



The Freedom Riders

"I wish I was jet-black"

By SAM LIPSKI

It used to be one of the rooms in Wood Coffill's funeral parlors at the top of George Street, Sydney. Now, still musty and cold on a midsummer night, it echoed to the souped-up electric guitars of an Aboriginal band practising for the next dance at what is now the headquarters of Sydney's Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs. The sound wafted through an open window upstairs, where Mr Bill Ford, a lecturer in economics at the University of New South Wales, was preaching a religion new to Australia.

"Don't any of you go into this tour with preconceived ideas about what you're going to face. When the first Freedom Riders came down from California to the Deep South there were 3000 police and troops ready to greet them when the 13 of them got there. Now this isn't going to happen here. Passive resistance works in some kinds of situations, but it doesn't in others. Obviously it wouldn't have done the Jews very much good against the Nazis. But it did work with Gandhi in India and it is working with students and Negroes in the Deep South." He was talking from personal experience having been an observer with the Freedom Riders while an exchange student in the United States.

At first the group he was addressing was to be known as SNVCC pronounced "Snick" and standing for "Students' Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee". Then for a short time it

was FRO pronounced "fro" and standing for "Freedom Riders Organisation" and now the audience of 35 students from Sydney University were members of SAFA, pronounced either "Saffa" or "Safer" and standing for "Student Action for Aborigines". Clearly, from what Bill Ford was telling them, more than just the name of this group, now touring Aboriginal communities in the north and north-east of New South Wales and the south of Queensland conducting surveys and staging demonstrations, owed its inspiration to the American racial experience. The new towns were to be Bowraville, Wilcannia and Kempsey, but the tactics were Birmingham, Jackson and Tuscaloosa.

"If you find a segregated swimming pool just go and stand out in front of it. Just stand there. Don't go climbing over fences or trying to force your way in. The real key to this whole thing is to get some visual image across, to make certain that when you do something the Press, radio and television know about it. But if you go into a segregated bar and someone pushes someone else aside and a brawl starts—well, you've lost everything. You've got to have discipline. Don't dissipate your energy demonstrating all over the place. Pick out one or two key centres and make sure you've got the camera on you. Remember, a passive demonstration is the most effective. Any violence and you've defeated your own purpose."

The links with the United States go further. The very existence of SAFA stems almost directly from the protests by Sydney University students against segregation in the Deep South in May, 1964. Those protests outside the American Consulate in Wynyard Street ended in brawls with the police which made headline news all over Australia and which received wide publicity abroad. But students found themselves damned with faint praise even from the groups which supported them. A letter from one of the American student groups active in campaigning for civil rights to the university newspaper "Honi Soit" thanked the students for their interest but asked why they were so demonstrative about the problems of Negroes in the United States when there was much to protest about the way Aborigines were living in Australia. The point struck home—at least among a small group of students and academics who began discussing the possibilities of action. Peter Westerway, at the time lecturer in Government at Sydney University and now in television, first articulated the idea of an Australian version of the freedom riders and together with Bill Ford, part-Aborigine Arts student Charles Perkins and other students called the first meeting in June, 1964.

At first the plans were vague. There was emphasis mainly on demonstrations, sit-ins, and protests, these to be duplicated in all States at the same time. The

group's membership and ideas changed as the year progressed and by the end of 1964 it was agreed that in addition to demonstrations the group would undertake a survey of Aboriginal conditions in some twelve towns covering housing, education, health, employment, social welfare, and racial attitudes among both Aborigines and whites. Just how much weight should be given to the survey as compared with the demonstration was the main source of open dissent within SAFA. Members based largely around the Student Christian Movement tried to postpone the idea of demonstrations altogether for a year. When they were overwhelmingly defeated on this they moved to give the survey more emphasis. In the end a compromise was reached by which the "Freedom Ride" is now, in theory at least, to give equal emphasis to both the survey and the demonstrations.

The other source of dissent was not so obvious on the surface but at one stage it could have wrecked the whole idea. Supported from the beginning by the whole range of political, religious, and general societies at Sydney University, SAFA found itself floundering for enough students to come on the tour in the last week. It looked for a few days as if members of the Communist-supported Eureka Youth League would be able to have a totally disproportionate number of students on the tour.

