

BLACK POWER, LAND RIGHTS AND ACADEMIC HISTORY

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In this article, I discuss certain aspects of Australian Indigenous history of the 1960s and 1970s and critically examine the manner in which this history has been taught and written by non-Indigenous academic historians. What has been the role of white academic historians, and how have their misinterpretations and distortions contributed to the regressive and repressive government policies of today, such as the Northern Territory intervention. The article calls for more Aboriginal university students to consider history as an equally important field of study to law, in terms of changing attitudes in Australian society.

I'd like to pay my respects to the people whose land I'm on at the moment, and to pay my respects and give my regards to all the elders from the local community, to all local community people, to all the community people from all over Australia and also to the special guests, our special guests from overseas – one of whom is intimidating me right at the moment. He's one of my great heroes, role models and inspirations over the last 30 years or more: Mr Russell Means. I had the honour of very nervously meeting him last night.

I am going to take you all on a lightning trip through a hundred years of Australian history. I am very strong on history: I am a historian. I chose not to be a lawyer when I ultimately went to university late in life, and I like to encourage as many young Aboriginal people as possible to consider history instead of the law. I think it's really important – especially in the context of the last ten years of the so-called 'history wars' in Australia – that we take control of the telling and owning and representation of our own history.

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Like I said, I'm going to take us on a lightning trip through a hundred years of history. I've called this talk 'Aspects of the Struggle', because I want to just go back over 100 years of the Aboriginal resistance in Australia. In doing so, I want to make the point that the leaders of the Aboriginal political resistance in Australia, ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, have been considerably more sophisticated in their adoption and adaptation of tactics and strategies from a whole range of situations from around the world than have been many of their counterpart white political leaders. This occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at a particular moment in the history of the world when many things were changing – the decolonisation of Africa and the Pacific and other colonised nations around the world; the upsurge of activity amongst other Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, especially the American Indians, and especially the Maori people from Aotearoa, 'The land of the wrong white crowd' ...

My history talks always start with a map of the language groups or nations of Aboriginal Australia: this was the political landscape of Australia for about 13,000 or 14,000 years BC (Before Cook) and before the end of the last Ice Age. These are the nations of Australia.

That is what we've always got to remember: we are the first people of Australia. Yet for the first 190 years of written Australian history, Aboriginal people were excised, excluded and ignored. We might first consider the beginning of what is Australia as it is now known. This began with Federation in 1901. It's important we never forget that this country became a country – became Australia, a federation, a 'commonwealth', a nation – on the basis of race. The purpose of federation was to exclude all non-white peoples from this country, and to establish the land of Australia as an isolated outpost of white supremacy.

This can be seen in the form of the first Act of the first Australian parliament, the *Immigration Restriction Act* – better known as the notorious White Australia policy. The next Act created in the same moment in 1901 was the *Pacific Islander Labourers Act*, which was designed to get rid of those blackfellas who'd been bought in here mostly as slaves and indentured labour to create the Queensland sugar industry. They had to get rid of them.

The White Australia policy was designed to keep all other non-whites out. The Pacific Islanders were regarded as a potential blot on a future White Australia. But the Aboriginal people weren't considered a problem, because at that point in history it was believed we were all going to die out. We were regarded as an inferior race and now, having come into contact with the inherently superior civilisation of the British Empire, we would quietly succumb and all die out within a generation. Those that were left of us, the so-called 'part'-Aborigines, would die out or be bred out through assimilation – the policies of assimilation that dominated Australia. So it was believed.

Australian Aboriginal people had now become victims of white Australia's obsession with racial purity. Having been invaded, colonised, subjugated, enslaved and brutalised, Aboriginal people were now not only an inconvenient reminder of the brutal dispossession to which they had been

subjected, but also an obstacle to ideas of a future pure white Australian nation.

In 1907, at the height of Australia's obsessive white supremacist xenophobia in the early years after Federation, an extraordinary meeting occurred in Sydney. It involved Jack Johnson, who was the most famous black man on the planet and who was regarded as the best heavyweight boxer in the world, and thus the black man most hated and feared by believers in white supremacist ideas. In 1908, he fought white boxer Tommy Burns to win the World Heavyweight title. This sporting event at the Sydney Stadium remained the biggest sporting event in Australian history until the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, and so shocking was the black man's win that film footage of the 1908 fight was banned in the United States for 35 years.

