

5. Aboriginal-directed education: Getting started

'Cause at the time you could see something growing, it was like there was something there shimmering, just waiting for someone to feed it and help it grow. Because at that time there wasn't anything like that, I don't think, in Australia.

Robert Stanley, Tranby graduate and staffer 1980

Transitions

Kevin returned from Canada early in 1980, bringing new confidence in the directions he wanted to head for community learning and development. At the same time, he kept in mind that Coady advice to make sure he carried his colleagues and comrades along with him in whatever he did. This chapter traces out the first impact of that strong sense of direction which Cookie had brought back. To do this, the chapter has drawn on Kevin's memories and those of the people who contributed to the development of Tranby from 1980, when Cookie returned from the Coady International Institute, to around 1983. The contributors are introduced further throughout the chapter and include Julie House, Robert Stanley, Brian Doolan and Paul Torzillo.

Cookie continued to have a strong conviction that co-operative organisation was important for communities because it encouraged equality in decision-making as well as setting the stage for economic self-sufficiency. And he was thinking about justice in urban areas as well as in rural ones. So when a chance came up to support a co-operative in the Sydney area, he encouraged the Tranby Board to grab it.

Tranby had been approached by Aboriginal communities in western Sydney to help to set up a co-operative factory producing boomerangs based on a method used by local man, Harry Cooley (see Fig 5.2 on left, in the co-operative factory) who had been crafting them at home for some years. This coincided with the offer being made by the NSW Department of Community Services (DACS) of short term funding to trial co-operatives. DACS insisted on professional management and a clear commercial goal to be met in order for funding to continue but the Tranby Board gave their auspices to the project.



Figure 5.1: The boomerang-making team working in the co-operative factory.

Courtesy Julie House.

Harry Cooley was to be joined by two younger men, including Rodney, pictured here working in the co-operative factory.

Searching for a sympathetic manager with relevant experience, Kevin found Julie House, a young woman who had been working on co-operative organisation with rural communities in Thailand.

Julie understood the community goals of achieving self-reliance through meaningful work and the project began with enthusiasm from the community board, although they were frustrated that the factory could only offer employment for three people.

Once the three workers had refined the machining steps, however, it became clear how labour intensive the process was. First the boomerangs needed to be cut out, then sanded perfectly to be ready for screen printing or heat-stamping to print or burn the design onto them, and then finally they were lacquered to finish them off.



Figure 5.2: Finished boomerangs with Harry's signature.

Courtesy Julie House.

While the three men were working in the factory, Julie was knocking on door after door of the city's tourism shops and art agencies, to show them samples of the boomerangs and negotiate a wholesale price. After a while, it was obvious to everyone that the factory was not going to be able to generate enough income to pay wages. These New South Wales machine-produced boomerangs – although designed and made entirely by Aboriginal workers – needed many hours work to produce but were facing stiff competition from low priced but hand-made boomerangs and other artefacts being marketed at that time from Queensland. So their wholesale price was continually undercut by the competing Queensland goods. Reluctantly, the workers and the community board decided the co-operative would have to wind up, selling off its machinery once it became clear it could not gain further funding or run independently.

The difficulties of the co-operative were a lesson to everyone at Tranby that the key to empowering city communities had to be aimed at adult education to increase Aboriginal competitiveness and professional skills. Aboriginal people had suffered through decades of discriminatory education. The education department had allowed NSW public schools to be officially racially segregated till the late 1940s and then the department continued to allow *de facto* segregation until the early 1970s.¹ Many Aboriginal people from country areas had been badly short changed when they had left school without literacy or numeracy skills, but they were increasingly taking on the management of community organisations as they tried to support community goals in urban areas.

Robert Stanley grew up in Moree and his experience of NSW state education was typical of what so many Aboriginal people had had to put up with before they came to Tranby. After a positive experience in a primary school where all the students were Aboriginal, Robert went into the Moree High School, with many more white students. He found it a major culture shock, and was unhappy there, although he stayed longer than many other Aboriginal students. Robert finished his Intermediate Certificate and left school at 16, working in an apprenticeship making rural tools and then in ringbarking contract teams. He had been thinking of coming down to Sydney to further his education but as he said in an interview with filmmaker Russ Herman: 'I didn't like that idea. I've never been past Narrabri before that so I didn't like the idea of the Big Smoke.' His mother encouraged him to enlist in the army, in which he served inside Australia for two years, and once he had returned to civilian life in 1979 he decided to make the leap to come to Tranby College to study.

