

## 9. Strategies: 1976 to 1981

By 1976, the campaign for Aboriginal land rights in the state of New South Wales badly needed a kick start.

There had been a long history of land rights demands in eastern Australia from at least the 1860s, and they had been escalating ever since, most often on a local or state level.<sup>1</sup> But by the early 1970s, the attention of Aboriginal people all over Australia had become focused on the national stage as the way to achieve land justice. The states had slipped from view.

This was because in 1972 the growing sense that a change of the national government – from the long reign of the conservative Robert Menzies to the Labor Party under Gough Whitlam – was going to happen had led the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to be established on the lawns of Federal Parliament. This increased the pressure on Whitlam and soon after his party finally won power in December 1972, the new government declared it would act rapidly on how best to achieve national land rights. But it soon became clear that the federal government would not be able to legislate to change state land laws. These remained under the sole control of state governments according to the Australian constitution. So the federal ALP concentrated on the laws it could change – those in the Northern Territory and the smaller Australian Capital Territory around Canberra and a naval base at Jervis Bay on the NSW South Coast. And Aboriginal people everywhere still focused on that campaign, in the hope that a good outcome in the Northern Territory would lead eventually to strong models for each of the states.

The NSW Aborigines Act was amended to form an ‘Aboriginal Lands Trust’ in 1973, in response to the rising Aboriginal interest in ownership of their land.<sup>2</sup> This amendment did not, however, pass real ownership of land to Aboriginal people. Instead, it simply renamed the existing nine member Aboriginal Advisory Council – previously an appointed body of Aboriginal people but from 1973 to be all elected – as trustees of all Crown lands reserved for the use of Aborigines. There were widespread demonstrations by Aboriginal people in 1973 opposing the creation of this ‘Trust’ and demanding instead the full handover of all remaining reserves as well as other lands of significance to Aboriginal people. These remaining reserves amounted only to 4300 hectares but the Trust was also to be empowered to submit claims to areas of ‘vacant Crown land’ deemed ‘claimable’ by the Minister for Lands. More than 250 claims

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1 Meredith Wilke 1985, *Aboriginal Land Rights in NSW*, Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited in association with Black Books, Sydney; Goodall 1996; Morris 1989.

2 *Aborigines Act 1969* (NSW); *Aborigines (Amendment) Act 1973* (NSW).

were submitted by the Lands Trust but these were mainly in the latter years of its existence, in the late 1970s, under pressure from unhappy communities who saw the main area of the Trust's activity to be approving the revocation of reserves to suit the government's agenda.<sup>3</sup>

When the Whitlam Government was ousted in December 1975, with the Bill for the NT Land Rights Act drafted and before parliament – but not passed – there was an even greater campaign applied to force the incoming conservative Fraser Government to honour the Labor Party commitments to the Aboriginal communities of the NT. Fraser watered down the Bill, giving even more concessions to the white graziers and miners, but eventually passed the amended Bill in 1976.<sup>4</sup>

But that left the question of what next? Shopfront and service organisations, like the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Aboriginal Medical Service, had flourished under the new funding from the federal Whitlam Government as well, of course, as the Aboriginal Housing Company in which Cookie and the Builders Labourers had been involved. While the Legal Service kept on looking for possibilities for legal challenges on the land issue, they had little time and few resources to follow these up in a big campaign.

It was now clear that each state would have to pass its own land rights bill – but this would mean re-building momentum for a new campaign for each state.

The initiative was taken, as has often been the case, by local communities. Aboriginal people around the state had been watching the process in the Northern Territory of communities explaining their connections to land with a formal claim. They had begun looking at how they could express their interests in land in the same way.

The first group to do this was the network of Gamilaraay people with a relationship to what had been the Aboriginal managed reserve at Terry Hie Hie, south-east of Moree. They had been forced away from the land and the Reserve had been revoked and they now lived in nearby towns like Boggabilla (where they had been sent when Terry Hie Hie was closed) and Moree. But in May 1977, they came together to demand that the Reserve be restored to them, as the first step in a recognition of their ownership over a wider area of land to which they had traditionally held the custodial rights. Their letter with documents supporting their claim was widely passed around among Aboriginal people, who were starting to consider how they too could make a claim on the land that was important to them.

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3 Wilkie 1985: 9.

4 *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cwlth).

Kevin was just becoming established at Tranby at that time, and knew some of the people involved in the Terry Hie Hie claim. In the communities he knew best, on the South Coast of NSW, Aboriginal people were watching Terry Hie Hie closely and eagerly talking over the possibilities of making their own claims.

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This chapter starts in 1977 when the campaign for land rights in New South Wales began to change gear. It looks at the choices made by activist groups to refocus land rights campaigning onto the potential of state legislation. These included choosing strategies like direct action, building alliances and making changes to party policy to force governments to take action. Then the chapter follows the story of how these strategies worked over the next few years to push the ALP government to focus on land rights in the hearings of its Select Committee, chaired by Maurie Keane, which took evidence in urban and later in rural areas. When the Select Committee reported in August 1980, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activists intensified their campaign for land rights in rural as well as urban areas. They expected that the Labor government would follow the Select Committee recommendations. These called for the government to begin extensive and in-depth consultations about how legislation could best respond to the deep desire for land which had been expressed to the Select Committee hearings.

Chapter 10 looks at this campaign from late 1981 to the end of 1982. A key experience for activists and communities in this period was the bush camp, a new type of political gathering for people in NSW which was modelled on meetings about land in the Northern Territory but then developed to meet local, NSW conditions. This type of meeting allowed NSW Aboriginal people to strengthen alliances across regional and personal differences. The outcome was that the campaign for rights to land began to build goals which were wider than any single piece of legislation.

Then, in Chapter 11 we explore the ways Kevin and his close friends like Barbara Flick and William Bates confronted the difficult decisions when a NSW government offered a Land Rights Act in 1983 which fell far short of Aboriginal goals. They had to decide whether and how to participate in a structure they believed to be flawed. The chapter then takes an in-depth look at two examples in which communities established local land councils, one in the city and one in the country. These were not organisations initiated from the top down, but instead were created by people organising at the grass roots level to build organisations which would meet what were often widely differing local goals and needs.

Finally, in Chapter 12 we look at how people went about actually getting land back in the early years of the Act – by either claim or by purchase. Both strategies meant that Aboriginal people had to gain very new skills very rapidly and they needed to have strong networks of support.

