

## Chapter 8

# University and Aboriginal politics, 1969 to 1971

Canberra was not initially a daunting prospect for me, mostly because in my mind I was deluded that my education problems were all behind me. On arrival in the national capital I went straight to John XXIII College at the Australian National University and was given a room. From memory, this was a Roman Catholic College run by the Jesuits and the Dean I recall was the Reverend Dr John Eddy, who later figured prominently in my life. It was here in John XXIII College that I began my 40-year long association with university life.

I began attending lectures and in my spare time looked for accommodation for us as a family. I rented a house in Dickson which was within walking distance of the university, and looked forward to my family's return from England. Norma liked the place I found and we all settled into life in the national capital. One of the enduring memories of this time was Norma bringing a game of Monopoly back from England. It became nightly entertainment for the Briscoe and Perkins families. By this time Eileen and Charlie had three children, Hetti, Adam and my god-daughter Rachel. The Perkins family would arrive at our house in Dickson and Monopoly would be on for one and all: that was until one night when Charlie got soundly beaten and out of frustration the Monopoly board went up in the air – houses and money went everywhere! We still laugh about that night.

I felt lucky because I could combine my studies and political interests, mainly through friends living in Canberra as well as those who came to the capital on government business. Life as a student at first appeared straight-forward and I enrolled in four subjects: economics, statistics, accounting and political science. For me these subjects conjured up the idea that they would bring me status I'd never had before and people might listen to me both as an Aboriginal person and an economist. These subjects also seemed important and fitted in with my notion that the way ahead meant that in only four years I would be someone to be reckoned with in political life. This, I thought at age 31, was the way that things worked and that it was just a matter of time, of which I had a great deal.

My studies continued and I did reasonably well at mid-year examinations. During the mid-year break we went to Adelaide for a reunion with the St Francis House boys, celebrating Father Smith's eightieth birthday. At this time I had given very little thought to the Church's underlying weakness and rationale in removing us with or without our mothers' consent to educate us in Adelaide.

I discuss my change of heart later but on this trip we all went off happily to Adelaide to see friends, many of whom I had not seen for over a decade or so since leaving the boys' home.

We had a Volkswagen car at the time, and drove there and back via the Riverina and Murray Valley route. Aaron was old enough to absorb every changing and exciting new event during the journey. Norma and I took it in turns to drive the 17 hours from Canberra to Adelaide. We took the direct route over the Hay plains but from Renmark we digressed through Morgan travelling down through the top end of the Barossa Valley from Eudunda to Adelaide. In Adelaide we stayed with Norma's great school friend, our bridesmaid, Elaine Ziersch and her husband Geoff. Norma was keen to catch up with Elaine and meet her new baby son Christopher so the trip was an all-round favourite. The St Francis reunion was held at one of the boy's houses. Father and Mrs Smith were overwhelmed to see so many of their 'boys' grown up as adults with families of their own. I was also able to visit Millie Glenn, my mother's sister, who had cared for me as a young child during the war at Mulgoa in Sydney.

We journeyed home from Adelaide after a week via Murray Bridge, Loxton, Renmark and Wentworth through to Canberra. A couple of events on that trip are dear to my memory. One was when we stopped on the banks of the Murray River to have lunch; we looked around and saw this huge crate of oranges that had been dumped on the side of the river. At first we took just a couple to eat with our lunch – but – they were the juiciest and sweetest oranges we had ever tasted and we could not resist filling a large part of the back seat up with oranges for the rest of the journey. The other fond memory is that of following a rainstorm from Narrandera to Wagga Wagga with Aaron counting frogs on the highway as we travelled. It was dark and we could clearly see the frogs leaping in the headlights of the car all the way home.

While studying I felt confident that I could also be political. I occupied positions on the magazine *Identity*, the Aboriginal Housing Panel, Aboriginal student politics and the Federal Council (generally abbreviated to FCAATSI). Housing for Aborigines was a huge problem right across Australia. In part, this was because of population growth and, in part, because sedentary living without shelter made people sick and caused innumerable deaths from exposure. The states possessed a politically parsimonious policy in regard to Aboriginal housing. They built houses that white people wanted but that Aboriginal families found inappropriate. Lack of funds for maintenance was a common state administrative response – build houses for Aborigines and then just leave them alone, was their refrain.

