

What can **OBJECTS** tell us about the **DEVELOPMENT** of **INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS'** **RIGHTS** over time?

Exploring the **FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW**
exhibition at the National Museum of Australia

*150 years ago the Aboriginals owned Australia and today
he demands more than the white man's charity. He wants the right to live!*

Joe Anderson (King Burrago), September 1933

This National Museum of Australia exhibition and associated website present the story of a group of Australians — Indigenous and non-Indigenous — who fought to improve the rights of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the years 1920 to 1970.

Some of these activists are well-recognised; others are obscure or forgotten. Some had suffered discrimination themselves; others took up the cause as a question of justice. They worked at a time when most Indigenous Australians did not have the same civil rights as everyone else and were treated with prejudice by many of their fellow Australians.

Your task in this unit is to look at some of the key objects on display in the exhibition, and to decide what they help us understand about the development of Indigenous Australians' rights in this period, the people involved in the struggles for these rights, and the issues they faced.

This will involve five steps:

STEP 1 **Observing some key objects** from the time (see pages 5–7)

STEP 2 **Analysing and hypothesising** about the significance of those objects

STEP 3 **Gaining further information** about the objects in order to test your hypotheses (see pages 8–11)

STEP 4 **Creating an annotated timeline** of development of Indigenous Australians' rights, based on the objects and associated information (see pages 12–13)

STEP 5 **Creating an additional component** to bring the exhibition forward in time (see page 14).

A key skill will be observing and analysing objects. How do you do that? Look at this example.



Here are six key questions that you can usually apply to an object:

- 1 What is it?
- 2 What is it used for?
- 3 When was it used?
- 4 What could its connection be to Indigenous culture and life?
- 5 How could it be connected to a particular person and place?
- 6 What is its message or meaning or symbolic significance for the development of Indigenous Australians' rights?

Unless you know details about the object you can only speculate, so here are possible answers to these questions for this object:

- 1 A spur used when riding horses.
- 2 Used for controlling the pace of horses.
- 3 Could be from the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.
- 4 Could be associated with the racing industry or cattle work.
- 5 Could belong to a famous person, or a specific issue or event associated with the industry.
- 6 Cannot tell without more detail.

To test these answers, and to answer the questions properly, we need more information. You will find extra information in this unit, and on the National Museum of Australia website at www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/from_little_things_big_things_grow/

Step 1

Step 2

OBSERVING SOME KEY OBJECTS FROM THE TIME

Look at the objects on pages 5–7.

Each is associated in some way with significant people and issues relating to the development of Indigenous Australians' rights from 1920 to 1970.

ANALYSING AND HYPOTHESISING ABOUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THOSE OBJECTS

For each object decide:

- 1 What is it?
- 2 What is it used for?
- 3 When was it used?
- 4 What could its connection be to Indigenous culture and life?
- 5 How could it be connected to a particular person and place?
- 6 What is its message or meaning or symbolic significance for the development of Indigenous Australians' rights? A clue has been given for each object to help you.

Then when you have completed this task, look at the additional information on pages 8–11 and use all this information to complete the timeline summary on pages 12–13.



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Belonged to a well known Aboriginal activist



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Belonged to someone who lived in a place reserved for Aboriginal people



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: A famous Aboriginal artist



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: A place of entertainment



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Some Aboriginal people used this in their work



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

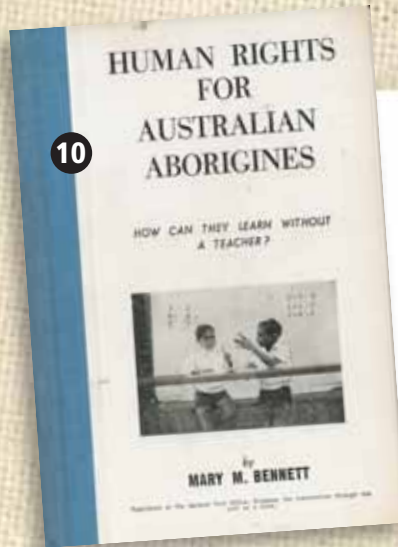
Clue: Communication method



7

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: This took place 150 years after European settlement



10

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Belonged to a non-Indigenous woman



8

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: An Aboriginal activist used this in his job



11

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Presented to federal parliament



9

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Commemorating a landmark event for Aboriginal people



12

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Part of a house in a place where Aboriginal people were encouraged to live



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Well known by non-Aboriginal people; later became Governor of South Australia

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Had to be carried by Aboriginal people



- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: Australians voted for this

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

Clue: A painting of an Aboriginal man in London



Image acknowledgements:

- 1, 11, 15 Photographs by George Serras, National Museum of Australia
- 3–6, 8, 10–12 Photographs by Harley Lannon, National Museum of Australia
- 13 Fairfax Photos
- 14 'Citizenship' by Sally Morgan 1987, Flinders Art Museum
- 16 Portrait of Anthony Martin Fernando by Raj Naji
- 2 National Library of Australia
- 7 National Archives of Australia NAA 8598, AK6/5/80/17

Step 3

GAINING FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE OBJECTS TO TEST YOUR HYPOTHESES

Read the following extracts from the National Museum of Australia's **FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW** exhibition and website. Match each information box with the object on pages 5–7 that it best relates to. Summarise the information on the timeline on pages 12–13.

A *I have pleaded my people's cause since 1887. I have seen whites in Australia go unpunished for murdering and ill-treating Aborigines. I have been boycotted everywhere. Look at my rags. All I hear is 'Go away, black man' but it is all tommyrot to say we are savages. Whites have shot, slowly starved and hanged us.*

Anthony Martin Fernando, 1929

In the 1920s and 1930s Anthony Martin Fernando (1864–1949) often stood outside London's Australia House wrapped in a long coat sewn over with toy skeletons. His cry was 'This is what the Australian government has done to Aboriginal people'.

Born in Sydney, Fernando left Australia in protest because he was prevented from giving evidence concerning a murder he had witnessed. He travelled to Europe, publicising the Australian Government's treatment of his people. Newspaper reports of his protests reached Aboriginal communities in New South Wales. He continued to protest into his old age, risking imprisonment and enduring poverty and the racism of the times.

B For much of the 20th century, many Indigenous people lived in institutions, known generally as 'missions'. These church missions, government reserves and settlements were sometimes places of refuge, sometimes of incarceration, but almost always of control.

People from different Aboriginal groups were placed together, and cultural practices were typically discouraged or forbidden. Often, communication with family members outside the mission and with the world at large was restricted.

Despite such regimens of control and feelings of dislocation, residents formed new communities from within. Today some people remember such places with affection because of the communal life. Others recall the lack of basic civil rights.

C *My family were drovers, stockmen, and ... I remember Mum saying ... 'That mob up at Wattie Creek have just walked off Lord Vestey's station. It was on the ABC news.' And I went, 'What?! Holy mackerel.' You know?*

Kev Carmody, Aboriginal songwriter

Aboriginal workers on Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory walked off the job in August 1966. They, like most Aboriginal pastoral workers, received little or no pay for their labour.

Their strike led to an enquiry which resulted in equal wages, but this had mixed results for the Aboriginal community. An injustice was redressed but many Aboriginal people were subsequently evicted from stations, many of which were located on their traditional lands.

*Vestey man said I'll double your wages
Seven quid a week you'll have in your hand
Vincent said uhuh we're not talking about wages
We're sitting right here till we get our land*

'From little things big things grow', Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody, 1991

To many of its supporters, the Wave Hill walk-off was a wages dispute. But for the local Gurindji people it was primarily about land. They subsequently put in a claim for their country — then leased by the Australian Government to the powerful English pastoral company Vestseys.

Nine years later, after a long campaign, the Wave Hill lease was surrendered and two new leases were issued: one to the Vestseys and one to the Gurindji people.

D The Australian Aborigines League was founded in Melbourne in the 1930s by Yorta Yorta activist William Cooper. It supported many Indigenous rights campaigns, including Cooper's 1937 Petition to King George V — which sought Aboriginal representation in federal parliament — and the Day of Mourning and Protest in 1938.

The league faltered following William Cooper's death in 1941 but was revived by Bill Onus and Doug Nicholls later in the 1940s, supporting campaigns such as opposition to the establishment of a rocket range in Central Australia by the British and Australian governments. This banner, made by Bill Onus, is a remarkable survivor from those times.

E *When I was about ten ... Mum took us down to the local shopping centre, to buy school shoes ... A police officer stopped us and spoke to Mum, who passed him a sheet of paper she had in her bag. He read it and allowed us to continue on our way. It was the family's exemption paper.*

Diane Ross, Townsville, Queensland, 2007

In the 1960s, in most parts of Australia, a person identified as 'Aboriginal' had to apply for citizenship to have the same civil rights as non-Indigenous people. They were then 'exempted' from the discriminatory legislation applying to Aboriginal people. Among other conditions, applicants had to pledge to abandon association with the Indigenous community.

Their exemption certificate had to be carried at all times and produced on demand. Aboriginal people called them 'dog tags'.