1 JJ Fletcher 1989, *Clean, Clad and Courteous: A History of Aboriginal Education in NSW*, Southwood Press, Sydney; Goodall 1996.

Robert: I done the year here at Tranby and at the end of the year then I went back to Moree. Then in January 1980, Reverend Clint wrote me a letter asking me would I like to work here. I jumped at the chance and started work here on the February 6 ...then in April of that year, Reverend Clint died. We made Kevin Cook the acting General Secretary and under Kevin's guidance actually we did have a bit more freedom than we had had before. Cause with Reverend Clint, all the letters and everything we had was addressed to his place, so we didn't see any of that. He was working here, but all the correspondence and everything went to his place out the other side of Manly there, which I thought was a bit odd. And he was the sole person that made all the decisions.

Then Kevin took over the role, he was voted in by the Board and he had the full support of the staff, which wasn't many but he had the backing of all of us. When I first started I was like an organiser, but we didn't have an accountant at the time so I was doing the books and just about everything. We didn't have many staff, especially in the office and at that time, you know, we was lucky to get paid. So you couldn't really get staff to stay here under those conditions.

But I thought it was great. 'Cause at the time you could see something growing, it was like there was something there shimmering, just waiting for someone to feed it and help it grow. Because at that time there wasn't anything like that, I don't think, in Australia.

There were other institutions there for Aboriginal people, but they were run by non-Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people had no say in it. When I came here, this was the first place where I seen where they was making their own decisions. And we didn't have government funding so we had no-one to answer to – so we just went ahead and did what we wanted, not what the government or non-Aboriginal people wanted. This was the first time we done it, something that the Aboriginal people themselves wanted.

Then we got Brian Doolan. He was in Wilcannia at the time, so Kevin asked him to come down here to Tranby. Brian come here in 1981 and he was really good. He was instrumental in setting up the College as it is today. Before Alf died, the College here was based on teaching about co-operatives, so all the subjects were things like the Credit Union. It was just the one course which didn't suit all the students because they was all at different levels. ...Our teachers was all voluntary. Most of them came from St Scholasticas Girls' School. Only thing we could offer them was a feed, on the good days! And most of them were nuns, which wasn't too bad.

1981 was the last year we had that Co-operative Course. At that time there was an HSC class in East Sydney Tech, which was all Aboriginal. Half way through the year, '81, that course was abandoned (by the Tech). I don't know what

happened. But Terry Widders was here at Tranby at the time, so Terry went up and got those students and we brought them back here to Tranby. In 1982 we started the Tertiary Preparation course and Terry wrote the program. So then we jumped from about 20 to 25 students a year in 1981, right up to about 110, 120 students in 1982.

Until Brian came along, we didn't have a Director of Studies. We'd made that position when Brian came here. There was only one little thing wrong, we didn't have any money. So most of the time we'd sort of help Brian with his rent.

We only had this old building here at Tranby, and the back part was hostels. We were virtually nursing each other! By 1983 we had four courses running: the basic skills education, a more advanced general education and then business studies, and then the Tertiary Prep course. So it was a lively old time at Tranby, for that first year.

All along we was eyeing off that building next door but they wanted half a million for it – we was lucky to provide meals, let alone buy a building for half a million!

Rethinking learning at Tranby

Kevin was interested in expanding the educational activities of the College to meet the changing needs of the urban and rural Aboriginal communities and he began looking for teaching staff who were interested too. He invited Brian Doolan to join the Co-operative as a teacher and to help to reshape the ways Tranby delivered education. When Kevin talked with Brian for this book, they discussed how the decisions they had made together about new courses and teaching methods.

Brian had most recently been living at Wilcannia in far western NSW, with his wife Kathy Bannister and their baby son Luke. He had trained as a teacher in the Catholic education system, but he was more attracted to community and adult learning than to formal institutions like schools. So he had worked with Father Ted Kennedy in his radical ministry to alcoholics in Redfern. Brian and Kathy had then moved to Wilcannia where Brian was employed by the Wiimpatjaa community to teach in their adult learning centre. Kevin asked him what he felt he'd learnt in those situations that he found useful when he came to Tranby.

