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TAKING CONTROL

Aboriginal organisations and self-determination in Redfern in the 1970s

Johanna Perheentupa¹

This chapter examines the tensions between some Aboriginal understandings of self-determination and the Whitlam Government's policy of self-determination. These tensions became evident in the context of Aboriginal organisations set up in the inner-Sydney suburb of Redfern in the 1970s: the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), Black Theatre, Murawina preschool and childcare centre, and Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC). These organisations had been founded before the Labor Government came to power. Their central principle was Aboriginal control, which was supported by ideas of Black Power and of Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. Thus, the organisations' ideas about self-determination differed from the one introduced under the policy of self-determination, which emphasised the need to address Aboriginal disadvantage in order to achieve their equal treatment. In the case of Redfern, the Whitlam Government's self-determination policy reflected the way in which the underlying belief in equal treatment and modernising Aboriginal people remained strong in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.² Accordingly, it treated the self-determination policy ultimately as a temporary solution.

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2 Rowse, *Remote*, 131.

Emphasis on Aboriginal control was a continuing aspect of Aboriginal political activism since the establishment of their first political organisations, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, in 1924. Charlie Leon, who was active in Sydney-based Aboriginal rights organisations and the Redfern community, called for Aboriginal-owned cooperatives as well as an Aboriginal-led federal organisation in his article for the Aboriginal Progressive Association journal *Churinga* in 1965.³ By the 1970s, the objective of Aboriginal control was rearticulated in calls for Aboriginal self-determination.

Although Fred Maynard had already used the concept in Aboriginal politics in the 1920s, Gary Foley, who participated extensively in Aboriginal activism in Redfern, suggested that self-determination became their central goal following the formation of the National Tribal Council (NTC) when it broke away from the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) in 1970.⁴ The NTC had developed as part of a shift in focus from equal rights to Indigenous rights and a growing sense of shared national Aboriginal or pan-Aboriginal identity in the 1960s. Indigenous people from different parts of Australia were able to explore their shared histories under colonisation, as well as common causes such as land rights and the right to self-determination as they got together at the FCAATSI annual general meetings.⁵ The Tent Embassy protestors, flying the Aboriginal flag as a symbol of nationhood for the first time, brought Aboriginal claims for self-determination and sovereignty to the awareness of a wider public in 1972.⁶

Even though Aboriginal nationalism was strongly culturally oriented in the 1970s,⁷ Aboriginal activists also demanded control over Aboriginal peoples' social, political and economic development within the Australian nation-state, as we can see in the case of Redfern in the 1970s. As Foley defined it in 1975: 'Self-determination means the fundamental right of the Aboriginal people to have at their disposal the facilities and the resources that will enable them to be in full control of their own lives, their own destinies'.⁸ The concept of self-determination allowed Indigenous peoples to identify as culturally distinct from the settler colonial societies in which

3 Leon, 'Memories', 17, 19.

4 Maynard, *Fight*, 53–54; Foley, 'Self-determination', 18.

5 Anderson, 'Introduction', 18; Attwood, *Rights*, 279, 330.

6 McGregor, *Indifferent*, 163–82; Attwood, *Rights*, 343; Martinez, 'Problematising', 140.

7 McGregor, 'Another', 345.

8 Foley, 'Self-determination', 17.

they lived, and to create political institutions that promoted their specific interests.⁹ In Australia, grassroot organisations, or ‘self-determination organisations’, such as the ALS and AMS, took the role of Aboriginal political institutions in the 1970s.¹⁰

As Aboriginal articulations of nationhood and arguments for self-determination started to take form as part of Aboriginal political discourse, increasing numbers of Aboriginal people migrated from rural areas to urban centres in New South Wales and elsewhere in Australia. While in 1950 around 3,000 Aboriginal people lived in Sydney, estimates of Sydney’s Aboriginal population ranged from 14,000 to over 20,000 by 1976.¹¹ Many Aboriginal people sought better employment and education opportunities in the city. Yet, they also faced discrimination and problems in health, education and housing, akin to the life they had hoped to escape.

