

A REFLECTION ON THE FIRST THIRTY DAYS OF THE EMBASSY

By Gary Foley

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It was in the first four weeks of the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy protest that a small group of Aboriginal activists rapidly improvised and transformed an opportunistic accident into an effective protest that captured world attention and brought significant historical and political change in Australia.¹ What had begun as a simple knee-jerk reaction to an Australia Day statement on Land Rights by the Australian Prime Minister, resulted in the accidental discovery that there was no law in Canberra that prevented the activists from staging a protest camp on the lawns of Parliament. The swift action of the activists to take advantage of this situation enabled them to gain political advantage over the McMahon Government in the propaganda war and political battle that would take place over the next six months.

Exactly how these events unfolded has never been written about in detail. Even in Scott Robinson's (ch.1 in this volume) or in Kathy Lothian's (2007) accounts, the crucial early days are not fully examined. Yet if we are to gain a better understanding of why the Aboriginal Embassy was able to become such an effective protest action, it is important to gain an awareness of how it all began. So in this chapter I will examine some of the factors that enabled the already highly effective group of Aboriginal activists from the Redfern Black Power collective to create a highly effective challenge to the political power structure and force a major change in policy.

I will examine the ill-conceived strategy of Prime Minister McMahon in deciding not only to make a statement rejecting Aboriginal Land Rights, but also to make such a statement on the most contested day on the Australian calendar. This was the 26th of January and whilst celebrated by most as Australia Day, it had since 1938 been deemed as a 'Day of Mourning' and Invasion Day by Aboriginal peoples. This provocative act seemed to invite a strong response from Aboriginal activists who had for the previous twelve months been staging major Land Rights demonstrations in southern Australian capital cities. The success of the activists' Land Rights campaign was a significant factor in the Prime Minister's decision to make his statement in the first place. The statement was supposed to politically defuse the issue as the Government entered the election year of 1972, but, because of the inept timing and non-committal content, it had almost completely the opposite effect.

Also considered in this chapter will be the stroke of luck that befell the activists when they appeared to accidentally discover that there was no law that prevented them from camping on the lawns of Parliament House. This enabled them to create a high-profile political action that simply could not be ignored. It also ensured that they won a significant level of public support from an Australian public who had six years before voted overwhelmingly in the 1967 Referendum in support of Aboriginal rights. A large segment of the Australian people also appreciated the gentle irony that enabled the activists to make pompous government officials look like fools. The Embassy protest appealed to the Australian larrikin sense of humour. This was quickly capitalised on by the Aboriginal activists who were able to win even further support through their clever

manipulation of mass media at a time when television news was still developing and visual images helped gain news coverage. As a spectacle the Aboriginal Embassy seemed made for television and the cultivation of Canberra journalists by Embassy activists was a key part of their strategy in the first four weeks of consolidation of the Embassy. In examining this aspect I will look at who some of the key media strategists were among the Embassy crew, as well as who some of the journalists involved were.

The key major change in Australian government policy that the Embassy produced was when in February 1972, Leader of the Federal Opposition, Gough Whitlam, visited the Embassy and was convinced to change the ALP policy on Aboriginal Affairs. During an election year Whitlam declared that a government led by him would grant Aboriginal Land Rights and the policy of the ALP would no longer be the bi-partisan policy of Assimilation. This dramatic change in ALP policy meant that for the first time since Federation one of the two major political parties likely to form government had dispensed with the racist policy of assimilation. And, because Whitlam would be elected Prime Minister later that year, this effectively meant the end of the era of Assimilation. This was one of the most important long term effects of the Aboriginal Embassy on Australian political history and I examine here how these events played out.

The first four weeks of the Aboriginal Embassy also brought to public attention the small well-organised and dedicated band of Aboriginal activists who were the soul and brains of the protest. In this chapter I will also look at some of those activists and provide some recognition for those whose names are already being erased from history.

Not only does the Aboriginal Embassy action of 1972 need to be more widely examined, analysed and understood, but also importantly so should the question of who were the young activists who made it such a success. It should also be understood that they were, apart from their mentor Chicka Dixon, for the most part only 19 or 20 years old when they challenged the Government.

The latter part of this chapter will look briefly at the political paralysis and paranoia that the Embassy protest seemed to induce in the McMahon Government. This apparent inability to find a response to the tents on the lawn bedevilled the government for the whole of the first four weeks described in this chapter. Furthermore, it was probably Prime Minister McMahon's ineptness at finding a way to resolve his Embassy dilemma that both encouraged the boldness of the protestors and won even more support for the Embassy from the general public. Years later Gough Whitlam (1986) would state that the Aboriginal Embassy played a key role in helping to bring an end to the McMahon Government and 23 consecutive years of conservative government. This was another reason the 1972 action by young Black Power activists should be regarded as a significant moment in Australian history.

Prime Minister McMahon's Australia Day Statement on Land Rights

Two major factors motivated the Prime Minister to make a public statement on Aboriginal land rights. Firstly, there was the *Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd* (the Gove Land Rights case) decision that had been handed down by Justice Blackburn in the

Northern Territory Supreme Court. This landmark finding effectively denied land rights to the Yolgnu people of Yirrikala, who were trying to stop the Swiss company Nabalco from mining bauxite on their land. The case had intensified the debate about land rights and was seen by many Australians to be a manifestly unjust decision, and had further increased pressure on the McMahon Government to clarify Federal policy on land rights. The second factor was the broad success of a major land rights campaign, coordinated mostly by Aboriginal Black Power activists who had been staging demonstrations in capital cities across south-eastern Australia.