Brian: The thing I learnt at Wilcannia was an awareness that there were no answers. As far as I'm concerned – actually none! If there were to be ways that were going to be successful, they would be articulated by Aboriginal people.

I think the other thing I learnt was because I was coming in as well through the Redfern experience with Ted Kennedy who worked with the *goomies* there.² So when I went to Wilcannia, I learnt about the overpowering impact that grog was having in the community. Of course I knew a bit about it already, but the experience actually in the community made it obvious that it was so totally debilitating and that it affected every aspect of what anyone was trying to do. Whether it was their involvement in a housing company, a medical service, an education centre, or whatever. And yet, despite the horrors of grog there were people who were still willing to stand up and try and set up education centres and medical services and legal services.

And so there were these amazing people right throughout, certainly in that stage. At Wilcannia, of course, I was exposed to people like Foxy Williams and Mrs Elsie Jones and others like them. And then at Menindee, I met Tartu – old Will Webster – and all those other people, who were amazing people in themselves.

When I first came to Tranby in '80 I think, there was one course that was repeated a couple of times a year. It was basically a course that sat around the notion of co-operatives. This meant of course that the funding base was unclear, to say the least.

Kevin: We didn't have a funding base!

Brian: It was pretty much hand to mouth. There were some individuals that seemed to get an enormous amount out of the courses. But there were a lot of other people who were participating in the classes but had other agendas. They were doing it because they wanted to be in Sydney or they wanted to be away from where they were coming from. They wanted to be away from problems, away from family or whatever. There was a group of young gay people who, I think, who found it comfortable to be around Tranby. They felt like it wasn't judgemental and they didn't have to face all those sort of problems that they might have had to face back home with families and things like that.

So there were lots of reasons for people being there. I found when I came from Wilcannia to Tranby was that there were so many reasons that people wanted to do things that it was a bit confusing but it was also very enabling. There were lots of options.

And historically, too, it hit a period when there were people in the bureaucracies who had been supporters of the Movement from the early '70s, with the Tent Embassy and those sorts of things. There were people like Evan Sutton

² *Goomies* is the NSW Aboriginal term for people addicted to alcohol and methylated spirits.

and Sue Rutter in Commonwealth Education and Keith Campbell in TAFE,³ Tim Hornibrook's boss. When an idea like Tranby or even the notion of this Aboriginal-controlled educational institution came along, they were able to push the buttons very quickly to give some support. And so when I came, I found lots of opportunities and all these possibilities.

I think one of the things we really wanted to do was to get a firm funding base for a post-secondary Aboriginal-controlled or Aboriginal-run institution. And that meant a couple of things. It meant firstly, pulling together some sort of curriculum that was recognisable for people in educational institutions and schools so they could say, 'Well, that sort of thing makes sense'. It was still very loose. It was centred around things like a co-operative studies course, a general education and then a tertiary education preparatory course that would create a bridge, a school to university or school to TAFE process.

Kevin: And Aboriginal Studies. It might sound strange that an Aboriginal institution would teach Aboriginal Studies to their students. But we had a lot of students who came from varied backgrounds. People have been taken away from their mothers and fathers and their communities and lived with non-Aboriginal people, and didn't know their history. We had people who have been brought up in very isolated communities, and didn't know the wider implications of the Aboriginal struggles. Aboriginal Studies was a very, very important issue for Aboriginal people. And so it was one of our core subjects – in fact it overlapped all of our subjects. I think that Aboriginal Studies and the way it's taught at Tranby is very important to the philosophy of the place.

Brian: Then of course was the input of senior people from the community like Jacko Campbell. He saw opportunities for things like the National Parks training course. It meant that people like the Suttons and the Campbells and the Rutters in those bureaucratic positions became allies. Kevin and I were able to talk to them and they'd say, 'Yeah, we want to support this'. Then they'd put together the bureaucratic package.

And the package often involved, say, from TAFE, 'We can give you X hundred teaching hours'. Tranby could then allocate those hours to certain teachers so they could come in and run those things. Or Commonwealth Ed would say, 'If you have X number of students we can give you this much' and we had to negotiate each year. Or they'd say, 'We can give you X dollars per head' which would help support the administrative arm of the College, the finance manager, all that kind of thing.

So when I came there I saw enormous opportunities. And all of those opportunities, of course, centred around Cookie's presence.

3 Technical and Further Education.



Figure 5.3: Jacko Campbell at Tranby, key member of the Board of Directors.

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



Figure 5.4: Cookie on the phone – as always. His desk was in the ‘front office’ which he shared with all the administration staff and the visitors – before they headed off to the dining room for a cup of tea.

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

He gave the place the validity to act as an Aboriginal-controlled centre for education. People found Cookie's presence enabled them to do things, and they weren't necessarily doing things just about Tranby. They were involved in the land rights movements, the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council, they had links with trade unions. There was this enabling force called Kevin Cook who validated all these different things that people were doing. And they criss-crossed around his desk and his telephone and that happened to sit, very fortunately, in Tranby. Which I think allowed the growth of the Tranby as one of the many initiatives that were centring around him in those days. So that was my take on it!

Kevin: But I think, too, the way it got done is that we hired some pretty important people in that field. Kathy Campbell came from Victoria where she had a very good reputation working in secondary education with adults. And it was very progressive, it had to be progressive because the Aboriginal people wouldn't have stayed. We tried to make it as interesting as possible and we did that by acquiring an incredibly good bunch of people. But they were often only able to stay a short period of time, say two years. Or sometimes, like Brian, about four or five years. Was that how long you lasted? Before he had to go out and get a real job and earn some money so that he could support his wife and kid! And that was the downfall of the place because as I saw it we didn't have that continuity all the way through which we would have liked because of the lack of money. But it also brought a number of other people in at very crucial times with very, you know, different ideas. So it'd bubble and – you know – start up again!

Brian: I think, too, there was a level of honesty amongst the people who came in around then. Nobody came with the answer. Everyone acknowledged that we didn't have a way of interacting with Aboriginal kids or interacting with young adults, or older adults, that provided a satisfactory education experience for them outside of a totally Aboriginal setting. I think there were some really interesting questions raised and good people came around, Chris Milne and Heather Goodall and Dave Morrissey and Paula Ware, Kathy Campbell. We were asking: 'How do people learn?' How do young adults learn, with all these different things pulling at them, home experiences, maybe grog problems?

Kevin: Drug problems, fights about homosexuality, all sorts of problems. They wanted to get away.

Brian: Yeah, that's right. All those young gays that came around Tranby were fantastic, creative and wonderful young people. All those people who came to teach, no-one really knew how to do it, but everyone was willing to give it a go. To give it a go with very scarce resources. I think people were stimulated and interested by the idea more than anything, because obviously we couldn't pay them much! And they didn't get a lot of prestige. Certainly not in the short term.

Kevin: How many years did you drive a cab when you first came to Tranby because we couldn't pay you? Robert Stanley and myself were sharing a wage with Brian. The three of us shared two wages.

Brian: And the wage came from union donations and from selling buttons and collecting on the corner. When I came originally the wage came through Operation Aborigine, the fundraiser out the back. And through unions.

Kevin: Those Gooriala buttons were incredibly good, you know. Not the old version that looked like a sad charity – that was earlier! The Gooriala ones never had any writing on them. It was a Dick Roughsey designed badge: the Mornington Island and the Aurukun people were down for a conference so they stayed at Tranby. And they gave us permission to use the dreaming. I got a badge when I was over in Canada. People in England, Italy, everywhere'd collect them! These Tranby badges were seen all over the world!



Figure 5.5: Kevin and the Board developed an innovative funding raising strategy which departed from previous 'charity' collection approaches. Tranby announced the Gooriala (Rainbow Serpent) campaign – drawing on cultural expression to develop the Gooriala image and performance.

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

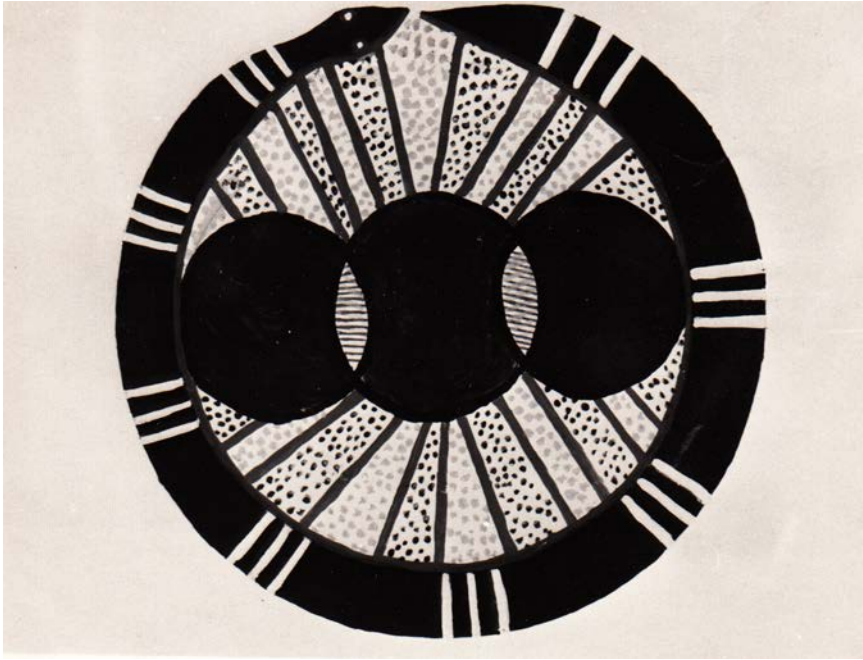


Figure 5.6: Gooriala badge.

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

But we never knew if we'd have enough money to cover wages! Once we had three weeks wages left and with no income we said that we'd have to close down most of the operations. People were going to go on the dole. People were going to go out and get second jobs. I know Kathy Campbell went out and got a job teaching English as a second language.

But at the end of the second week, a woman down the road from Tranby had died and left money to Tranby in their will. So we were able to pay wages and that happened on a couple of occasions. We had nothing. The next minute we had \$100,000.

Brian: That's right. Remember I got that job at Granville TAFE, at nights, going and teaching literacy for two hours. I also had a job out at Long Bay Gaol. Which was terrific because I got to meet all that mob from Brewarrina out at Long Bay. Do creative writing.

Kevin: That's right, yeah.



Figure 5.7: Kathy Campbell and Wally Mussing.

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

Brian: There was that week where we went into the front room, took the tea pot and the plates. Remember that donation? People would bring donations for the poor Aborigines in the outback. But they'd bring all this stuff and then Tranby had no funds to post it out. I remember once when we literally had no money. Partly as a bit of a joke – just laughing – Cookie grabbed a teapot and I grabbed a couple of plates and we said: 'That's it for this week!' That must have been '81, '82, something like that?

Kevin: The way we got our first funding from the Commonwealth, was that Brian and I went to see Holding, before he became a minister, at some federal Select Committee on Aboriginal Education.

Brian: Yeah, it was in 1983, down near Circular Quay. There was you and Terry Widders and I. One of the people sitting across the other side was Susan Ryan, we knew who she was. But there was this other bloke, Clyde Holding. And I certainly had no idea who he was. He was just a name at the other end of the table. Then the election happened, Labor got in and we get this phone call.

Kevin: Yeah, to come down and see him. He was the new Minister for Aboriginal Affairs! Brian and I were doing cartwheels around Tranby. Whistling and singing. We run down there and he promised the world.

Brian: We met him down in Martin Place. There's some Commonwealth offices and we went in there. He promised us so much. Well, it's probably a pittance really, these days. But it was the first real financial help and we thought might be some longer term financial base for Tranby. We were so happy, we came out and we walked down the street and we went to what for us was a really expensive restaurant. It's probably just a better class of fish and chip shop. Shouted ourselves a big meal! We thought: 'Oh, well, we've done it here!' Holding said, 'We think Tranby is a really good idea. We like the idea of an Aboriginal-controlled adult education facility. We want to back it, and in the short term here's some money to underwrite it'. And it might have been \$100,000 or \$200,000. It wasn't enormous. But to us...