But what is less known is that Jack Johnson had visited Sydney twelve months before in 1907, and met two Aboriginal wharf labourers who were members of a waterfront organisation of African, West Indian and African-American sailors and dock workers called the Coloured Progressive Association. Those Aboriginal wharf labourers were Fred Maynard and Tom Lacey. They were inspired by the example of Jack Johnson as black role model who refused to be intimidated by the racism of that era.

Maynard and Lacey later went on to become members of Marcus Garvey's international Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey had spread his ideas of black nationalism and economic independence around the globe by recruiting black sailors, and encouraged them to create branches of UNIA in all ports of the world where their ships docked. By 1920, there was a branch of Marcus Garvey's UNIA on the Sydney waterfront. Both Fred Maynard and Tom Lacey were members. They weren't so much interested in Garvey's ideas about going back to Africa, because we didn't come from there, but they were interested in ideas about self-determination and economic independence. They adopted and adapted these ideas to the Australian context, and in 1924 formed the first modern Aboriginal political organisation: the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association (AAPA).

Their organisation was an Aboriginal-only organisation. The AAPA stood for self-reliance, economic independence and race pride. That was an idea they adopted from Marcus Garvey: about self-esteem – the self-esteem of Aboriginal people and self-confidence which enables people to face great challenges.

In the 1930s, two new Aboriginal political organisations emerged. In 1936 in Melbourne, Cumeragunga refugees set up the Australian Aborigines League (AAL). William Cooper, Doug Nicholls, Bill Onus and Marj Tucker were among the founders of the AAL. The membership was open to all Aboriginal people, and the founders of the AAL had been well aware of previous work in the earlier part of the century by the AAPA.

At the same time in the 1930s in New South Wales, two men – the legendary Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson – established the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), a follow-up organisation from the old

AAPA, as can be seen from the name. Jack Patten had previous associations with Fred Maynard and Tom Lacey in the earlier organisation.

In 1938, these two organisations – the AAL and the APA – came together to form one of the first major internationally recognised Aboriginal protests: the 1938 Day of Mourning. This was the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the British occupation of Australia, and the two Aboriginal organisations held a demonstration in Sydney. The Day of Mourning demonstration was the first major successful attempt by an Aboriginal political movement to attract local and overseas attention. Australian embassies throughout the world were urged to produce public propaganda to counter the effects of this demonstration internationally.

Now I concede, folks, that this is a very East Coast-biased presentation. I will be making reference to some of the key points in other parts of Australia, but this is basically an attempt to try to present a sequence of just some of the more important and most significant events that occurred in the 100 years I'm talking about. There are many more important moments and instances of Aboriginal resistance over that 100 years in numerous places across Australia. Today I am merely talking about a few events that were part of that broader resistance.

Another significant moment between 1939 and 1960 is the 1946 Pilbara strike. This is a defining moment, and a really important event in black history. There are some who say that the Pilbara strike in many ways created the inspiration and led into the later move by the Gurindji in the mid-1960s to do their famous action.

Five years later in 1951, there was an Aboriginal workers' strike in Darwin – again, a very significant moment. Also in 1951, ASIO, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (as distinct from our ASIO, the Aboriginal Security and Intelligence Organisation) began its surveillance of Aboriginal activists, including Faith Bandler and Ray Peckham. Ray Peckham went on to become the Aboriginal activist with the biggest ASIO file, while over the next quarter of a century the Australian government security agencies maintain a close interest in Aboriginal political activities.

In 1958 the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) was set up in Adelaide. Later on, in the early 1960s, its name was changed to the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI).

The next significant moment that I want to talk about is the 1965 Freedom Ride. Here was an example of an Aboriginal person, Charlie Perkins, who was a student at Sydney University at the time, adopting and adapting a tactic and a strategy from the American Civil Rights Movement. We were very conscious in the late 1950s and early 1960s of what was going on in the African American Civil Rights Movement in America, and Charlie Perkins and his fellow Freedom Riders adopted and adapted the idea, which became one of the most successful and a strategically extraordinarily important moments in the history that I'm talking about.