Colonists inherited this racist attitude from their British roots of two centuries ago and it solidified their racial prejudices. My mother grew up under similar

conditions and on many occasions I returned to find her living in a tin shack with a dirt floor, unlined walls with nail holes everywhere and doors that let flies and vermin in as they pleased. The housing panel enabled me to use my knowledge of poverty to travel extensively to both urban and rural areas, and to remote communities like the central and western desert regions. As a student I became deeply involved in Aboriginal issues and travelled to a number of conferences that included both government and FCAATSI business as a student delegate.

It is worth looking at some of FCAATSI's history not only because I was involved but because it was a major player in Aboriginal political reform. From FCAATSI's inception in 1958 the guiding ideas focused on 'advancement'. To many of the Aborigines involved, it seemed contradictory. Less than a decade after its beginnings the ideological flaws began appearing in FCAATSI's policies and it was under serious political attack from within. This unrest was underpinned to some extent by the fact that all the states within the Federation had draconian legislation that concentrated Aboriginal communities on reserves and missions, many of which were run by religious orders.

Legislation such as the 'White Australia Policy' operated under laws built on the myth that 'people of colour' produced societies with inherent 'racial' problems and undesirable social diseases. In the minds of white people, 'blacks' were devils, filthy, diseased and incapable of becoming like Europeans. So those white people already here not only prohibited 'black' persons but also those of swarthy Mediterranean descent from entering Australia under highly racist legislative criteria.<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'racism' here as one in which dominant societies use political power, in any form, to oppress groups in their society because of their 'colour', in particular; and because of their differences.<sup>2</sup>

FCAATSI built its aims on 'advancement' and gaining white paternalistic acceptance, and in so doing lost sight not just of international laws but missed a critique of Australian laws, and the white majorities practising the culture of racism. The revolt against racism was not just by Aborigines but by society in general. Nevertheless Aboriginal youth was the catalyst that, in their naivety, began to erode FCAATSI's underlying prejudices. What Aboriginal youth wanted was to change Australia's racist laws and to declare illegal acts that contravened international laws.

At the 1968 FCAATSI Easter conference, signs of confusion appeared. In hindsight, Aborigines at the conference were unsure who the delegates were and how much voting power Aborigines possessed. Aboriginal members and visitors could see that they had the balance of power in numbers. In the

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1 Tavan 2005: 7-31.

2 Fredrickson 2002: 9.

circumstances FCAATSI's constitution ruled the day because all of the many Aborigines who turned up, but who were not delegates of a particular union or organisation, were not allowed to vote. As usual, the Aboriginal session drew about 100 participants who came from all states and the main issue focused on 'Land Rights and compensation'. South Australia already had land and compensation legislation but its laws had limitations. This particular year the Aboriginal delegates asked FCAATSI to support a publicity campaign for remaining states to grant land and compensation for loss of lands. Some focused on tribal lands, others wanted their mission and government reserve lands while those removed by previous generations wanted compensation to purchase land in urban areas for housing and employment.

That Friday evening Dr HC 'Nugget' Coombs gave a keynote speech on Aboriginal leadership. There was distinct scepticism about what Coombs stood for. Aborigines were impatient about what progress the Commonwealth, and in particular, Coombs and his Minister WC Wentworth (who was also present at the conference), had achieved following the 1967 referendum success. Joe McGuinness, the then President of FCAATSI, responded by saying that Coombs had not taken much notice of Aboriginal points of view and feelings. On the Saturday, I recall, there was general acceptance of Executive member Frank Engel's ideas to create a Trust Fund to give Aborigines more power over their own lives. But these were not ideas warmly accepted by most white people on the floor of the conference. Aboriginal dissent seemed a form of ungratefulness of the perceived good they had accomplished for Aborigines over a long period of time. And Faith Bandler showed certain complicity with this viewpoint.