Kevin: And then we didn't get it!

Brian: That's right. But we were very happy about the notion of *almost* getting it. Holding didn't actually have the bureaucratic mechanism to allow that to happen.

Kevin: When we did get the money it was about a third of what he said he was going to give us and we still couldn't pay the wages! But before that funding from the federal government, it wasn't funny, we'd go along and we wouldn't know whether we could pay wages each week.

Brian: The other thing is that my memory of the period is that Tranby as an educational experience wasn't all a raging success. I mean it was an honest attempt by a bunch of people to provide that education environment and content for a very diverse group of younger people who were there for a whole range of reasons. And only a few of those reasons actually had anything to do with the education.

So there were some spectacular failures. There were young people who might have been attending classes at Tranby, but then they got caught up in other things or in grog problems, formed relationships which turned violent. Sometimes within the college group. I remember once when we had the hostel out the back, we actually had to ask a couple of people to leave. You know, it wasn't as though they walked into this hallowed area that changed things.

What it was – it was a *hub* of things. It didn't necessarily change their experiences, but there were some people who flowered. I'm not sure if that's because of anything we did. When most people flower it's usually because of the individual and they just take that opportunity. I remember young guys in the National Parks course particularly. And some of those guys who went back to the South Coast and were doing park ranger stuff and were incredibly successful.

Kevin: And we had a lot of people go into the public service. And one of our ex-students used to run the examinations for the public service board and she used to come out to Tranby, put our students through. You look through the public service now and there's a lot of our ex-students in there in incredibly good roles.

Brian: And if you look at the broader, political context you see the importance of the experiences they had. I remember the education department protest when the assistant secretary or someone at Bourke had made some racist slurs. It was the students at Tranby that organised the demonstration calling for her removal. They actually went on to occupy the offices of the department. Now I think for a kid from Collarenebri that's come to Sydney and to then be involved in confronting what had been seen as the white stronghold, the Department of Education. And not only confronting it but basically thumbing their noses at it by occupying the building. And then being able to negotiate, to be able to say, we're going to walk out based on these ten conditions. I thought it was an enormously liberating experience.

Kevin: Yeah, it was good. It empowered those students. And a lot of them have gone back and worked within their own community. And that's the beauty of it. You mightn't see their name in lights, but they're working on their local group and playing a very important role. They can read their financial statements so they can have an input how the money is spent. If you can't read the financial statement, you haven't got a chance in telling your community how they can direct their money. And that's why, before Aboriginal people were educated, white people were able to dictate where Aboriginal people would spend their money. It was crazy. And that's the other thing that Tranby done a good job at.

Overall, I don't think I got really frustrated at anything in those days at Tranby. If something didn't work then it might have been the wrong time or the wrong place, so you'd come back to that at a different stage and try something new. And you'd keep going on something else. Life's too short to hold grudges.

Working with the Board

Paul Torzillo has been introduced in earlier chapters as a medical student who worked as a builders labourer during his holidays where he got to know Kevin. Paul became a respiratory physician at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and continued to be involved with Aboriginal medical issues and broader community development in NSW. Then he worked in the Pitjantjatjara Freehold Lands in Central Australia as a doctor with the Aboriginal-controlled Nganampa Health Service in 1984 and 1985, and has continued to be its Medical Director. Cookie asked him to become a member of the Tranby Board of Directors in 1986 and he remained on the board till Cookie retired in 2002.

Kevin talked with Paul and Brian about the role of the Board of Directors.

Kevin: I think a lot of the credit for what Tranby did could go to the Board of Directors. We had people in there for a long time, like John Short, an accountant working for Qantas. John and his wife met Alf Clint when they were younger and built up a relationship with him. John was there as chairman for years and years. Peru Permal, was another guy. They didn't come into Tranby and say, 'I'm on the board of directors, what's happening?' They sat back and listened to what the people were saying to them. We had Paddy Crumblin, from the Seamen's Union and then there was you, Paulie, you used to be the chief doctor for Tranby. Many weekends, some of our students were crook. We had to get people into hospital. First port of call was Paulie.

Brian: In the early days you had Justice Bob Hope, Bob Bellar, Michael Knott.