## 1977 to 1978: Kick start strategies

This section draws on Kevin's discussions with Rod Pickette, an organiser in the Australian Theatrical and Amusement Employees Association (ATEA) and Meredith Burgmann, in the National Tertiary Education Union, both unionists who Cookie had come to know well as a Builders Labourer and with Barbara Flick, a good friend and Yuwalarai woman from Collarenebri. Kevin had first met Barbara during the anti-Apartheid campaigns when she had come to Sydney to study nursing at the Children's Hospital and later to enrol in a Bachelor of Education at the University of Sydney. Barbara remembered that she had left the university disillusioned after a lecture in her politics course on the Wee Waa cotton strike in which no Aboriginal perspectives were acknowledged. Although the strike had been organised by her father Joe Flick, with Barbara and many others actively involved, no Aboriginal voices had been recognised in the university account. Frustrated, Barbara had deferred her studies, moving into an activist role in community organisations like the Western Aboriginal Legal Service.

### Direct action: Black Defence, the 1977 Land Rights Conference and land claims

The Black Defence Group was an idea that came out of the atmosphere of protest and action campaigns that Kevin and his friends had been involved in during the previous few years. There were many occasions when small groups of people – who could be organised quickly to come and stand in a picket line or make up a deputation – could make a big difference. Some of Kevin's friends in the unions and others he was meeting in his first years at Tranby were eager to take on these active roles and it helped to make it sound like a 'real' organisation if it had a name. So the 'Black Defence Group' came into being.

As *Kevin* explained in the discussion with Rod: It was a motley crew when we first started off the Black Defence Group. Marcia Langton, myself, you Rod and Toni Smith – that red-headed girl who used to ride the motorbike. There were other Aboriginal women like Barbara Flick and her Auntie Isabel. There was Nellie Anairs and Lorraine Fitzpatrick. Then there was Meredith Burgmann who used to come to the meetings and you did too, Heather and so did Paulie Torzillo

when he could. But I always said, after working for the Builders Labourers: you can achieve a helluva lot with a very few people. As long as everyone *stuck fats*. That's an old saying from playing marbles. It means as long as they're together! *Stick fats*. And we did! On Saturday nights, you know, we used to be out pasting up posters for demonstrations!

*Rod Pickette* laughed: We sounded like a pretty dangerous organisation, didn't we! [laughter] The Black Defence Group. I think they thought it was something like the Black Panthers in the US. Little did they know there was half a dozen people meeting in a telephone box. [laughter] It just shows it's amazing what you can do, you know, with a small group of people just focusing on the right sort of issues at the right time. You could easily get a lot moving.

But as *Kevin* pointed out, it was helpful to sound impressive: We used to ring up the Aboriginal Affairs, we'd say, 'Look, we want that report!' [or whatever it was]. They'd say, 'Who's this?' And we'd say, '*Black Defence*! You just send it to Box so-and-so in Redfern'. [laughter] 'Who are you?', they'd want to know. 'Don't you worry who we are', we'd say. 'Just send the stuff in the mail!'

But as time went by, the Black Defence Group formed a nucleus of reliable people who provided the infrastructure for organising grass roots support for Aboriginal goals around land.

*Kevin*: Marcia Langton had a lot to do with the Black Defence Group, where you know we used to sit around and talk. Land was always the issue, everything could come back and there'd be land. I think without the Black Defence Group, organising that 1977 Land Rights Conference, you might have gone another five or ten years without anything happening. There had to be someone who took up that issue. You know, everybody was talking about it, because the NSW Lands Trust wasn't *doing* anything. So people hated the Lands Trust with venom!

Perhaps the most important event was the 1977 Land Rights Conference, which was the first time for decades that Aboriginal people had come together to talk about their goals for land in many different regions of the state. It was held in Redfern on the October Labour Day long weekend, celebrating the eight hour day, and more importantly when the Aboriginal Football Knockout was on. This is a major sporting and cultural festival organised wholly within the Aboriginal community and which is held each year on the October long weekend, hosted by the victors of the previous year's knockout, researched now by Heidi Norman. In 1977 it was going to be held in Sydney because the Redfern All-Blacks had won the previous year. Marcia Langton (a key member of the Black Defence Group) and Cookie decided this would be a good opportunity to allow people from all the different regions across the state to share their goals about land. In previous decades, people had preferred to organise regionally and the land

rights campaigns of the 1920s, for example, about which John Maynard has written, tended to be organised by the coastal regions, while those in the 1930s were based at Cumeragunja on the Murray River. The campaigns around rent and then land in the 1960s and early 1970s had arisen from conditions on the North Coast of NSW and had built up their momentum there.<sup>5</sup>

So the Football Knockout in 1977 was an important opportunity to bring people together to talk about what might happen in NSW now the Northern Territory Land Rights Act had finally been passed.<sup>6</sup> The Black Defence Group provided workers for support: Meredith Burgmann handled registrations from rural areas and kept the books for the conference, Rod Pickette organised union sponsorship and others like Barbara Flick and myself pasted up posters and licked envelopes for mailouts. It was an extraordinary event as Rod Pickette recalled.

*Rod:* That was spectacular when you think about it now. It was a pretty dramatic achievement even if that'd been all that happened. What amazed me about that was the wide representation. Just about every area was represented there. And it seemed to bring all these people, and it was the really respected community leaders from every area around NSW. And they were all speaking in the same language, you know.

Kevin pointed out that the football games themselves, always an important social event, had been set aside by some people so they could come to the conference instead to talk about land.

*Kevin:* It was funny, because at the same time there was the football knockouts on. And a lot of people didn't go to the Knockout for the first time, you know. They wanted to come to the Land Rights Conference instead. It was that big an issue. 'Cause at that time the Land Trust (the NSW government management group) were doing terrible things to people. That's when they were selling off bits and pieces of land.

They tried to sell off the old reserve at Terry Hie Hie near Moree. There was another place near Penrith in western Sydney, called Llanillo. Rod and I went out there, as part of the Black Defence Group, to meet the community reps. They got that land, too. They stopped the Lands Trust getting rid of Llanillo. The Lands Trust tried to sell other land off too, but we stopped them selling that as well, which was good!

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5 Heidi Norman 2013 (forthcoming), *From Activism to Enterprise: A Political History of the NSW Aboriginal Lands Rights Act, 1983*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra; Maynard 2007; Goodall 1996.

6 *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cwlth).

Rod remembered the galvanising effect it seemed to have on the western Sydney Aboriginal community who were trying to stop the sale of Llanillo to feel they had some support.

*Rod:* It seemed to be so empowering for them, you know, that they suddenly had an organisation backing them. Yeah, it was bloody good to see.

The conference called for the full scale recognition of Aboriginal rights to land, set up the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council and demanded the abolition of the Aboriginal Lands Trust. A working group of 11 people was elected, all well known for their past campaigning against government control through bodies like the Lands Trust, although they did represent coastal areas more strongly than western ones. This working group included Kevin Cook as convenor and later chairperson, Joyce Clague as secretary, Kevin Gilbert on publicity, Alice Briggs as treasurer, Alan Woods as initial chair, Camela Potter, Trudy Longbottom, Betty Tighe, Ray Kelly, Jack Campbell, and Ted Thomas.