Thus, under duress from both international media attention and domestic political pressure, the Prime Minister made his now famous statement on Australia Day 1972. By choosing such a strongly contested and controversial day as the one known to Aboriginal Australia as 'Invasion Day', the Prime Minister had made a significant political mistake. That day had been deemed in 1938 to be a "Day of Mourning" by legendary Aboriginal leaders William Cooper, Doug Nicholls and Jack Patten. It was therefore an extremely provocative move, although McMahon and his advisers seemed blithely oblivious to this, despite the fact that the content and timing of the statement even went against the advice of the Government's own appointed Council for Aboriginal Affairs. The Secretary of the CAA Barrie Dexter has said:

We tried, without success, to dissuade [McMahon], since we felt that a statement of new policies as niggardly as those now adopted by the Government was hardly appropriate on Australia Day - the anniversary of the beginning of the dispossession of the Aborigines. (Dexter, ch.4 this volume)

This was a situation that was therefore inevitably destined to agitate the young black radicals of Redfern. Indeed, the only way the McMahon Government could have saved the day would have been to make a statement that conceded that Aboriginal people should be granted Land Rights. Unfortunately and as expected, the Prime Minister enhanced his reputation for political ineptitude by doing exactly the opposite.

The 1972 Australia Day Statement by Prime Minister William McMahon was summarised by Scott Robinson thus:

The statement epitomized the Liberal-Country Party coalition's policy of a diluted assimilationism which sought to quash the 'separateness' of Aboriginal people, and make them part of mainstream Australian society. (Robinson, ch.1 this volume)

Whilst on one hand acknowledging 'the deep affinity between Aboriginal people and the land' the statement went on to proclaim that the mining of Aboriginal land would 'contribute to the economic advancement of Aborigines resident on them'. Overall, the Australia Day statement consisted of a statement of five Government Objectives. They were generally understood to be:

1. A promise to assist groups and individuals 'to hold effective and respected places within one Australian society' (McMahon 1972).

2. A declaration that whilst assimilation was now a matter of choice, any ideas of ‘separate development as a long term aim is utterly alien’ to the Government’s policies (McMahon 1972).
3. An idea that the role of Government was to take action to improve employment, education and housing in line with its concept of assimilation, and that there should be special efforts to remove ‘special disabilities’ before the law (McMahon 1972).
4. In response to the Black Power movement’s demands for Land Rights, McMahon (1972) declared there would be no Land Rights as such because that would ‘lead to uncertainties and possible challenge in relation to land titles in Australia which are presently unquestioned and secure’. However, McMahon proposed the introduction of ‘special purpose leases’ only in the Northern Territory. These leases were to be limited to 50 years and would only be granted where the recipients could make ‘reasonable economic and social use of the land’ (McMahon 1972).
5. The Government had decided that ‘special measures will be necessary to overcome the disabilities suffered’ by Aboriginal people, and that these ‘special measures’ were to be regarded as ‘temporary and transitional’ (McMahon 1972).

Finally the Government declared that the strong opposition of the Yirrkala people would be ignored and the Nabalco mining of bauxite would proceed on the grounds that the mine was ‘in the national interest’ (McMahon 1972). This was all a long way short of what Aboriginal people around the nation had been calling for and only resulted in an intensification of anger among the activists. Even *The Australian* newspaper could see the flaws in both the timing of the statement and the shortcomings contained therein. In

an editorial response the paper said, 'To choose that day as the occasion to announce a Government decision on the intensely felt issue of Aboriginal Land Rights is to invite the full judgment of historical perspective on the decision' (Australian 1972a). Little did they know how right they were.

Birth of the Aboriginal Embassy

Inevitably, Aboriginal activists around Australia were outraged by McMahon's statement and in Redfern the Black Caucus (as the Black Power group had come to be known) held urgent consultations to decide how they might respond. These young activists by now had accumulated a significant degree of knowledge and experience in a range of areas, including political agitation and organisation, establishing major community self-help programs, creating a sophisticated public relations network that clearly was able to out-manoeuvre and out-wit the highly paid public servants presenting the Government perspective. They also had a significant advantage over the older generation of FCAATSI era leaders, in that they could communicate, assemble and meet very quickly. They were mobile and mostly living within short distances of each other in the suburb of Redfern, and they all regularly frequented the popular community social gathering places such as the Empress and Clifton Hotels on Regent Street. So the young Black Power group was able to come up with a swift reaction to McMahon before the more ponderous, considered and conservative response of the older generation. Thus the young Black Power activists seized control of the initiative and political agenda.

Discussions took place among the key players in various locations around inner-city suburbs of Sydney. At the home of Lyn and Peter Thompson in East Sydney between people such as Paul Coe, Billy Craigie, Isobel Coe, Gary Williams, Albert Haydn, Tony Coorey and myself. The wise old man of the Black Power movement, Chicka Dixon, had a significant input. Michael Anderson and Kevin Gilbert held talks and interstate activists such as Don Brady, Denis Walker, Sue Chilli and Sam Watson Jnr in Brisbane and Bruce McGuinness, Brian Lovett and Marge Thorpe in Melbourne were consulted. It quickly emerged that most people felt it was vitally important that the response should happen immediately so as to strongly communicate to the Australian people that the black movement absolutely rejected the Prime Minister's statement. The Redfern activists had felt they were making considerable progress in terms of the development of self-help programs and raising general community awareness of Aboriginal community problems related to dispossession. Beyond Redfern it was widely felt that McMahon's Australia Day statement was a provocative political act that was out of sync with the political perceptions in the Aboriginal community. Thus an immediate and strong response was required.