The wheels go round on the Boggabilla bus, folks. This on the map is the route that they took. The important thing is that the freedom ride went into each of these country towns, in some of the most racist, red-necked areas of north-western New South Wales. There was a generation, my generation – we were all about 15, 16 years old – and in Walgett, in Moree, in Kempsey and Barrowul and in Nambucca where I was living, this was the first time many of us of our generation had ever seen an Aboriginal man stand up to the local white, red-necked bigots and be able to walk away alive or relatively undamaged. That doesn't mean to say that the Freedom Riders weren't threatened with this (their bus was driven off the road and all sorts of crazy things happened to them), but it was an enormous influence on my generation; we were inspired by that moment. The Freedom Riders were young, white middle-class Sydney University students, some of whom went on to become very eminent people in New South Wales society. The man with his head above the rest of them in the photo is today the Chief Justice of New South Wales.

So the Freedom Ride was a success in a range of ways. But the most important thing, as I said, is that it had a powerful effect on my generation, the young generation. We were the first generation in New South Wales who were given a little tiny opportunity at education. But most of us (I discovered in later years) who got that little bit of opportunity had it cut short when we started to show how smart we were.

I got thrown out of high school when I was fifteen, and many of the young Aboriginal people I met in Sydney had similar experiences in the country schools we had all attended. But, like they say folks, a little education is a dangerous thing. As indeed it was with us, because not long after getting thrown out of high school and not long after those young kids like Lyall Munro and Billy Craigie and others up in Moree who'd busted and desegregated the local swimming pool up there – we all landed in Sydney. When we were about sixteen, most of us headed for Sydney.

In 1966, the legendary Gurindji walk-off occurred. Vincent Lingiari is in my mind one of the greatest of all Aboriginal leaders of the twentieth century. What he and his little band of people did and inspired and achieved is really extraordinary. They are justifiably called the fathers and mothers of the modern-day Aboriginal Land Rights Movement.

In 1967, we saw the historic referendum. It was the first federal referendum in Australian history since Federation where the Australian people had voted 'yes' to any question. Australian voters, in their weird way, are very conservative and they never vote 'yes' in federal referendums. More than 90 per cent voted 'yes' in the historic 1967 referendum. One would think that such an overwhelming expression on the part of mainstream Australia should have been taken much more seriously by the Australian political and bureaucratic leaders.

The problem with this referendum, despite its historical significance, is that it didn't appear to be taken very seriously at all, and little seemed to change for black Australians. As a result, nothing really happened in the areas where I was in New South Wales. This led to a radicalisation of the

young generation, who had been politicised by seeing Charlie Perkins' Freedom Ride. My generation, in seeing the referendum fail, believed that the tactics and strategies of the older generation were now discredited. It wasn't really the older generation's fault, but we believed that their tactics had failed, so we sought other ways.

Part of this was a thing called the Australian Black Power Movement. That was born in Melbourne in 1969, when this man, Roosevelt Brown – a Caribbean academic – came. All he did was give a press conference at the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne, but Australian media distorted his message about black empowerment. AAL official Bruce McInnes managed to manipulate some of that negative publicity into a focus on the situation of Aboriginal Australians.

Around the same time in an inner-city suburb in Sydney, a group called the Black Caucus – variously known as the Black Caucus, the Black Power group (all sorts of names have existed for it over the years) – began supporting the campaign for the Gurindji. This group of young people, led by people such as Paul Coe, Sol Blair, Gary Williams, and a big mob of Redfern younger people, came together and started to become politically active.

This was accelerated by the fact that the Aboriginal population of Sydney had grown to around 30,000 people, which made it the biggest Aboriginal community in Australia, and was a big black ghetto in the heart of a big white Sydney. Because don't forget: the White Australia policy was still very much alive at that time, and Sydney was a very big white city. A big black community in the middle of that white city made the whitefellas nervous, so we decided to exploit some of that nervousness.

The Black Power Movement had its origins in the Perkins Freedom Ride. We'd also read and heard about the American Indian takeover of Alcatraz, which my brother Russell Means here was part of. That was a significant inspiration for group of young blackfellas half a world away in Redfern.