Land Rights was on most lips the following year, but not on Minister Wentworth's, nor on his Party's collective mind. Liberal conservatives like Wentworth either rejected outright Aboriginal economic and political interests or hung steadfastly on to the notion that Aborigines had no claim on anything. At the same time students were rallying around the Gurindji claims for land and better working conditions, but left a gap in the collective minds of Australians. Faith Bandler and Jack Horner drew public criticism from many Aboriginal people for their lack of understanding of Aboriginal political issues.<sup>3</sup>

A later writer blamed the changing of FCAATSI's position on its lack of intellectual and ideological foresight. 'Land Rights' was a difficult proposition for FCAATSI members, which had until then focused on 'advancement' and not 'political change'. Even some members like Joe McGuinness could not grasp the gravity of the demand for land and its attack on the British notion of land ownership. Faith Bandler, as acting General Secretary, feared upsetting white society and the Council's meagre outside support, that is, the truculent white

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<sup>3</sup> Taffe 2005: 210.

Australian land owning upper-class.<sup>4</sup> Land demands tended to be too hard not only for the political and legal minds of FCAATSI, which feared this demand was revolutionary, and confrontational, but also for some Aboriginal executive members.

I recall Gordon Bryant discussing Ken Brindle's brutish nature, manners and attitude outside the Telopea Park High School's assembly hall where the conference took place. Bryant indicated privately that he not only vehemently disliked Brindle's brutishness and threatening manner but more that Brindle had no understanding of Aboriginal affairs outside New South Wales. Brindle, Bryant claimed, was more interested in being popular in Redfern. Bryant was right in some respects that Brindle was more interested in his ability to control crowds at the Big E (slang for The Empress Hotel, the Aboriginal haunt in Botany Road, Redfern) rather than Aboriginal politics in general. But there was another side to Brindle in that he wanted land for a cultural centre and sporting club and that is where Bryant revealed his own paternalism and lack of local knowledge. Brindle also found jobs for people and was extremely close to Department of Social Security officers; his other interest was looking after the Redfern-All-Blacks rugby team.

Charlie Perkins complained on the conference floor that FCAATSI was out of touch and that meetings should be held in the Northern Territory where members could really appreciate Aboriginal demands for Land Rights in an attempt to escape poverty. The conflict between Perkins and Bandler intensified in that period but mostly behind closed doors. Perkins had moved to Canberra and Bandler remained in Sydney, where she operated the FCAATSI office not far from Trades Hall in Sussex Street.

FCAATSI members listened to Aborigines who came to their conferences but did nothing to abate their real concerns. Aborigines believed the main agenda for FCAATSI members was the election of a Federal Labor government and because of its weak ideological perspective a resolution to have a 'Land Rights' campaign fell flat. This brought to the surface the concept that the return of Aboriginal lands frightened white people, allowing television commentators to observe just how land and pastoral lobbies reacted to Aboriginal spokespeople like Burnum Burnum. But in reality white peoples' fears were even more deep-seated in that they rejected the idea that Aborigines on missions, including those of mixed descent off reserves, could have any heritage claims. Most white people believed that land claims would bring the whole legal land structure down when in reality all Aborigines of any description wanted was a plate of food each day and to be like whites!

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4 Taffe 2005: 208-10.

Some white FCAATSI spokespersons argued, as the historian Sue Taffe writes, that Aborigines were their own worst enemy because they could not understand what they wanted themselves. And even more revealing is that Aborigines were often unable to attend meetings to articulate what was occurring in their society. This exposed how little power Aboriginal Presidents such as Joe McGuinness really had in the organisation. Charlie Perkins continually complained to Faith Bandler about Joe's position but failed to impress her or other executive members. This captured the hostility between them. Later Charlie confided in me that the Council should have paid his fare to every Council meeting rather than leaving him out, only producing him when it was 'convenient to Council'. Changes to the executive in 1968 caused a deepening of the rift of the inability of Aborigines to articulate what they thought about their lives. Most Aborigines believed that, because of FCAATSI's failures, the Australian polity was unable to comprehend how they felt about their social and cultural circumstances including what they wanted from state and federal legislators.