As Kevin explained, the 1977 Land Rights Conference was a turning point.

*Kevin:* That Land Rights Conference really got things going again. We set up that NSW Land Council from that, and people started traveling around, talking about land.

The 1977 land council born out of the Land Rights Conference in Redfern gave a platform for the first time to all the regional interests in NSW to meet and express their views about land. But all the travelling round 'talking about land' was done from 1977 to 1983 out of people's own pockets, with pension money and hard earned wages paying for petrol and food to camp out. This was the way that people from the South Coast like Jacko Campbell and Ted Thomas could get to bush meetings at Angledool or Menindee, on the Darling River. And it was the way that people like Aunty Phoebe Mumbler and Jessie Williams from Nambucca Heads on the coast could cross the mountains to be at a land rights meeting in Dubbo. There they met up with other people from across the state, all of them on limited means, travelling on public transport with pensioner concessions or in old cars and sharing petrol money. At the meeting they camped out or stayed in hostels, and were fed with cups of billy tea and sandwiches made up in the kitchens of the Aboriginal community members of the town.





**Figure 9.1: 1977 Redfern Land Rights Conference, Black Theatre, Marcia Langton and Bob Bellear.**

Courtesy Peter Thompson.



**Figure 9.2: 1977 Redfern Land Rights Conference: Mick Miller and Cookie.**





**Figure 9.3: Percy Mumbulla (left), Gail Lovelock (from Armidale) and Gerry Bostock (right).**

Courtesy Peter Thompson.

One of the ways the land council acted as a turning point was in stimulating still more communities to formulate their land demands as a claim which they could lodge with the state government. The very fact that these claims were made then created growing pressure on the new Wran Government to set up a process which could hear and recognise the claims.

After Terry Hie Hie, the next two claims to be written up and lodged were the Jerringa claim over Roseby Park, in February 1978, with Jacko Campbell as community representative, and the Yuin claim, over Wallaga Lake in June 1978, with Ted Thomas as signatory. These three documents set out clearly and powerfully – in maps and words – the long held demands of these communities for land justice, with their claims based on traditional culture but also on historical association and economic need. They were strong grounds on which to launch a campaign for the recognition of land rights under NSW law.

## Building alliances, 1977: Unions, churches and beyond...

Kevin thought hard about planning to achieve changes. He has described how this planning was applied to the land rights campaigning. He talks here with Barbara Flick about developing strategies and working them through in practice.

*Kevin:* When we had the Black Defence Group, we sat down and we analysed where our support for land rights could come from. The only two areas that it could come from was the trade union movement and the churches, as progressive groups. We started out with the Trade Union Committee for Aboriginal Rights, TUCAR, and that was easy to set up because most of the people who were on the Black Defence Group were also trade unionists. (See discussion in Chapter 7 about politics and Tranby.)

And we also wanted to set up an organisation to go out and see if we could influence the churches. Then we started to get involved with the Australian Council of Churches. They already had an Advisory group, with Bob Bellear as Chairman. After he stood down as chairman, Foley took over and I went onto the group in Bob's place. Then when Foley stood down, I took over as Chair. I must've been there six years or something like that. So Black Defence played a role in getting that support from the churches through the ACC as well as from the trade unions through TUCAR and that support was one of the things that helped us get land rights.

*Barbara:* I know you kept on working with the unions all through that time. How did you get on with the Communist party mob then?

*Kevin:* They had a few people still in positions in the union. I got on terrifically with all of the factions. See there was two parties then, the Australian Communist Party and the SPA, the Socialist Party of Australia. I had mates in both camps. But I think the strangest connection for me was Charlie Oliver, from the AWU, who was on the Right. Now he played a very good role later on, in 1981, in getting the unions to see Wran.

*Barbara:* There was a lot of talking going on with the churches. And I went to some meetings with Kevin. But he certainly went to a lot more than I did. And speaking on campuses, university campuses, we did some of that work together. But then again, he did much more than I did. So it was really a busy time in trying to reach as many people as possible, through trade unions, through workers, through the churches, the student groups. None of it would have happened unless we were able to convince all of those people that it was justice that we were talking about.

And I suppose it was the '70s was a period of time when the world started to think about justice, because many things were affecting people personally. Like the war in Vietnam. And the television screens that showed images of civil rights actions in the United States, and the Women's Movement, things were happening. So I think the country was getting used to people expressing their needs and being articulate about it.

And this is what grew out of Tranby College at that time that Kevin was involved.

*Kevin:* Dick Scott from the Metal Workers – the AMWU – was an example of that. The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union is a huge union but he'd been associated with Tranby for years. A great guy, you know, really nice bloke. And an Anglican, a Christian Anglican in Alf's camp, you know, who done a lot for Tranby and who done a hell of a lot for the land rights.

Penno – Mervyn Penrith – used to come up from the South Coast with Jack Campbell, and we'd say: 'Ok, there's a meeting on tonight, come out'. We got a lot of support from the churches that we went to. The Quakers were always good. And the Manly-Warringah Support Group started up after that. People who were working with us then from that group are still working with us now. It was a great support for the land rights campaign.

So it was an incredible set of connections, but it not only did Aboriginal people good, but it's also done non-Aboriginal people good. Because the people who supported the land rights, a lot of them are still actively involved in support groups, in Tranby, or some Aboriginal organisations. Now they're getting to go down to, you know, the South Coast, and they know where to go, where not to go. They go out west now. You know, a lot of people went to the handback of Mutawintji, you know. So then, that's something else that was done through land rights.

*Barbara:* And remember Margaret Roadknight was a great supporter. She used to come to the university campuses with us, and entertain and liven up the crowd.

*Kevin:* I carried her guitar.

*Barbara:* I have a photo of you carrying her guitar! It was fairly early days for people and that was a really good thing for her to do. She'd come along with her guitar, and she was really popular on campus at the time. She'd lend her support to our fundraisers and dances and encourage people to be active. So we got really good bands for nothing, like Mental as Anything. And do you remember Chips MacInolty doing posters for us. And the Tin Sheds at Sydney Uni.

*Kevin:* The non-Aboriginal support, it was really great. People played a very vital role in the introduction of the land rights legislation. Like the Land Rights

Support Group – Dave Morrissey organised that and he got lots of people together to help out – like they’d paste up posters or lick envelopes or type or print off books. And you talk to them, and you say: ‘You’re part of history. You helped in that area!’

It’s just amazing how so much can be done by so little mob of people. I learnt that in the Builders Labourers. We used strategies from everybody I think. It’s amazing... what I thought was quite funny, a lot of people ask me: ‘Who’s giving you all this information?’ ‘How are youse doing it so good?’ And we thought we were bumbling along and everyone else thought we were going really great. And we were doing it ourselves, which was good!