SAFA had never introduced any screening methods—any student who came along and paid his deposit had to be accepted. But there had been a tacit understanding among the organisers of the tour that any takeover by extremists whether of the larrikin or political type would leave the group wide open to being labelled.

Faced with the possibility of an EYL influx, SAFA's secretary, Mr Jim Spigelman, made it clear that he and Chairman Charles Perkins would not stand for any stacking of the tour and were able to discourage most of the EYL members from enrolling.

As the coach takes them on their 1390-mile trip through NSW, the declared aims of SAFA are to arouse public attention to fundamental Aboriginal problems in health, education and housing; to break down socially discriminatory barriers to the extent possible by student actions; and to stimulate the interest of Aborigines in resisting discrimination. How likely are the students to go anywhere near achieving these aims and what significance is there in SAFA? Perhaps the best way of getting close to an answer is to see SAFA in terms more of what it will do for students than what it will achieve immediately for Aborigines.

These are some of the questions the "Freedom Riders" will ask Whites.

The Aborigines are morally inferior to most other people, do you agree?

Aborigines do not know the value of money — do you agree?

Aborigines are just as loyal to the country in which they live as any other citizens—do you agree?

The Aboriginal problem has been much exaggerated. Do you agree with this?

Would you welcome an Aboriginal neighbor in your street?

Do you think white people are happier than Aborigines?

The idea of a "freedom ride" even in its present form is unrelated to Australian conditions but at least it is an act of commitment by the students to some tangible social ideal—the betterment of the Aborigines' position. The students plan to demonstrate in Bowraville, NSW, where they allege there is discrimination in picture theatres, cafes and other public facilities. They will also demonstrate in other towns where they believe discrimination exists, such as at the swimming pool at Kempsey, depending on what they find when they get there.

But they are obviously on the tour with a different expectation than American students. They are not going so much to right a social injustice, the form of which is clear and known, as to find out what form the problem takes. There are, however, some parallels with the American experience. Bill Ford claims that the civil rights movement in the United States has given the youth of America some sense of social involvement, a cause, and a feeling that they don't have to be 35 before anything they do makes a difference to society.

Not all the student members of SAFA agree that their tour is likely to make Aborigines feel that change is possible. They hope it will—but they point to the fact that, with the exception of Charles Perkins, the student harbingers of change and hope are all white. In the United States the dynamism for the freedom riders was supplied largely by Negro university students themselves. How deep an impression will white university students make in NSW country towns? So much depends on their tact and ability to win the confidence of Aborigines, many of whom are tired of the Press photographers posing their half-naked swollen-bellied children on garbage tins, ashamed of the way their squalor is exploited for publicity, and sensitive to their shabbiness being exposed.

Yet, with all the difficulties the stu-

dents potentially do represent a force for change. What kind of a force and where it fits into the pattern of forces changing the conditions of Australia's 100,000 Aborigines has to be considered against the background of developments over the past 18 months — the legislative reforms, the gradual growth of racial identity among the Aborigines themselves, the emergence of Aboriginal leadership in sensitive positions, the activities of organisations concerned with Aborigines, the upsurge in research and academic concern with Aborigines and the increasing international and political interest in their problems. The last 18 months have seen a series of drastic legislative changes, which, with some exceptions, now means that all discriminatory laws have been removed.

Many of these legislative changes are largely nullified in the Northern Territory and in parts of Queensland and Western Australia where the fact that most Aborigines do not receive the wages of the white man makes many of the changes seem hollow concessions to inevitable progress.

The N. Aust. Worker's Union is dedicated to change this change, threatening to bring the whole Territory out on strike if the cattlemen and the Government do not concede their claims by July 1. In Western Australia, the legislative changes, especially those allowing Aborigines to drink, seem to have made life even more nasty, brutish and short than it ever was. Against the predictions of the hopeful reformers the Aborigine continues to prostitute his women and, as if to spite the do-gooders, loses himself in dirt, drink, and disease. If any State needed an organisation like SAFA then clearly it is Western Australia.