Most Aboriginal people in Sydney lived in the inner-city suburbs of Redfern, Newtown, Glebe and St Peters.¹² In fact, Aboriginal people defined ‘Redfern’ fluidly to include Waterloo, Alexandria and even Newtown.¹³ Inner Sydney, in the vicinity of Central Station, was attractive for its easy access to public transport and its location near the central business district. There was also employment available in local industry, for example at the Eveleigh Railway Yards. Furthermore, many Aboriginal migrants found support and accommodation with family and kin already living in the inner city. Since Aboriginal people were largely excluded from mainstream welfare benefits in Australia until the 1960s,¹⁴ they also relied on the local welfare organisations. One such support base was the Redfern All Blacks Rugby League Club, which symbolised resistance for the whole Aboriginal community and challenged the contemporary discourses of assimilation. As a model of Indigenous self-help it also advanced the welfare of the community.¹⁵

9 Weaver, ‘Self-determination’, 53.

10 Foley, ‘Self-determination’, 17.

11 Wait cited in Morgan, *Unsettled Places*, 47; Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, 173–74; Foley, ‘An Autobiographical’, 94, 132.

12 Beasley, ‘The Aboriginal’, 137–39; Department of Health, *Workshop on Aboriginal Medical Services*, 65.

13 Chicka Dixon, interviewed by the author, La Perouse, 26 June 2000.

14 Sanders, ‘Citizenship’, 142; Cass, ‘Contested’, 100–101.

15 Hartley, ‘Black, White’, 154–59.

Although in the middle of an affluent city, Redfern was poverty stricken and even described as a slum in the contemporary media.¹⁶ Local welfare organisation South Sydney Community Aid reported that Redfern had the 'heaviest concentration of Aboriginal population, living in the worst housing conditions'.¹⁷ Finding accommodation was difficult because landlords were hesitant to rent to Indigenous people. The housing they were able to find was poor and crowded; consequently, twice as many people occupied Indigenous residences compared to the regional average. Aboriginal people suffered from diverse health problems; for example, high infant mortality and malnutrition among Aboriginal children.¹⁸ The police maintained an unofficial curfew on the streets of Redfern, and so violent was the harassment that, in the early 1970s, visiting New Zealand anthropologist Leith Duncan deemed it a calculated attempt to break down Aboriginal resistance to assimilation in Redfern.¹⁹ Yet, it had the opposite effect, shaping a stronger sense of a distinct and shared Aboriginal identity in Sydney.

In response to this wide range of socio-economic challenges, Aboriginal activists set up Aboriginal-controlled organisations providing welfare services *by* Aboriginal people *for* Aboriginal people. These organisations provided free, culturally specific services, thereby overcoming the difficulties preventing Aboriginal people from seeking help from mainstream services. As Foley noted, 'since we got started doing things for ourselves, we've got Legal Service, Medical Service, we've got survival programs, we're providing services for the community'.²⁰

In establishing their organisations, Aboriginal activists adopted ideas of Black Power, which for Indigenous peoples in the Pacific embodied a form of decolonisation.²¹ Gary Williams, co-founder of the Tent Embassy and the first vice-president of the Aboriginal Legal Service, emphasised that Black Power was not about violence, but about reclaiming power to pressure the government to meet demands from Aboriginal people. He further explained Black Power as 'a statement that we are finding our

16 'Rats and Water in Aborigines' Homes' Sydney Slums', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 1964, 4.

17 University of New South Wales (UNSW) Archives, Hollows, 97A48/69.

18 W.D. Scott & Co., *Problems*, 6-37, 8-3, 8-11; Beasley, 'The Aboriginal', 184-86.

19 Duncan cited in Howell, 'Black Power', 68.

20 Cavadini, *Ningla A'Na*.

21 Banivanua-Mar, *Decolonisation*, 197.

own feet and want to control our own lives in our own way'.²² Black Power helped Aboriginal people to undermine the sense of powerlessness they experienced and to take control of their lives, politically, economically, socially and ideologically.²³

The Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), set up in 1970, is perhaps the most famous example of the influence of Black Power ideology in Redfern. Inspired by the Black Panthers' 'pig patrols', young Aboriginal activists such as Gary Foley, Gary Williams and Paul Coe started to record and confront the police for using unnecessary violence and indiscriminately arresting Aboriginal people. Once established with a shopfront office, the ALS, with the support of non-Indigenous volunteer lawyers, made legal representation accessible to Aboriginal people for the first time. The Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) soon followed in 1971. It was initiated by Gordon Briscoe, a field officer for the ALS, and Shirley Smith, a highly respected member of the Sydney Indigenous community who worked with Aboriginal prisoners. Murawina Preschool and Childcare Service started as the breakfast program run from the AMS in 1972. Aboriginal women took full control of the program in early 1973, forming Murawina to target the disadvantages that Aboriginal children faced in education. The Black Theatre, 'the cultural spearhead' of the Aboriginal movement, had its first performance in 1972.²⁴ The Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) answered the desperate need for Aboriginal-controlled housing and strengthened the geographic base for Aboriginal people in inner Sydney. It was set up by Aboriginal activists and their supporters, such as Bob and Kaye Bellear and Father Ted Kennedy from the local St Vincent's Presbytery in 1973.

All these Redfern Aboriginal organisations lobbied for Aboriginal self-determination and argued for their right to have control over their operations. Foley explained in a contemporary newspaper interview: 'We always see ourselves in the context of the political struggle because we're simply an extension of that struggle, working in a positive way to ease the plight of the people we are politically working for'.²⁵ While access to culturally appropriate services was Aboriginal organisations' initial and central aim, they all also extended their activities beyond service delivery.

22 'Interview with Gary Williams', *Arena* 6, September 1973, 22.

23 Lothian, 'A Blackward', 9, 50.

24 Bob Maza in Cavadini, *Ningla A'Na*.

25 Prokopovich, 'Aboriginal Health', 8.

For example, the members of the AMS emphasised the need to alleviate poverty as it led to poor nutrition and hygiene, substandard housing and lack of clean water, all of which contributed to poor health. They also pointed to police violence and colonisation as causes of ill health and noted the impossibility of taking care of Aboriginal health ‘without being drawn in to the many, [v]aried, and serious other problems suffered by the community’.²⁶ In response to this diversity of problems, the organisations (the Black Theatre included) employed field officers to address social and economic disadvantage in the community.²⁷ Paul Coe later reflected that Aboriginal field officers were a way to reintroduce Aboriginal cultural structures in their practice.²⁸

Community building and strengthening urban Indigenous identity were also important elements of Aboriginal activism for self-determination in Redfern. As Paul Coe stated, the revitalisation of Aboriginal culture was the ‘only possible means of counteracting the present government policy of assimilation’.²⁹ The Black Theatre assumed a central role in this process through its theatre and dance performances as well as workshops and art exhibitions.³⁰ However, other Aboriginal organisations also affirmed the shared identity of Aboriginal people, who had migrated from different parts of New South Wales and elsewhere in Australia to live in inner Sydney. Murawina women working with Aboriginal children expressed their hope that ‘we Aboriginal mothers can at last provide our children with a strong identity and an opportunity for both mothers and children to be part of an Aboriginal dream of self-determination’.³¹ The medical service wanted to improve Aboriginal self-esteem by developing their cultural identity and thus improve Aboriginal health. For example, the AMS organised a display of Aboriginal material culture in celebration of Aboriginality.³² Furthermore, the mere existence of Aboriginal services run and staffed by Aboriginal people affirmed Indigenous identity as they became established in the urban streetscape.

26 UNSW Archives, Hollows, 97A48/69.

27 National Archives of Australia (NAA) C1696/10, R76/59 and R76/4; Lester Bostock interviewed by the author, Marrickville, 14 December 2000.

28 Coe, ‘The Early’, 30.

29 Coe cited in Tatz, *Black Viewpoints*, 105.

30 NAA C1696/10, R76/36.

31 NAA C1696/10, R76/2.

32 NAA C1696/10, R76/59; UNSW Archives, Hollows, 97A48/66.

Although Aboriginal organisations such as the AMS in Sydney drew mainly from pan-Aboriginal identity, rather than a territorial base, in their justification for self-determination, as Maria John discusses elsewhere in this book, there was a territorial element to Aboriginal self-determination in Redfern. The geographic location of the organisations in the heart of Redfern was significant for the developing sense of community among the local Aboriginal people. For example, Coe envisioned in 1972 that he and other Aboriginal people in Redfern were working towards an Aboriginal village in the centre of Sydney. He suggested that this could be achieved with government funding paid as compensation for the effects of colonisation, particularly the loss of land. Coe described ‘an Aboriginal type of village, where ... you have Aboriginal controlled community, both politically and economically’.³³ The AHC, bordered by Louis, Eveleigh, Caroline and Vine streets, with its design around Aboriginal communal living, was the most salient aspect of this vision of an Aboriginal village and the territorial element of self-determination in Redfern.