Barbara had a key role in introducing people from the South Coast, like Jacko Campbell and Mervyn Penrith to her relations and friends on the Darling River, a story which will be taken up in the next Chapter, ‘Experiences’.

## Making changes to policy: ALP Conference, June 1978 leads to Select Committee

But first, the other strategic step which flowed directly out of the 1977 Land Rights Conference was the attempt to work from inside the Labor Party to change its Platform which would then put pressure on the Labor government to make real changes in policy. With the evidence of the already-submitted Terry Hie Hie claim and with drafting of the Jerringa and Wallaga Lake claims underway, activists like Kevin were looking for ways to put pressure on the Labor Party to respond.

To follow up this part of the story, Kevin talked with Rod Pickette and Meredith Burgmann, both members of the ALP with a keen interest in the formal structures which brought motions up to the Annual Conference which was where the Party Platform was decided.

Rod Pickette has explained how he saw his role in supporting land rights within the ALP.

*Rod:* When you think back to 20 years ago when land rights was the issue – it really was very central. Other things were seen to hang off that. I saw my role to be a white fella supporting Aboriginal land rights, because I thought that unless there was a way of ensuring that Aboriginal people still have rights and ownership over land, then the other things – like the culture – won’t have the same chance of surviving as a living thing. I still think it’s absolutely as important today as it was then. It’s all very well for everyone to be educated to a standard or to have jobs with equal access, but that’s not sufficient. It was really a renewal of the call for self-determination, it seems to me.



**Figure 9.4: Walking along the beach to lay the wreaths into Botany Bay.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



The situation after the fall of the Whitlam Government was that the NSW activists had to shift the focus from the federal government back to the state government, which was then held by the ALP. Kevin's assessment of the support from state Labor politicians was that those who had been longest involved were his old friend Bill Knox, then George Peterson, Frank Walker and Maurie Keane. While others in the ALP were sympathetic, it was these four whom he expected to be the most informed and consistent supporters. He was pessimistic about the commitment of the rest of the party members, because, as he said: 'The Labor Party, they only pay lip-service to it.'

The unions, whom he had begun to draw in through the TUCAR structure, were an influential extra-parliamentary support, but the parties to the left of the ALP were more varied in their attitude. Rod pointed out that the Communist Party of Australia had not taken the issue up as a major campaign, although individuals within the party were strong supporters. But he felt that 'It took the Communist party a long time to actually grab the land rights movement. Inside the party, it didn't actually ever form a significant issue'.

Kevin felt this was because Aboriginal people had not joined the party.

*Kevin:* There would only have been a few Aboriginal members. There was Louise West. But that's one thing about how the community saw it. Like I remember we were going down the South Coast with old Jacko, and you know what a wonderful bloke he was. But then someone said, 'Oh, I think so-and-so is in the Communist party'. And Jacko and them all reeled back – like it was 'Shock, horror!' And I said, 'What's the difference between them and Merv Nixon, you all work with him?' And they said, 'Oh well, he's a white fella!'

But if you were black, there was a stigma about being in the Communist party. My uncle was in the Communist party in Wollongong years ago. See, I think people were at uni when they were joining the Communist party, or at work in the unions and joining the Communist party. Very few Aboriginal people ever were at the uni and there were very few people in jobs! And so they just didn't do it!

The smaller Socialist Workers' Party had been much more evident but as Kevin pointed out, their support for the Aboriginal movement was even more reluctantly received.

*Kevin:* ... That was because they tried to take the issues and run with them rather than supporting the Aboriginal people, and that was a problem, you know. People got a bit scared of them doing that. And that's why they stayed well clear of them.





**Figure 9.5: Rod Pickette with son Maka and daughter Akidi.**

Courtesy Rod Pickette family collection.

Overall, Kevin argued, ‘There wasn’t a political party that got behind Aboriginal land rights at the time’.

So changing the ALP Platform was a priority. Meredith Burgmann was a long time member of the ALP. She is speaking to Kevin and to Rod as she describes the frustrations of even trying to get Aboriginal ALP members like Kevin onto the Aboriginal Affairs working party.

*Meredith:* In a number of the things that we were involved with – you were it! You were the only black! And which is why, getting on to the Labor Party work, Kevin was used absolutely unashamedly. Do you know remember when we got you on the Aboriginal Affairs Policy Committee, but they kept saying ‘How many branch meetings has he been to?’ And I said, ‘He’s the only Aborigine on the Aboriginal Affairs Committee, don’t you think it’s a good idea to have him there?’

But it was a real issue for them! We actually had to have that discussion. They weren’t too bad though, they pretty quickly understood the politics of it and put him on and having him there was really, really critical. Because it legitimised all

the things that he was working on, suddenly. The fact that there was a structural connection was really important, because there were no Aborigines involved in the Labor Party at all until then. Bob Bellear wasn't really actively involved until a bit after you and people like Joycie Clague and others had been members but hadn't been on the policy-making committees.

*Rod:* Yeah, I can remember being on that Aboriginal Policy group, Cookie was on it already, and then after that Bob Bellear was the Chair. And the only other person I remembered that was on it was Alan Duncan, who was involved in Aboriginal education for all those years. And there were two or three other people who were not Aboriginal.

Now the Right faction had the numbers in the Party, but the funny thing is, they just didn't grasp the importance of the Aboriginal Policy Committee. On the Policy Committee we'd actually done quite a lot of work – we looked at all the Northern Territory stuff. That was 1976, and we looked at the federal Act that affected the Northern Territory. I was co-opted onto the committee when that was going on. And we got help from people we knew who could explain the federal Act and the other laws to us. So basically we were a bit amateurish in a way, because we didn't get a lot of senior professional advice. But nevertheless we tried to pull together all the best ideas we could about what land rights really meant.

*Kevin:* We were mainly on about *communal inalienable freehold title*, it was a really new way of holding title to land.

*Rod:* Yeah, it was the words that it turned on. I think that's why there was such a scare. When it got to the state conference in June '78, half the conference probably didn't realise what they were actually voting for. I remember that conference well, I was there because I was the Theatrical Employees Union delegate. Despite all the work we'd put in at the committee, there still wasn't any guarantee that any policy recommendation you put up would actually make it to the floor of the conference. And then if it didn't get voted on during the conference, it would just have to wait another year or so to try to get put up again. But there was probably also an element of support.

It was a growing public issue. There's no question about that. And so a lot of people were very sympathetic. And I think particularly the church organisations and other organisations like that. It was a bit of a contradiction, you know. People would find their natural conservatism and their racism was sort of pushing them to say 'No'. But other elements of them, like their Christian ethics or something would say, 'Okay, we've got to support this', so there was an element of sympathy there. So even though people mightn't have understood what they were really doing, nevertheless we were able to get some support.

*Kevin:* We'd done a pretty good job in that committee in the short time that we were around. But at that conference I think it was very late in the session. Nearly the last thing on the agenda.

