

For Aboriginal sovereignty

by Gary Foley

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On 26 January 1988, Aboriginal Australia celebrated and gave a great show of solidarity, an expression of our ongoing sovereignty of this country. We've never relinquished the sovereignty of this country. I think it is important that people realise that it's not a question of coming and looking at the poor little old Aborigines and asking what you can do for us. I believe that we are in a position to teach you how to do the sort of things that I think you have come together to talk about at this conference.* I believe that Aboriginal Australia politically is in a very healthy position in terms of controlling our own affairs within our own community. We have an ongoing battle trying to get more resources to enable us to do the jobs that we want to do properly. But Aboriginal Australians have proven, especially in the last 20 years, that we are capable of solving our own problems if we've got control over the resources to do so.

An example is in the area of health care. Aboriginal people in the last 15 years in particular have built up a system of health care that is unique in the world. It is the only health care system that we know of which operates in accordance with the basic guidelines laid down by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for effective delivery of community health care. It is a revolutionary system for the simple reason that it's not the so-called professionals who run the system. It's not a system run by doctors or by people who have been to university and have letters after their names. It's a system that has been conceived, designed, established and is today controlled by the Aboriginal people themselves Aboriginal people from the communities in which these health services operate. It began 15 years ago with an Aboriginal health service in Redfern, which had been set up by the Aboriginal community, and one in Fitzroy, Melbourne. Today, there are about 60 Aboriginal community-controlled health services throughout this country. As a group of organisations, they are represented nationally, politically, by their umbrella organisation which is the National Aboriginal Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO). It is no accident that in the last 15 years both conservative Liberal governments and conservative Labor governments have done everything they possibly could to try and undermine that organisation. The simple reason is that the bureaucrats and the politicians have seen NAIHO for what it is - a threat to them and their power over Aboriginal people.

Too many Australians find it very difficult to accept that Aboriginal people are capable of controlling their own affairs; are capable of doing things better than your so-called white experts can. And as a result we are perceived NAIHO has been perceived as a threat, especially by the bureaucrats. For 15 years they've done everything possible to try and starve that organisation of resources when at the same time that organisation has done unbelievable things. It has not only overcome immediate problems within the communities where it operates but has also strengthened politically and nationally the Aboriginal community.

Around 1980 the federal government allocation for Aboriginal health was about \$20 million a year. Considering the appalling health problems confronted by the Aboriginal community it was chicken-shit money, but at the same time even the \$20 million was denied Aboriginal health services. Sixteen million of that 20 million used to be handed straight over to the various state health bureaucracies around Australia, not one of which was involved in the delivery of primary health care. They were all running what they called preventive health programs which in reality simply meant that they employed a few token blackfellas to make their offices look good and black, and they made posters

telling Aboriginal people to wash their hands after they go to the toilet. That was their preventive health program. They didn't take into account the fact that many Aboriginal communities at that time had no access even to running water to wash their bloody hands. At the same time as those \$16 million were going into totally inappropriate, totally pointless state health bureaucratic programs, NAIHO, representing at that time about 50 community controlled health services throughout this country, delivered an integrated primary health care and preventive health care program. According to the WHO this is the only way you can deliver effective health care. Those 50 community controlled health services, scattered all over Australia, were expected to operate with about two and a half million of the remaining \$4 million. And yet despite all the attempts to confine our operations, to control us, to deny us the resources needed to do the job properly, we still managed through sheer effort, through the incredible courage and determination of thousands of Aboriginal people. We managed not only to bring about identifiable improvements in the health of Aboriginal people where these health services were, but we also built a formidable national political organisation in the NAIHO: an organisation that in conjunction with other national Aboriginal organisations was able to extend the Aboriginal political movement into the international political arena to such an extent that the chickens are now well and truly coming home to roost for the Bob Hawkes and the politicians and the bureaucrats of Australia. There has never been the extent of international scrutiny of Australia that exists today, especially in this wonderful year of 1988, possibly the best year for Aborigines so far at least politically.

What was potentially a politically disastrous year for Aboriginal people has been transformed into a great success for us. The bicentennial seems to have fizzled out a little bit lately. Not too many people seem all that interested in it. But lots of people, both within Australia and overseas especially, are vitally interested in what's happening in Aboriginal Australia.

Now you can go and set up Rainbow Alliances and whatever you like but it is important that you learn that we don't want you to come and say to us "what can we do to help you?" It's important that you look at the true history of our political struggle, especially in the last 20 years or so, and come to the realisation that we've got a lot to teach you about how to build a grass roots movement from the bottom up, not from the top down. I think if you look at the way in which the Aboriginal movement has organised itself, you will see that we didn't start off by a few hot-shots getting together and making decisions on behalf of the people at the bottom. It began from the bottom up, from the community out, identifying specific problems in a given community and then helping people gain knowledge and information about what was going on around them.

Information is power. And through people gaining information about what should happen or what shouldn't happen, or what their history is, and what's gone wrong, we're able to get our community organised. For example, when the Aboriginal Legal Service in New South Wales was first established it was something that came out of the Aboriginal community as a direct response by Aboriginal people to a specific major problem that existed in their community. And the NSW Aboriginal Legal Service became an extremely important organisation in the political history of the modern day Aboriginal political movement. It made an incredible contribution. It was one of the key organisations involved in the Aboriginal embassy.

People have to look honestly at their own history. I don't believe enough non-Aboriginal Australians know much about the reality of the Australian historical experience; about your history; about our history; about the two and where they connect. I think it is really important for people to learn that, and make other people aware; you must try in some way to come to terms with it and at least begin to understand and try to figure out how to overcome the incredibly entrenched racism that exists to this day in this society. Australia has such a long tradition of racism and there's not enough discussion of that. There aren't enough attempts to come to terms with that; to understand it; to try and remove

the scourges of racism, sexism, and exploitation from the Australian community. You need to look inwards to start figuring out how to overcome that.

You've got to do all those things before you come to us and try and do anything with us. Learn from us. Aboriginal people are doing alright. Politically, we're doing brilliantly. There's a lot of room for improvement, but we have a strong united national political movement which not only attempts to bring about political change, but, parallel with that, is actually overcoming specific problems that confront our community. It's not something that's separate from helping people take control of their own lives. It's something that happens with people in conjunction with each other, not apart and separate.

If you look and learn from the Aboriginal experience you will see that Aboriginal people have tried to take control of their own affairs to exercise true self-determination. Ordinary Aboriginal people themselves have organised and contributed to the whole process. It's because Aboriginal people have organised themselves in such a way that I think is absolutely brilliant. There's no other group of people in this country who have gone from the position we were in 20 or 25 years ago to where we are today.

We are strong and united today. Any of you who marched on 26 January in Sydney can only have been overwhelmed in the same way I was by the unbelievable feeling of that day. And it was tremendous to see non- Aboriginal people marching with us and they got caught up in the spirit of the thing too.

We're strong, we're united and we're working on a multitude of levels, all of which ultimately form one great self-determination for Aboriginal people in this country: we must achieve economic independence for ourselves as communities of people. But if we achieve that in the next ten or 20 years, we will still be surrounded by an Australia that is in all aspects diametrically the opposite of our society. We'll end up as what amounts to socialist enclaves in the midst of a mad capitalist white Australia; a twisted white Australia.

The only sort of Australia that I think Aboriginal Australia can ultimately live alongside in true harmony is some form of socialist republic Australia where racism, sexism and exploitation have been eliminated. Now, we're doing alright in organising our mob. What the hell are you mob doing? You are so disorganised and splintered. It's vitally important that you get your act together, because whether we like it or not, we're all in this together.