Aboriginal activists in Redfern continued to frame their desire for Aboriginal control as self-help in the 1970s, following the earlier approach of organisations such as the Redfern All Blacks.³⁴ Norma Williams noted in 1975 that ‘self-help is our object’ when describing the importance of Aboriginal volunteer staff in supporting Murawina’s non-Indigenous teaching staff.³⁵ However, emphasis on Aboriginal self-help now aligned with contemporary social radicalism and a new understanding of self-help designed to empower people on a collective level to manage their own affairs, rather than the older and more conservative idea of self-help that advocated individual and family responsibility as a means of cutting public cost and responsibility.³⁶ Importantly, a more progressive understanding of self-help supported Aboriginal control and demanded public funding to support Aboriginal empowerment, while at the same time, strategically, the rhetoric of self-help continued to appeal to the potentially more conservative sections of their non-Indigenous support base, such as the 150 barristers who volunteered to roster with the ALS in 1971.³⁷ After the Tent Embassy protest with its call for self-determination and land rights, and the election of the Whitlam Government, the rhetoric of self-

33 Coe, in Coe and Sykes, ‘Monday Conference’, 146.

34 NAA C1696/10, R76/4; NAA C1696/10, R76/59.

35 Gare, ‘Aboriginal Woman’, 50.

36 Lane, ‘The History’, 7.

37 NAA C1696/10, R76/4.

help, however, started to give way to that of self-determination in Redfern Aboriginal organisations. Murawina had expressed its wish to be part of 'an Aboriginal dream of self-determination' in 1974,³⁸ while Bobbi Sykes, a Redfern-based Black activist who also worked for the AMS, stated that Aboriginal organisations: 'Have tremendous political function ... they are the Blacks working to alleviate their own problems – the power of self-destiny – the power of self-determination'.³⁹

In response to Aboriginal calls for control and self-determination, the Whitlam Government introduced a policy of self-determination once it came to power in December 1972. It also established a Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA, replacing the Office of Aboriginal Affairs) and boosted its budget by \$13 million in early 1973.⁴⁰ Aboriginal organisations in Redfern were among the first to experience this new policy in practice. They benefited from the generous funding and from some weaknesses in government oversight during the early stages of the self-determination policy. The DAA, for example, gave advance payments of the entire allocation and policed audits loosely, which allowed Aboriginal activists to take greater control of their organisations and to expand their operations more than was intended by the government and its officials. Thus, Redfern Aboriginal organisations were able to achieve, to a limited extent, self-determination as they defined it under the Whitlam Government.⁴¹

However, it soon became apparent that the Labor Government and Aboriginal activists in Redfern had different views of the aims and delivery of self-determination policy.⁴² The DAA was ultimately accountable to their minister and parliament, rather than to Aboriginal people. Following formal scrutiny of the DAA operations and the auditor-general's supplementary report in 1974, it established funding structures and started to apply stricter financial controls on organisations, such as mandatory quarterly reports.⁴³ Furthermore, DAA officials saw self-determination as limited to Aboriginal control in service delivery, and already in 1973 criticised the ALS for not limiting their activities to legal

38 NAA C1696/10, R76/2.

39 Sykes, 'Bobbi Sykes Talks', 6.

40 Long, 'The Commonwealth', 110.

41 Perheentupa, 'Whitlam'.

42 Gillian Cowlshaw makes similar observation in relations to self-determination as policy and practice in Rembarringa, Northern Territory. Cowlshaw, 'Erasing Culture', 163.

43 Rowse, *Remote*, 6–7.

aid.⁴⁴ As the 1970s progressed, the DAA increasingly sought to curtail the organisations' spending and limit their activities to what the DAA considered to be within their field of operations.

