

10. Experiences: 1981 to 1982— Street demos and bush camps

They wanted a piece of land that was theirs. And that was what made me sit up and take notice of how we couldn't stuff it up.

Kevin Cook on the Menindee Meeting, 5 December 1981

The state election in mid September 1981 brought Neville Wran's Labor Government back into power – but it gave no real sign that the land rights issue would be advanced in the coming term. Aboriginal activists escalated their campaign to force the government into action, however reluctant the Premier himself appeared to be.

This campaign took some well-worn paths, with deputations, petitions and demonstrations. Street marches had been an important way to publicise land issues and a memorable one had been in July 1980, before the Select Committee's First Report, when the Aboriginal Legal Service demanded support for its legal challenge to the state on the grounds of continuing and unceded Aboriginal sovereignty. A hired train, the Moree Special, had brought people from the north-west to march on Parliament and they had been met with a warm welcome at Central Station.

This strategy was one used to put pressure on this second Wran Government in 1982 as well, with a major march planned by the NSW Land Council (the political organising body set up after the 1977 Land Rights conference) which would draw people from all over the state to march down the city streets to demand land rights laws urgently.

The most striking innovation of the NSW Land Council campaign however was to create welcoming spaces for Aboriginal people to talk to each other. These were the bush meetings which became the hallmark of that year of mobilisation. Rather than the old style formal meetings in halls – like the 1977 Land Rights Conference had been – the Land Council concentrated now on building communication in rural areas, between communities and between regions. This strategy of creating time and conditions for Aboriginal people to meet and talk over goals and develop strategies had been seen to work in remote areas – often associated with ceremonial meetings, the opportunity to develop common political strategies had paid off in the 1945 Pilbara Strike and then during the early 1970s in the Northern Territory land rights campaigns. Before 1981, it had seldom taken place in New South Wales. But the bush meeting idea made it clear that Aboriginal relations to land were the foundation for talking and planning for the future.



Figure 10.1: Tombo Winters (from Brewarrina) and Joe Flick (from Wee Waa and Collarenebri) meet the specially hired train, the *Moree Special* at Central Station, July 1981.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

The one hope in that second Wran Government was that although the establishment of a Department of Aboriginal Affairs, announced in September 1981, was unwanted, the new minister, Frank Walker, appeared to be serious about addressing land questions. Walker, from the Left of the ALP and previously Attorney General but not involved in Aboriginal Affairs, nevertheless initiated discussions in Sydney with Aboriginal organisations to determine their priorities and particularly to seek their views on land rights. Although he did not initiate the extensive consultations with Aboriginal people which the Select Committee had recommended, Walker's interest made the bush meetings even

more important because they allowed communities to discuss and if necessary argue out all the options so they had common positions to take to Walker and the government. Finally, after two years of frustration, these discussions seemed to bear fruit just before Christmas in December 1982 when Walker issued a 'Green Paper' on land rights, a document understood to be virtually a draft for the new legislation.

This chapter, 'Experiences' does not trace in detail the events from the 1981 election through to the Green Paper. Instead, it gives the perspective of the Aboriginal participants on the kinds of campaigning they did – in both the bush meetings and the street demonstrations – in which *they* stimulated and supported effective and widespread discussions across the state about what land rights might actually mean to Aboriginal people on the ground. This made visible the processes of real exchange and cross-generational input into planning about land to which the government could have had access for its 1983 Land Rights Bill – but in which it had failed to take part.



Figure 10.2: Greg Davis, Land Rights March, July 1981.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



Figure 10.3: Alice Briggs (Taree) at Land Rights March, July 1981.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



Figure 10.4: Land Rights March, July 1981 led to rally at Parliament House – Gary Williams speaking.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

The Aboriginal Land Council Sydney march, 30 October 1981

The NSW Aboriginal Land Council organised a large rally and march in Sydney in October 1981, when it was looking very unlikely that the Wran Government was going to take action on land after the election. The Land Rights Support Group, a loosely-structured network of interested volunteers, some teachers from Tranby and a range of other community groups, were called on to paste up posters and screenprint the yellow T-shirts that the land council handed out to all and sundry on the day of the march.

Here Karen and Barbara Flick, sisters but living in different towns in country NSW, talk about their views of this experience.