Almost nothing changed in 1969 as most whites supporting FCAATSI, through finance or friendship, saw 'advancement' as meaning a 'multiracial coalition' and not social justice or anti-colonial redress – mirroring the notion argued years before by Professor Bill Geddes at the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs. Most Australians believed that their rights were supreme and the United Nations post Second World War Declaration of Human rights reflected this 'brave new world'. There was little doubt that it resulted in a better society for white people but left virtually nothing for Aborigines. Little had changed since the British gladly handed the land over to Australians at Federation, and Aborigines got nothing. They were to be beyond all understanding of what it was to be human, to be beyond material gain, owned nothing and were to inherit nothing from their dead ancestors!

Social justice in the 1960s was a concept barely reaching the academic journals or the daily print media but it was a term used by lawyers, particularly those following international law. The silence of the anthropologists in dealing only with those people defined as possessing pure Aboriginal culture – the so-called advocates maintaining their lofty cultural illusions – was intellectually stultifying. As agents of government they worked when government money flowed. The only voice who understood the Aboriginal historical predicament on civil rights, legal rights and Land Rights was the Australian National University political scientist Charles Rowley, who was refused full membership to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Rowley understood the rigour of change from colonial politics to Australian nationalism and how it affected all people of Aboriginal descent – not just those who served the interests of the anthropological discipline. Rowley also recognised that Aboriginal problems were political and not just economic and cultural questions.

Barrie Pittock had read the signs too, and was telling the FCAATSI executive that change had come and Aborigines wanted more than the Council had previously stood for. Pittock, a Quaker, had investigated the conditions of blacks in United States penal institutions. As the interest in, and by, the World Council of Churches and the United Nations intensified, these two bodies developed policies, including covenants, on oppressed and landless Indigenous peoples and began looking towards people affected by post-colonialism like Australia.<sup>4</sup> These issues of Aboriginal 'autonomy', executive involvement and control sizzled beneath the surface as FCAATSI bore the brunt of growing Aboriginal radicalism. The 1968 annual conference shifted its ideology from 'advancement' to more complex ideas like Aboriginal autonomy, leadership as well as Aboriginal control of their organisations and future.

Ken Brindle has been credited for bringing Aboriginal leadership further into focus but I recall more Denis Walker, Bruce and Joe McGuinness, John Newfong and Kath Walker as the ginger group calling for overall change and greater Aboriginal leadership. Anger and dissent was fuelled by the failure of FCAATSI to either properly fund the 'All Aboriginal Land Committee' or to give the concept its full and spirited support. It appeared to those Aborigines present, myself included, that they did not know where it was going. This left participants at the 1969 meeting stunned, a position that tended to last all year while issues of Aboriginal leadership, autonomy and control dominated intellectual thought.

Although the Easter conference of 1970 was predicted to be the ideological battle-ground, few could have forecast what would happen. In addition, there was the elephant in the room – the Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs – and nobody was able to predict what impact it would have on the discussions! The development of Federal policy was in the hands of Coombs, Stanner, Dexter and the bumbling Federal Minister Howson as much as with Aboriginal spokespersons around the country. Everyone, including the Church, was vying for the moral high ground. While Aborigines around Australia were looking for inspiration from international political sources, FCAATSI looked to Barrie Pittock and Kath Walker for solace while Australians looked to the security of their own land titles for safety. But it was the Church and anthropological theorists that government relied on to articulate Aboriginal perspectives to the Advisory Council in 1970.

My critique of anthropology, and its disciples, is based on the fact that anthropologists dominated policy from the early part of the twentieth century until the new millennium. One such actor was Professor Bill Stanner who had returned from overseas in the late 1940s and was appointed as a reader in comparative social institutions at the Australian National University. Stanner was looked on as the heir apparent to Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen. Stanner