DAA officials saw self-determination policy ultimately as a solution to Aboriginal disadvantage that would elevate Aboriginal people to an equal level with the mainstream population. In this they followed their minister's framing of self-determination policy with heavy emphasis on its ability to work towards equality. For Gordon Bryant, 'the basic object of my Government's policy is to restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs'; he referred to a statement Prime Minister Whitlam had given to a conference of Commonwealth and state ministers in Aboriginal affairs in Adelaide in April 1973.⁴⁵ This was to be achieved, Whitlam had stated, by:

Encouraging and assisting Aboriginal groups and incorporated organisations in the metropolitan areas and groups and communities in the Central Australian and other reserves to develop their own programs and to manage their own affairs.⁴⁶

Whitlam's definition of self-determination had the potential to align with Indigenous views. However, his statement did not clearly frame 'self-determination' in the context of Indigenous rights and, when executing the policy, as Bryant explained in July 1973:

Our programs are designed to restore to the Aboriginal people their lost power of self-determination, their self-respect and dignity. They are designed to eliminate their handicaps in health, housing, education and vocational training and to promote their enjoyment of civil liberties and remove remaining laws discrimination against them.⁴⁷

Thus, even if self-determination policy was clearly a shift from the policy of assimilation, in that it supported the continuity of Aboriginal cultures and Aboriginal people as distinct from the settler colonial population with different needs, it was set up as a policy with a strong emphasis on elimination of disadvantage, rather than to assure the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination.

⁴⁴ Aboriginal Legal Service, *Conference*.

⁴⁵ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 10 April 1974, Question no. 437, Gordon Bryant.

⁴⁶ Whitlam, 'Aboriginals', 3.

⁴⁷ Bryant, 'Government Policy', 899.

Framing self-determination in the context of Aboriginal disadvantage rather than Indigenous rights made it vulnerable to being viewed as temporary in the inner city, where Indigenous people could not demand self-determination on a territorial or linguistic basis. Bryant likened self-determination policy to pre-existing policies and legislation that targeted disadvantage, such as those governing aged pensions, widowed pensions and child endowment.⁴⁸ He also justified the establishment of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs on the high level of need of Aboriginal people, whom he considered special citizens, similar to veterans, needing departmental advocates.⁴⁹ However, unlike the financial support required by pensioners or persons with disability, Aboriginal disadvantage could arguably cease to exist, and thus would end the rationale for supporting Aboriginal self-determination policy.

The tendency to see self-determination policy as temporary, and as one of several possible policy approaches, was reflected in the early threats to mainstream the services under the Whitlam Government. Jim Cavanagh, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs after Bryant, raised the possibility of an alternative service to the ALS in New South Wales in November 1974.⁵⁰ Barrie Dexter, Secretary of the DAA, in his letter to Kevin Martin, Regional Director of the DAA, in November 1975, considered that the Australian Legal Aid Office could provide an alternative to the ALS. He wrote:

Even if the Aboriginal Legal Service were, as it threatened, to close down when funds run out, I have no doubt that we could provide an adequate service to NSW Aboriginals without it – and indeed such a situation would be advantageous to us.⁵¹

Dexter noted in 1975 that the self-determination policy's rationale was to allow Aboriginal communities to decide the pace and nature of their development within the government framework, but this development was to take place within 'the legal, social and economic restraints of Australian society'.⁵² Dexter's definition of self-determination emphasised the way in which he felt accountable to the Australian public for administering the policy of self-determination and defining its limits.

48 Bryant cited in Nettheim, *Aborigines Human Rights*, 156.

49 Rowse, *Obliged*, 111.

50 NAA C1696/10, R76/4.

51 NAA C1696/10, R76/4.

52 Dexter, *Pandora's Box*, 320.

Redfern activists felt that ‘the Labour [sic] Government has betrayed the Black Community’, and they protested against the government’s interpretation of self-determination policy and control by the DAA in 1974, when they re-established the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the Lawns of Parliament House.⁵³ For Aboriginal people, the crucial areas of policy were ‘self-determination and land rights’, according to a statement released by a Redfern-based Organisation for Aboriginal Unity at the time.⁵⁴ The statement further claimed that neither ‘Black people nor their representatives have any say in the funding or its allocations’, and demanded a greater role for Aboriginal people in making decisions. Gordon Briscoe, who had been involved with both the ALS and the AMS, criticised the restrictiveness of government policy in 1975: ‘anything that has the slightest suggestions of policies of “a nation within a nation”, or “self-determination”, or “Black Power”, or “separation”, is rejected’ by governments.⁵⁵ As far as the Indigenous activists were concerned, their organisations were an avenue towards a lasting Aboriginal self-determination, not merely a pathway to equality with the mainstream population. In his memoir, Briscoe reflected that: ‘In the 1920s [self-determination] meant “the rights of nations” and in the 1970s it meant the “rights of Indigenous peoples and decolonised groups”’.⁵⁶ Accordingly, the Redfern organisations took part in the continuing Aboriginal resistance to colonisation and were accountable to Aboriginal people.⁵⁷

