co-chaired the meeting with Harry Penrith, later known as Burnam Burnam.

My working life had been varied, with jobs all around Australia, and some overseas work on an oil tanker in Aotearoa New Zealand and a trip to the Persian Gulf. In 1979 it became clear to me that I had to stand with our brothers and sisters in the Aboriginal political activism going on in Tasmania. The TAC was the leading political organisation at the time, and still is, albeit with a lessened political role due to government control through funding agreements.

Back then the TAC was a leading Aboriginal voice in the National Aboriginal Movement. Prominent leader Michael Mansell had other Aboriginal organisations in the Movement waiting to see what our political position was with most major issues. For example, I remember when the Indian residents of Fiji outnumbered the Native Fijians vote, Colonel Rabuka held a coup and took over the Fijian Government. The Aboriginal organisations making up the National Aboriginal Movement were soon phoning the TAC to know our position on this issue. We of course supported the Native Fijians and their right to block being colonised through the results of an election.

When I began in the Movement in 1979, aged 38, I knew very little about the complex world of Aboriginal and government politics, and the reasons our struggle continued since colonial invasion. I was soon to learn, and take a role in the political activism organised by the TAC. My beginning as an Aboriginal Legal Aid Field Officer with the TAC reconnected me to my Tasmanian Aboriginal community. My parents and extended family had moved to Victoria to get away from the racism and low self-esteem it caused them in Tasmania.

Returning after 12 years away from Tasmania when I was 16 meant that, although my parents knew our families and relationships, my siblings and I knew very little. But I soon got to know our community families, and our family relations, and the circumstances that caused us to tackle political issues.

In late 1979, the Tasmanian Government established its first Aboriginal identified position in the Department of Social Welfare (we were simply labelled as welfare problems). I was appointed to this department with the title of Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Aboriginal Affairs, and began the job in January 1980. This job was to head up an Aboriginal child welfare committee, but I pushed to become adviser on Aboriginal affairs to the Minister Responsible for Aboriginal Affairs.

I became a mole in the government, leaking information to the TAC, and even assisting in organising Aboriginal community protests. I served seven years in this position, and on leaving in 1987, I was voted in as State Secretary of the TAC.

The State Secretary had the role as the Aboriginal community voice in the TAC's State Committee determinations. It was also my role to lead Aboriginal community activism supported by the TAC in its role as our community's political voice. The TAC Think Tank, comprising Tasmanian Aboriginal political activists, made decisions on political target issues. Our role was to organise demonstrations, protest, make demands for justice and Land Rights, protect our heritage, and demand the return of our ancestors' human remains from museums and institutions in Australia and around the world.

Our activism included, for example, taking over the lobby in parliament in Hobart and to establish an Aboriginal Embassy on parliament's lawns. I was in my role as State Liaison Officer when we set up a tent as our Aboriginal Embassy and a few men, women and children from our community sat inside waiting for government members to meet us in response to our demands.

That evening the police literally jumped on our embassy tent crushing the people inside causing injuries and fear among our community supporters, paying no heed to the presence of children. The police took our tent away, but we soon had another 'tent' erected by using a sun-shade umbrella as the Aboriginal Embassy. The police came and took that away too. This didn't deter us, and we sat the icy winter night out on the parliament lawn, until it was so cold we had to huddle in a TAC bus with the motor going for heat.

The next morning the police told us we could pick up our tents and sun-shade at the Hobart Police Station. I drove our TAC 12-seater bus to the police station and parked out front. A young police officer came along while I waited for our lawyer to retrieve our 'embassy' tents, and there was a confrontation about my licence not authorising me to drive a 12-seater bus. (There had been a change in licence categories and my heavy vehicle licence no longer met regulations).

The cop arrested me and took me into the police station, and his police mates inside heckled me with racist comments, saying, "You're not black", or "There are no Tasmanian Aborigines here anymore", and on and on it went. Eventually they charged me, took my finger prints, and released me. I strode down the hallway to the Police Superintendent and told him what his officers had done, and as State Liaison Officer, Aboriginal Affairs, would make a full report to the Police Commissioner and the minister.