However enlightened the legislation in any State its success will always depend not on the statute makers but on the clerks who hand out the social service payments, the health inspectors who visit Aboriginal homes, the hotel keepers who serve colored drinkers. In large measure the public servants, the hotel-keepers, the store proprietors, the potential employers are carrying out the letter of the law but the Aborigine is less convinced that they are fulfilling its spirit. Extremely sensitive to any imagined slight the Aborigine is only slowly making use of his new-found rights. To a large extent this is also due to his own ignorance of what they are and how they operate. But whatever the problems associated with implementing the legislation, the removal of legal discrimination is clearly a necessary first step before there can be any other change.

In Sydney and, to a lesser extent, in Melbourne, there is a growing sense of racial identification as Aborigines from all over the State keep moving in

in increasing numbers, crowding into the same suburbs, drinking in the same hotels, meeting at the same clubs and organisations. When the Kenyan leader, Mr Tom Mboya, was in Australia he said he was most struck by the almost complete lack of "nationalism" among the Aborigines. Certainly nationalism in African terms is still remote and may never come to the Aborigine. But Aboriginal leaders like Charles Perkins are convinced of a change. "Aborigines used to be very quick to say to someone—'You're a Barrowville boy, or you're from Queensland or you're a Kempsey boy'. If the kinship ties weren't there they wouldn't have much to do with you. But now there's a growing feeling that we're all part of one people." Aborigines who once tried to pass themselves off as Malaysians, or Chinese, or Italians or Indians—anything as long as not to be known as Aborigines—are now extremely rare. There are even hints of an incipient sense of "negritude" among some mixed-blood Aborigines comparable to the new Negro spirit throughout Africa. A veteran Aboriginal leader like Mr Bert Groves, president of the Aborigines' Progressive Association, says: "I'm chocolate-colored, I wish I was jet-black."

Except for the rare exception urban Aborigines seem just as much caught in the vicious circle of self-perpetuating poverty, ignorance and disease as they were ten years ago. And despite the growing sense of belonging it is hard to detect any feeling among the Aborigine who is not active in organisations that things are going to change in any way at all let alone improve radically. One social anthropologist trying to sum up the attitude of mind among Aborigines concluded that it was one of "acquiescence". Charles Perkins puts it this way: "My people are humble, you know, and humility is not a virtue in the twentieth century. What we need is militant humility." Meaningful change is not likely to come to the Aborigine from the outside alone, however well-intentioned the majority environment. For it to get anywhere from the inside it must of course rely on leadership and this, despite the difficulties, may be forthcoming at last.

No Tom Mboyas

ABORIGINES have had leaders in the past, they have had prominent sportsmen and artists—but none seems to have made any lasting impact on his own people nor has any one of them taken on a true-to-life quality in the non-Aborigine community; no Mboya, no Kenyatta, no Martin Luther King. Not only does traditional Aboriginal custom and group organisation make it hard for leaders to emerge, their present system

These are some of the questions the "Freedom Riders" will ask Aborigines.

Are the Aboriginal people as good as the white people in every way?

Aborigines are not counted in the census and are not accepted for military service — do you think this is wrong?

Did all your children get their needles from the doctor when they were small?

Do you think the Aboriginal Welfare Board is doing a good job?

Do you think that the Aboriginal situation has improved at all over the last 20 years?

Do you think that Aboriginal people are happier than white people?

of values works against it too. According to one social scientist the Aborigine of 1965 is very reminiscent of the shearers of the 1890s keeping alive the legendary Australian ideals of egalitarianism, and "knocking the tall poppy down a peg or two".

Charles Perkins at 29, two-thirds through an Arts degree at Sydney University, and the most constructively angry of the new kind of Aboriginal leaders in Sydney, is wary of his own image growing too fast for his own and his own people's good. "I'm not a leader, I'm not a symbol—if the Aborigines want me to be a leader then that's all right but don't force my image down them. They're funny this way. Like I said, they're very humble people, Aborigines, not like the Negroes who were forced into humility by the white man—they're naturally humble. I'd like them to accept me but they don't go for leaders who force themselves."

Perkins' anger is directed to apathy rather than discrimination. "The Australians are sometimes criminally apathetic. It's criminal, it is. I think it is, I definitely do. If there are Aborigines dying in the desert near Alice Springs and the mortality rate goes up a few miles just out of there . . . then it's criminal." (Perkins comes originally from Alice Springs and is specialising in Anthropology and Sociology at the University.) "Let's recognise the problem here. If we don't know our own country we're like a stranger in paradise—that's what Australia is—paradise. But we hear a lot about the White Australia Policy and Wheat for India. Look, I know all that's important but there are Aboriginal kids right here in Redfern suffering from malnutrition and 10 per cent of those we'll see on the freedom ride are suffering from it too. At last university students have woken up to their own problems."