*Rod:* In fact I think we had to do some hard work to actually make sure it got up, you know, because so many of those Policy Committee reports would just never get up. Because of the time limitations, and the shenanigans that used to go on there. So I think there was a lot of behind-the-scenes lobbying. If I remember rightly it was way down on the agenda because Aboriginal Affairs, you know, wasn't going to be at the forefront of the issues on the day. But a bit of work got done to make sure that it actually got through at that time. Because I think it would have got kinda lost if it hadn't got up at that time. Nobody would be working on it. So all that energy would have dissipated. That was at the height of all the work on the committee and it would have been really hard to get it up to that peak again.

*Kevin:* We actually got it up on to the agenda I think through the unions.

*Rod:* Yes. It was people like Dick Scott. I'm pretty sure it was those big union delegations and of course Charlie Oliver. You can see how the political alliances there were so critical really to getting it through. But it would have been different if it had just been seen as a Left union thing – because in those days the party was running at about 65 per cent right wing and about 35 per cent left wing delegates. So – because this was something that was seen as a fairly radical policy – if that had been seen as coming only from the left wing it probably would have got rolled just on factional lines.

*Kevin:* It wouldn't have even got up.

*Rod:* No, that's right. It wouldn't have even got onto the agenda, let alone get passed. But, you know, it got through that process and got put up at the conference and got voted on.

*Kevin:* And once it got on the floor, people then probably didn't want to be seen as racist. And it just went through pretty easy. Bob Bellar was the main instrument in getting that through, he moved it and he made a great speech. Because not too many people on the committee would go against him. Not only because his arguments were incredibly good. But as well they didn't like to be looked to be racist or silly.

*Rod:* Bob was probably seen as more centre figure – he wouldn't have been seen as a fringe left-wing sort of militant. Bob was studying law at the same time and so he had the right credentials. If it had been, say, Gary Foley or someone, maybe it wouldn't have happened, you know. Once Bob had moved it, I don't think there was virtually any opposition to it. I don't recall one speaker actually

getting up and opposing it. There have been some questions about the balance of the report or something, that you know needed more emphasis on some other thing, but I can't honestly remember who actually spoke even about that.

*Kevin:* No. And I think a few of the unions that were members of TUCAR spoke for the motion. So the role of TUCAR was pretty important in mobilising people for that, eh?

Now once that policy change had been made in June '78, we had something to push the Labor Party on. To catch up with their own policy!

And we started having marches as well as the meetings in the bush. And then from one of the marches, I think I was there in parliament with you Rod and other people too, after the 1978 election, when Maurie Keene asked Wran that Dorothy Dix question about the land rights issue, about whether or not the government was going to act on the Report. But it was only after everybody was yelling and screaming at him, you know, 'Why don't you get something done about that platform'. That's when he got up and asked the Dorothy Dix question. And that set it moving about getting the Select Committee into Aboriginal Affairs.

*Rod:* So the sequence was: the Land Rights Conference, then the period of agitation and working through the Labor Party, then that meant that after the election, the Select Committee got up.

*Kevin:* That's right. The Select Committee only got set up because that policy was already there.

*Rod:* But still the Select Committee was really the Wran Government's attempt to head off land rights because they were concerned that the policy was vastly more radical than I think they'd ever expected to get through a NSW Labor Party conference. So then the Select Committee was set up as a way of dissipating the push for land rights, because it had health and education and everything else in it too... So that was one time when TUCAR organised its people to gather in Maurie Keene's office to go to Wran. The Select Committee had already been established, and Maurie was Chair, but it was inquiring into everything, wasn't it? It had to look at education, housing, health.

*Kevin:* And land rights was running a poor last!

*Rod:* It was way down the list, that's right. And it seems like Keane was given the writing instructions to put these other things up on the top of the agenda and don't let this land rights thing run too far ahead.

*Kevin:* So we needed pressure to put land rights back up onto the top of the agenda again.

## 1978: Turning points

The Tranby base was important because it had links into rural Aboriginal communities along the North Coast – where the Co-operatives were based – and on the South Coast, from where Kevin's networks had developed, as well as in urban Aboriginal communities. And as we have just seen, it was a crucial focus for drawing in city resources and allies. But the land council's working group was far more representative of city and coastal people than of those in the far west and if the movement was going to represent views from all over the state it needed to extend its geographic range.

There were other developing resource bases in rural NSW which allowed this to happen. The Western Aboriginal Legal Service (WALS) which covered the whole western half of the state, had broken away from the Sydney-based Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) in 1977. By 1978, WALS had consolidated its main office in Dubbo, from which it supported the active, experienced field officers living in Brewarrina, Wilcannia, Broken Hill, Menindee and Dareton. Barbara Flick began visiting the far west in 1978 and then became the coordinator of WALS in 1979. She was able to bring together the north-western communities, where she had grown up, with those of the far west. For this whole region, WALS was now providing strong and committed legal staff, eager to back up local political demands with innovative legal strategies on land and heritage. Barbara here is talking with Kevin about her early introduction to the far west.

*Barbara:* I think in '78 was the first time I really went back out west to Wilcannia to that dance we held to raise money for the Peter Tobin<sup>7</sup> law scholarship and I started to really make some links with those people out there. And by the end of '79 to '80 I really wanted to go back out there, so I took it when the opportunity came along. And it was that the political base had been fairly well developed in Sydney with Cookie's contacts in the trade unions, and with Marcia Langton and also with the politicians like those guys from the South Coast – Bill Knott, George Peterson and to some extent Frank Walker. So the base in Sydney was fairly strong. ... There were lots of interesting people in the north-west and the west and the South Coast.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Tobin was a legal student at Sydney University who had been involved in the late 1960s and early 1970s in support for Aboriginal communities and in the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS). On graduating, he became the first lawyer to take up a country post with the ALS, working with field officers Tombo Winters and Stephen Gordon in the newly-opened Brewarrina Legal Service office in 1973. Peter was killed in a plane crash in Cuba in 1977 and Aboriginal activists like Tombo, Stephen, William Bates, George Rose and Isabel Flick established a scholarship to assist Aboriginal people to study law. A number of these people were later involved in WALS.

I think that with me going to an organisation that worked in the west, and Cookie, you being in one in the city, we were able to provide resources and mix between the two groups.

And to try to use those joint resources to do what people were telling us had to be done. It wasn't just the people down the South Coast who were talking about legislation for land rights in NSW, it was people from the west and from Sydney and from the North Coast. But we seem to have had an organisational base to bring all that together. And we also insisted on making sure that what we did was the initiative of older people. We were just younger in those days and so we were given instructions and were able to do that kind of work.

