

## CONTEXTUALISING CHURCH INVOLVEMENT IN

# 'THE FIRST ABORIGINAL RACE RIOT'

Meredith Lake suggests that overseas anti-racism activism influenced church participation in Australian racial politics in the 1970s

At around midday on Tuesday, 23 November 1971, approximately 200 Aboriginal people took to the streets of Brisbane in protest against the Queensland Government's proposed Aborigines Bill. Angry that this had been drafted without adequate consultation with Aboriginal people, that it made no provision for the establishment of Aboriginal councils with real power and that it continued to deny Aboriginal people ownership of reserve lands, the protesters demanded an audience

with the Director of the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs, Mr Killoran.

When the protesters found themselves locked out of Mr Killoran's office, the demonstration erupted into violence. Rocks were thrown at passing buses and department windows were smashed. Fistfights broke out and policemen were knocked down and kicked. Nine Aboriginal people were arrested.

Over 100 Christians attended the protest as sympathetic observers. All of them were members of the Australian Council of Churches (ACC), an organisation that represented almost all the major non-Catholic churches in the country. All of them were delegates at a conference on 'Racism in Australia' being held nearby at Southport. They had gathered because, as organiser Clifford Wright put it, 'Many of us were well informed about racism in the United States of America and in South Africa, but little aware of its presence and details of its operation in Australia'. The conference program featured several expert speakers, including Faith Bandler, then general secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and Charles Spivey, staff member with the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism.

Two days into the conference, Aboriginal Methodist pastor Don Brady rose to his feet and presented the delegates with a plan to occupy the government offices of the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs. He explained that he had come to the conference 'to find out where you're at, where you stand'. If serious about combating racism in Australia, he said, 'You should be down there [at the protest tomorrow] trying to rip [the staff] out of their offices'.

Dennis Walker, co-organiser of the protest, added that 'passing a few resolutions and then go[ing] home saying "we did the right thing"' was no means by which to 'seriously challenge the right of the white parliament, the white courts, the white system to deny blacks human rights'.

[Faith Bandler at the Australian Council of Churches, Sydney, 1971] gelatin silver photograph; 26.3 x 20.2 cm  
Pictures Collection nla.pic-an23182011  
Courtesy of The Herald and Weekly Times Ltd



Over the next 36 hours, delegates debated the wisdom of attending the protest. Many were concerned about potential violence but, recognising the need to show their opposition to the Bill in the manner requested by Brady and Walker, they eventually resolved to shut down the conference and travel to Brisbane. As a result, scores of Christians, including bishops, Australian Council of Churches executive members and other church leaders, were present at what the *Sydney Morning Herald* called the 'first Aboriginal race riot'.

Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen was furious with the Australian Council of Churches for its involvement in the demonstration and publicly blamed it for the 'ugly scenes' that ensued. There was no issue of racism in Queensland, he fumed, 'militants among the Aboriginals and white demonstrators' had simply come to Brisbane 'looking for trouble'.

The Australian Council of Churches' sincere commitment to the cause of Australia's Indigenous peoples, expressed in the presence of its members at the demonstration, had produced conflict with the governments it lobbied and uncertainty over the appropriateness of violence within its own ranks. These were both issues with which the World Council of Churches (WCC) was similarly occupied in the early 1970s. This international backdrop was very important in shaping the nature of the Australian Council of Churches' involvement both in the Brisbane demonstration and in anti-racism activism generally.

When the Australian Council of Churches was formed in the mid-1940s, its purpose was to give 'practical expression in the local sphere' to the 'lofty ideals ... and dreams' of the World Council of Churches. Its organisational structure reflected the decisions of the World Council of Churches. In the early 1960s, after the World Council of Churches merged with the International Missionary Council, the Australian Council of Churches similarly incorporated the National Missionary Council of Australia (NMC) as its new Division of Mission. This was of great significance to the emergence of a political concern for Aboriginal rights and welfare within the Australian Council of Churches, as the National Missionary Council of Australia had been among the first white organisations to advocate land



rights for Aboriginal people. The influence of the World Council of Churches on the actual structure of the Australian Council of Churches provoked in the latter a deepening concern for Aboriginal rights and welfare.