offset any real Aboriginal political unity when he drew a long bow in his 1968 Boyer Lectures, *After the Dreaming*.<sup>5</sup> He successfully constructed a picture of a moribund Aboriginal society with nothing left of its culture and without capacity to either fight back or rebuild. On a number of occasions Stanner tended towards posturing as an amateur historian, not the anthropologist that he was, but relying on his Tory histrionics. He began his Boyer Lectures recalling Phillip's landing, his attempts at 'consultation' and his lasting legacy of failure. Stanner could not bring himself to talk of 'racism', because he believed Australian did not stoop to such prejudice, preferring to brand it as 'racial relations' drawing Aborigines into the bad half of that relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Stanner's private role as an anthropologist and conservative political actor was to ensure that in his and his colleague's minds Aborigines were defined as those who managed to retain a pristine culture. He held that any change to that pristine culture would render them without an ancestral claim on their heritage.<sup>7</sup> The catharsis Aborigines faced, according to Stanner, rendered them unwilling to put their claim and they could, therefore, do nothing but 'flock into [white] settlement'. Stanner believed that the 'natives' stories' ended in the first decade of British occupation.<sup>8</sup>

Australia's anthropologists were the first to sign-post the distinction between people of mixed European, British or other races and those they claimed as their own clientele, the people of 'full-descent'. Stanner always talked about Aborigines but these people had no names, no biographies and we knew nothing about their lives, what they did and the worlds they lived in. Australia knew very little about them and knows little still. Baldwin Spencer, the creator of Australian anthropology, had maintained that half-castes were the destroyers of Aboriginal culture and they must be got out of native society, or words to that effect. Stanner himself did not produce much major work from his own research and did not speak an Aboriginal language publicly: the very thing he hypocritically accused others of not doing. These days he is held up as an Australian intellectual icon and neither Aborigines nor white society appears to question this.

In the early 1960s the Menzies government gave anthropologists huge Commonwealth funds to create a special organisation exclusively for antiquarians – the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) which later included Torres Strait Islanders in its title (AIATSIS). The Institute backed the anthropologists' faith in conservatism, and their moribund humanities discipline. To this day, anthropology has never questioned its monopoly. Anthropologists

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5 Stanner 1972.

6 Stanner 1972: 7-8.

7 Stanner 1972: 8-11.

8 Stanner 1972: 11-15.

were able to double-dip in a way unavailable to other academics. If they failed to get a government research grant they could then make their bid to the Institute for a grant. Stanner's criticisms of historians helped to ensure that they were not granted membership of the Institute for some time, ensuring that until recently biographical and historical collections were limited. In addition, this club for anthropologists has remained silent on outside Aboriginal politics. So to come full circle: Stanner was in an ideal position to protect his interests as the anthropological representative of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs. His view of Aborigines as those of full descent prevailed. Consequently many Aboriginal rights and much of their heritage were forgotten.

Coombs's Council for Aboriginal Affairs was reticent in promoting democratic political structures in Aboriginal society. He and his Council members Stanner and Dexter preferred to continue what state government bodies had done before and following Federation: protectionism and assimilation. Freedom of association was absent from state legislation and was strictly forbidden even in the face of democratic trade union and equal wage struggles by the Northern Territory Ordinance.<sup>9</sup> The Council did nothing about the Aboriginal labour question until well into the 1970s when it created the community development employment programs. Stanner, working in the northern areas of Australia, made only non-committal comments on the struggles over equal wages, often after the event. The comments he made were mainly about lawyers, not freedom of Aboriginal labour, a struggle which had been raging since before the 1920s. Once 'Land Rights' came up as a political issue, anthropologists resisted giving political advice to FCAATSI nor did they offer their affiliation.

Aborigines across Australia thought that 'Land Rights' would mean a Land Rights Commission to work through the return of traditional lands to all peoples who were owed a birth right. However, the appointment of an anthropologist to advise Woodward made certain that Aborigines who no longer practised their traditional culture as they themselves defined it, would get nothing. This anthropological strategy ensured that limited benefits went to non-tribal groups even though they had moral and legal rights to their heritage and land. Aborigines and their democratic interests were sidelined until the 1980s when the Hawke government moved to create a new commission to be a supreme representative governing council for the Indigenous peoples.