At one stage Chicka Dixon advocated that the response should be 'we take over Pinchgut Island (Fort Denison) in the middle of Sydney Harbour' (Dixon 1984; see also ch.2, this volume). He later explained, 'The reason why I wanted to take over Pinchgut Island [is that] the Indians in America had taken over Alcatraz. So I wanted to put it in the eyes of the world' (Dixon 1984). After the group had ruled out this idea on the grounds that few were prepared to consider rowing a boat at night on shark-infested

Sydney Harbour, Dixon then told the group of an idea that his political mentor Jack Patten had suggested in 1946. Patten had 'said we should be setting up an Aboriginal mission station in front of this white man's Parliament House' (Dixon 1984). Thus the idea for a protest centring on the Federal Parliament had its germination. Consultations and meetings resulted in a consensus that a major demonstration would be held in Canberra as soon as it could be organised, probably that weekend, three days hence. It was decided that in the interim a small group would be dispatched to Canberra that night to establish a visible presence and immediate physical response to the PM's statement. Exactly how this decision was made has been the subject of debate over the past thirty years with various versions told by Kevin Gilbert, Michael Anderson, Chicka Dixon, myself and others, but all versions agree on the fact that the team that left Sydney that night consisted of Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey, and Bert Williams.

Of the four, only Craigie and Coorey were members of the inner circle of the Redfern Black Power group, whilst Anderson had a close association and Bert Williams was a son of legendary Aboriginal musician Harry Williams and had been involved in the developing Black Theatre movement in Melbourne. It is interesting to note that Scott Robinson (1993: 91; 1994: 51) in his otherwise excellent account of the Embassy, mistakenly named the four as Anderson, Craigie, Coorey and Gary Williams.² This mistake possibly arose because Gary Williams had been in the car earlier in the evening but was not in the vehicle when it left for Canberra. Furthermore, Bert Williams had been using the alias Kevin Johnstone because of a police warrant for his arrest on a petty charge under his own name (Williams 2006). A humorous moment when the team

assembled that night is told by Michael Anderson who relates that when the crew arrived in a house in the inner-Sydney suburb of Erskineville to pick up Bert Williams, they found him in bed in the arms of one of his female admirers. Upon being told they were there to take him to Canberra to go to a demonstration, he without hesitation dressed and jumped in the car, hastily bidding farewell to his female companion.

Anderson was to later comment that this was the first time in history that an Aboriginal man 'had got out of bed with a woman to go to a protest' (Anderson in Peters-Little 1993).

One of the reasons that many of the main figures of the Redfern Black Power group were not part of the deputation that went to Canberra that night to set up the Embassy was because many of them were already on their way to a major conference in Brisbane being organised by university student activists to be held over the Australia Day weekend. The Action Conference on Racism and Education held on the campus of the University of Queensland, was seen by the key leaders of the Black Power movement in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane as a great opportunity to both increase the pressure on the McMahon Government, as well as join forces to confront, challenge and test the mettle of white student activists (see interview with Chilly, Walker & Watson, ch.2 this volume).

Black Power activists in Australia at times appeared to derive a perverse pleasure from subjecting earnest, small "I" liberal white Australians to occasional brutal challenges. This often meant accusing the white student activists of being hypocrites because they always seemed to be more willing to confront racist nations elsewhere in the world

other than their own country. Frequently, Aboriginal activists made these accusations in a light-hearted way just to see the response of the white students. In fact the black activists held some of the white political supporters in high regard, but out of fun were not about to let their white comrades know that. It was considered a better strategy to “keep them on their toes”. In Brisbane, on the first day of the conference, the Black Power contingent managed to hijack the conference and impose their own agenda, which would concentrate on ways the student movement might do more to support the black struggle. Many white activists who personally felt they were politically progressive were confronted with people such as Denis Walker, Bruce McGuinness and Paul Coe who strongly challenged leaders of the student Aboriginal support organisation ABSCHOL to step down in favour of Aboriginal candidates for their jobs.

These events were transpiring at the very moment that the media was beginning to report the new Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House. This not only gave a boost to the arguments and confidence of the black activists in Brisbane, but also through reports in the Australian National University newspaper *Woroni* conveyed to the students at that university, it created an awareness of issues related to Aboriginal rights (Woroni 1972). Over the next six months the empathy and support of those ANU students and their union would become crucial to the ability of Aboriginal Embassy activists to sustain and survive the freezing Canberra winter of 1972.