F *The fellow that owned the Bowraville picture theatre said to Charles Perkins 'I don't care if you're the Prime Minister of Australia, you're still not sitting on a white seat.'*

Tom Roper, member of the Freedom Ride, 1987

One of the destinations on the Freedom Ride was Bowraville, New South Wales. Bowraville theatre, like many country cinemas, was segregated: white people on plush seats up the back; Aboriginal patrons on wooden seats down the front. Aboriginal people also entered the theatre via a special door after the film had started.

When Bowraville theatre — closed for more than three decades — reopened in 2000, local Gumbaynggirr elders held a ceremony to cleanse the building of its unhappy past. Charles Perkins' son Adam delivered a speech at the opening.

G *Bukudjuini gonga yuru napurrunha yirrakilli*
The humble petition of the undersigned people of Yirrkala.

Yirrkala bark petition, 1963

In 1963, mining exploration was approved at Gove, near Yirrkala, in the Northern Territory's Aboriginal Arnhem Land Reserve. In response, there were two parliamentary 'firsts'. The people of Yirrkala presented a petition to the federal parliament protesting against the mining prospect — the first time traditional Indigenous documents had been recognised by parliament; and the Hon Kim Beazley senior presented a case to parliament for the creation of an Aboriginal land title.

The Yirrkala people challenged the mining project in court in 1968, but the case was lost. The judge found that any rights the Yirrkala people may have had before colonisation had been invalidated by the Crown.

Almost a decade later, in 1978, the Yirrkala people gained title to their land under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*, but the mining leases were specifically excluded.

H *My people ... How can we save them? ... We talk to politicians and they say Yes, they'll do this and do that but the years go on and what is done?*

William Cooper, 1937

Since the arrival of the British in 1788, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have protested over the loss of their country and their rights. In the 1920s and 1930s Indigenous people began to form organisations to bring their concerns to the attention of the wider community.

Most Australians at that time believed British settlement had been a gift of 'civilisation' to 'savages', so they failed to respond to these concerns. But as Aboriginal activist Fred Maynard wrote to New South Wales Premier Jack Lang in 1927: We accept no condition of inferiority as compared with European people ... The European people by the arts of war destroyed our more ancient civilization and ... by their vices and diseases our people have been decimated ... But neither of these facts are evidence of superiority. Quite the contrary.

I *The Administrator ... may ... declare a person to be a ward ... by reason of —*

- (a) his manner of living*
- (b) his inability, without assistance, adequately to manage his own affairs*
- (c) his standard of social habit and behaviour and*
- (d) his personal association.*

Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance, 1957

In the Northern Territory, all Aboriginal people of full descent were declared wards of the state in 1957. Only six people were exempted, including artist Albert Namatjira. Among other restrictions, wards could not marry without permission, be legal guardians of their children, move around freely, control their own money or consume alcohol.

In 1958 Namatjira was jailed for supplying alcohol to a family member. The artist had always shared the privileges of his success with his family, but his relative was a ward of the state, which made the gift of alcohol illegal. News of the conviction created enormous publicity and drew attention to the conditions under which Aboriginal people lived.

After his release, Namatjira was no longer interested in art and he passed away within a year.

J *You can't get anywhere without a change in the Constitution, and you can't get that without a referendum. You'll need a petition with 100,000 signatures. We'd better start at once.*

Jessie Street to Faith Bandler, 1956

After 10 years of dedicated campaigning, a referendum was held in 1967 to change the Australian Constitution. An 'umbrella' organisation, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, carried out much of the campaigning. Campaigners were extraordinarily diverse: Indigenous, non-Indigenous, young, old, Christian, Jewish, communist, wealthy and working class.

The 90 per cent 'yes' vote was the highest in Australia's history.

Now the federal government could legislate for Aboriginal people and they were counted in the census. These changes were seen by many as a recognition of Indigenous people as full citizens. Reflecting on the referendum 30 years later, activist Chicka Dixon said: *For most Aborigines [the referendum] is basically and most importantly a matter of seeing white Australians, finally, after 179 years, affirming at last that they believe we are human beings.*

Others, such as poet and activist Kevin Gilbert (1992), saw it differently: *If the referendum hadn't been passed, we would have been further advanced, because white Australia would not have fooled the world into thinking something positive was being done.*

K *'Why did you let me go?'*

'My son, you were going to school I took you to school every day ... then I went to pick you up this day and you were gone.'

John Moriarty and his mother, Kathleen, 1970

For over 150 years, thousands of Indigenous families had their children taken away under government and church policies. Little value was placed on Indigenous culture — it was assumed that removed children would be better off raised as 'whites'. It was generally intended that they would never return home.