These understandings, impressions and events set the stage for the catharsis that beset FCAATSI meetings before and after the election of the Whitlam government in 1972. This story had its origins as the Easter conference of 1970 loomed; most Aborigines interested in what was happening in FCAATSI knew that the World Council of Churches would soon be providing funds to support the growth and

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9 Stevens 1974.

development of a national Aboriginal political body. Others have given their views on the workings of FCAATSI in the early 1970s, but I want to concentrate on the internal 'split' as I recall it. At the time I was a student living in Canberra and attended the meeting as an Australian National University representative for the National Student Union. The numbers of Aborigines present is hard to gauge but it was certainly more than in 1969.

Issues of Aboriginal political rights dominated along with questions of control, leadership and autonomy. I distinctly recall the early sessions were mainly about Commonwealth grants to Roper River and Willowra cattle stations. Spokespersons for these groups wanted support for their moves to buy back their traditional land on cattle properties. Dexter Daniels and Martin Jumpatjimba asked especially for their land to be bought back under a Commonwealth pastoral grant and got a resounding vote of support. The Office of Aboriginal Affairs was having a real impact both on land and constitutional questions and it was significant that Dr Coombs would speak that evening on the question of 'autonomy and leadership'. Kath Walker raised discussion on the constitutional question that all Aborigines be given full voting rights in FCAATSI business. To support these notions we were all given candle-lit torches and marched from the Telopea Park school hall to Parliament House where a number of speakers talked on 'Land Rights'.

The following day both Aborigines and Commonwealth officials tried to persuade and influence the conference to hand over power to Aboriginal people. People like Kath Walker, Doug Nicholls, Charlie Perkins, Phillip and Jacob Roberts, Len Watson and John Newfong all indicated that Aborigines were ready and willing to take control of FCAATSI. Talk by most whites and a few Aboriginal state delegates likened the push to 'Black Power' which alienated some FCAATSI delegates who took a more conservative line echoing the idea that politics was about compromise. However, compromise was not a sentiment in the minds of most Aborigines, who wanted nothing less than a take-over.

FCAATSI was in turmoil as Joe McGuinness, Jack Horner, Ken Brindle and Faith Bandler tried to change the nature of the discussions and move past the question of constitutional change. Executives also tried to console the majority, but had there been an open vote Kath Walker's motion would most certainly have been carried. But back room dealings, led mostly by Bryant, Bandler, Brindle and Horner, succeeded in delaying election of new office bearers, and the constitutional question of Aboriginal autonomy was back on the agenda. This political strategy was designed to take advantage of the fact that many Aborigines had left the conference and the delay meant that the constitutional question was defeated. Doug Nicholls and Kath Walker called for a further vote

of those present, rather than a delegate vote, asking those who supported the defeated motion to move to one side and those who did not, to move to the other side of the hall. Others recall this as a:

rift [which] marked the effective end of the Federal Council as a body that brought together diverse representatives from all over the country: both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous supporters such as trade unionists, members of churches and religious bodies and peace activists.<sup>10</sup>

The final nail in the coffin for FCAATSI was driven in with Labor's victory in 1972. The balance of power in Aboriginal Affairs changed subtly, and sometimes not so subtly. The new Minister Gordon Bryant's long involvement with FCAATSI gave him a sound understanding of the ideology, workings and membership of the organisation; he was fully aware of the current schism within the movement. One of the first things he did was to bring together members of the old, mainly white FCAATSI guard, together with the new young Aboriginal radicals. Bryant then performed what would now be called classic wedge or divide-and-conquer politics by symbolically sidelining the old guard from any further policy discussion within government by taking the radicals out to dinner to seek their counsel. In so doing he left the white members out in the cold. Gordon Bryant went on to create what looked to be a representative body of Aboriginal advisors in the form of the National Aboriginal Consultative Council. However, this body was not one democratically elected but one carefully selected by the Office of Aboriginal Affairs staff. Democracy went out the window and bureaucracy took its place.