Meanwhile, the four Redfern activists had been driven to Canberra by a non-Aboriginal supporter called Noel Hazzard who was a photographer for the Communist Party newspaper *Tribune*.³ As they travelled that night, the general idea in mind was simply to

stage a protest on the lawn of Parliament House and hope that some media would capture some images for broadcast or publication before the police arrived who, it was assumed, would then arrest the activists. As Robinson (ch.1, this volume) notes, ‘the ideology expressed at this stage was vague in detail, a slogan rather than a program.’ But events and circumstances were to conspire that night to allow an extraordinarily different result that would in effect change the course of history. Upon arrival in the national capital the group approached an academic friend of Hazzard’s and fellow CPA member who provided them with a beach umbrella and materials to make some placards. In the early hours of 27 January they set up their beach umbrella and a roughly scrawled sign that read Aboriginal Embassy. It was Tony Coorey’s idea to give that name to the protest, which proved to be a stroke of genius. Nevertheless, they were not there long before, as expected, the police arrived to see what was going on. When asked what they were doing, the young Aboriginal men declared, ‘We are having a protest!’ Whereupon the police departed in order to determine whether any actual offense was being committed. Twenty four hours later, in their first report on the Embassy, the *Sydney Morning Herald* mistakenly states that the group consisted of three men. The paper reported Michael Anderson as stating that the group was ‘protesting against the policy statement on Aborigines given by the Prime Minister’ (Anderson cited in Sydney Morning Herald 1972a). Anderson said the Embassy represented an ‘ultimatum’ to the Government to meet Aboriginal claims for Land Rights. He was quoted as saying ‘if the Government does not act, we will take extreme measures’ (Anderson cited in Sydney Morning Herald 1972a).

As it happened, the four activists had unwittingly discovered that there was in fact no law against camping on the lawns of Parliament! It appeared that the only relevant legislation to deal with such a situation was the Gaming and Betting Ordinance, s.19 (a), which prohibited loitering in a public place. So instead of arresting the activists the police simply placed the Embassy under 24 hour surveillance (Robinson, ch.1 in this volume). This was an extraordinary development that was completely unexpected on the part of the four activists who had been prepared to be arrested and spend the night in the cells in Canberra until the next day when the Redfern Black Caucus would bail them out. Instead, they had accidentally exposed a loophole in the law in Canberra that meant the Police were unable to prevent them from staying on the lawns. While the police and politicians dithered, the Aboriginal activists moved quickly to take advantage of the situation. The next day the Melbourne Age reported that an “Aboriginal Embassy” had been established on the lawns of Federal Parliament House and that spokesman Michael Anderson had declared that ‘We mean business. We will stay here until the Government listens to us!’ (Anderson cited in Age 1972a). Within 24 hours, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal support began to flow.

On 28 January a large contingent of Aboriginal women from the National Council of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Women (NCATSIW), who were by co-incidence holding a conference at ANU, arrived on the lawns to express their support. These women went from the newly established Embassy to hold a three day conference (the first ever national conference of Aboriginal women) at the conclusion of which they would release a series of recommendations that were a devastating indictment of the McMahon Government. The conference called for the resignation of both Prime

Minister McMahon and his Minister for Aborigines, Arts and the Environment, Mr. Howson. The women's conference was 'particularly disappointed at token gestures regarding Land Rights' and described the PM as 'incompetent, uninterested and unsympathetic' in his dealings with Aboriginal issues (Canberra Times 1972a). They further described Mr. Howson's 'insolent manner' in his dealings with representatives of the Women's Council, and said he 'lacked interest and knowledge of Aboriginal people' (Canberra Times 1972a). McMahon must have been horrified to have heard these sentiments at that moment of crisis, as he would have normally regarded these Aboriginal women as not particularly radical. It should have been obvious to him by now that this upsurge in radical Aboriginal activity was much more intense and widespread than the Australian community had realised.

Meanwhile, at the Embassy, local white student and anti-apartheid activists quickly began making contact and assisting with the logistics to feed and house the expected large number of Aboriginal supporters. Because of the audacity of the Embassy action, as well as extensive, good-natured, and positive initial media coverage, it appeared the protest had captured the imagination of a largely sympathetic Australian public. On 2 February, the Embassy activists, in part to emphasise the sense of alienation the Embassy represented, as well as underlining their assertions of Aboriginal sovereignty, set about designing and flying their own flag. The first flag that flew on the tents was a black, green, red and black pennant which was the flag developed 50 years earlier by Marcus Garvey as the symbol of his international black consciousness movement (see Maynard in this volume). Later, in April it was joined by another comprising a spear laid across a red and black background with four crescents looking inward to symbolise

the black rights struggle from the four corners of Australia This flag was later replaced by the famous red, black and yellow one that was designed by Harold Thomas in association with me and introduced at the Embassy by myself.

On 5 February in another move to formalise its status, the Embassy issued a five point plan for Land Rights. This plan called for Aboriginal control of the Northern Territory, legal title to all existing reserve lands and settlements throughout Australia and minimum compensation of at least six billion dollars and a percentage of the gross national product for lands alienated (Newfong, ch.3 this volume). These demands strongly reflected the general philosophy of the Black Power group that now controlled the Embassy. The Embassy protest struck a chord with the larrikin streak in many Australians and the public seemed to be amused by the inability of the authorities to do anything about it. Indeed, Robinson (ch.1, this volume) observed: 'The concept of symbolic demonstration was employed at a conscious level, but also with an Aboriginal twist on the larrikin sense of humour which throws rough hewn insolence in the direction of established Australian authority'. The *Canberra Times* observed that:

If the Prime Minister, Mr McMahon, thought that his Australia Day statement 'Australian Aborigines: Commonwealth Policy and Achievements', was the last word on the subject, the burgeoning encampment of the 'Aboriginal Embassy' across the road from his office has presumably disabused him of the notion. (Canberra Times 1972a)

Government Paralysis and Embassy consolidation

The McMahon cabinet seemed to be caught by surprise by the action and were at a loss as how to respond. Without a specific law to act upon the police's hands were tied, and there was a marked reluctance on the part of police to act without proper authorisation to do so. Moreover, to the surprise of the Aboriginal protestors, the Canberra Police were a different proposition to the more thuggish NSW Police Force that they were accustomed to dealing with. Unlike the brutal members of the notorious NSW 21 Division, these Canberra police were downright 'civilized', and would later regularly join the campers for a cuppa and chat. It almost seemed the ACT Police were enjoying the McMahon Government's political discomfort at its own impotence as much as everyone else in Australia. So relations with the Police initially remained cordial as basic logistics were negotiated.