In 1978 too, there was a major political campaign over the Wilcannia Common, which focused the attention of many local people on the potential of combined legal and political action to achieve some control over their land again. Peter Thompson talked to Cookie about this event. Peter is an archaeologist originally from Moree. He is one of the few non-Aboriginal people with a continuing, close relationship to the Aboriginal community. He had been married to Lynne Craigie, a Gamilaraay woman from Moree who had since died. Lynne and Peter had a daughter, Yeena. In 1978, Peter was living in Wilcannia with his partner, Edna Hunter, from the Aboriginal community there, and they were raising their son, Warlpa, and Edna's granddaughter, Emily.

*Peter:* We had a big thing about the Wilcannia Common in 1978 I think when John Terry was out there as the lawyer for the Western Aboriginal Legal Service. There was a 10,000 acre Common being neglected. In the middle of it is a big lake, and it floods when the river floods, so, the Commons are meant to be run in a way which would allow flexibility without overtaxing it in the fertile years. This hadn't been run that way probably ever but certainly not for 20 or 30 years. And in the '76 flood, it flooded this lake and then when it went down there was a beautiful pasture there for months and months and months like pasture you wouldn't see around Wilcannia, more likely to see around Wellington or something. So butchers in Adelaide had heard about this and they were just trucking their cattle up there to depasture on the free agistment, because there was this huge unregulated Common.

So they ended up having a bit of a crisis about it, and the Western Lands Commission ordered an inquiry by the Local Land Board. Now John Terry wanted to put in a submission about it, because people used to hunt on there and there's lots of burials around the sand dune around the edge of it. So John Terry was there, and he got interested I think because Jack Cromby had been ordered by the Common chairperson of the Common's trust to do a muster, and he'd never been paid properly. So that's how JT got involved. His first entry was to take up Jack's wages claim and then all this other stuff started to develop



as he talked to people, about the burials around there that all these cattle are treading on and, you know that's the only place we can go and hunt without getting hunted off. And so we put in quite a lot in the submission about that. I think that was '78 and I think that was one of the issues that was brought up when the select committee came in '79. It had helped to focus people's attention on a recent battle about land and hunting and culture.

*Kevin:* They knew a lot about it, didn't they, you know. People weren't coming into the land rights campaigns with no knowledge at all. There had been that campaign and then there were several meetings all in that area and they all focused in on that land, just land, land, land. Not anything else, they couldn't be side tracked you know.

After that 1977 Land Rights Conference in Sydney meeting we pretty soon started going out into the bush. And I think the first time that I met you Peter was when I went up to Wilcannia, after that '77 meeting. I remember when I slept out under the verandah outside of your joint. I was scared of snakes.

*Peter:* ...I probably wouldn't let you in the house! And there was more snakes inside anyway!

*Kevin:* I didn't know that! I was outside 'cause it was really hot and I said I'd sleep there on that bed frame you had outside. I was going to sleep in the car, but it was too hot, but where you had the bed, there was a bit of a breeze, so I slept there. I think Father Carter was up there too.

*Peter:* Well he came to Wilcannia in '78. And that's when we started organising the Western Regional Land Council.

*Kevin:* So I talked to you, Edna Hunter, Batesy [William Bates], Crow [Mervyn Williams], he was the Chairman of the regional land council so it must have been going when I was there. And Brian Doolan was working up there too. But I think Barbara Flick was the link, she'd gone up to work at the Western Aboriginal Legal Service in Dubbo, and I can remember her saying you have to go and see Peter Thompson. So I come out there, and I've started to cry! I just couldn't understand why people would live in a place that was so hot! And it had no sea!!

Although Kevin was travelling in 1978 on land council business, he had Tranby and its students in mind – and finally came to see how they felt about being in Sydney, so far away from home. But not only that – he found the Tranby networks really did extend across the state:

*Kevin:* It wasn't till the students started coming down to Tranby from Bourke that I fully understood what it meant by that commitment to their country.

You know people would leave Tranby Thursday afternoon to go home for the weekend at Bourke, and I'd say, 'What do you want to go all that way for? Why would you go home?'

'Oh Kevin', they'd say, 'we have fun!'

They might be fighting in the pub you know, but they'd say to me, 'Yeah, but it's *my* country!'

They wouldn't leave it for the world. And some of them, you know, might have got offered a really high powered job in Sydney, but they still would have wanted to stay in Bourke or in Wilcannia or in Moree.

I went up there more or less on land council business at that time, but while I was up there I'd try to get students for Tranby. And old Alf had kept telling me about this bloke at Wilcannia. Johnny Quayle. He was the one who was involved in setting up of the first brickworks, you know. He was up there when we was running around with the land council in 1978, but he didn't get involved.

*Peter:* That's right. Alf would have known him because Johnny had been a student at Tranby. That's sort of typical of the connections between Tranby and lots of places in the bush, isn't it. When you see somebody like Johnny Quayle who's pretty important in community development, you often find out that they'd been to Tranby.

While Kevin was there in 1978, he, Peter, Barbara and others would talk over the directions in which land rights organisation might go in NSW. As well as their own local experiences, they had been watching developments in the Northern Territory since 1973 and had learned lessons from what they saw. They saw a really important role for the regional land councils but not in the same way as these bodies had developed in the Northern Territory. The discussion which follows gives an insight into how the regional land councils were imagined before the NSW Land Rights Act existed.

*Kevin:* Remember when we used to sit down, Pete, and try and work out what the best way to go forward was with this land council idea? And we'd talk about what the structure would be – should be – like. We didn't want it to be like the Northern Territory, they only had two regions. We said, 'What is it we really want to do? Is it just land rights, or is it a wider thing than land rights?'

And it was to organise people, that was one of the main things, so that you could ring up and get your message across to the largest number of Aboriginal people in New South Wales that's possible.

And we thought concentrating on the regional land councils was the best way of going about it. You'd still have local land councils and a state body, but the

regional land councils would be the focus. So that if you wanted someone to go on tour, you could have a central position within the region, where they'd go and all of the regional community would come in. Also because we were expecting we'd be going into new ventures, so if they were setting up motels or something like that in one local area, then any problems that one area had, they could come together with another area in the region who were going to buy a little motel then tell them what all the problems would be and how to find the solutions before they went into it. So that they wouldn't have that problem. Or in any industry that they were going to set up in that area, the regional council could be the place where they'd all be able to sit down from across that area, so that the locals wouldn't be doing the same thing and competing against one another. If they all wanted to get into it, they could get into it on a regional basis, or, they could go in it by themselves. But the whole region would know what they're doing.



**Figure 9.6: Joe Flick, Isabel Walford Flick, Paul Torzillo, Jacqui Mason  
'Labor Party policy says YES!'**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

So when all the regions come together as a state body, it's a lot easier to get that information out. It might even be hosting, say, music bands going through, so that they could go to each region. They'd get a large number of people there, make money for the regional land council and then go off into the other regions. So it wasn't just on land issues, it was the whole economic issue.

And it can still be done, if they organise themselves properly. That's why the regional land council was set up.

