

Opinion

Fire at Old Parliament House served no purpose and gained no respect



The tent embassy in 1972, re-erected in the afternoon after police tore it down in the morning.

Hannah McGlade
Legal academic

January 5, 2022

The Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established 50 years ago by four young Aboriginal men, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey, Michael Anderson and Bert Williams, in protest at the government's treatment of Aboriginal people. They called for land rights, the protection of Aboriginal sacred sites, and proper compensation for lands not returned. Indigenous protestors highlighted the violence of colonisation, theft of Aboriginal land and the risk that posed to Aboriginal culture. They succeeded in drawing many supporters, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and meeting prime minister Gough Whitlam, highlighting the recognition of Aboriginal people as people with rights to land and culture.

This is a proud history of Aboriginal activism that shaped national consciousness and united Aboriginal people across the country in our justice claims. It showed survival and resistance, as protesters stood their ground against police violence when the government ordered the embassy be disbanded. It is now a powerful symbol of Aboriginal sovereignty.

In the early '90s, as a young Noongar law student, I travelled to Canberra to the Tent Embassy protesting against the Western Australian government's treatment of Aboriginal youth through laws known as "three strikes".

These laws still exist and result in mandatory incarceration for property related offences. They explain why Aboriginal child and youth incarceration is so high in WA and the Northern Territory, about double that of the national average, which is also shocking. I took several young people with me who were at risk of such laws, and we sought "refuge" at the embassy to highlight nationally what was happening. At the Tent Embassy I met people who had very senior reputations as fighters for Aboriginal justice, Isobel Coe and Kevin Gilbert, who talked about colonisation without treaty and what this meant now: that our sovereignty as Aboriginal people has never been ceded and that Australia was acquired unlawfully under international law and the Law of Nations.

The recent incident of setting fire to Old Parliament House was shocking and disappointing. This was not the activism of old that I had been raised in, and didn't represent any of the Aboriginal people and communities I know.

It was not in the tradition of non-violent protest established at the original Tent Embassy, which I witnessed in the '90s. This action served no purpose and gained no respect. According to a statement by the Tent Embassy, the protesters actions and the "smoking ceremony" that precipitated the damage was done without the "knowledge, consent or mandate" of the embassy's council or traditional owners responsible for the embassy.



Wadjularbinna Nulyarimma (L) and Isobel Coe at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in front of Old Parliament House in 1999.

There's also been concern the "freedom" movement, which broadcast the incident, was involved, consistent with other reports that anti-vaxxer white supremacist groups and QAnon have been attempting to influence Aboriginal communities at risk of COVID. These agendas no doubt endanger and undermine Aboriginal people and our claims

as Indigenous peoples. According to local respected Ngunnawal elder Matilda House-Williams: “These behaviours do not represent the Aboriginal community here, and it doesn’t reflect the vision and families that have held the space at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy for almost 50 years.”

What happened no doubt reflects a lack of respect to our elders and leaders by individuals who don’t know our cultural protocols and proud history of activism and leadership. They have no place in Indigenous rights. There are many influences at play, including the interference in our people’s business by non-Aboriginal people who still think they know better than us. Senator Lidia Thorpe, in a now deleted tweet, wrote that the arson was a sign of the colonial order “burning down” but nothing could be as far removed from the truth – the colonial order remains well and truly entrenched. All around this country, Aboriginal people want to see real reforms and change, based in culture and respect for people and country.

It’s clear that the history of Aboriginal rights activism the Tent Embassy has always stood for is needed now more than ever. Our rights as Indigenous peoples continue to be violated every day, and, while assimilation is no longer official government policy, Aboriginal people are systematically discriminated against for being Aboriginal. There is increasing evidence that racism is on the rise and Aboriginal people, even our children, are subjected to racism in every sphere of life. White Australian conservative agendas are the norm and Aboriginal resistance is met with significant opposition and open hostility.

The continued and increasing removal of Aboriginal children and babies, from mothers and families, from their country and culture, continues Australia’s shameful history of genocide.

There are more Aboriginal children removed today than during the history of the Stolen Generations. And, across the country, Aboriginal heritage sites are still being destroyed by mining companies and developers with permission from states who show no concern or respect for Indigenous people’s fundamental rights to lands, heritage and culture.

The Australian government has a clear obligation to address the outstanding issue of Treaty, having made such promises since the 1980s and consistent with international human rights law, which required a treaty or treaties with Indigenous peoples. Just before Christmas, the federal government released its long-awaited report about the new national Indigenous representative body or voice. The Voice as envisaged by the Uluru Statement from the Heart precipitates a process of agreement making. Yet, the federal proposal falls short of the significant reforms envisaged by the Voice, Treaty and Truth and the importance of a constitutionally protected body.

We know that the rights set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are being violated, especially the right to self-determination and the protection of Aboriginal lands, heritage and culture. The rule of law is supposed to ensure that all are equal before the law, but Aboriginal people are still being killed by police and dying in custody because of racism in the legal system. Our people, men,

women, and children are incarcerated at levels unprecedented and involving cruelty that would amount to torture.

All these issues have been highlighted to the Australian government by UN human rights treaty bodies and, while Australia claims to protect and promote human rights at the UN, it does not follow words with matching actions at home where it counts most. It is becoming increasingly obvious to the world that our government does not adequately respect the rights of Aboriginal people and the significant gap between the declaration and reality is a serious challenge that must be addressed.

The incident at Old Parliament House must not distract us from the serious issues and challenges facing Indigenous peoples. As a nation we have outstanding business about the colonial foundations, their ongoing impacts and serious issues of race relations and human rights violations that must be addressed.

This year, the 50th anniversary of the Tent Embassy, marks an important moment in history and is an opportunity to remember and reflect on the leadership of the activists of the past. Aboriginal people who came together because they understood the importance of justice and protection of our cultures and country. Through their activism, grounded in community and culture, they asserted our sovereignty, refused to be silent in the face of injustice and oppression, and powerfully reminded Australia: This always will be Aboriginal lands.

Associate Professor Hannah McGlade is from the Noongar Bibbulum people of West Australia and a member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues.