

7

ADULT LITERACY, LAND RIGHTS AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Bob Boughton

Self-determination can be understood as a policy of the Australian settler state, in a particular period. But it is also a key demand of the social movement for Indigenous rights, and a set of practices within the organisations that comprise that movement. This chapter outlines a view of that movement's history based on my work within it as a non-Indigenous activist, and as a practitioner and academic in the field of adult education and development. I began my activism in Sydney in the 1970s as a member of the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Rights Support Group. In the 1980s I worked for Tangentyere Council and the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) in Alice Springs, and in the 1990s for Tranby Aboriginal College and the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP). Currently, I work with the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), an Aboriginal organisation established in 2013 by three Aboriginal education leaders, Pat Anderson, Donna Ah Chee and Jack Beetson, to lead a national adult literacy campaign across Aboriginal Australia.¹

The achievement of self-determination involves the collective exercise by Aboriginal peoples of a high degree of control over their social, political and economic development. This has entailed a long political struggle in

1 The Foundation's website is at www.lff.org.au.

and with the apparatus of the Australian colonial settler state, a struggle to mobilise and engage the Indigenous population in the process of retaking control of the conditions of their existence. It included the struggle to establish an independent economic base, since political independence requires a degree of economic independence to sustain it; and so the history of self-determination in NSW, the focus of this paper, is inseparable from the struggle for land rights and compensation. At the same time, the colonial state on which these demands are being made is also not autonomous, but must to some extent serve its economic base, by taking responsibility for the institutions of social reproduction that sustain the settler-capitalist economy, including the formal education system.

Indigenous peoples, the 'self' in self-determination, constitute themselves as a collective historical subject through the actions of the social movement for Indigenous rights. As E. P. Thompson said of the English working class, they are present at their own making. Moreover, like the working class of classical Marxism, while they are making history, it is not in conditions of their own choosing. Each generation struggles to achieve, and to practice, self-determination under conditions and within limits inherited from the past. Most importantly for this chapter, these inherited conditions include the 'level' and type of education to which people have had access. In New South Wales (NSW), while the formal education system has served the settler economy well for generations, it has, over the same period, left the majority of the Aboriginal peoples of rural and remote areas with minimal education levels, and with minimal understanding of their rights, as peoples.² This has been despite the best efforts of Indigenous peoples themselves, through their organisations and with their allies, to make it do otherwise.³

'Closing the gap' in enrolments and outcomes from *existing* education institutions is not enough. Education for Indigenous self-determination can only be provided when Indigenous people are themselves exercising control over that education. How could it be otherwise? The reproduction (and in the case of a colonised people, the reconstruction) of all societies requires them to control their own systems of educating future generations. This is why community-controlled education plays a central role in the movement for land rights and self-determination. In NSW, the intimate connection between community-controlled education and

2 Audit Office of NSW, *Improving the Literacy*.

3 Fletcher, *Clean*.

the achievement of the right of self-determination is demonstrated most clearly through the role of Tranby Aboriginal College.⁴ However, Tranby College and its courses were central parts of a 'system' that extended well beyond the walls of its classrooms in inner-Sydney Glebe, including the social and political activities of the wider movement as an integral part of its 'curriculum' and pedagogy.

Since reaching a high point in the late 1990s, Aboriginal community-controlled education has suffered a series of defeats, part of the wider neoliberal roll back of the social democratic self-determination/land rights model legislated in 1983 by the NSW Labor Government.⁵ Two decades on from those defeats, this still-emerging system of 'education for self-determination' is now addressing one of its most significant challenges, a challenge common to decolonising movements all over the world – namely, how to raise the level of literacy among the majority adult population, especially in rural communities.

Adult education, adult literacy and self-determination

In Australia, as in much of the world, adult education has several traditions. From the universities sprang a liberal tradition of adult education, sometimes called 'extension studies', dating back to the late nineteenth century. In recent decades, this tradition has become less prominent, as more people entered university education directly from school. A second tradition that began with working men's colleges and mechanics institutes eventually became what we now know as the vocational education and training (VET) system. This includes public TAFE colleges and, increasingly, private and not-for-profit registered training organisations. In the 1950s, these two traditions, liberal and vocational, combined to provide a model of adult education for countries of the Global South, in the field known as adult education and development, which is strongly supported by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). A third, more radical variant of adult education originated with the Chartist movement in Britain and was taken up by socialist and communist tendencies within the labour

4 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*; Cook and Goodall, *Making Change*.

5 Austin-Broos, 'Brewarrina'.

movements of the Global North, and by anti-colonial movements in the Global South. Originally known as independent working-class education, this is today more commonly referred to by its Latin American name, as popular education,⁶ or as social movement learning.⁷

In this popular education tradition, the right of self-determination became part of the 'curriculum' of the Aboriginal rights movement in the early years of the twentieth century,⁸ and it first appeared in policy statements of the communist and socialist workers' movement in the 1930s.⁹ University adult education did not seek to develop leadership for self-determination until much later. According to Rowse, Indigenous Australians were 'not visible as political agents' to the university-based historians and political scientists of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁰ He cites Charles Rowley, writing in *Oceania* in 1962:

We cannot produce leadership; what we can do, in situations where it is not too late, is to provide some of the conditions in which it becomes possible; and to provide assistance on request to potential leaders.¹¹

Rowley's background was in liberal adult education. He was an adult educator in the Australian Army Education Service (AAES) and, in 1949, he was a member of the Australian delegation to the first UNESCO CONFINTEA, a world conference on adult education.¹² In 1950, he wrote about his experiences as an army educator, and took part in debates at that time about the 'tasks of adult education'. He was among the first adult educators in Australia to promote 'community development' as integral to adult education.¹³ In 1962, as principal of the Australian School of Pacific Administration in Sydney, he was still an adult educator, training patrol officers to work in Papua New Guinea, the Northern Territory and the Pacific.

6 Boughton, 'Does Popular'.

7 Choudry, *Learning Activism*.

8 Maynard, *Fight for Liberty*.

9 Boughton, 'The Communist Party'.

10 Rowse, 'The Reforming State', 66.

11 Rowley, 'Aborigines', 263.

12 The AAES was under the command of Bert Madgwick, who, before the war, was a Sydney University Extension lecturer. He became the first vice-chancellor of my university, the University of New England (UNE), and Founding President in 1961 of the Australian Association of Adult Education. Dymock, *Sweet Use of Adversity*.

13 Inglis, 'Charles Dunford Rowley'.

Although Rowley looked to adult education agencies in 1962 to overcome 'peculiar difficulties in urban areas' for Aboriginal development, he did not mention an active adult education agency in inner Sydney that was already developing Indigenous leadership courses to help people take more control of development in their communities. In 1958, Tranby Aboriginal Cooperative College had opened in the Sydney suburb of Glebe, pioneering structured education for Aboriginal leaders in how to use cooperatives to take over economic and social development on reserves and missions. Cooperatives were a product of the independent working-class education tradition, initially promoted by nineteenth-century English Chartists and taken up by the early socialist movement. Their adoption in Australia at this time was due to the work of an Anglican minister and missionary, Alf Clint, Tranby's first director, who had a long association with the radical working-class movement dating back to his experiences 'actively supporting pastoral workers during the big 1930s strikes around Brewarrina and Bourke'.¹⁴ Clint's work at Tranby drew also on a progressive Anglican tradition, which had seen programs of adult education and cooperative development established on Queensland missions in the 1950s.¹⁵ The liberal tradition eventually took some interest in the model, as when H. C. Coombs corresponded in 1968 with Stan Davey and Don McLeod, two non-Indigenous leaders in the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), seeking information about the Pindan Co-operative that McLeod (a communist) had helped the Pilbara strikers to establish in north-west Western Australia in the 1940s. In his address that same year to the FCAA, Coombs also referred to the Cabbage Tree Island Co-operative, the establishment of which Tranby had supported, calling it one of the organisations that 'may help Aboriginal Australians to cope with the contemporary world by their own efforts'.¹⁶

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, in NSW as in many other parts of Australia, the independent tradition of adult 'popular' education played a key role in the movement for land rights and self-determination. Tranby was the base from which the first NSW Aboriginal Land Council (NSWALC) was established in 1977; Kevin Cook, a former builder's labourer who took over from Clint as Tranby's director, was the land council's first convenor. The college assisted several NSW communities to prepare land claims well before any legislation was

14 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 299.

15 Loos and Keast, 'The radical promise'; Loos, *White Cross*, 119–24.

16 Boughton, 'The Communist Party'; Rowse, *Obliged*, 31–32.

in place. Tranby played a central role in NSWALC's campaign to get the NSW Labor Government to legislate land rights, which it did in 1983. The college and its supporters were also deeply involved in the campaign against Black Deaths in Custody, which led to the establishment of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1988. Some of this history has found its way into accounts of the period, but the direct connection between the kind of adult education that Tranby offered and the growing strength of the social movement for land rights and self-determination is rarely acknowledged.¹⁷ Once the NSW land rights regime was established by legislation in 1983, Tranby continued to provide adult education programs specifically designed to support and strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal communities to win back more of their lands and secure greater control over their own affairs.

The educative work of Tranby and the movement's other organisations occurred against a backdrop of the continuing failure of mainstream formal education to adapt its goals and methods to the policy of self-determination announced by the Whitlam Government in 1973. The Aboriginal Consultative Group's (ACG) report to the Schools Commission in 1975 reflected both the liberal and the independent traditions of adult education:

We see education as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self-determination for the Aboriginal people of Australia. We do not see education as a method of producing an anglicised Aborigine but rather as an instrument for creating an informed community with intellectual and technological skills, in harmony with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be Aboriginal citizens in a changing Australia. ...

Our vision of education is not compatible with the current education system with its over emphasis on manpower orientated goals that most Australian people know.¹⁸

The ACG lamented the fact that, in 1971, out of a population of 'between 106,000 and 150,000', there were only 55 Aboriginal students attending university. It drew specific attention to the lack of administrative expertise, proposing a School of Aboriginal Affairs Administration.

17 Norman, *What Do We Want?*, 82–83.

18 Aboriginal Consultative Group, *Education for Aborigines*.

Thirteen years later, the 1988 Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force was more strident, finding that, ‘as a result of the lack of education provided for Aboriginal people it can be assumed that at least one half of the Aboriginal population is illiterate or functionally illiterate’. It called on the Commonwealth to negotiate with states and territories to ‘develop and implement a national Aboriginal literacy strategy aimed to significantly increase the opportunities available to Aboriginal adults to improve their literacy skills’.¹⁹ The Commonwealth’s response, the 1990 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, remains today the only national education policy ever adopted.²⁰ Two of its 21 goals are relevant to the current analysis:

Goal 18: To provide community education services which enable Aboriginal people to develop the skills to manage the development of their communities.

Goal 19: To enable the attainment of proficiency in English language and numeracy competencies by Aboriginal adults with limited or no educational experience.²¹

However, as critics at the time pointed out, responsibility for implementation of the policy was left almost entirely to state education systems, and there was very little government funding for independent Aboriginal-controlled adult education.

The lack of adult education services to support self-determination continued as a major theme of numerous inquiries and academic papers in subsequent years. In August 1990, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs report *Our Future, Our Selves: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Control, Management and Resources* noted that many submissions ‘pointed to Aboriginal people’s lack of skills – such as English literacy, numeracy, etc – and their lack of

¹⁹ Hughes, *Report*, 33.

²⁰ The members of the ACG were: David Anderson, NAC, Vic.; Jill Churnside, Pre-School teacher, WA; Roslyn Ella, Teacher, NSW; Walter Fejo, NAC, NT; Rex Granites, Teaching Assistant, NT; Eric Hayward, Community Worker, WA; Nita Koolamatrie, Teacher, SA; Verna Langdon, Community Worker, Tas.; Ted Loban, NAC, Torres Strait Islands; Bruce McGuinness, NAC, Vic.; Natasha McNamara, Lecturer, SA; Michael Miller, Teacher, Qld; George Mye, NAC, Torres Strait Islands; Wiyendji Nunggula, Housefather, NT; May O’Brien, Teacher, WA; James Stewart, Teacher, SA; Margaret Valadian, Social Worker, NSW. Special Advisers: John Moriarty, Department of Aboriginal Affairs; Eric Wilmott, Department of Education. See Australia, Aboriginal Consultative Group, ‘Report’.

²¹ Department of Social Services, ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989’.

knowledge about how the governmental system works, as major obstacles to the achievement of self-determination or self-management'. It said that 'high levels of adult illiteracy similarly restrict the usefulness of the public exhibition of draft community government schemes'.²² The final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991 similarly recognised the 'historical educational disadvantage which Aboriginal people have experienced' and recommended that governments support 'Aboriginal community controlled education institutions and other institutions which provide a program of courses which have the support of the Aboriginal community' (Recommendation 298). In 2000, Gray, Hunter and Schwab identified 'community development and training including English literacy and numeracy for indigenous adults' as an unmet need 'where attention should be concentrated in attempts to improve outcomes in indigenous education'.²³ In 2004, Diane Smith, writing about governance in the Northern Territory, made the same point:

Grossly inadequate literacy and numeracy levels, and poor health, mean that Indigenous people will continue to remain reliant upon others for important aspects of their community management and decision-making. Poor outcomes in these areas will continue to substantially impede Indigenous aspirations for self-determination, meaningful participation and effective representation.²⁴

A high point

In the 1990s, Tranby began working closely with other independent colleges, including the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs and Tauondi College in Adelaide. Together with several smaller organisations, they established the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP), which lobbied nationally and internationally for the addition of a different model of provision to that offered through state systems, to give people a choice. The Foundation President of FIAEP, Jack Beetson, joined Tranby in the early 1980s, becoming director of studies in 1991. When Kevin Cook became too ill to continue as Tranby's director, Beetson took over and held this position until 2003. Beetson worked with Donna Ah Chee, IAD's director, and Bill Wilson, Tauondi's

22 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, *Our Future, Our Selves*.

23 Gray, Hunter and Schwab, 'Trends in Indigenous', 115.

24 Smith, *From Gove*, 14.

director, to convince the Commonwealth to direct more of its Aboriginal post-school education budget towards the independents, resisting the growing trend at this time towards the ‘mainstreaming’ of Aboriginal services. In post-school education, mainstreaming would have meant governments funding only public state-run TAFEs and non-Indigenous registered training organisations.

In 1997, Beetson attended UNESCO CONFINTEA V, the Fifth World Conference on Adult Education, the same forum that Rowley had attended in 1949. This was the first time the Australian Government’s delegation included an Indigenous representative, and Beetson used the opportunity to call on UNESCO to support the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, referring in particular to Article 15, which declares the right of Indigenous peoples to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Addressing the conference, Beetson spoke of the need for Indigenous-controlled education:

Indigenous education has to mean something different from education FOR indigenous peoples. If our education is conceived as simply something we can get from the non-indigenous mainstream system, by increasing our ‘access’ and ‘participation’, then education will remain what it has been for us for over 200 years, a continuation of our colonisation ...

The non-indigenous colonial state has used education as a major arm of its strategy for more effective government administration & control of indigenous peoples, and we have always struggled against this. This struggle has seen the emergence, alongside our informal indigenous educational practices, of a new and now officially-recognised indigenous community-controlled education sector. Today, this sector struggles to survive on inadequate funding and a lack of acknowledgment of its expression of a fundamental right of indigenous peoples, the right to control our own education.²⁵

In the late 1990s, the campaigning work of the FIAEP leadership began bearing fruit, due in part to the support of a sympathetic Aboriginal education leader working inside the Department of Education, Employment and Training, Peter Buckskin, who had a long association

25 Beetson, ‘Address to the UNSECO Confintea’.

through Tauondi with the independent tradition. With increased Commonwealth funding, and responding to the growing need for an educated leadership inside the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, the independent colleges introduced new courses designed to develop local leaders, courses that included narratives of Australia's colonial history and of the movements of Indigenous resistance, including the land rights campaigns, drawing on movement leaders as guest lecturers and mentors for their students.²⁶

By 2004, this independent model of adult education for self-determination was rolled back, as Commonwealth and state governments implemented two articles of neoliberal 'common sense': that post-school education should be 'vocational', endowing students with nothing more than the skills demanded by employers; and that providers of post-school education would be more efficient if they were enterprises responding in a competitive market to student demand for vocational training.²⁷ While such neoliberal reform initially made it possible for non-government providers, including the independent colleges, to access government funding, all providers soon had to surrender a significant level of control of their curriculum and courses. The colleges were eventually forced to offer, under pain of losing all funding, national 'training packages' with mandated 'competency standards', developed by industry training boards dominated by representatives of employer associations and the training bureaucracy. These uniform 'training packages' were to be utilised by all public TAFEs, and by both non-government and private for-profit registered training organisations.

Aboriginal colleges continued to make some space in their courses for the political, historical and cultural education that had been central to their curriculum in previous decades. Yet the demobilisation of the wider land rights movement that was also occurring at this time made things more difficult. In NSW, the state government introduced much closer supervision of the state's land council, especially the Local Aboriginal Land Councils; in this regime, governance focused much more on compliance with norms of public sector management than on community education and development.²⁸ As the movement became more defensive, forced to make compromises to protect the gains it had won in the 1980s,

26 Durnan and Boughton, *Succeeding Against*; Cook and Goodall, *Making Change*, 390–95.

27 Munro, 'The Indigenous'.

28 Morris, *Protest, Land Rights*, 44–48; Norman, 'What Do We Want?', 137.

the education programs that gave the movement its energy and mass support slowly lost their radical edge. At the same time, the increasing professionalisation of community organisation leadership and staffing saw the majority of their ‘base’, the rural Aboriginal population, become more removed from day-to-day decision-making, as the land councils became more accountable to government than to their social base, a process that the international social movement literature has dubbed ‘NGOisation’.²⁹

Self-determination, community control and adult literacy

Aboriginal people and their allies rightly claim that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations are the building blocks of self-determination. Megan Davis, writing in the *Indigenous Law Bulletin* about the United Nations Declaration (UNDRIP), asks: ‘What does the right to self-determination look like in practice in Australian communities?’ Her answer is: ‘It looks a lot like “community control”’, and her illustration is the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs).³⁰ However, self-determination via community control is not achieved once and for all. As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson said in his first report, it is a process, and it develops over time, involving not only the relationships between organisations and government agencies, but also the organisations’ relationships with their own communities.³¹