Many of the Australian Council of Churches' ventures were undertaken in line with World Council priorities and objectives. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, the World Council of Churches' opposition to apartheid in South Africa informed the Australian Council of Churches' own campaign for the boycott of South African goods and the cancellation of sporting tours by white South African teams. The influence of the World Council of Churches in Australia extended beyond prompting the Australian Council of Churches to protest against racial oppression in South Africa and other countries. When the World Council of Churches established its Programme to Combat Racism in 1969,

above:  
Dennis Walker at the Brisbane protest, shown falling from his speaking position on the roof of a car, 24 November 1971  
Reproduced from the *Courier-Mail* Pictures Collection  
Courtesy of Queensland Newspapers

below:  
Dennis Walker being arrested by Brisbane police as Pastor Don Brady looks on, 24 November 1971  
Reproduced from the *Courier-Mail* Pictures Collection  
Courtesy of Queensland Newspapers



it confronted the Australian Council of Churches with the increasingly urgent need for Christian action against racism. It made the Australian Council of Churches specifically responsible for raising and acting upon questions of race relations in Australia. During the 1970s, the Australian Council of Churches' increasing involvement in the campaign for Indigenous land rights was largely motivated and informed by world church moves to combat racism.

The World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism had a direct impact on the land rights movement in Australia. Most immediately, it equipped activists with resources. Through its Special Fund grant scheme, it provided financial assistance to both the National Tribal Council and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Through its encouragement of, and advice to, the Australian Council of Churches' leaders, the Programme to Combat Racism also contributed skills and ideas.

Significantly, the Programme to Combat Racism boosted the profile of the Aboriginal peoples' campaign within the world church community. This engendered financial benefits for Aboriginal activist groups, as churches around the world were encouraged and enabled to give to their work. The support of the World Council of Churches and other national churches also added moral and political weight to the Australian Council of Churches' own lobbying and campaign activities.

In 1971, when the Queensland Government announced the Aborigines Bill against which the Brisbane protest was directed, World Council racism experts were among its severest and most outspoken critics. They publicly labelled the legislation 'almost as iniquitous as South Africa's apartheid' and called for the greater self-government of Aboriginal people. When the Australian Council of Churches conference delegates resolved to attend the demonstration in solidarity with the aggrieved Aboriginal organisers, they did so with the moral and political support of the World Council.

At the time of the Brisbane demonstration, the World Council of Churches was not alone in working internationally to combat racism. The United Nations (UN) had declared 1971 'International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial

Discrimination' and had adopted the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Such large-scale anti-racism campaigns marked the crucial recognition of racism as a global problem demanding similarly global action. The UN's declaration served to universalise terms like 'racism' and 'racial discrimination', creating discursive unities between racial struggles waged all over the world. The civil rights movement in America, resistance to apartheid in South Africa and the campaign for Indigenous land rights in Australia were no longer local struggles against local forces of oppression: they were reconceptualised as campaigns directed against the common root problem of racism.

It was clear to contemporary commentators that the Brisbane riot was informed by an increasingly international discourse of anti-racism, and by the Black American experience in particular. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the demonstration as 'the first of its kind in Australia—the violent, urban protest of a coloured minority in familiar Black Power traditions'. Participants, too, were conscious of appropriating American methods of struggle. Apart from resorting to violence, four of the Aboriginal people arrested at the demonstration gave the 'black power' salute upon their release from police custody. The protest marked more than an important development in the tactics of Aboriginal rights campaigners: it led both commentators and participants to locate the Aboriginal peoples' campaign in the context of a wider movement for black and Indigenous rights.

The Christian and Indigenous participants in the Brisbane demonstration were influenced respectively by the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism and the American civil rights movement. This indicates the substantial impact of the emergent discourse of international anti-racism activism on racial politics in Australia. It points to a need to view episodes like the Brisbane protest in the context of a more global drama. Such a task, highly important to the development of the cultural history of religion in Australia, can be well sustained by the diverse collections of the National Library of Australia.

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[Australian Methodists Alan Walker (left) and Dr Secomb (right) lead the opening procession at the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948] (detail) gelatin silver photograph; 20.0 x 13.4 cm  
In the Collection of Personal Photographs of the Rev. Dr Sir Alan Walker  
Pictures Collection nla.pic-vn3066032