Further down the track when we were thinking about what we might do to react to Prime Minister McMahon's infamous statement on land rights in 1972, it was suggested that we do something along the lines of the American Indian takeover at Alcatraz. We thought of what was sitting in the middle of Sydney Harbour: Fort Denison – the perfect, perfect place for such a copycat protest. Our mentor Chicka Dixon was keen on us doing that. I'm not quite sure why we eventually dropped off that idea. Perhaps it might have had something to do with all of us having to get in a rowboat and row across shark-infested Sydney Harbour in the middle of the night.

Meanwhile, the emergence of the Black Power movement in Sydney had been in part stimulated by contact between Redfern activists and black soldiers from the Vietnam War, who were coming to Sydney on R&R and coming into the Aboriginal community in Redfern. These Afro-American soldiers were bringing with them African American political literature, which was of interest to us and which could not otherwise be obtained in Australia.

The problem with American Indian information and literature – political literature – at that time is that we couldn't get it in Australia. In fact, there were only two ways one could get books on African American political literature. They were either brought into our community by African American soldiers from the Vietnam War, or there was a little bookshop in Sydney called the Third World Bookshop, where we used to go and steal them, until the proprietor saw the logic in simply giving the books to us. The African American political literature included writings by Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Bobby Searle, Angela Davis and others.

I read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* when I was seventeen years old, and it grabbed me. I knew what he was talking about; it didn't matter that it was a completely different people with a different history and in a completely different country. What Malcolm X was talking about in terms of the question of racial oppression struck a chord with us, where we could see the reality of black oppression in Redfern around us at the time. The Redfern ghetto seemed to us to be no different to some of the black ghettos that we were reading about in America. We saw a whole range of parallels, and we drew upon those parallels.

Others who inspired us included a diverse range of anti-imperialists like Franz Fanon, Vine Deloria Jr, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. And we loved Ho Chi Minh, for the simple reason that, as well as being one of the great political strategists in history at that time, he was giving the Yanks a good kicking in Vietnam. And in the end he gave them the best kicking of the lot – all the way right out of Vietnam.

One of the leaders of the Redfern Black Caucus was Paul Coe, and in Queensland the legendary Dennis Walker took it a step further – the rage, the paranoia and fear in white Australia, that is – and created the Black Panther Party of Australia.

Also around about that time the young Black Power activists came under intense surveillance by ASIO. These photos I am showing now are actually some genuine ASIO surveillance photographs taken of myself and Dennis Walker behaving suspiciously in the vicinity of the Australian Communist Party headquarters back in 1971.

To all you people in the audience, if you believe that you've got an ASIO file, some of you older mob, go and check it out. After 30 years all Australian government documents go to the Archives, including ASIO files. If you think you had an ASIO file 30 years ago, it would be in the National Archives now. Most people who these days reckon they would have had an ASIO file go to the National Archives only to discover that they don't. But those who were part of the Black Power movement certainly do because ASIO kept a close eye on us.

The year 1971 was significant because there was a tour of the South African Rugby team. They were seen as ambassadors for Apartheid at this point in history, and all of these white Australian 'anti-racists' – about 10,000 of them – went out on the streets, saying they were demonstrating against the Springbok tour. At one of their demos, Paul Coe jumped up and commandeered the microphone and he challenged the crowd. He said: 'How

is it that you people can turn out in these numbers protesting about racism half-way round the world? What about in your own backyard – have you ever considered the possibility that you might be part of the oppressive unit?’ And he challenged them saying: ‘If you don’t get out in the same sort of numbers in support of us and our land rights demonstrations, then you know you will be regarded as hypocrites.’

Now these white Australians could have easily said, ‘Oh go and get stuffed, Coe’ and taken no notice of him. Instead, to their credit, they accepted the challenge that Coe had thrown at them. So they started turning up at our demos in support of land rights.

