

## Faith Bandler: Gentle activist who worked her charm



*Faith Bandler's white cotton gloves*

By Gideon Haigh  
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“Housewife leads fight for dignity” was the headline in this newspaper on April 3, 1967 on the eve of the referendum seeking to include Indigenous Australians in the census. The subject of the interview was Faith Bandler, director of the Yes campaign in NSW who had campaigned tirelessly on the issue for a decade, but who cheerfully identified as “a busy housewife and mother of two”. It was part of her effectiveness.

Bandler was a gifted, fluent public speaker. As state secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, she could utter tough truths, such as that the Australian constitution as it stood had left its indigenous population “classed with animals”, and “that rights are not handed on a platter by governments, they have to be won”.

She was a staunch republican who rejected an MBE out of objection to colonialism.

She was also, invariably, immaculate. The budding activist poet Roberta Sykes saw Bandler for the first time at a luncheon in Townsville and was overwhelmed: “I regret I don’t recall a thing Faith said as I was so overcome with her poise, dress and charming manner! She wore dainty white gloves and elegant shoes. I had never seen a black woman so elegantly groomed.”

The daughter of an escaped Kanaka slave — who had eluded deportation to become a lay preacher — and a young Indian-Scottish widow, Bandler had grown up in fiercely segregated Murwillumbah. When her father contracted the influenza that killed him, he was treated not in the local hospital but in an adjoining tent for “coloureds”.

She also experienced great kindness: from teachers, from her needlework and piano instructor, from working-class colleagues in the Women's Land Army and eventually in the bohemian salons of Kings Cross who wakened her political consciousness and introduced her to engineer Hans Bandler, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald. He became her husband.

So when the referendum campaign was in full swing, Bandler set out to persuade and charm as much as to admonish, to minimise the distance between herself and her audiences at Rotary, Apex and Lions Clubs, church groups, women's guilds, teachers' federations and so on.

These "day gloves", then de rigueur for middle-class women, accompanied her everywhere. "How comfortable you make people feel!" wrote an audience member.

The impact on Sykes was electric also: "In a flash, all the negative stereotypes of Blacks were smashed down. I had always secretly hoped that it was possible for Blacks to rise above the level at which we were kept in Townsville — and suddenly I knew it was possible!"

It's quite possible that there has never been such a successful campaign in Australian history. Forty-eight matters have been put to Australians in referendums and plebiscites. Eight have passed. Nothing has achieved anything like the 90.77 per cent favourable vote on May 27, 1967.

Ironically, FCAATSI's success contained the seeds of its doom. Critics emerged, including Sykes, of its incrementalism and multiracialism, and a campaign split the body along Indigenous and non-Indigenous lines three years later.

Bandler always argued that for great political and social change "the time needed to be right; the society must be made ready; and momentum needs to be built and maintained". Her 1983 history of the FCAATSI was entitled *The Time Was Ripe*; her 2002 biography, by Marilyn Lake, styles her the "gentle activist".

But the referendum victory, it was counterclaimed, was mitigated by it having been "a victory for white Australians, who formed a coalition with Black Australians", the latter of which should repudiate "white political machines" altogether. Not only did the clenched fist succeed the kid glove, but housewifery slipped sharply from fashion.