*Peter:* Well, in the bush, at Wilcannia, we'd been toying around with things, and the housing was one of the first to get going with the Paakantji Housing Company. Wilcannia was trying to do it a bit differently through Paakantji and not getting anywhere! But the way that it was different was to find answers in people's culture and so it meant reconnecting with the past and people's own history and culture and language and land and all those issues. I think that was probably important. The other one was that people out there were very unconcerned about material things. So they weren't focusing on getting the flash house, or stuff like that. When they were getting organised, it always seemed to come back to basic issues of survival like fishing, hunting and the need for land to do those things and just extending that to protecting sites and culture. So it was pretty easy for people to focus on land issues out there, probably easier than in other regions, where they could think 'Oh yeah, we might be able to start this business', or that factory.

And then, after the Wilcannia Common, there as a couple of issues came up, one of them, one of them was protecting the grave on Kinchega National Park. This must be around '82 I suppose. The National Parks Service had a road going across the top of this old grave and they didn't want to move the road. So Barbara Flick at the legal service, I think it would be just before the land councils got going, the Land Rights *Act* land councils, but the Western *Regional* Land Council was already going. She got the lawyers looking up what we could do and they decided to use the section of the Crimes Act<sup>8</sup> that stopped medical students from mucking around with corpses, you know you have to treat human remains with dignity. And so we threatened to take National Parks to the court under the Crimes Act and they very soon found that it was necessary to change the road a bit, put an island up in the middle!

So that was one issue, and the other one was Telecom with the tower on Coonanberi Mountain. We found out about that a week before they were going to air lift the tower out there with helicopters. So we just launched this little campaign, and were successful, eh! We wrote letters to various ministers I think and said it was sacred site and the tower just couldn't be done.

So it was won by asserting the muscle, I suppose, of the regional land council. That was the other reason why the regional land council was important, it gave, it gave leadership opportunities. Some of the other structures didn't. You had the legal service, which gave leadership opportunities in a fairly structured way in an organisation over the whole of western New South Wales, and prior to that

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8 *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW).

all of New South Wales. And that structure and scale meant that people were competing against each other to be directors. But because the land council at that time wasn't a corporation, it allowed people to co-operate and get their co-operative leadership working. I think that was important too.

And finally none of those issues, like no land issue, no culture issue, no hunting or fishing issue was strictly speaking a local one. It affected people beyond the local area and so, you know, it linked people across the region and allowed people to operate, or this organisation allowed people to operate at that level. The big issues at that level were land, culture and fishing and hunting. They weren't housing, they weren't sewerage, they weren't running a petrol station or something, all of those were local issues. So that once people organised at a regional then land became an obvious focus.

## **The campaign kick start happens: 1978 to 1981**

Once the ALP Conference in June had voted to change ALP policy – and particularly to demand land rights for Aboriginal people – the pressure was on the Wran Government to put this new policy into action. Even with a new mandate after the election was won, Premier Neville Wran appeared to be reluctant to initiate any policy change and it was only after a lot of pressure that Maurie Keane, Member for Woronora in southern Sydney, moved in October 1978 that an inquiry should be established into the current state of Aboriginal affairs. Land was low on the agenda in this proposal, which was initially going to look first at health, housing and education before it turned to land. But through November, pressure was brought to bear on Wran by trade unions and the churches, encouraged by high profile Aboriginal figures like Bob Bellear but particularly mobilised by the behind-the-scenes organising from TUCAR and Tranby, orchestrated by Kevin and his colleagues. In February 1979, the Select Committee began to take evidence in its first hearings at Wallaga Lake and Roseby Park, where there were strong statements from Aboriginal witnesses demanding that Land be the priority for the inquiry. There were few further rural hearings during 1979, but it continued to come under heavy pressure from the NSW Land Council to focus on Land.

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During 1979, Kevin went to Coady in the second half of the year, but the campaigning for land was accelerating across the state. Communities were

preparing land claims in Wilcannia in the far west, Bodalla on the South Coast, Warangesda in the south-west, La Perouse in Sydney, Toomelah in the north-west and Nambucca Heads on the North Coast.

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When Kevin returned from Canada, he had spent six months talking over the strategies for gaining NSW land rights with the community activists at Coady from Africa, India and Latin America, giving an even wider context for the conversations he had been having with Barbara, Peter, Jacko and others in Australia. As well his already strong commitment to be working at grass roots level, he had an even stronger awareness of the importance of taking people along with him in whatever goals he had.

The land claim from Bodalla was lodged early in 1980 and the others began to flow, all increasing the pressure on the Select Committee to focus on land. The land council held a large community meeting at Dubbo in May, with people attending from the north and south coast and from right across the west. This was an unprecedented gathering of Aboriginal people from regions who were not normally able to be in touch with one another. Among their resolutions calling on the state government to fulfil its Platform to recognise Aboriginal rights to land, the Aboriginal Land Council demanded speaking rights at the coming ALP conference in June. They gained this demand, and two South Coast activists, Mervyn Penrith and Max Harrison, spoke movingly at the state conference demanding urgent action on land rights.

The Select Committee's approach had changed in response to this pressure, holding more rural hearings. Its brief was not whether land rights should be granted, as this decision had already been cemented by the change in the party's platform in 1978. Rather it's brief was *how* to implement it. In August 1980, the Committee brought down its first report, the Interim Report on Aboriginal Land Rights. Meredith Wilkie's careful assessment is that the Report acknowledged four significant principles (although some of its recommendations did not follow these through fully). These principles were self-determination, prior ownership, right to full compensation and cultural integrity.<sup>9</sup> It recommended:

1. scrapping all existing legislation;
2. allow claims to be lodged on any area of Crown land that was defined as open to claim;
3. establishing a three tiered structure with decision making at local and regional level land councils, while the 'upper' state-level land council was to act as a forum rather than a centralised decision-making body;

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkie 1985: 23.



4. a Land Fund for land purchases (in recognition of the high proportion of state land already alienated over 200 years of colonisation) to be drawn from 7.5 per cent Land Tax for 14 years.

While this report was generally received favourably by Aboriginal people in NSW, the Aboriginal Land Council was cautious – it argued this was only a first step towards what should be a broader recognition of land rights. But it agreed to work on with the report as a basis if there were immediate and wide consultations with Aboriginal people across the state on how to implement the recommendations and an immediate freeze on the alienation of all Crown land, to allow claims to be prepared.