Throughout 1971, these growing numbers in the Aboriginal political demonstrations started to make the Australian prime minister nervous, and he thereby felt compelled to make a statement about Aboriginal land rights. Unfortunately for him, the day he chose to make that statement, of all the days he could have chosen – if you’re the prime minister of Australia in 1972 and you’re going to make a statement to Aboriginal people that essentially says, ‘go to hell you get nothing from us’ – then it’s not good politics to make that statement on 26 January. It is the most sensitive and contested date in the Australian calendar – the day Aboriginal people know as Invasion Day, the day white Australians call Australia Day.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister McMahon duly made the major policy statement on that day. The statement in effect that the government would never grant land rights to Aboriginal people, and the Black Power movement considered both the statement and the day chosen to deliver it particularly provocative. In response, that night four young men went down to Canberra to set up a protest on the lawns of Parliament House. In theory, we believed they were going to get arrested that night. We said: ‘The coppers will come and pinch you, sleep it out in the cells that night and we’ll bail you out tomorrow.’

Except that things didn’t go as expected when they got to Canberra and set up the protest on the lawns of Parliament House. The police arrived, and because these boys were from Redfern, as soon as they saw a uniform it was a natural reflex action to argue with them, so the boys are going ‘arrgh’, and the copper says: ‘Boys, boys listen to what I’m saying.’ And the cop said to them: ‘Well there’s no law against camping on the lawns of Parliament House. As long as you’ve only got eleven tents. You put twelve tents here we can move you; we can deem you a camping area and move you. You’ve got eleven tents, there’s nothing we can do.’

The copper got in his car and went away. The boys had accidentally found a loophole in Canberra law: it was perfectly legal to camp on the lawns of Parliament House. So within a couple of days, they set up a flash new tent as the office, and in no time at all, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy became the newest tourist attraction in Canberra. And remember, this was just a couple of years after the 1967 referendum and there was an enormous amount of support and goodwill out there in white Australia for us at that moment in history. We got even more support as we made the government

look like fools, because there was nothing that the prime minister could do. And so for six months, that embassy was on the lawn.

Then Gough Whitlam, the then leader of the Labor opposition in Canberra, visited the Embassy and he got up to make a big-noting speech, and said: 'My party will give this to Aboriginal people.' But in the middle of his speech, Paul Coe jumped up and challenged Whitlam. Coe said: 'Well hang on a sec, Mr Whitlam. Isn't your party the ALP? Isn't your policy the same as the Liberal Country Party? Isn't your party's policy assimilation? Assimilation equals genocide. You know, don't come here and bullshit us Mr Whitlam.' Amazingly, Whitlam accepted Coe's challenge and went away and changed the ALP policy.

Suddenly the ALP policy became land rights for Aboriginal people. Now this is the big moment at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy; this is the extraordinary thing that it had achieved: it forced a change in the national agenda. When it did that, naturally the prime minister was really starting to get cheesed off, and so he decided 'I've got to do something about these buggers on the lawn'. So he introduced a new law making it illegal to camp on the lawns of Parliament House. Sure enough, on 20 July when that law became power, he sent the troops in and busted us.

But two days later, 2000 Aboriginal people came back to the lawns of Parliament House, set up the embassy again and defied the police to take it down. Eighteen people were arrested this time. A week later, we came back and put it up again, but this time we realised we'd gained the moral high ground and we let the coppers symbolically take the tent off our heads and we declared a moral victory, which in fact it was. The Aboriginal embassy in 1972 put Aboriginal issues on to the national political agenda, where they remain to this day.

I'm sorry for my American Indian brothers and sisters, but I have to point out that it's a long time since American Indian issues have been on the front pages, on a regular basis, of American newspapers. Americans have managed to choose to ignore or rewrite your history in the same way they've rewritten ours, but Aboriginal issues were put on the national agenda in 1972 by the Aboriginal Embassy and they remain there to this day.

The Aboriginal Embassy helped bring an end to 23 years of conservative governments. Six months after the McMahon government sent the police against the Aboriginal Embassy, Gough Whitlam was elected prime minister. Aboriginal affairs became a major issue. Unfortunately, we were to learn a lesson we should have already known: that politicians speak with forked tongues.

Whitlam had announced both at the Aboriginal Embassy and during his 1972 election campaign that his government would 'grant Aborigines land rights'. Now that he was prime minister, we suddenly realised that he didn't mean that *all* Aborigines would get land rights. He apparently meant only the Aborigines in the Northern Territory, because technically they're the only ones that the Commonwealth government has jurisdiction over, and the rest of the Aboriginal people are under the states' jurisdiction and would have to wait.