The first public response by the Government on the Embassy came five days later on 31 January when the Minister for Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, Mr. Peter Howson, was reported in the *Canberra News* expressing concern at what he saw as, 'a disturbing undertone in the use of the term Aboriginal Embassy. The term implied a sovereign state and cut across the Government's expressed objection to separate development and was kindred to apartheid' (Canberra News 1972). The latter element of this statement was curious given the Australian Government's implicit and explicit support for the South African Apartheid regime during this period. The Minister's concern about the implication that Aboriginal activists were challenging the legitimacy

of the sovereignty of Australia was well founded, and would continue to obsess Government officials for some time to come.

Whilst at first the Government vacillated, it nonetheless orchestrated a short-lived campaign of petty harassment of the activists now camped on the lawn opposite Parliament House. On the second day of the protest the activists had installed better tents for the 'office' and sleeping quarters and had accepted the numerous offers of food, blankets and money from the growing number of supportive and friendly Canberra residents. Now the Government insisted that the lawns needed to be mowed and the sprinklers should water the lawns (and protestors) daily. Those matters were overcome when the Aboriginal activists negotiated with police and said that they would mow the lawns themselves, and the sprinklers eventually ceased dousing the tents when sympathetic parks and gardens workers refused to do it. Meanwhile the Black Power movement's public relations machinery, consisting of a hand-operated 'roneo' copying machine and John Newfong orchestrating coverage with a phone in one hand, and a little black book of comprehensive Parliamentary Press Gallery contacts in the other, swung into action. Not that the story was a difficult one to get the media interested in.

From day one the Aboriginal Embassy captured the imagination of the nation. In the weeks that followed virtually every major Australian newspaper, television news and current affairs show, and radio news program carried major stories of the audacious protest on the lawns of Federal Parliament House. Quickly following on the heels of the local media came numerous international television and newspaper reporters who made the story a global phenomenon. Among some of the respected international journalists,

one who had already made contact with and reported on the activities of the Redfern group was Stewart Harris, who was Canberra correspondent for the *London Times*. Harris was a gentle man, who developed a wide range of friends in Aboriginal Australia, ranging from conservatives such as Neville Bonner to the young radicals of Redfern. Harris had met and become friends with people like myself, Paul Coe, Gary Williams and Lyn Thompson during the 1971 Springbok tour. He had become particularly interested in the plight of Aboriginal Australia. As well as filing empathetic stories in *The Times* throughout the Embassy's existence, he eventually wrote two important books on the Aboriginal land rights struggle (Harris 1972; Harris 1979).

Among other international media that covered the Embassy were *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Le Figaro*, *Time magazine*, the *Israeli Post*, and *Le Monde*. Also papers as far afield as Manilla, Norway, Tokyo, Beijing, New Delhi, Jamaica, and Malaysia. Television networks in Japan and Sweden had also featured the Embassy'. John Newfong elaborated on the intense international media interest in an interview with the *Tribune*:

Norway's *The Way of the World*, second largest paper in the country, had a reporter make a special journey to Australia to cover it. The BBC World Service gave the Embassy story in two ten-minute segments. Westinghouse Radio in the USA also gave it good cover. The Japanese national television network, in an hour long documentary on Australia, gave a good twenty minutes to the Embassy. (Newfong 1972)

With that sort of local and international media coverage it very quickly became apparent that the Embassy protest was becoming a major political embarrassment for the McMahon Government. The Black Power activists were not behaving in a manner consistent with the way the Government was portraying them. On the 1st February Billy Craigie responded positively to a Commonwealth Police request to mow the lawns around the Embassy as part of a general spruce up of Canberra on the eve of a formal visit by President Suharto of Indonesia, and again Government attempts to demonise the protestors were defused.

On the 5 February John Newfong (ch.3 in this volume) released a petition drawn up by the Embassy which contained a 'five point plan for land rights'. The plan called for:

1. Control of the Northern Territory as a State within the Commonwealth of Australia; the parliament in the Northern Territory to be predominantly Aboriginal with title and mining rights to all land within the Territory.
2. Legal title and mining rights to all other presently existing reserve lands and settlements throughout Australia.
3. The preservation of all sacred sites in Australia.
4. Legal title and mining rights to areas in and around all Australian capital cities.
5. Compensation monies for lands not returnable to take the form of a down-payment of six million dollars and an annual percentage of the gross national income. (see Newfong, ch.4, this volume)

The five point plan was obviously conceived and written in haste (most likely by Newfong in consultation with Anderson, Chicka Dixon and Paul Coe). But it nevertheless represented one of the rare moments when the loose coalition known as the Black Power movement ever made a public declaration of their broader aims.

