

A journalist, lecturer and consultant, he brought a rare vision and insight to Aboriginal activism.

Born: 3.11.1943

Died: 30.5.1999

By **DIANA PLATER**

If anybody were to write the full story of Aboriginal Australia at the turn of the 20th century it should have been John Newfong. The tragedy is he died in Sydney at the age of 55 without having finished the memoirs that many people had been waiting for years to read.

Newfong, described by Charles Perkins, as a "genius with a pen", was the first Aborigine employed as a journalist in mainstream print media. His work and activism crossed the whole gamut of Aboriginal affairs from health to media to arts to land rights, encompassing his unique understanding of both the media and the international scene. He is seen here with the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, at the opening of the National Aboriginal Conference in Canberra in 1978.

As a young man, fresh from a stint as campaign secretary for the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the 1967 Aboriginal referendum, he was hired by Adrian Deamer, the then editor of *The Australian*. The newspaper had been looking for an Aboriginal journalist, somebody who had a feel for the issues and could give them some guidance on them. Newfong also worked as a general reporter. Colleagues say it wasn't easy for him to reconcile his work in mainstream media while also being connected to the Aboriginal movement, especially as the media were not necessarily seen as allies at that time. Yet he continued to work as a journalist, lecturer and consultant until his death.

John Archibald Newfong was born at Wynnum, east of Brisbane, on 3 November 1943, but spent his early years on Stradbroke Island. Both his parents, Archie and Edna Newfong, had strong ties to the island, although his mother came



"Newfong was known for his beautiful speaking voice, his sharp wit, his fine intellect, his huge store of anecdotes and his unusual ability to have fun in what many see as a deeply serious world."

from the Wynnum area. When Newfong was five, his parents moved to Wynnum to enable him to attend school and he later graduated from Wynnum High School.

Edna had played representative cricket for Queensland and was a member of the Australian women's team which played against England in 1935. Archie, an ex-serviceman, was at one time Queensland heavyweight boxing champion. Both instilled in John, his brother Neville, and his sisters Becky and Judy, a strong work ethic and principles about treating people equally.

Nobody is really sure where Newfong inherited his brilliant writing skills, but many agree he was the first Aboriginal person to have such a natural way with the written word. One of his best pieces was an excerpt from his unpublished book, *A Black Light*. Titled *Aboriginal Australia — the reality and not the myth*, it formed the foreword to the National Aboriginal Health Strategy.

Newfong, a big man, was also known for his beautiful speaking voice, his sharp wit, his fine intellect, his huge store of

anecdotes, his immense charm and his unusual ability to have fun in what many see as a deeply serious world. Yet he was not an egotistical person — he was unassuming about the importance of his role in the past 30 years of Aboriginal politics.

While elected general secretary for FCAATSI in 1970, Newfong continued to work for *The Australian* and later for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. In 1971 he reported from Paris on the election of President Pompidou and in Uganda covered the seizure of power by General Amin and the outbreak of civil war.

This international experience and contacts were invaluable for Newfong back in Australia in 1972 when he took up the role of an "ambassador" or chief spokesman for the first Aboriginal tent embassy on the front lawns of Parliament House in Canberra. As Newfong later pointed out, this protest was to be a milestone in the history of the Aboriginal movement.

A fellow tent embassy participant, Gary Foley, said the main reason the embassy was a success was because of the way they were able to orchestrate their media image; Newfong, understanding how the

media worked, played a crucial role. Newfong was one of the first people in the Aboriginal movement to realise the importance of international pressure on the Australian Government — particularly from the African nations and India and significantly in the area of Aboriginal health. He had contacts with diplomats, royalty and influential people from Russia to Ethiopia and was a frequent name on the guest list of diplomatic cocktail parties in Canberra.

"His knowledge of issues of international importance relevant to our situation was encyclopaedic," Foley said. "He was a black Barry Jones and inspired us younger ones to read more. He was one of the old staunch crew who changed history and should be lauded as a hero of the struggle."

Among his many achievements, Newfong played a crucial role in the early days of the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern, Sydney.

He also was director of public relations and information for the Aboriginal Development Commission under Charles Perkins and later media and political adviser to Perkins' successor, Shirley McPherson; he had an important role in the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting, particularly as director of the Public Broadcasting Foundation of Australia in 1982; was editor of *Identity*, the national indigenous color magazine; was a member of the former Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee of the then Australian Council for the Arts, and was Queensland state chairman of the National Aboriginal Conference.

His many other roles included being a consultant to the Australian Medical Association, which led to a widening of curricula at medical schools to include a greater awareness of Australian indigenous health requirements.

As a lecturer in journalism and media studies and in Australian indigenous health at James Cook University, Newfong had a profound effect on his students, helping them to think in a truly global way while discovering their own potential.

John Newfong was buried beside his parents and brother at Myora on Stradbroke Island on Friday. He is survived by his partner, Adrian Atkins, his sisters, Becky Thomson and Judy Watego, and his large extended family. A memorial service will be held at 11am on Wednesday at St Vincent's Catholic Church in Redfern, Sydney.