In April 2009, the Lowitja Institute convened a Roundtable on Adult Literacy in Alice Springs. Among the Aboriginal leaders attending were John Little (CAAC), Donna Ah Chee (IAD), Pat Anderson (Lowitja), Mick Dodson (The Australian National University/Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), Marcia Langton (Melbourne University) and Jack Beetson. Stephanie Bell, then director of one of Australia’s largest ACCHOs, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC), outlined the difficulties of achieving effective community control:

29 Choudry and Kapoor, *NGOization*.

30 Davis, ‘Community Control’.

31 Dodson, ‘First Report 1993’, 41.

It is a struggle to find enough people to sit on health boards and to work in clinics – to negotiate with government agencies, and to make decisions and give some leadership about health development. This means it is hard for the community to take control ... Moreover, each year, the challenges of service delivery and good governance seem to get more complex, and require even more education and training.³²

Bell cited the Northern Territory Education Department's own self-critical inquiry (over a decade earlier) to argue that the school system was failing to graduate young people with education sufficient to play an effective role in community governance. In particular, she argued that 'one of the biggest barriers' to Aboriginal control of their own organisations was 'the very low levels of English language literacy we see every day in our communities. People can't read, and don't read'.³³

However, Bell doubted that the formal system would deliver the kind of education that adults needed:

The majority of adults never access this system sufficiently to get even a basic education, a basic understanding of how the world works and what you have to do if you want to change things for the better ... We see the majority of people continuing to live in intolerable conditions, and no one is helping them learn what they need to know to get out of that situation ... non-literate and semi-literate people have got almost no chance of taking control of their health, or of becoming leaders in their communities.³⁴

Bell pointed out that, unlike the organised Aboriginal presence in the Territory's health system, 'we don't have a community-controlled education sector'.

The Lowitja Institute subsequently funded another round of work, to secure Commonwealth Government support to pilot an adult literacy campaign in Australia, utilising a Cuban model that was then operating successfully in Timor-Leste. Over two years later, in February 2012, the first campaign was launched in the western NSW town of Wilcannia.³⁵

32 Bell, 'Opening Address'.

33 Bell, 'Opening Address'.

34 Bell, 'Opening Address'.

35 Boughton et al., 'An Aboriginal Adult'.

Literacy and land councils in western NSW

The campaign has continued for the past seven years, supported by a combination of government and private funding, and much voluntary labour. Having reached eight NSW communities, in 2019 it moved into Central Australia. A key to the model's success is that it requires the local community to provide the leadership to run it, including the people who mobilise the community behind the campaign and the people who teach the classes. It is thus continuing the tradition of independent Aboriginal community-controlled adult education, and the campaign's three national leaders – Jack Beetson, Donna Ah Chee and Pat Anderson – have all had a long association with this tradition. Likewise, many of the community-based campaign activists in NSW have previously been participants in education and political action initiated through Tranby, or are the children and grandchildren of people who were.

There is not space here to tell the story of the campaign over the last seven years in any detail. However, the campaign's action-research, a component of its popular education approach, has confirmed that low levels of adult literacy inhibit people's participation in their community-controlled organisations. In each community, locally recruited researchers conduct household surveys to raise awareness of the campaign and identify people who want help to develop their literacy. At the time of writing, almost 800 adults have been surveyed, of whom more than 70 per cent have self-identified as having difficulty with basic reading and writing tasks. This appalling statistic is confirmed by professional literacy assessments of a sample of the 300 adults who have joined the literacy classes to date. The assessment utilises the national VET system standard known as the Australian Core Skills Framework. On this standard, well over half the adult population in these communities are at Level 1 or below, compared with 14 per cent of the Australian population as a whole.³⁶ Given that most written texts utilised in workplaces require at least Level 2 and often Level 3 to produce and comprehend, it is not surprising that the majority of the people who join the campaign report that they play little or no role at all in the management of their local community-controlled organisations.³⁷ As Sullivan has shown in communities in the Kimberley

36 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*.

37 The data in this paragraph are based on research as yet unpublished, from an ARC Linkage project being conducted jointly by UNE, University of NSW, LFLF and the Lowitja Institute.

in Western Australia, the increasing complexity of the accountability and compliance regimes in which local organisations receiving government funding must now operate exacerbates this problem.³⁸

The NSW movement for land rights and self-determination must now address low literacy levels. Across NSW, there are about 16,000 members of the Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) set up under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* (NSW). The members elect the directors of their LALC, as well as the councillors who comprise the leadership of the statewide NSW body, NSWALC. Table 7.1, below, traces the membership and voting participation figures for the state body over the period 1991–2015.

Table 7.1: NSW Aboriginal Land Council membership and voting.