Neville Wran was reluctant to take action on the Committee's report, arguing its recommendations would be hard to implement. In October 1980, he established a 'Cabinet Committee of Review' which was widely seen as a delaying mechanism. His promises of wide consultation did not eventuate. In September 1981 he announced the – unasked for – establishment of a Department of Aboriginal Affairs which was again widely seen as a distraction from the continuing demand for urgent implementation of the Select Committee's recommendations – as a minimum – leading to a wider land rights law.<sup>10</sup>

The Aboriginal Land Council held a major meeting in November 1980 and resolved to counter Wran's delaying tactics by embarking on its own consultation program, with members committing to travel round the state asking local communities what they saw as the best ways to implement land rights. With some funding support from the Australian Council of Churches Aboriginal Affairs Committee, chaired by Cookie, the South Coast elders like Jacko Campbell and Ted Thomas, accompanied by Mervyn and Shirley Penrith, began to travel from community to community, gathering Aboriginal views and recommendations. Their trips continued into 1981, and then in April, the Select Committee released its second and final report, on health, education and state-federal relations. Its major advice however, was that rapid implementation of its recommendations on land rights was essential to the success of any of its recommendations on other themes.

The land council meeting in November 1980 had been to organise people, Kevin felt, to give people a chance to decide what their next steps would be. Barbara Flick and Kevin talked about their sense of where things were going then:

*Barbara:* I think we'd decided by then that the Select Committee report was strong enough to put pressure on for legislation to be introduced in the State Parliament. And I think that that was... although there'd been a lot of political activity before, it needed to become more focused and to try and work out a

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<sup>10</sup> Wilkie 1985: 36.

real role for the responsibilities. And how to be accountable, back to the old people... to make sure that the struggle wasn't just for younger people to go on and build power bases, that it was to try and work out, how do we now try and influence legislation to realise the dreams of what older people had? And it had to become more formalised, and I think it was at that time that you took on formally the role of chairperson in a different way. And that we supported you, Kevin, and the other executive officers of the organisation. Peter Thompson was around at that stage and we started to think about what claims people had already talked about and that had been around for a long time. We wanted to work towards documenting those claims that people had had in their minds for a long time.

*Kevin:* And that's when the Land Rights Support Group helped get that book out... the NSW Aboriginal Land Claims Book. On the South Coast and the far South Coast they had already drawn up their claims. Jacko Campbell was one of the first, with the Jerringa claim for Roseby Park. And Wallaga Lakes. I've always admired the people down at Wallaga Lakes – their old reserve covered an area of land where the council came in and sold it off. The council had cut a road through it and sold part of the property, the same as what they did at Orient Point, Jacko's home at Roseby Park. In the Wallaga Lake land claim the border came right up to the houses. So in the claim they didn't claim the full reserve, they claimed just up to people's houses, and then they put it in... They wanted first option to buy the houses if they ever come up for sale. But they didn't claim them! And I still say that first document that was drawn up had very conservative claims by Aboriginal people.

*Barbara:* But there was an incredible solidarity. Everything was happening at once. There was the barricades in Glebe about the expressway. So those links with the old Builders Labourers like Jack Munday and Bobby Pringle were reinforced all the time. And people were really beginning to understand that the struggle was a struggle of the people. So it had made it clear how important solidarity was right across all of those issues, which were about building a better life for everybody. So I think all those links had held to build political strategies shared across all those movements at the time.

*Kevin:* But I think the land rights campaign was the best organised group that I'd seen, and that's including the Builders Labourers!

*Barbara:* We were very disciplined. And a lot of it was because you were at Tranby Cookie. There were many times when there were long-term feuds happening between individuals but Cookie, you could often fix them up in a way nobody else could do, because everybody else carried baggage, you know, from one side or the other. But Tranby really was independent and non-aligned, and I think it's true that you also were that way. One of the strangest things

about you, Cookie, is that I don't think I've ever heard you run anybody down. And not put up with it very much when anybody else wants to do that. So, I think that was important at the time that people saw you as being independent and somebody who thought for himself and wasn't tied by all of those long-term family feuds or regional feuds that happen constantly.

*Kevin:* I think those old feuds were a great waste of energy and manpower. That was one of the things that would've killed us, if any infighting would've broken out. I think we would've been gone right from the first.



**Figure 9.7: Tombo Winters, Brewarrina, with Land Rights Claims book.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



**Figure 9.8: Aboriginal people travelling to connect up across the state: Pearl Gibbs, South Coast women, Tudi Longbottom (La Per), Isabel Walford Flick (Wee Waa and Dubbo) and Leila Murray (Wee Waa) at Farm in Dubbo, talking about land rights.**

Courtesy Barbara Flick family collection.



**Figure 9.9: Meeting in Dubbo, about land rights with Guboo Ted Thomas (South Coast), Phoebe Mumbler (Nambucca Heads, North Coast) and Terry Fox.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



*Barbara:* There weren't many people around who didn't have strong alliances – whether it be with the region or with the bush or with the city or with the way in which things happened. But Cookie you were one of the few people that was the voice of reason and would work through things with individuals and with groups to make sure that everybody went along the same path.

*Kevin:* Well, we did have some sticky times didn't we? Some things we could never mend, but some of these things we got over pretty quickly.

I think we learnt a lot about other people just by working together... I don't think you know people personally. I think you know how they work under different conditions, and how to get the best out of those people. I've got a lot of admiration for people like Tombo Winters with what they did with the first years of the land rights.

And I think people knew it was important to stick together, because if we didn't stick together, we would've been gone very quickly. And the government would've been laughing at us. No, I think overall, it was a very good show of the solidarity and I still believe people are reaping the benefits now. You know, communities, they've got land. They would never ever been able to afford the land that they got. And you know if they sit down and start working out where to from here, I think there's a lot more to be gained from the land rights struggle in NSW. If that happens then we're better off. And that's all it was, to make sure that Aboriginal people's standards were lifted. If our standards lift then everybody else's standards have lifted. Because we still don't own very many shops or many farms. We don't own very many hotels. And non-Aboriginal people will benefit from our struggles.

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Through an election campaign in September 1981, Wran continued to delay, and 1982 shaped up as a key year in the expression of Aboriginal goals for land justice in NSW.

The next chapter gives some insights into the experiences of the activists in the campaigns in 1982 and 1983 to pressure the government to fulfil its land rights policy. The bush meetings in NSW allowed for shared discussions about strategies for achieving cultural and social goals through land. This had results which were more important than only forcing the government to act, as it finally did in 1983. By the time the Act came into being, there was a far more solid and shared consensus among Aboriginal communities in many regions about what access to and control over some land might offer them.



**Figure 9.10: Another visualisation of the shared pressure on Aboriginal people across the country. In this demonstration against uranium mining contrary to Aboriginal wishes in the Northern Territory, a representative from the Northern Land Council digs up some symbolic earth in Macquarie Street, opposite the offices of the mining company, Energy Resources Australia, operating on Aboriginal land at the Ranger site.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.





**Figure 9.11: Meredith Burgmann and Kevin Cook, in crowd of supporters against the Ranger mine.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



**Figure 9.12: Bob Belleair throws the load of symbolic soil into the foyer of the Energy Resources Australia office building.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.