In their correspondence with government, Redfern organisations emphasised their demand for Aboriginal control of their operations. The ALS 1974 submission underlined the role of government in funding the organisation, while asserting full independence in its operations:

We see the venture as a joint enterprise in which the Government contributes the necessary funds and the ALS contributes the necessary organisation, know-how, experience, professional expertise, drive, enthusiasm, identification with Aborigines, and independence.⁵⁸

53 UNSW, Hollows, 97A48/69.

54 UNSW, Hollows, 97A48/69. Organisation for Aboriginal (or Black) Unity comprised of AHC, Black Theatre, the AMS and ALS (NAA C1696/10, R76/4).

55 Briscoe cited in Tatz, *Black Viewpoints*, 100.

56 Briscoe, *Racial Folly*, 177.

57 Briscoe, ‘Aboriginal Health’, 16.

58 NAA C1696/10, R76/4.

Accordingly, Aboriginal organisations in Redfern resisted DAA officials' attempts to supervise and monitor spending; for example, by not submitting all reports required by the DAA. They treated government funding as compensation for colonisation and thought of it as Aboriginal money.⁵⁹ Redfern organisations also resisted government attempts to limit their operation to service delivery and continued to pursue a wider role in serving their community.

The DAA under the Whitlam Government was not entirely opposed to the idea of the revitalisation of Aboriginal culture in the city. It saw, for example, the development of the Black Theatre and an urban arts program as vital to Aboriginal people in Redfern. Barrie Dexter specifically hoped that a cultural centre would help to solve problems of alcohol abuse and violence in the inner-city area.⁶⁰ Thus, the DAA's emphasis was on alleviating social disadvantage via cultural revitalisation, effected only through the operation of a cultural centre. Meanwhile, from the government's perspective the AHC provided solutions to Aboriginal housing problems, but it also fitted the popular rhetoric of 'slum clearance' that the government had adopted.

While sharing a struggle for self-determination, the Aboriginal organisations in Redfern differed in the way they responded to the opportunities and challenges of the DAA's self-determination policy. The ALS had a unique position compared to the other organisations in Redfern. Together with other Aboriginal legal services in Australia, it had responsibility for providing free legal representation for Aboriginal people as pledged by the Whitlam Government.⁶¹ However, as the government did not yet have funding structures in place, the ALS in Redfern seized the opportunity to expand its operations to other parts of New South Wales. It refused to seek government permission for the resulting expenses, submit to government conditions or negotiate the limits of its activities with government.

The medical service, like the ALS, expanded the kinds of services it offered under the government's self-determination policy. However, the DAA rejected its plans to operate statewide, preferring to fund separate medical services in different parts of New South Wales. Members of the AMS

59 NAA C1696/10, R76/4; NAA C1696/10, R79/16.

60 NAA C1696/10, R76/36.

61 Attorney-General's Department, 'Aboriginal Legal Service'.

protested at the way the DAA controlled its activities. Naomi Mayers, the administrator of the AMS, wrote in her correspondence to the DAA in May 1975: 'I feel that the AMS seems to be banging its head against a brick wall whenever we submit for funds to enlarge our activities'.⁶² There were at least two possible reasons why the DAA opposed AMS plans to expand outside Redfern, while it funded the ALS's statewide operations. First, the AMS competed for funding with the state's mainstream health services that also arguably serviced Aboriginal people, while the ALS was the only legal service available to Aboriginal people. Second, the DAA perhaps wanted to limit the influence of the Sydney-based Aboriginal activists in other parts of New South Wales. Thus, the DAA also prevented the AMS from becoming as powerful an organisation as the ALS, which DAA officials had difficulty in making comply with government requirements and regulations.