	1991	1996	1999	2007	2011	2015
NSW Aboriginal population 18+	42,011	86,886	91,617	110,026	123,371	128,000
NSWALC membership	12,412	19,287	20,539	16,643	16,136	15,718
Memberships as % of adult population (density)	30%	22%	22%	15%	13%	12%
Voters	6,574	7,031	6,148	4,663	4,120	5,106
Participation rate (voters as a proportion of members)	53%	36%	30%	28%	26%	32%
Increase/decrease in participation rate		-17%	-6%	-2%	-2%	7%
Voters as % of 18+ popn	16%	8%	7%	4%	3%	4%

Sources: ABS Census data and relevant NSWALC Election Reports and Annual Reports of the NSW Electoral Commission.

Table 7.1 demonstrates, first, that the NSW Aboriginal adult population grew very rapidly in the first period (1991–96); second, and in part because of this, the proportion of the adult population who are land council members (density) is quite low and falling; and third, that even among members, the participation rate in terms of voting is also very low. Given that both the LALCs and NSWALC were established to lead the movement for land rights and self-determination, the low membership and participation relative to the total Aboriginal population is a serious problem. As one NSWALC councillor said, in a workshop with literacy

38 Sullivan, 'The Tyranny'.

campaign participants in Brewarrina: ‘The leaders of the movement from the 1970s might have trouble recognising what they fought for in what we now have’.³⁹

As people become more literate, they become both more informed and more confident to engage with the local land council and other community organisations, including the ACCHOs. Follow-up surveys conducted as part of a longitudinal study of the campaign’s impact show there has also been some increase in membership and participation in land councils and other local Aboriginal organisations among campaign graduates. In one community, Enngonia, where the local Murruwarri Land Council is the only on-site Aboriginal organisation controlled by local community members, the campaign coordinator has now taken on the role of LALC CEO, and is mobilising the campaign graduates to play a greater role in LALC meetings and in developing and implementing small-scale local development projects.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Dealing on equal terms with government in modern Australia requires a level of formal education denied to the majority of the Aboriginal population. The historical movement for self-determination that began with Maynard’s Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in 1924 faced what development theorists call a problem of scale-up when, from the 1970s onwards, governments began to entertain the possibility of increased self-determination. Commonwealth and state government policies that created an expanded role for Aboriginal organisations increased the demand for people to staff and lead these organisations. Each government agency also began to foster the development of their own specific Aboriginal body or bodies to which they could turn for advice, and to partner the provision of their services. The work of such bodies, however, required people in communities to have much more formal education than that to which they had previously had access.

Advisers to governments in the 1960s and 1970s such as Rowley, who had international experience in the political economy of adult education and development, should have seen the problem coming. In UNESCO forums

³⁹ Boughton, field notes in author’s possession.

⁴⁰ Lee, ‘Remote Disadvantaged’.

at the time, the problem of majority populations in the colonised world having minimal education was already well-known, as was the fact that formal schooling, no matter how much was invested in it, could not, on its own, overcome the problem.⁴¹ There had also to be a systematic system of popular adult education, one that could bring the people who had little formal education into the development process as active participants. This is why, in every decade of the second half of the twentieth century, most newly independent countries mounted mass literacy campaigns, which became the subject of an international literature of research and evaluation.⁴²

A more intractable problem, however, faced minority Indigenous populations in modern settler states (the peoples of the Fourth World). Simply increasing Aboriginal peoples' access to formal education was not sufficient, because the formal education system of schools, vocational colleges and universities was so implicated in the colonising practices of the previous decades that it could not simply reinvent itself; such a thorough-going transformation would have to be informed by self-reflective critique. As Paulo Freire had written in his 1972 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, people oppressed by particular social institutions cannot overcome their situation simply through a process of inclusion in those same institutions. The solution Freire proposed was revolutionary or transformative 'praxis', that is, direct political action to change those institutions, combined with constant critical reflection (i.e. research and theory-building) on what was being learned.⁴³ In the context of education systems of the Australian settler state, this 'revolutionizing practice' would require what is now commonly called a 'decolonising education'.⁴⁴ Because the Literacy for Life campaigns are run with a high degree of local as well as national Indigenous control, the acquisition of literacy is inevitably embedded in, and contextualised to, the life experiences of the Indigenous teachers and students. Literacy is a social practice, never just a technical skill, though acquiring and using it requires one to develop skills (e.g. spelling, reading, writing and so forth). The literacy that people acquire through the Literacy for Life campaign may well turn out to be different from the literacy they did not acquire through the school system.

41 Rowley, *The Politics*.

42 Bhola, *Campaigning*; Arno and Graff, *National Literacy*.

43 Freire, *Pedagogy*.

44 Hickling-Hudson, 'Beyond Schooling'.

This is exactly Paulo Freire's point – people will read the world, from their own standpoint, and what they write and say as they become literate will be informed by their experiences.