The Superintendent told me to wait, and went to see the police officers in the charge room. Soon he was back claiming he had had a 'good talk' to his officers, and I was free to get our tents and drive the bus back to parliament. I was pleased I had won that small confrontation with the cops. We were all pleased with our action, but we still had not forced the government to negotiate with us.

Robin Gray was Tasmanian premier from 1981 until 1989, and the most bigoted and mean-arsed premier in the Tasmanian parliament's history following the Second World War. The TAC carried out many political activist demonstrations and protests during Gray's time in office, including the successful campaign to save the Gordon below Franklin River. While this victory was claimed by the Commonwealth, Greens and conservationists, it was the TAC's argument to save our heritage that ensured World Heritage status of the area and forced Prime Minister Bob Hawke to save the day by paying off the Tasmanian Government.

The TAC mounted a successful campaign to have our ancestors' human remains returned. Our victories in this campaign saw us well ahead of any other Aboriginal organisations' efforts. In 1983, we started a political campaign to have the "Crowther Collection" returned to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community so we could hold ceremony and bring them spiritual peace.

These human remains, mainly skeletal remains, were housed in the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery (TMAG). These were the remains of our Old People who had survived the Aboriginal Station called Wybalenna on Flinders Island. The 47 survivors of the genocide program at Wybalenna were transferred to Oyster Cove south of Hobart in 1847 and were left to 'languish' there; to die out. Most of these survivors died due to poor diets, cold timber huts, and alcohol and its effects on the group. A small number did survive, and their families are now established in southeast Tasmania.

As our Old People died, William Crowther, a senior surgeon in the Hobart hospital buried them in a graveyard on his property at Oyster Cove. He sent many of our Old People's human remains to overseas institutions in Europe and Britain.

This campaign by the TAC, headed up by lawyer Michael Mansell as our political leader, was an unflinching confrontation with the Tasmanian Government. At the time, we were strongly confident of winning our case. Our objective was to make the government and TMAG buckle and return our Old People to us. In fact, our political activists were so firmly confident in breaking Robin Gray's refusal to return our ancestors, that our political strategies devised by Mansell achieved everything we sought in our campaign.

Our community reclaimed Oyster Cove on 16 January 1984, and after some strong campaigning Gray and TMAG broke. We won! We woke up to see the *Mercury* newspaper with a simple heading: **Government to give bones to blacks**. After some negotiations our Old People were handed over to us. This was an amazing political campaign, well supported by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community who came in great numbers to maintain our claim over Oyster Cove, and our demands for justice for our Old People's human remains.

In May 1985, and under TAC guidance, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community held ceremony and cremated our ancestor's human remains at Oyster Cove. My sons participated as the Fire-Keepers for the cremation. But the issue was far from over, our community insisted that Oyster Cove was sovereign land, and that we would not leave it unattended until it was handed back to our community.

We carried out a sit-in to demand Land Rights over Oyster Cove, but the government was not going to allow us to maintain our presence. Not long after the cremation ceremony the government sent in contractors to lay a concrete block over our cremation site. Our ever-present community 'guards' formed a chain of bodies around the cremation site and turned the contractor away. The next day the government sent in a truck loaded with a 7-tonne rock and a crane to lay this rock over our cremation site, seeking to regain control of Oyster Cove.

Our Aboriginal community 'guards' had set up a bark tepee around the cremation site, and further protected the site with their bodies as a human shield. The crane, set up with its outriggers lowered in the soft earth, hooked the rock, lifted it off the truck and swung it around towards the cremation site. They warned the community protectors if they didn't move, the rock would drop on them. Our mob held fast.

There was no way they would move, and as the rock swung towards them, the crane's outriggers sank into the ground causing the crane to tip. The crane driver was forced to release the rock, and the attempt to control us was lost. Fortunately, all of this was caught on camera and aired on national television.

The Tasmanian Aboriginal struggle was to be acknowledged as a living Aboriginal community with rights inherent in that status. Our strategy was to achieve land rights believing this would open the way for Aboriginal funding to assist our community development. Has this been achieved?

The National Aboriginal Movement from the 1970s to the early 1990s included the following leading organisations:

- Northern Aboriginal Land Council (NLC)
- Central Land Council (CLC)
- Kimberley Land Council (KLC)
- National Aboriginal & Islander Legal Secretariat (NAILS)
- National Aboriginal & Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO)
- National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations (NCAO)
- National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC)
- Secretariat for National Aboriginal & Islander Child Care (SNAICC)
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC)

Many other local community-based Aboriginal community organisations supported the Aboriginal Movement, contributing their respective political activist skills to participate in demonstrations and protests. For example, the Radio Redfern mob were always covering political action and supporting activists through their radio program; Tranby Aboriginal College in Sydney was involved; the Northern Territory Land Councils also had leadership, producing a newspaper *Land Rights News*. Local community organisations in the country and rural regions of every state and territory were leading their local mobs to take political action locally and be a part of the National Movement wherever they could.

Land rights was the main issue we all faced, each national representative organisation had firm reasons for what land meant to Aboriginal education, our children, laws, and community health. The National Aboriginal Movement would meet at Bazzo's Farm at Alice Springs to discuss political issues, and to determine strategies to tackle the Commonwealth Government and demand action for land rights. Pat Dodson was the co-ordinator of the Federation of Land Councils of which all of the national Aboriginal organisations were members.

After each meeting each organisation returned to their respective headquarters to activate whatever strategies were mutually agreed. Many were local land rights claims to be enacted under national legislation for all regions of Australia.

Political activists around the country protested for change, and for land rights on a national basis. Prime minister, Bob Hawke and Clyde Holding, minister for Aboriginal Affairs tried a variety of ideas, a treaty statement by Hawke at the Barunga Festival failed due to a million-dollar media campaign against it by the mining sector in Western Australia. Hawke then called for a Makarrata meaning reconciliation, changed it to a Compact, and finally launched a reconciliation program.

None of these political strategies worked and our protests continued.

Hawke moved on to launch the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1990 and a national election of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders was held to manage Aboriginal policies and “advise” government. Tasmanian Aboriginal activists who had fought the good fight refused to participate, leaving it open for Aboriginals who had self-interests to be elected. Many of the ATSIC members in Tasmania were challenged to confirm their Aboriginal identity. Court actions did sort some of this out but a few who were called tick-a-box blacks were allowed to stand, and were eventually elected.

Nevertheless, many of the ‘old guard’ participated in other parts of the country and were elected causing the National Aboriginal Movement to fall apart and lose our national voice. Money bought the inexperienced self-interested ATSIC members into the government authority, and the Movement fell completely apart. This was a successful government strategy to ‘*divide and conquer*’ our National Aboriginal Movement. It never recovered its national representative voice for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and finally fell into local/regional voices from Aboriginal activists who sought honorary white privileges from government for representing government views over Aboriginal community views.

There is no longer a National Aboriginal Movement of any sort, political activism is still a regional matter, with some very strong political activists maintaining pressure to stop mining and other developments from destroying local Aboriginal traditional lands, waterways and seas. Governments continue to change laws to ensure these destructive developments go ahead, actions seen as direct attacks on Aboriginal connections to country.

Attacks on Aboriginal understanding, and how we are part of the greater relational ecosystems of our belonging, continue to cause trauma across our communities.

Political activism as we knew it during the 1970s – 1980s, and the dying years leading through the 1990s, is now very low key. We see little of the strong politics that were our strengths in the Tasmania Aboriginal community being active at all, with no protection from assimilation of our people into the dominant Australian British culture and politics of the day. Calls for a treaty are almost laughable, with so-called Aboriginal leaders calling for government to act and produce a treaty with our First Nations.

Laughable because they have no national authority, have no national Aboriginal structure to be our authority, no regional authorities from which to elect their political leaders into a national authority, and no mutually agreed principles and policies for negotiating with governments. Furthermore, they have no set policies, and have no

agreed ideas as to what should be compromised if the Australian Government is to accede to treaty ideas.

No matter what a treaty means to our so-called Aboriginal leaders, it will be a Domestic Agreement only that will, if successful, be agreed to by government and white-Australia.

*\*These days I lead a more relaxed life, spending time with friends and family, my children and grandchildren. My granddaughter Molly will soon turn 16, and is interested in Aboriginal philosophy. I have written Molly a letter to explain my Master's thesis, about contemporary Pakana metaphilosophy, and what it means to be Aboriginal. By the time you read this, she will have read that letter, and will have told me what parts she doesn't understand so that I can rewrite it until she does.*