It is clear reading the plan that the primary focus of the Embassy activists was land. Or to be more precise, Land Rights. To the 1972 activists land was clearly regarded as important for its potential as an economic base for development of economic self-sufficiency as much as because of its sacred or spiritual importance. We were talking about legal ownership of land, not some obscure, legal 'interest' in land, such as with native title (see Watson, ch.16 this volume). We saw the economic importance for an impoverished Aboriginal community benefiting from the rights and royalties to the fortunes being extracted from their lands by mining companies. We also saw that the economic, social and political reconstruction of a vanquished Black Australia was going to take generations and that the cost of that could be covered through an ongoing form of compensation for the lands alienated over two hundred years of occupation. The point we were making was that in their quest for justice and compensation, we were unwilling to displace those white Australians who owned homes and had thereby unwittingly benefited from stolen Aboriginal land. Rather than blame the broader Australian community for their present plight, we regarded the politicians and bureaucrats of the Federal Government as responsible because of their failure to implement the policy changes expected after the 1967 referendum.

By so arguing, the Black Power activists were duly acknowledging the support expressed by the broader Australian community for Aboriginal rights in the remarkable result of the 1967 referendum. This set of demands was described by Robinson thus:

This five-point plan addressed Aboriginal ownership of all existing reserves and settlements (including rights to mineral deposits), ownership of land in the capital cities (including mineral rights), preservation of all sacred sites in all parts of the continent, six billion dollars in compensation, and full rights to statehood in the Northern Territory. (Robinson, ch.1 in this volume)

At the same time Anderson named a 'ministry', including a Minister for the Arts, Environment and Caucasian Affairs. These demands were an expression of a program of Land Rights for all Aboriginal people. They were both serious demands for redress and an example of the use by the Embassy of uncompromising public relations which created unprecedented media attention for Aboriginal activism and its cause (Robinson, ch.1 in this volume).

The release of the Embassy five point plan intensified the political pressure on the Government and, by 8 February the *Canberra Times* reported that the Embassy was now comprised of the eleven tents permitted and the 'staff' on site had grown to sixteen Activists. This group had staged a small protest when President Suharto had arrived at Parliament House the day before. Among the placards carried by Embassy activists that day was one which read 'Whitlam: when you change McMahon's Govt will it make any change to the suppression of Aboriginal people?' (Canberra Times 1972b). Here was a

challenge levelled directly at the Leader of the Opposition. Whitlam responded immediately by visiting the Embassy tents the very next day on the 8 February. Along with the Federal Labor member for the ACT, Kep Enderby, he spent several hours in discussion with the protestors. Whitlam's discussions were also in response to an earlier challenge by Paul Coe who had expressed a profound lack of confidence in the Aboriginal Affairs policy of the ALP. After intense discussions with Coe and other Embassy staff, Whitlam stepped out of the tent to publicly proclaim a promise of Aboriginal land rights (Australian 1972b).

To politically capitalise on Whitlam's radical new stance, Embassy activists quickly organised a rally for the 22 February opposite Parliament House. Meanwhile, on 14 February, an Interdepartmental Committee quietly recommended to Cabinet that the *Trespass on Commonwealth Lands Ordinance* be strengthened. It would be another month of dithering before the Minister for the Interior, Ralph Hunt, would write to the Prime Minister indicating his intention to amend the ordinance (Department of Interior 1972). Then on 22 February, the rally at the Embassy was held, under the watchful eyes of ASIO. Approximately 200 Aboriginal people and their supporters gathered and listened to some of the great black speakers of that era (see Eatock, ch.3 this volume). They included Chicka Dixon, John Newfong, Bruce McGuinness, Paul Coe, Sam Watson, Frank Roberts and Michael Anderson, as well as two representatives of the Gurindji. But undoubtedly the star speaker on that occasion was Leader of the Opposition Gough Whitlam. Robinson recognised the significance of this moment when he wrote that:

The visit by the ALP delegation established a link between the protestors and the parliamentary Labor party...An election was soon to be held, and one of the major parties had offered considerable

support. The protestors were aware of the value of this public endorsement of their cause: members of other parties, such as Hunt, Howson and Bonner were refused an invitation to the tents. (Robinson 1993: 108- 109)

Meanwhile the Government seemed to be struggling to decide what could be done with what they regarded as a ‘rabble’ on their front lawn. On 9 February the Minister for the Interior, Mr. Ralph Hunt, whose electorate of Gwydir included Aboriginal communities like Moree and Walgett where some of the Embassy activists had grown up, then made the first Government statement calling for the Embassy to be removed. Mr Hunt, along with Minister for the Arts, Aborigines and the Environment, Mr Peter Howson, would become the most vocal advocates on the Government side calling for the removal of the tents, but they remained frustrated by the lack of a formal, legal administrative mechanism to do so. An interdepartmental committee was set up to examine the problem. On 14th February the Committee ‘recommended that the *Betting and Gaming Ordinance* not be applied, and that new legislation be created under the *Commonwealth Lands Ordinance*’ (Robinson 1993: 51-52).

But the McMahon Government was in an increasingly difficult situation as its own Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA) was not exactly supporting the Government’s

position. Members of the CAA had expressed muted praise of McMahon's Australia Day Statement, describing it as 'a very small step forward', and in early February Dr. Coombs had visited the Embassy and told the protestors that he had 'complete sympathy' with their objectives (Canberra Times 1972c). Furthermore, Robinson quoted CAA member Barrie Dexter (later in 1973 to become the first Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs) as saying:

From the outset...[the CAA] felt sympathy and admiration for the 'Embassy' members, who had demonstrated a perceptive understanding of the real meaning of the Government's policy, and devised a most ingenious means of getting across to the Government the message we had been trying to impart. (Robinson 1993: 53-54).