Karen: We came down to Sydney for those land rights rallies. I remember Dave Morrissey was with the Land Rights Support Group then, with his little canvas bag with the flag on. We had that big rally where we took all the curries and everything over to Black Theatre and gave everyone a big feed there. Then we had the march.

Cookie played a fairly key role in that again for two reasons. Firstly was because it was calling for land rights but also it was about being able to mobilise this support group, down here, that allowed people from the country to come there and be a part of it. That's what I think you need as well. You need to have that assistance. It's a bit more than sympathy, because those people are also committed to doing the right thing.

It was real support. We know that they'd go in and support you, that they'd stand on the sideline but that they would do everything that you wanted within reason to back you up. Dave Morrissey and the people like that, they'd put their hand in their pocket all the time, they'd take people home to their place and billet them out, they'd go around do the cooking, do the washing up, be the drivers, so that it made it as easy as possible for those people who come down from the country areas to actually participate in that meeting.

You know those country people would come up to me and say, 'Look this is the best meeting we've ever been too, we didn't have to do anything other than go to the meeting and sit down there and talk'. I think that's what we tried to plan to do, we'd sit around before the rally or the meeting and say, 'These people are going to come there, they've got little or no resources in their home towns, what we have to do is to show them they've got support down here'.

And they did that. Exceptionally well!



Figure 10.5: Frank Walker, newly appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Wran Labor Government, speaks at Land Rights rally. Supports call for implementation of the Select Committee Report Recommendations on Land.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

Kevin encouraged Tranby students to take part in the overall land rights support process with mixed results. Overall however he saw it as a key part of the development of their confidence, and that was the goal, whether or not it happened through the land rights campaign.

Kevin: There are some students who are very, very involved in land rights. And then other students are not. Until they start learning about it, you know. It's part of history, you know. Unless you know the history, you're not going to be involved in it. We used to get some students who'd come out and paste up. Not

too many, eh? We always gave them the opportunity – [laughter] Briany Bates from Bourke was one. He was good. And there was Chittles – Colin Thorne from Collarenebri. But see Chittles'd never been involved in anything like that before.

We had those four-gallon drums of that glue, you know, in those days, it was before computers, you know. I think Dave Morrissey had run off the posters. We took the Tranby bus. It had a little door that opened in the middle and we'd have to get out and put the thing up. It was the most exercise any of those students got in three years at Tranby! [laughter]

But it's funny, you know, to see some of the students, when they come in to Tranby at first they'd have their heads down. Not looking left or right. And six months later they walk in and take over the office and using your telephone! You have to get a stick to knock 'em out of the office. It was always great to see how they'd change!



Figure 10.6: 'Land Rights NOW!' The banners had become more urgent ...

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



Figure 10.7: ... And now much more culturally assertive – this sign was written in Paakantji, reflecting the high proportion of people who had come down to join the rally from far western NSW along the Darling River, from Wilcannia, Menindee and Broken Hill along with those from the coast. Many have extensive knowledge of their own language and an active language teaching program had begun in the schools. In this photo, Percy Mumbulla from the South Coast is shown speaking in front of a Paakantji sign reading: ‘We Are on Our *OWN* Land!’ The people standing near him include Kevin Cook, Paul Coe, Karen Flick and Guboo Ted Thomas.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

From the time of the election, even though Aboriginal people were not confident that Wran would take any action on land rights, the opposition from rural farming and mining industry groups began to escalate. Despite the Select Committee recommendations, which had been very moderate, there was a rising campaign of fear mongering. Accusations were made repeatedly – as there had been against the Northern Territory Land Rights Act – that Aboriginal people were going to take landowners’ ‘backyards’ – including suburban backyards. These advertising campaigns were aimed particularly at voters in urban areas, where the majority of NSW citizens lived and where sympathy for land rights was likely to be strongest. So the campaigns by industry groups led to widespread urban anxiety among whites about the outcomes of any land rights legislation. This rising hostility was the atmosphere in October 1981 when the

big Land Council march was held and it was one of the reasons so many country people – including senior country people – made the long trip down to Sydney to be at the march.

Barbara: They were incredible times because lots of old people came and marched. They felt that they were able to participate in what could have been seen as fairly radical type of activity. I think that was a really important element at the time...



Figure 10.8: Barbara Flick speaks at rally while Kevin talks to Maurie Keane, chairman of the Select Committee Report.