Many removed children eventually did come home; but others are lost to their communities forever.

John Moriarty was removed from his family and sent to children's homes in Adelaide and, later, Sydney. He was one who found his way home.

As a designer, his work celebrates Aboriginal culture, and his experience of removal has made him an advocate for Aboriginal identity and rights.

L *If you had to get to an executive meeting in Canberra or Sydney, you had to find out how to pay your own fare ... It was an unbelievable dedication on the part of those people.*

Faith Bandler, 1993

Bandler is best-known for her tireless campaigning for the 1967 Referendum. She well remembers Jessie Street putting the draft petition in her hand and saying, 'Well, there you are girl, go get yourself a referendum'.

Her father, a Pacific Islander from Ambryn in the New Hebrides, was forcibly taken to Queensland to work as slave labour in the sugarcane fields. This experience and her exposure to activists like Jessie Street galvanised Bandler to work for an Australia where black and white Australians were accepted as one people.

In 2009, Bandler was awarded the Companion of the Order of Australia for her services to social justice and human rights.

M *The Aborigines were not a dying race until white people made them die by refusing them the most elementary human rights.*

Mary Montgomerie Bennett, 1934

Mary Bennett spent time as a child on her father's pastoral station in the country of the Dalleburra people in north Queensland and became a passionate activist for Indigenous rights. She met the 'skeleton coat' protester Anthony Martin Fernando in London and was impressed by his solitary dedication.

In 1930 Bennett moved to Western Australia to continue her advocacy. She saw the suffering of the people she worked with as needing a political as well as a personal response, and pressured the Anti-Slavery Society and various women's organisations to assist her in her work.

O *We're not here in anger. We're here in sorrow. Because of the fact that you won't give Aborigines their rights, same as other individuals.*

Doug Nicholls to the Hon William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, MP, at a protest outside Parliament House, Canberra, about 1967

Nicholls' achievements as an Australian Rules footballer meant he was well-known among non-Indigenous Australians. He used his fame to bring attention to causes such as preserving Lake Tyers Aboriginal reserve in Victoria for its people, in the 1960s, and support for the 1967 Referendum.

The first Aboriginal person to be knighted, Nicholls was later appointed the Governor of South Australia, in 1976.

N *I am on call seven days a week ... social service applications, education and student grants, wages and trust fund negotiations, legal advisor, tax consultant.*

Joe McGinness, 1971

Like many Indigenous people, McGinness began his life as a ward of the state. After serving in Borneo during the Second World War, he worked as a wharfie and union man in Cairns, north Queensland. There he learnt how collective action could improve conditions, giving him hope for Indigenous working rights.

As an activist he travelled around Australia campaigning for civil rights issues, including the 1967 Referendum. He was president of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) for 16 years.

McGinness was always generous with his time. 'Send for Joe' was often the call when an Indigenous person needed assistance.

P *We want that Vestey mob to go away from here. To go away from here and never come back.*

Vincent Lingiari, about 1966

In August 1966, Lingiari, a stockman on Wave Hill station, went to the station manager and asked for higher wages for Aboriginal stockmen. When the manager refused, Lingiari signaled to the other Aboriginal stockmen and they walked off the property.

Lingiari was one of four signatories to the 1967 petition to the Governor-General that argued that 'morally the land is ours and should be returned to us'. It was into Lingiari's hand that Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured earth from Wave Hill (Kalkaringi), to mark the return of Gurindji lands.

Step 4

CREATING AN ANNOTATED TIMELINE OF DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS' RIGHTS, BASED ON THE OBJECTS AND ASSOCIATED INFORMATION

Now complete these summary pages, using the information and ideas you have gained from pages 5–11. Then you will be able to re-organise the panels into a chronological order that traces the development of Indigenous Australians' rights over time.

Object	Period	People	Themes	Message

Object	Period	People	Themes	Message

Step 5

CREATING AN ADDITIONAL COMPONENT TO BRING THE EXHIBITION FORWARD IN TIME

Reckoning

There are still some people... who believe that their new life came by the grace of God. I tell them about the dedicated people who worked for years to bring about those changes.

Evelyn Scott, Aboriginal activist, 1989

By 1970, what had these activists achieved in 50 years of struggle? The 1967 Referendum has been passed with an unprecedented majority. In most states people could now move freely. Legal discrimination had almost disappeared and exemption certificates abandoned. Indigenous people and Indigenous-run organisations were more prominent in public life.

But not everything had changed. Repressive state laws remained in place; social inequalities were still deeply entrenched; and racist attitudes were still commonplace. In 1980, the Chair of the Aboriginal Development Corporation, Charles Perkins, returned to the Walgett RSL Club he had picketed on the Freedom Ride in 1965. The doorman turned and said to him: 'You know you boys aren't allowed in here'.