By the time the first Parliamentary sitting for the year began on 23 February, it was clear that the McMahon Government had a major problem on its hands in the form of the tent protest on their Parliament lawn. In less than a month, the Embassy had managed to both engage in, and at the same time subvert, the conventional, mainstream political process to the extent of winning substantial political endorsement and support from the Opposition Leader, yet simultaneously stubbornly resisting attempts to draw the protest back into a conventional style and form. The Embassy had already established its aura and power because it had functioned outside the normal, bureaucratic system of protracted negotiation and compromise, so why meddle with success?

The young black militants experienced a great collective surge of confidence as they suddenly found themselves the focus of national political debate. They learned very quickly how to orchestrate media events and stunts in a way that would have maximum appeal on the TV news that night and they were savvy enough to time their events/stunts so that it met the afternoon deadline for the TV news and current affairs crews. Many journalists became close friends with some of the protestors. Journalists such as *London Times* correspondent Stewart Harris, who I mentioned earlier, and Geraldine Willisee, (sister of television personality Mike Willisee and daughter of Labor Senator Don Willisee) who was writing for the *Nation Review* also spent time at the Embassy and became friends with many of the activists.⁴

An unlikely friendship was that which developed between myself and Sydney tabloid *Daily Mirror* journalist Gus de Brito, who wrote a major feature article on me in 1972, which overnight had created instant notoriety (not to mention the increased police and ASIO surveillance and harassment) for me (de Brito 1972). Another young journalist in the Canberra Press gallery at the time who became friends with some of the Embassy staff was Michelle Grattan. She nevertheless maintained a professional distance from the tent people, and wrote some of the best (and sympathetic) news coverage of the protest. Also Jack Waterford who would later become editor of the *Canberra Times* made some close friends among the Embassy activists, especially Gary Williams. Many other journalists in the Canberra gallery were friends or professional associates of John Newfong, who had worked for a variety of major mainstream media outlets in the previous five years.

Furthermore, the newly developed bond with the ALP led to the occasional strange scenario that would provide fodder for the notorious Canberra gossip mill. Sympathetic Labor MPs would sometimes invite some of the protestors to join them at lunch inside Parliament House. The sight of scruffy, long-haired Black Power protestors happily dining on taxpayer-subsidised meals of the Parliamentary dining room created consternation amid ASIO and security staff and outrage and apoplexy among conservative Government Ministers. Robinson observed that:

A number of ALP members were committed to the issue...Aboriginal people were invited into the parliamentary dining room by ALP members. There remained, however, a certain distance between the protestors and the politicians...and the protest remained outside the more institutionalised politics within Parliament House. (Robinson 1993: 109)

As if to emphasise that point, just prior to the Parliament sitting, John Newfong announced a forthcoming visit to the Peoples Republic of China by an Aboriginal delegation comprised of some of the Embassy activists. Newfong said: 'The solution to our problem may lie outside Australian parliamentary channels' (cited in Age 1972b).

According to Scott Robinson (1993: 111), 'The Embassy had already made use of a range of tactics, and now included an international protest of a nature which directly contested Australian foreign policy'. Furthermore, a boost to the tent protestor's morale came when a delegation of key leaders from Northern Australia arrived in Canberra to hold meetings with the Government in the wake of the Gove Land Rights Case. Two

key men from Yirrkala were Roy Marika and Galarrwuy Yunupingu, who endorsed the tent protest and declared that ‘everyone’ in the remote tribal areas had heard of the Embassy. This was a serious blow for those who had up until then contended that in their anthropological opinion the ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people would never support such an action. These people (on both sides of the political fence) were blinded by their own inability to conceive that the Gurindji struggle was for more than just equal wages, and that the people of Yirrkala might be a little upset about having a bauxite mine imposed on them and being told their own land was not theirs.

The Embassy represented a major public challenge to the McMahon Government, and during question time when Parliament began sitting, in the public gallery were a large contingent of Aboriginal people, including Embassy protestors and the delegation from the Northern Territory. Robinson noted that:

The physical presence of so many Aboriginal people from all parts of Australia, and the currency of the symbolic protest for land rights, made this opening of parliament an occasion which introduced the land rights question as an issue of prominence through the action of the protesters. (Robinson 1993: 112-113)

On the day Parliament opened, the Embassy activists held a rally on the lawns. The rally attracted a crowd of at least 60 Aboriginal activists along with 400 non-Aboriginal supporters (mostly student activists from ANU) (Robinson 1993: 111-112). The high point of the rally came when it was addressed by Opposition Leader Gough Whitlam, who reiterated the new ALP general policy of land Rights for Aborigines. But, as

Robinson observed, on this occasion Whitlam was careful to commit his party to Land Rights where 'there is a historical connection between a tribe or clan and land' and made no mention of compensation for lands alienated (Robinson 1993: 112; see also Coe, ch.3 in this volume).