Stepping back a little, the period from 1970 to 1971 for me involved two significant events: the creation of the 'National Tribal Council', and my family's move back to Sydney. First, the National Tribal Council. After the 1967 referendum, Joyce Clague and Don Dunstan went to Geneva and came back with the impression that when South African liberation movements had achieved their goal, Aboriginal aspirations would be the next agenda item. To temper this impression Kath Walker attended a World Council of Churches conference on racism, returning to Australia with her eyes widened and her resolve stiffened to root out FCAATSI's paternalism and assimilationist programs. She had a steadfast supporter in Barrie Pittock. Thus the 1970s 'split or rift' had a next stage – the creation of the National Tribal Council. This body was funded by contributions from the World Council of Churches and was modelled on the existing Queensland Tribal Council. It was created following a vitriolic struggle of Aborigines wanting to take-over control of FCAATSI. This push included backing John Newfong as General Secretary. In September of 1970 the first

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<sup>10</sup> Taffe 2005: 260.

annual Tribal Council conference was held. I was appointed as the Council's Minister for Health, a position I held until October 1972. While these political fractures persisted and dominated my thinking my education was affected and I failed miserably the end of year university exams. I then enrolled at the newly created Canberra College of Advanced Education where I studied and passed three subjects, English, systems theory and organisational theory. But my meagre scholarship was proving more and more difficult for a growing family to live on, leading me to apply for a Liaison Officer's position at the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney.

In April of 1970 I attended a conference on Aboriginal drug and alcohol dependency. While there I met the young Gary Foley, an Aboriginal political activist from Sydney. Gary was born in Grafton in New South Wales and had parental links to Gympie in Queensland. He had spent his youth in Coffs Harbour and migrated to Sydney as a drafting apprentice.<sup>11</sup> He spent time at an adult education employment program at the University of Sydney's adult education centre. The program was financed by Commonwealth Social Security funding, and managed by Allan Duncan, a white lecturer, and Ken Brindle. Foley talked to me about what was happening in Aboriginal politics in Sydney, how he had come to Sydney and what the political climate was like. Foley told me that the Foundation needed staff with a capacity to be able to change its policy away from a welfare body bent on providing services to the poor and destitute. These were admirable tasks, but Gary wanted me to get involved in the creation of a legal service for migrating Aborigines from rural areas who were being harassed by squads of police in the inner city area.

I returned to Canberra not with study on my mind but the urge to take the job in Sydney. In June and July of 1970, I went to Perth in Western Australia for the National Tribal Council Conference and up to the Warburton Ranges to look at Aboriginal housing conditions at the local mission. The National Tribal Council had by this time received funding from the World Council of Churches.<sup>12</sup> As Health Minister, I reported on the state of Aboriginal health and the Council supported my idea that primary health care funds be budgeted to help establish independent primary health arrangements. Other Council members backed this concept, well aware that many communities known to them were without access to medical and health services. Rural white people could access specialist treatment in regional centres when their bus or plane travel was funded by Commonwealth rural health subsidies. Why was it that Aborigines could not access these primary and secondary health services, I wondered? I answer these

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<sup>11</sup> McGlade 1994: 374. See also Duncan 1971-76: 1150-1174.

<sup>12</sup> Howie-Willis 1994c: 764-765.

questions later, but as I was really only one of a few people in the organisation that had any semblance of understanding about the Australian health system at the time, our expertise was stretched.

In September 1970 I was successful in gaining a paid position at the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney. We left Canberra all packed up in the Volkswagen with light hearts looking forward to a new chapter of our lives back in Sydney. At the time the chairman of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs was Professor Geddes. Geddes was a New Zealander who had married a Maori woman and they were both original members of the Foundation's board. Professor Geddes was head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, where Charlie Perkins had majored in anthropology in the middle of the 1960s. They had become political allies in developing the Foundation's welfare and political strategy. One of the original key policies developed by Geddes and Charlie had been the idea of having a property wholly owned by the Foundation on George Street, Sydney. Now that was achieved. There was an underlying ideological current among those running the Foundation. Geddes supported a liberal approach to race relations that favoured a multi-racial board which raised its own funds through public donations. The liberal position was to bring into practice new 'race relations' ideas together with 'economic opportunities'. Most Aborigines supported these liberal views but it caused some friction with the left-leaning Labor Party supporters. The socialist view favoured government funding with a totally Aboriginal board practising self-determination and was supported by FCAATSI radicals, the Glebe Labor factions, the Aboriginal trade unionists and the University of Sydney student movement.