Kevin: Those type of people were incredibly good and stiffened up the organisation. They'd look at what you were doing. They looked at the money pretty critically – like Michael Knott. We had this old car and we were trying to trade it. He looked at the finances and said, 'No, we can't do it!' And straight away that was okay, because we knew he'd really looked into it. They were really fair.

Brian: But they were flexible enough to be able to cope with the sort of changes that you were bringing in. In the early eighties there was such a huge change in the educational structure of the place, from one course running repeatedly, to three different courses at least and the other offshoots like Black Books, and huge extra numbers of people. And all that complicated business trying to stretch the money, and the board coped pretty well.

Paul: I've got a slightly different view of how the Board worked. Some things that were obvious to me were that the Board relied very heavily on Cookie's directions and views about what was going on. I think that was pretty clear both in minor issues and philosophically.

But there were a few things going on at the same time. One thing was that in my observation, Cookie often used board meetings as a way of generally pulling in influential white support for the Aboriginal movement in general, not just for Tranby. So one set of discussions at the board meetings would be about things in which Tranby was in fact not directly involved, say, Tranby might be supporting this issue but not actually taking part. There might need to be a political response to what the government was doing in education for example. Or it might have been the visit of some international activist from South Africa... or it might be a general issue about trade unions. And Cookie would be saying, 'Well, I think we should send a letter supporting this move...' or 'The Tranby students are intending to go this political demonstration or that

event...’ and then there’d follow a general discussion about why Cookie thought this was important... It was often a political education session for influential white people on the board, for example conservatives like Bob Hope, and to some extent Peru. And Cookie would be making sure he was pulling in the trade union people who were there. Very often that wasn’t hard, because they were already on side. But there was often a bit of shoring it up, with ongoing information and news about these issues, and I thought a lot of the time it was general education about the general Aboriginal scene or even the progressive left movement.

And then the second thing that was going on was involving Tranby in mainstream or progressive left political action. That meant the big political movements and events that were happening, like changes in the industrial laws, the waterfront, the whole waterfront issues, the whole of that actually got discussed at board meetings... In a way, Cookie was able to link the Aboriginal scene to the issues about workers’ rights, I think. And part of that was to have these issues discussed at Tranby board meetings.

Another way of doing that was through the constituents or the makeup of the Board. The Board was just a remarkable spread of people with vastly different backgrounds, even different political perspectives from a pretty conservative judge going through to union activists. And even shop steward level activists, not just people like Paddy Crumlin who was a Federal Secretary. And then there was Peru Perumal with his progressive background that was international, there were members of his family who had been politicians in countries overseas, but who worked in a fairly middle class environment. And on the other hand there were these key Aboriginal people who were mixing with them. So it was a really heterogeneous mix of people but discussing all these issues where generally people were carried along. There might have been a criticism of having a Board that had influential white people on it, but a real advantage was that you had all these people of different backgrounds who could pull in all sorts of support, especially the trade unions, but it made Aboriginal affairs and Tranby a part of mainstream politics and not a side issue, and that was important.

I think the third thing that was going on that was important... and is probably even more important now in retrospect – was it was a real public display of financial integrity. So here was a group of people, some of whom were successful business people, one of them was a judge, experienced trade unionists, they were not people who were going to let some sort of dodgy audit or financial scam happen. And when you look around at the sort of catastrophic way that some of the organisations have been managed and at some of the financial ripoffs that were going on then. It was incredibly important to have that very public display of financial integrity.

In practice, it meant that the place was run honestly, but secondly, there were a lot of people from outside the scene who got to look at the audited books every month and clearly nothing shonky was going to go on. Now at the time I thought that was a minor issue.

When I look back on it, it was actually really important because it was a very upfront, transparent look at how the organisation was run. Which was different from a lot of other organisations where clearly there was a lot of money was being ripped off by key people. So this made Tranby very different. And it was a real problem for the place when that situation broke down temporarily in 2002.

Cookie: To me, Bob Hope was pretty progressive. I used to go and sit down and talk to him about lots of issues. We owned a property in northern Queensland and the people up there wanted to renew their lease and they wanted a long term lease. And being a judge, he knew the pitfalls. I sat down and talked to him for a long time about it over a number of weeks. And in the end he drew up the lease for us, and we took it to our solicitors, and said 'This is what we want, and anything that you think should be included we'll sit down and talk to you about it'. And the lease was for a 50 year lease with a 50 year option. And that's a very long term lease, and I think we charged the community \$2.00 per year. And the property's worth millions and millions of dollars. It's an old banana plantation. To get that kind of experience and knowledge to me was incredible. And you could sit down and feel easy about what you were doing.

And all of the people on the Board of Directors had their own expertise. Peru was an architect. He did a lot of work over the years at Tranby for nothing. He didn't talk about it, but whenever we needed anything done, I'd just go up and talk to him about it and he'd get it done. And the people from the trade union movement like Dick Scott. He was the chairman of the board at Tranby for years. After he retired I used to go up and see him, I'd take my lunch up and he'd have a cup of coffee and I used to stay there for about half an hour...

And Mawley, the BWIU rep, he was another bloke from Newcastle, he played a very good role at Tranby. The BWIU altogether played a really important role at the College, with Stan Sharkey and Pat Clancy. Then you had the Seamen's Union, Pat Sweetenson and Jack Hassan ... They told me that Jack Hassan was going to be a director... and I'm looking for Jack Hassan the fighter, I knew he worked on the wharves! But this was the white Jack Hassan! Now Sweetenson and Hassan were rank and filers, and they played a really important role. The people on the Board of Directors never ever got any kudos! Like Paulie here. We'd wake Paul up in the middle of the night to get our students into hospital or to come and have a look at one of them if they were sick.

The Aboriginal people who were on the Board were important, and I'd sit down and talk to them on the different issues, especially on land and really important issues like that. Jacko Campbell was someone I relied on a hell of a lot. And I'd go to board meetings with the knowledge that I'd spoken to them before, and I knew what they were thinking. People like Sylvia Scot, Bob Belleair, Cliff Foley, Robert Stanley, and old Wally Mussing when he was alive. People like that. It was incredible just to be able to sit down and get their views, to get a really good picture. And to make sure I wasn't running away with what I thought was right all the time. And then before meetings I used to go outside the Board of Directors on certain issues and talk to other Aboriginal people on certain issues and get their views, and then come back and bring it to the Board... and put it up before our Board. And nine times out of ten they'd pass it.

Isabel Flick was really important. She wasn't on the Board till really late, but I used to talk to her a lot about issues that were coming up at the Board. Then she went onto the Board later on, taking Delia Low's place. Nan Campbell, Jacko's wife and Delia's mother, was another one I relied on, she had a lot of knowledge. She wasn't on the Board but I talked to her a lot. And those are the sort of people who even though they weren't on the Board directly, they were as much the decision makers as the Board of Directors I think.



Figure 5.8: Regie on the switch.

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

There'd be a lot of people were just dropping into the front office and talking over their plans and projects. Just on the land rights issue in NSW, say, people were all the time coming through and they'd use Tranby as a meeting place. We said they could use our facilities, you know have a cup of coffee, if they had meetings in town they'd go into town, come back. And so we had students who'd be involved with them and individual [members of the] Board of Directors, if they were around, were involved with them also. And then you had people like Johnny Ah Kit,⁴ Paddy Dodson, David Ross, all interstate people, they'd come down and be around. Terry O'Shane, he'd been involved with Tranby before I was, through Alf Clint. Joe McGinness. He was another person who used to spend a lot of time at Tranby. I'd be talking to him to get advice, he'd be talking to students. He wrote his book down here. He come down here and stayed at our place for a couple of months, and he used the Tranby facilities and the Tranby people like Chris Kerr. Now Isabel Flick and people like her were able to use Chrissy too. Isabel used to say, 'Oh, I don't know how to do this...' and Chris'd be on the phone getting it done! And any typing that they needed to be done, Chris'd get that done. They used to use my office. And Joe McGinness got a bit of typing done too for his book. And that was really good for our staff to be able to say, 'Oh yeah I knew them...' and for our students too... See that's paying respects to their elders and to people who they looked up to...

4 John Ah Kit, referred to mostly by Kevin as 'Jack' or just 'Ah Kit'.