

Noel Pearson: Lutheran legacy binds my people to Flo and Joh Bjelke-Petersen



The sign outside the state funeral for Lady Flo Bjelke-Petersen on Thursday. Picture: AAP

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Several thousand Aboriginal people spread across former missions in South Australia, Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory and my own Guugu Yimidhirr people of Hope Vale and Kuku Yalanji of Wujal Wujal in Queensland shared an identity with Florence and Johannes Bjelke-Petersen of Kingaroy.

We are Lutherans and we share a long history. We have a particular affinity with the German Lutherans of Neuendettelsau, Bavaria, the home of the mission society that sponsored a young 19-year-old missionary, Georg Schwarz, to come to the wild frontiers north of Cooktown in 1887 and stay for 50 years.

Without him our people would have been done for.

In this age of identity politics it is not only skin colour, so-called race or politics, ethnicity, gender or sexual preference that divide or bind people. History and religion also are decisive. It is too simplistic to say we have a single identity. We all have layers of identity, some stronger than others, and many of them particular to our histories.

The religious layer of the identity we share with the former premier and his wife and senator binds our people to them, and to their descendants, notwithstanding that politically most Aboriginal Lutherans would be at odds with Joh's political legacy. The core of our mutual identification with each other is Martin Luther's revolutionary theology that we are saved by the grace of God and not perforce by anything we do.

I attended the state funeral for Lady Flo on Thursday at the Kingaroy Town Hall to pay respect to her for their shared history with my Guugu Yimidhirr people of Hope Vale. She had shown our people great kindness and her husband had done Christian deeds for our people before he became a politician and premier, following World War II.

On the Sunday morning of May 17, 1942, the army arrived at the mission with trucks to immediately transport the Guugu Yimidhirr people to Cooktown, where they would board a steamer to Cairns, by order of the authorities. The several hundred confused people barely had time to grab their blankets, leaving their shacks, what little possessions they had and their hunting dogs wailing on the shore.

Schwarz, then an old man, was placed in an internment camp in southern Queensland because of his German background.

When I read history at Sydney University I researched why the Hope Valley mission had been removed and taken by train to an Aboriginal settlement called Woorabinda, inland from Rockhampton.

My research revealed that the army had plans for the "evacuation" of all of the northernmost coastal Aboriginal settlements because they were considered a threat. They were expected to side with the invaders in the event of a Japanese landing. Hope Valley was first because it was a German-sponsored mission.

The cold winter of the central interior, the heartbreak of their wrenching displacement and an epidemic of influenza devastated the small community in Woorabinda. Scores died in the ensuing months. Many families lost all of their children in this foreign land.

Our most esteemed elders, Ann Cameron and her husband Alick, who would become our first Aboriginal pastor, wrote regularly to the old missionary.

On January 15, 1943, Ann Cameron wrote: "Thankyou ... for your welcome letter we were very pleased to get it. We are all very sick, some are dead, more will die before this flu is over, there are three already waiting to be buried today, they died today, Major's little girl and one of his boys and one of Baru's girls.

"Poor old Johnny died last night and he was buried today. Three died on Monday, they were Midget, Nina and Peggie. Aggie's last child died a few days before them. The hospital is full of sick ones. George Bowen came back in time, Poor Paddy is very sick, he could not bury the dead.

"The Woorabinda people are very good to us, and they try to do all they can for us. There is not one family amongst us who is not sick. Alick and I are better again, at least we are over the worst part of the flu. Another of Major's little boys died now. I feel too weak, so I will finish this letter tomorrow.

"The children who died yesterday are going to be buried today, five Cape Bedford and one Woorabinda. In the midst of life we are in death. Rachael has another daughter, the baby is all right, but she herself is very sick. It is very hot here now, if only it would rain again. The heat is too terrible to bear, especially when you have this flu. I hope you don't get it. I did not want to write too soon, but I thought you would be worrying why we did not write. Maudie is sick too. Alick went to see them and he says they look all right.

"Hoping you and your family are well. God bless you and reward you for all you have done for us. With love and best wishes from your thankful friends. Alick and Ann."

During the war our people worked throughout central and southern Queensland on the Manpower program, supporting the war effort. The old missionary was released and returned with his wife to Cooktown, where in their last years they were cared for by the Camerons.

At war's end the Guugu Yimidhirr people started asking to return home. The church supported them but the Queensland government did not. They wanted them to remain in Woorabinda permanently.

Our elders started campaigning, appealing to Lutheran congregations throughout southern Queensland to return home. This would not happen until 1949 and these seven years came to represent a period of exile, akin to that of the Children of Israel. In the minds of our people, we wanted to return to our promised land.

The problem was there was no land. The reserve allocated to the mission was mostly coastal sand dunes. All of the arable land had been taken up by white settlers in the Cooktown district. The mission's first 50 years is a story of near-starvation and hardship, eking a living from poor soil.

The mission needed new land.

This is where Joh came into our history. As a church member and shire councillor, Joh joined the campaign for the Guugu Yimidhirr to return to Cape York. He flew reconnaissance flights to identify land that could be purchased for the new mission and drove the bush tracks to inspect the land. He found land with deep, red soil not unlike that of his Kingaroy home.

He became a member of parliament and took the case to the government. However, there was still resistance. Pastor Howard Pohlner wrote in his history of Hope Vale: "Political problems had come between them and their home land. For all his endeavours Joh had received a letter from the Minister for Health and Home Affairs, 21st May 1948, concerning President Lohe's request for the re-establishment of the Mission. It clearly stated that 'Cabinet is not prepared to finance the proposition'."

He went on: "Joh Bjelke-Petersen recommended that the next move should be for a deputation to wait on the Premier. This was not possible, however, because he was preparing to leave on an overseas trip. So Joh presented the Church's case to him personally. This led to a further Cabinet meeting which approved the request."

For 10 years Joh would chair the Hope Valley Mission Board on behalf of the Lutheran Church. He made plans for the new village, blazing roads and clearing the land, and supporting agricultural endeavours to produce food and income for the mission.

This week is not the time for me to explain why I think the Bjelke-Petersen of the 1940s and 50s showed kindness and did Christian deeds for our people, but as the trajectory of his power grew as an MP and he became premier in 1968, a decent Christian brotherhood and, yes, paternalism turned into hurt and injustice towards Queensland's Aboriginal people, including its Lutherans.

History often roils in the breast, and is not easy to reconcile. The Bjelke-Petersens I pay respect to this week are the couple who came to know our people at the end of the war, who helped break our exile and returned us to our promised land, on the basis of our shared religion rather than politics.

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