In the 1970s, the struggle to decolonise the formal education system in Australia had barely begun, and it would be the work of decades. The formal education system could not, in the form it took in Australia in the late twentieth century, prepare people adequately for the tasks of self-determination, because the social sciences taught within universities, the disciplinary bases of modern theories of governance and organisation, were and still are the intellectual products of twentieth-century colonialism and imperialism.⁴⁵ As Torres Strait Islander educator Martin Nakata has argued, the education to be gained within the formal system has to be critiqued from 'an Indigenous standpoint', that is, from the point of view of the knowledges and experiences of Indigenous peoples, rather than simply taken over as a set of neutral ideas and technical skills.⁴⁶

The failure of the formal education system to accommodate a more independent self-determining Aboriginal education has now produced a new contradiction within the movement for self-determination itself. On the one hand, the Aboriginal organisations which set out to become the foundation of self-determination, and the public service agencies with which they must interact to achieve their goals, are increasingly managed, staffed and led by Aboriginal people who have succeeded in formal education. On the other hand, a significant minority of the Aboriginal people from whom these organisation derive their mandate and legitimacy, and the majority of the people whose daily needs are most urgent, struggle to participate in their deliberations, due to their lack of success in formal education and, most importantly, their very low levels of English language literacy.

The policy of self-determination was, for Coombs, 'an experiment', requiring us to view government as 'an activity of knowledge-production'.⁴⁷ This chapter has sought to show that the social movement for Aboriginal self-determination in NSW also was, and still is, a process of knowledge creation, of learning-in-action. The Aboriginal adult literacy campaign can thus be seen as a further stage in this movement 'experiment', one which

45 Connell, *Southern Theory*.

46 Nakata, *Disciplining*.

47 Rowse, *Rethinking*, 196.

both exposes and clarifies a new contradiction, while at the same time employing an Aboriginal-controlled self-determining education process to move beyond it.

References

- Aboriginal Consultative Group. 'Report to the Schools Commission by the Aboriginal Consultative Group – June 1975'. *Aboriginal Child at School* 3, no. 4 (August 1975): 60–64. doi.org/10.1017/s1326011100601473.
- Aboriginal Consultative Group. *Education For Aborigines: Report to the Schools Commission*. Canberra: Schools Commission, 2014 [1975].
- Arnové, R. F. and H. J. Graff, eds. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2008. doi.org/10.4324/9781315125077.
- Audit Office of New South Wales. *Improving the Literacy of Aboriginal Students in NSW Public Schools: Department of Education and Communities*. Sydney: Audit Office of New South Wales, 2012. Accessed 30 October 2017. www.audit.nsw.gov.au/.
- Austin-Broos, Diane. 'Brewarrina: An Australian Story'. *Oceania* 85, no. 2 (2015): 238–42. doi.org/10.1002/occa.5087.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011–12*. ABS Cat No. 4228.0. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013.
- Beetson, Jack. 'Address to the UNESCO Confintea V Indigenous Education Panel'. 15 July 1997. Transcript. Board of Studies New South Wales, Teaching Heritage Teaching Materials. Accessed September 2018. www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/section07/wd1_beetson.php.
- Bell, Sharon. 'Opening Address'. Lowitja Roundtable, Alice Springs. Unpublished manuscript. 2009.
- Bhola, H. S. *Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences of the Twentieth Century, with a Memorandum to Decision-Makers*. Paris: UNESCO, 1984.
- Boughton, Bob. 'The Communist Party of Australia's Involvement in the Struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Rights 1920–1970'. In *Labour and Community: Historical Essays*, edited by R. Markey, 263–94. Wollongong, NSW: University of Wollongong Press, 2001.

- Boughton, Bob. 'Does Popular Education Have a Past?' In *New Directions in Australian Adult Education*, edited by B. Boughton, T. Brown and G. Foley, 1–27. Sydney: University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Centre for Popular Education, 1997.
- Boughton, Bob, Donna Ah Chee, Jack Beetson, Deborah Durnan and Jose Chala LeBlanch. 'An Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign Pilot Study in Australia using Yes I Can'. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies* 21 no. 1 (2013): 5–32. doi.org/10.5130/lns.v21i1.3328.
- Choudry, Aziz. *Learning Activism: The Intellectual Life of Contemporary Social Movements*. Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2015.
- Choudry, Aziz and Dip Kapoor, eds. *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2013.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007.
- Cook, Kevin and Heather Goodall. *Making Change Happen: Black and White Activists Talk to Kevin Cook about Aboriginal, Union and Liberation Politics*. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013. doi.org/10.26530/oapen_459993.
- Davis, Megan. 'Community Control and the Work of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation: Putting Meat on the Bones of the "UNDRIP"'. *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 8, no. 7 (2013): 11–14.
- Department of Social Services. 'National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989'. Updated 28 May 2015. Accessed 9 September 2018. www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education-policy-1989. doi.org/10.1017/9781108123754.004.
- Dodson, Mick. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission: First Report 1993'. Canberra: AGPS, 1994 [1993]. Indigenous Law Resources, Austlii. www8.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/1993/3.html.
- Durnan, Deborah and Bob Boughton. *Succeeding against the Odds. The Outcomes Obtained by Indigenous Students in Aboriginal Community-Controlled Colleges*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 1999.
- Dymock, Darryl. *A Sweet Use of Adversity: The Australian Army Education Service in World War II and Its Impact on Australian Adult Education*. Armidale, NSW: University of New England Press in association with AAACE, 1995.

- Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP). *Education for Self-determination: A Review of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in Relation to Aboriginal Community-Controlled Adult Education*. Canberra: FIAEP, 1997.
- Fletcher, John J. *Clean, Clad and Courteous: A History of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales*. Carlton, NSW: J. Fletcher, 1989.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education, 1972.
- Goodall, Heather. *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770–1972*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin and Black Books, 1996.
- Gray, M. C., Boyd Hunter and R. G. Schwab. ‘Trends in Indigenous Educational Participation and Attainment, 1986–96’. *Australian Journal of Education* 44, no. 2 (2000): 101–17. doi.org/10.1177/000494410004400202.
- Hickling-Hudson, Anne. ‘Beyond Schooling: The Role of Adult and Community Education in Postcolonial Change’. In *Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local*, edited by R. Arnove and C. Torres, 229–51. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs. *Our Future Our Selves. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Control, Management and Resources*. Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee of Aboriginal Affairs. Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service, August 1990.
- Hughes, Paul. *Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force*. Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service, 1988.
- Inglis, Ken. S. ‘Charles Dunford Rowley (1906–1985)’. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University. adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rowley-charles-dunford-14191/text25203, published first in hardcopy 2012, accessed July 2018.
- Lee, Tim. ‘Remote Disadvantaged Community Thriving Thanks to Native Bush Food It’s Cultivating’. *ABC Landline*, 16 June 2018. Accessed September 2019. www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-15/native-bush-food-helping-remote-nsw-community-thrive/9870698.
- Loos, Noel. *White Cross, Black Cross: The Emergence of a Black Church*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007.

- Loos, Noel and Keast, R. 'The Radical Promise: The Aboriginal Christian Cooperative Movement'. *Australian Historical Studies* 25, no. 99 (1992): 286–301. doi.org/10.1080/10314619208595911.
- Maynard, John. *Fight for Liberty and Freedom: The Origins of Australian Aboriginal Activism*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007.
- Morris, Barry. *Protest, Land Rights and Riots: Postcolonial Struggles in Australia in the 1980s*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2013.
- Munro, Kate. 'The Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill (2005): A Threat to Self-determination in Indigenous Education?' *Indigenous Law Bulletin* 6, no. 12 (2005): 12–15.
- Nakata, Martin. *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007.
- Norman, Heidi. *'What Do We Want?': A Political History of Aboriginal Land Rights in New South Wales*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2015.
- Rowley, Charles. D. 'Aborigines and Other Australians'. *Oceania* 32, no. 4 (1962): 247–66. doi.org/10.1002/j.1834-4461.1962.tb01781.x.
- Rowley, Charles. D. *The Politics of Educational Planning in Developing Countries*. Paris: UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 1971.
- Rowse, Tim. *Obligated to be Difficult: Nugget Coombs' Legacy in Indigenous Affairs*. Oakley: Cambridge University Press, 2000. doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511552199.
- Rowse, Tim. 'The Reforming State, the Concerned Public and Indigenous Political Actors'. *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 56, no. 1 (2010): 66–81. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2010.01542.x.
- Rowse, Tim. *Rethinking Social Justice: From 'Peoples' to 'Populations'*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2012.
- Smith, Diane. E. *From Gove to Governance: Reshaping Indigenous Governance in the Northern Territory*. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, 2004.
- Sullivan, Patrick. 'The Tyranny of Neoliberal Public Management and the Challenge for Aboriginal Community Organisations'. In *The Neoliberal State, Recognition and Indigenous Rights. New Paternalism to New Imaginings*, edited by Deirdre Howard-Wagner, Maria Bargh and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez, 201–15. CAEPR Research Monograph, no. 40. Canberra: ANU Press, 2018. doi.org/10.22459/caepr40.07.2018.11.

This text is taken from *Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia: Histories and Historiography*, edited by Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/ISA.2020.07