The other *raison d'être* of the Foundation was to be an organisation with considerable political clout that Aborigines could learn to run. The idea was that when the Foundation made a public announcement it would be a rallying cry that others in New South Wales and ultimately Australia would listen to. That was the theory when I arrived, a theory that had lasted from the early 1960s when funds were first raised for the purchase of land and the Foundation's operations. In 1970 I still believed that the organisation was a force for good and opposed what most thinking Aboriginal people in New South Wales saw as the abominable practice of 'assimilation'.<sup>13</sup>

The move back to Sydney had disappointments initially both on the home and work fronts. We moved as a family back to our old weatherboard home in Greenacre. The house had been rented out while we were in Canberra and when we returned we found a big hole in the lounge room wall along with a very sad looking house. It was a big frustration for both of us, but more so for Norma

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13 Rowley 1971a: 383-450.

because she had struggled for years to buy furniture for the house and had gone back to work to buy new carpets that were now ruined. Norma was never fully able to see the house in a better light and we began to look for another home.

While all this was going on I began working as the Foundation's field officer. I had a great belief that the Foundation was all those things I've already spoken about, essentially a place of hope and opportunity for Aborigines. The first three managers were Aborigines – Charlie Perkins, Chicka Dixon and Herb Simms – but by the time I started there was a white ex-Commonwealth public servant as manager, Peter Taylor. I was not immediately disillusioned, throwing myself into the new job. At the same time we began looking for a house closer to my work. But it was not long before other Aboriginal members of staff started expressing their disappointment about their wages and the way they were being treated.

Much of my time in the Foundation's office was spent providing welfare assistance such as meal tickets to destitute Aborigines to eat at a grill cafe in George Street. It is likely that when the Foundation was first established the main focus was this welfare role rather than pursuing liberty for all Aborigines. But by the time I came to work there things had become more complex. There was a general feeling of disquiet about the way Taylor and the Foundation executive were running this once important organisation. So strong were the Aboriginal staff member's feelings that a strike was called. A week later I was sacked. I was now out of work and spending my time fund raising and doing social welfare tasks for the National Tribal Council. While not working in the community I sharpened up my home renovation skills.

We were more fortunate with the new house search than I was with the job. We found a house that we both liked in Summer Hill, an inner city suburb of Sydney with good rail transport links. It was a semi-detached full brick house of Federation style with dark red brick, slate roof and terrazzo front verandah. The outside was in very good condition but the inside needed renovating. I neither regarded myself as a renovator, nor a handyman, but I had learned some maintenance at the boys' home and applied these skills. Two of the bedrooms were in need of major repairs including joists and new floor-boards. After repairing the floors I sanded and varnished them back to their original Russian white pine origins. We painted and re-papered the walls in the dining room and prepared the kitchen for an update. An Aboriginal friend, Jerry Bostock, helped paint the main lounge and second bedroom. But the renovation work was endless and more and more my time at home was reduced as other demands increased.

Part of my job at the Foundation had been familiarising myself with aspects of Aboriginal politics and organisational activities between La Perouse, the City

and Glebe. Gary Foley introduced me to the Aboriginal Legal Service Committee and we met each week at the Presbyterian Church in Botany Road, Redfern, about five doors up from South Sydney Community Aid. The legal service committee was made up of white and Aboriginal members. Most of the white members were lawyers and included people like Professor (later Justice) Hal Wootten, Ross McKenna, Eddy Neumann, Bob Debus, Paul Lander, Gordon Samuels and Peter Isaacs. The Aboriginal members were Paul Coe, Gary Williams, Gary Foley, Billy Craigie and me. These meetings often included visiting Aboriginal men from country areas as well as students who were associated with the Aboriginal Education Foundation and the Allan Duncan Adult Education program at the University of Sydney. My ties with the legal service were to open up a new chapter in my life.

This was a time of great excitement and change following the repeal of racist laws in the late 1960s. By the early 1970s rural New South Wales reserve and fringe camp Aborigines were flocking into Sydney looking for work opportunities and a better way of life, and that's a story I elaborate upon in the next chapter.