So Gough drafted the *Northern Territory Land Rights Act*, but didn't even get a chance to pass the Bill because in 1975 the CIA knocked him off in its Australian coup, probably in part due to many of the CIA stooges that are in the Labor Party to this day.

So when Gough Whitlam gets thrown out, Malcolm Fraser comes in as the new prime minister. Malcolm Fraser's term was largely forgettable except for the fact that he passed the *Northern Territory Aboriginal Land Rights Act* in 1976. Under the *Territory Land Rights Act*, technically the Aboriginal people could claim freehold title. And that is what we were talking about in those days: freehold title, ownership of land.

So Malcolm Fraser comes and goes. We ran brilliant demonstrations at the Brisbane Commonwealth Games in 1982, put pressure on him. Then in 1983 Mr Bob Hawke – the 'doggy bodgy', as they called him – becomes the prime minister of Australia.

Bob Hawke, upon becoming prime minister, declared on the public record extensively that: 'My government will deliver national uniform land rights legislation to Aboriginal people.' And somebody said: 'Well, what about if the states object?' Hawke replied: 'If the states object, the Commonwealth will introduce legislation that overrides the states. We are determined to give Aboriginal people land rights all over Australia, freehold title.'

Well that was a pretty significant moment in Australian history. Except that it didn't last long. Within a couple of months, Hawke started backing off and dodging and ducking and weaving, you know. Then one of the more notorious people in Australian history, the then premier of Western Australia and president of the Australian Labour Party – a man by the name of Brian Burke (the same man who I think since has been gaoled twice for corruption, and he's still to this day interfering in politics in Western Australia) summoned Bob Hawke to Perth. He said to Bob Hawke: 'Listen, Bob, you can't give all of this land to them black bastards, it will upset my mates in the mining industry, and my mates are your mates because they fund the Party.' So Bob Hawke flew back to the eastern states and declared in a flurry of doublespeak that National Uniform Land Rights legislation was off the agenda for the ALP. End of land rights, folks.

That's pretty much what happened, folks. Now, when the Labor Party left power in 1993, what did we have? Bob Hawke came to power saying 'national uniform land rights legislation'. What did we have when they left government? We had native title folks, yippee! Native title! Oh marvellous, folks, you know that's really done us a lot of good hasn't it?

And so sorry, sorry folks ... that's all there is to it. I've managed to get through 100 years of history in 40 minutes, and I'm hoping by doing this that I'm setting the stage, reminding all the legal people of the importance of history in all this. It's important to know the battles we've been through, learn from the tactics and strategies we've employed, learn from others in the tactics and strategies they've employed. In the same way, there are people in our midst who are of the ilk that in the Indian community in America, Russell Means calls 'vichy' Indians. Out here I call them 'quisling'

Indians: the collaborators and the traitors in our own ranks. We know who they are, don't we folks?

In certain ways, the great tragedy for me – having lived through all of that, knowing what I know now – is that I look around me today at the political landscape and I believe that the situation for us today seems to me to be actually worse than what it was when I was seventeen years old and I got the fire in my belly. So this sort of history is even more important to understand.

What you had there was a national unified movement. Unity is strength. We showed that then. When we were unified as people, all of our mobs came together from all over Australia; we worked together as a unified unit and we brought down a government, folks. That's what we can achieve: we've shown what we can do when we've got unity and strength and good tactics and strategies. We need the same again today.

The sad thing is – and I want to say this in finishing up – many of the people you knew who were part of those struggles back in the late '60s and early '70s, far too many of them today are no longer with us. The majority of young people like me, who were at the Aboriginal embassy, are no longer with us. This is the reality; this is how the reality of the statistics comes out. They say 'Aboriginal life expectancy is 20 to 30 years less than whites'. How we see that is that we've been going to funerals for 30 years, and too many of those people died too young, and they continue to do so today.

Our next generation – my kids, our kids – are dying at the same rates, so it's more urgent than it's ever been for us to try to learn something from that, and encourage our younger mob to strive to that sort of thing.