But one year on, the Aboriginal flag would fly for the first time.

Indigenous people were no longer seen as 'dying out'; identity was to be celebrated, not denied. In 1990, reflecting on 200 years of racism and discrimination, Perkins said: *White people ... if they could only realise that Aboriginal culture could be so fulfilling to them, and broaden their lives in every possible way ... If they could just reach out and take in Aboriginal culture and then Aboriginal people ... I think it would make the best society in the world.*

- 1 This exhibition covers events to about 1970. As a class brainstorm to identify any significant changes in Indigenous people's rights (either positive or negative) that have occurred between 1970 and today.
- 2 Against each of these changes, list what might be a significant object that the National Museum of Australia might collect to represent and symbolise that development. For example, it might be the clap stick used by Gladys Tybingoompain celebrating the 1996 Wik decision about native title outside the High Court, or the didjeridu used during the Apology ceremony in Parliament House in 2008.
- 3 You have seen some information about significant individuals involved in the struggle for Indigenous Australians' rights. Choose some to research further. You will find good biographical information on the Collaborating for Indigenous Rights website at www.indigenousrights.net.au/default and at www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/. You might also include recent leaders in your research — people such as Marcia Langdon, Noel Pearson, Pat Dodson, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Mick Dodson, Linda Burney and many others. Have they all been good leaders? In your research and evaluation you should consider what qualities and behaviour are part of good leadership.
- 4 There are many current proposals and issues relating to Indigenous Australians' rights. These include:
 - the federal government intervention in Northern Territory communities
 - proposals for a treaty with Indigenous Australians
 - proposals for compensation of Indigenous Australians as part of reconciliation
 - Australia's position on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People
 - proposals for dedicated seats for Indigenous Australians in the Australian Parliament
 - and others you will discover in your research.Research one of these, gather the strongest arguments for and against, and reach your own conclusion.













THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES LEAGUE

THE ABORIGINE SPEAKS _
THE VOICE of THE ABORIGINE MUST BE HEARD



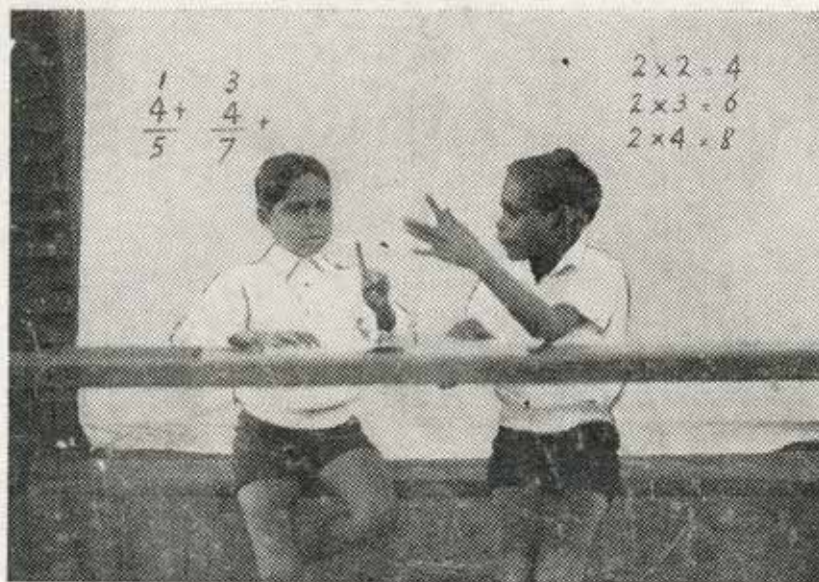




AT THE SITE ON 16 AUGUST 1997
MR. VICTOR LINDHART
LEADER OF THE VANDUKE PEOPLE
RECEIVED FROM
THE PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA
THE HONOURABLE J. G. MURRAY, O.C. M.B.
AND
THE MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS,
THE HONOURABLE LES JOHNSON, M.P.
THE PASTORAL LEASE TO 1250 SQUARE KILOMETERS
FORMERLY PART OF THE VANDUKE PEOPLE

HUMAN RIGHTS FOR AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

HOW CAN THEY LEARN WITHOUT
A TEACHER?



by
MARY M. BENNETT

Registered at the General Post Office, Brisbane, for transmission through the
post as a book.









**In 1944 Aborigines were allowed to become
"Australian Citizens." Aboriginal people called
their citizenship papers "Dog Tags."
We had to be licensed to be called Australian.**