He has done well at the University.

He reads voraciously about racial issues — in Africa, in the United States and anywhere else. He wants to go to Africa which attracts him because of the leaders it has produced, among whom Tom Mboya impressed him greatly during his visit. He also regards himself as a disciple of Martin Luther King. Perkins' ideas have not crystallised fully and it is confidence, determination, and technical understanding of the Aboriginal problems which are his great assets for leadership at present. But he has other qualities which mark him out for the future. He is a good public speaker, and though ironically he could pass for a white man, his acceptance among his people, especially among young Aborigines, is growing. Whatever he says about his reluctance to accept leadership he is, in fact, the up-and-coming leader.

Just what his role is in SAFA is difficult to formalise. He is chairman of the organisation and has been the focal point for the group's activities and plans. Many of the students, in trying to explain why SAFA should have started in 1964, say that until a year earlier they had had no direct contact with Aborigines on the campus. Perkins' main importance as an Aboriginal leader derives even more from his work with the recently established Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs which he has been running during his University vacation.

Packing them in

THE Foundation has made some sort of breakthrough in the short time it opened half-way through last December following an appeal for funds which raised £80,000, less than the hoped-for £150,000. In the eight weeks it has been open Perkins has had nearly 1000 interviews with job-seekers, with evicted families, abandoned children, people seeking information about social services, about education and many who come because they have nothing else to do. The weekly dance which started off with a poor attendance now packs them in with 250 each Friday night.

The Foundation gained almost immediate acceptance among Aborigines and Perkins believes this is because it is one of the few organisations to co-operate directly with Aborigines in asking them what their needs are rather than dictating to them out of a do-good paternalism or political Left-wing authoritarianism. If it can survive its financial problems the Foundation may succeed where many other organisations have failed. There are signs also in the Northern Territory that, following their visits to Kenya, Philip Roberts and Davis Daniels will together with recently appointed union secretary Sydney Cook be Aboriginal voices demanding a hearing.

In the light of these developments it

is amazing that with the exception of the Communist Party no other Australian political party takes the issue really seriously. Two of the most articulate spokesmen on Aboriginal affairs, the Liberals' W. C. Wentworth, MHR, and Labor's Kim Beazley, MHR, have both drawn attention in different ways to the still widely ungrasped reality that, whatever we may think we are doing for the Aborigines and however fast we may think we are doing it, international agitation for colored people everywhere is going on at its own pace according to its own time scale with its own slogans and with its own view of the needs of indigenous peoples.

The Red and the Black

THE Communist Party's interest in Aborigines dates back to the Party's inception, and has changed as the international Communist line has changed. But at no time in its history has CPA interest in, and work amongst the Aborigines been more active than it is today. The current programme, still in its draft form, has been under discussion by Party members and some Aborigines for about eighteen months and will probably soon emerge; to Aborigines it will be the most attractive programme yet.

The most crucial issue on which the Communists have brought pressure to bear in the past and will continue to do so in the future is whether to take the problems of Aborigines to the United Nations. There are indications that some non-Communist members of the key national organisation, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, want to take the matter to the UN only as a last resort after every attempt at finding a domestic solution (to the problems of land rights and compensation, for instance) has been exhausted. But they may not be able to resist the growing Communist and fellow traveller pressure in that organisation for long.

The issue will come up again at Easter when FCAA meets in Canberra. The organisers plan to hold discussion on this topic behind closed doors.

One Aborigine who will oppose taking the matter to the United Nations is Charles Perkins. He feels strongly that Australians must make any decisions themselves without outside interference. It is in this context, then, that the Student Action For Aborigines organisation shows its potential strength—as a responsible force for political change. But as the students continue their tour through New South Wales there will be others watching them beside the curious Aboriginal families and the irritated pub-keepers, to see if it really is a "Freedom Ride", or whether the Aborigines are just being taken for a ride . . . soon to be forgotten again.