The next day debate on the issue of the Embassy began in the House of Representatives, where Minister for the Interior, Mr. Ralph Hunt spoke of the 'Aborigines who are demonstrating in a peaceful way for a case in which they believe' (Hansard 1972: 108). He said that 'they have been extremely quiet and that they have behaved and cooperated with the police extremely well. There is no litter and there is no health problem', but flagged possible future action against the campers when he stated that the Government 'will have to look at an ordinance to ensure that Parliament House is reserved for its purpose a place for peaceful and orderly demonstration, but not a place upon which people can camp indefinitely' (Hansard 1972: 108). Later the Minister for Aborigines, Environment and Arts, Peter Howson, defended the Prime Minister's Australia Day Statement and offered a range of gestures to 'traditional' Aboriginal groups in Northern Australia and claimed that notions of Land Rights were 'alien to native thought' (Hansard 1972: 134).

These statements by Hunt and Howson mirrored the popular conservative line on Aborigines at the time. It was a position that held that the 'traditional' Aborigines of Arnhem Land and Central Australia were the only 'real' Aboriginal people, and that the 'part bloods' of the South were 'detrified' and therefore must become 'assimilated'. This had been the racial ideology that had underpinned more than fifty years of

assimilationist policy on the part of Federal and State Governments. These policies had been articulated and implemented by anthropologist administrators who had created an Australian apartheid system that imposed on those Aboriginal people of 'mixed blood' a life of misery and enforced assimilation. By the time of the Embassy these outmoded and racist notions had been discredited and rejected in most parts of the Western world, and as the 'winds of change' blew threw a rapidly de-colonising Africa, it seemed extraordinary that Australian conservative politicians would cling so tenaciously to such ideas.

By contrast, the scruffy band of black activists across the road had a much more sophisticated critique of the values and ideas of the white conservative lawmakers. They had read Native American Vine Deloria's devastating challenge to anthropologists in his classic 1969 book *Custer Died for Your Sins: an Indian Manifesto*, and were acutely aware of the way in which anthropology as a profession had denied their existence and experience and effectively deemed them 'non-Aboriginal' people. They also liked to quote Deloria's (1969) joke: 'An anthropologist asked an Indian, "What did you call this place before the white man came?" The Indian responds, "Ours."' The focus of the Embassy on the right of self-determination demonstrated an acute awareness of the right of Aboriginal people not only to control their own affairs, but also to define who should be regarded as 'Aboriginal'. The Embassy would later be smashed by the ACT Police, but the basic issues of Self-determination, Land Rights and economic and political independence (or lack thereof) that it had focussed attention upon would continue to this day to be at the heart of Aboriginal-white relations in Australia.

In its brief six month existence in 1972, the Aboriginal Embassy changed Australian history by bringing an end to the era of assimilation that had dominated Government Aboriginal policies since Federation. The Embassy protest was also a major propaganda war against the Australian government as the young black activists developed a sophisticated public relations machine that cultivated and educated journalists. Through the media they were able to create an awareness among the Australian public, who just five years earlier in 1967 had voted strongly in support of Aboriginal rights. In making the voice of the Aboriginal people heard, the Aboriginal Embassy firmly planted Aboriginal issues on the national political agenda for the first time. The Embassy was credited by later Prime Minister Gough Whitlam as playing a key role in the final demise of the McMahon Liberal/Country Party Government. For all of these reasons it can be seen that the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy changed the course of Australian history.

The election of the Whitlam government in December 1972, six months after McMahon had presided over the violent removal of the tent protest, was welcomed by the activists who had organized the Aboriginal Embassy. But the young black radicals would get their first major lesson in political deceit and duplicity when the new Prime Minister Whitlam reneged on this promises to the Aboriginal peoples (see Newfong, ch.4 this volume). Less than twelve months later the failure by Whitlam to deliver on his promise of Land Rights saw the return of the Aboriginal Embassy to the lawns of Parliament House. Since then the Aboriginal Embassy has for forty years stood as an enduring and resilient symbol of Aboriginal resistance in Australia.

Whilst politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra would prefer that people focus on more timid and gentle distractions such as ‘reconciliation’, *ersatz* land rights in the form of native title, and a completely meaningless and empty Prime Ministerial ‘apology’, the Aboriginal Embassy remains on the lawns of Parliament as a reminder of the truth. That it has endured for four decades as a potent symbol rejecting the hypocrisy, deceit and duplicity by successive Australian governments is a testament to the refusal of large numbers of Aboriginal people to concede defeat in a two hundred year struggle for justice. On Australia Day in 2012 the Aboriginal Embassy was again the focal point for national and international attention in a incident involving Prime Minister Gillard.

Whilst much of the Australian media attention bordered on hysteria and the incident itself was distorted out of all proportion (see Graham, ch.5 this volume), it nevertheless demonstrated the intensity that the Embassy can still provoke after forty years of just sitting there. If, as some suggest, the Embassy can only ever be removed by Aboriginal people achieving their goals of Land Rights, Self-Determination and economic independence, then I suspect the Embassy will be with us for many more decades yet.

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¹ This chapter is an edited extract of Foley (2012).

² This has been corrected in the reprinted version of Robinson's article in ch.1 of this volume.

³ These photographs are now available on the website of the National Archives of Australia.

⁴ Geraldine would later in the year be fined \$50 after being arrested in company with members of the Redfern Black Caucus at the notorious Redfern Empress Hotel. During

those court hearings she had testified that she believed that NSW Police were ‘under political pressure to destroy the Black Power movement’ (cited in Sydney Morning Herald 1972b).