The DAA also expected the AMS, unlike the ALS, to do voluntary fundraising to support its activities. The AMS became very efficient at fundraising and used the independent funding to set up medical services elsewhere in New South Wales, thus circumventing DAA control. In 1975, the AMS financed the opening of a clinic at Mt Druitt and was also directly involved in setting up a medical service at Kempsey.⁶³

Reliance on donations and non-Indigenous supporters who volunteered their time and expertise, however, made the AMS dependent on its non-Indigenous supporters, doctors and other medical practitioners, to a different degree than the ALS. Thus, it was important that AMS members defined Aboriginal control in such a way that it allowed cooperation with non-Indigenous people. Individual non-Indigenous supporters, such as Fred Hollows, who respected the principles of Aboriginal control and the AMS's desire for self-determination, remained active members of the AMS throughout the 1970s. Hollows, a professor of ophthalmology at the University of New South Wales, assisted in setting up the service and became its medical director. The ALS, however, did not rely on donations or volunteer lawyers and legal practitioners once it started to receive funding under the Whitlam Government. It decided to exclude non-Indigenous people from its council membership in 1974 and, later, in 1975, they were also excluded from attending council meetings.⁶⁴

62 NAA C1696/10, R76/59.

63 NAA C1696/10, R76/59; *AMS Newsletter*, no. 16, June 1975, 3.

64 ML MSS 6222/1, Vivienne Abraham papers.

With the election of the Liberal Government in December 1975, and in line with its principle of small government, federal Aboriginal affairs policy shifted from self-determination to 'self-management'. Once DAA officials started to further emphasise accountability, Aboriginal activists strengthened their call for self-determination while opposing the changes in government policy. However, as before, the organisations responded differently to the challenges presented by the changes to government policy. The ALS continued to refuse to provide the DAA with financial reports or report on its activities. Nor did it follow its budget or the DAA guidelines. The ALS was able to maintain this position for two more years, as there were no alternative legal services available for Aboriginal people and the DAA was unwilling to fund breakaway Aboriginal legal services. Coe reflected confidence in the ALS's position in his letter to Ian Viner, then minister for Aboriginal affairs, in 1977: 'your depriving us of funds leaves us no option other than to close office immediately leaving the Aboriginal community to your tender mercies. All clients of the service will be referred to you personally'.⁶⁵ However, later in 1977 the government decided to fund three breakaway legal services in different parts of New South Wales, thus limiting the ALS's power to decide its own agenda and to resist DAA control.

The AMS, unlike the ALS, provided the DAA with the minimum necessary information to fulfil government requirements of accountability and to assure continued funding. In their negotiations with government, the AMS, like the other Aboriginal organisations, ultimately tried to maximise their level of funding and the level of Aboriginal control under changing government policies, maintaining the argument that funding for Aboriginal organisations was compensation. Bobbi Sykes stated in the *Aboriginal Medical Service Newsletter* in 1977: 'funding of Black organizations should not be considered an act of charity – compensating the Black community for historical land loss would merely be an act of JUSTICE'.⁶⁶ The same year, the DAA listed the AMS, together with the ALS and Murawina, among the most politically sensitive organisations with which the DAA Area Office had dealings. DAA officials disapproved of the way these organisations employed 'radical' Aboriginal activists who used the organisations for political purposes.⁶⁷ The government's views

65 NAA C1696/10, R76/4.

66 *AMS Newsletter*, October 1977, 2.

67 NAA C1696/10, R76/59.

about the management of Aboriginal affairs had drifted even further away from the idea of self-determination advocated by Redfern Aboriginal organisations.

Although the Aboriginal organisations in Redfern started as ‘self-help’ organisations relying on non-Indigenous support, self-determination became their defining principle once the Whitlam Government came to power. However, the Aboriginal view of self-determination differed from that introduced by the Whitlam Government and its Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Aboriginal activists in Redfern argued for Aboriginal control of their organisations based on their rights as Indigenous peoples and, with the means available and in their multiple ways, strove to establish the organisations as long-term elements of community governance and platforms for political activism. They tended to see government funding as compensation for colonisation. Meanwhile, the government ultimately saw self-determination policy as a way to address Aboriginal disadvantage and achieve equal opportunity. Its framing of self-determination policy in the context of Indigenous disadvantage, rather than as Indigenous rights, set it up as reliant on public funding and opinion, and thus as potentially temporary. While the Liberal Government’s shift to a policy of self-management further undermined the organisations’ autonomy, they nonetheless continued to fight for their own views of self-determination and to maintain control over their operations.

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