Courtesy Heather Goodall.

And from all over the state, they found a way to express their involvement in this campaign, and to support what people like Kevin were trying to achieve. That was a really strong vote of confidence, for those old people to come down to Sydney to march on State Parliament and to make some statements.

Kevin: And that gives you heart. Unless that had happened, I wouldn't have been able to keep going! I used to think about it when we were being boo-ed and hissed at some of those rallies we spoke at, at the universities and in other places. When you sat down and talked to some of them old people, they'd just said: 'Don't worry about that. You're doing a fantastic job.'

And then half the time, the people who were hissing and boo-ing would come straight up to you, after the meeting, or a couple of days later. And they'd have their arm around you and say: 'Look, I'm sorry but, you know, you knew what was going on.' That didn't stop it hurting at the time!

But the people who give you that support, that's what made it all worthwhile.

The Menindee meeting, 5 December 1981

One of the first of the big bush meetings was early in December, in which the western Aboriginal communities came together to form a regional council – again on the model of the Northern Territory structures but with the intention of operating more effectively and more widely than had been the case in the Territory.

Barbara Flick had been working actively with Kevin since her move to Dubbo to coordinate the Western Aboriginal Legal Service (WALS) in 1979. She was living with Stephen Fitzpatrick, a WALS lawyer and she and Stephen were sharing a rented farmhouse out of town with a number of other lawyers for the service. It was here that some early Land Council meetings had been held. The location out of town was a clear benefit, but the meeting at Menindee, an old Protection Board-managed station to which many people on the Darling River had a close personal and historic attachment, took the process to a new level. Even though many people travelled up and down the Darling from where they were now living, once they had arrived at Menindee they felt at home in those surroundings. This meant those people who felt this security were able to confidently welcome others who came from further away, like Barbara and her relations from the north-western areas, or Jacko Campbell and Kevin from the South Coast.

Barbara: What I think was interesting was that at the Menindee meeting, the old people like *Thartu* – Big Will Webster – were really supportive.

218 *Kevin:* I remember that old woman who got up and spoke – Tibby Briar. She spoke for about four to five minutes and she was really articulate and I thought

it was incredibly well-researched. Coming from Wilcannia where there is hardly anywhere to get the information from. When she spoke you'd think that she'd been to every meeting for the last ten years down in Sydney. And she had her heart into it! I listened to her for about ten minutes and I thought butter wouldn't melt in this woman's mouth. And then she said: 'And they can all go and get fucked!' I just burst out laughing. And she was serious eh? But she was really on the ball, she knew exactly what she wanted to say. And she was getting angrier and angrier.

That was a great meeting.

Barbara: Tibby was real active about this for years. She was the one who took me and Maureen O'Donnell down to Wentworth to take the skulls out of the museum, the Wentworth Museum. And she had been involved in diverting the road at Kinchega National Park so that it didn't go where the people were buried. So she was an old campaigner. I think it was really good at that stage because we still had a lot of the old people around us. A lot have died in the ten years since then. But in the early '80s, we still had people like Big Will Webster, Tibby, May Barlow, Jacko Campbell, to give instruction to us.

Kevin: And we didn't do anything off our own bat, which was really great because there was a lot of responsibility in pushing the land rights issue. The older people would say: 'This is what you have to do.' And all we did was to do their bidding. It wasn't us jumping up and down and saying: 'We're going to get you land rights, and this is the way we're going to do it.' It was *them* telling us what to do! We'd go back and work on it, and then coming back to the next meeting and say: 'This is what we've done. What's our next step?'

Barbara: And I remember in particular that meeting at Menindee Mission, because Kevin coming out there was a big deal to them. It wasn't the done thing! You know, the people in the regions travelled around and worked in the bush for their mob, but people who were based in Sydney, and acted state-wide, it's really difficult and we didn't see them much. But Cookie was one of the few people who was able to move around the state and people felt comfortable. There's a great black and white photograph that I have of you Cookie and Big Will and William Bates, under the bough shade at Menindee Mission. To me this is what that time meant, what that whole period meant.

They say you can't have your head in the clouds if your feet aren't on the ground. And there was also a lot of pressure, I think, at the time from various individuals who wanted to turn this into some kind of money-making deal. Or they would've liked to negotiate with Cookie about how to set-up the power base so that might benefit them, not mentioning any names! So I think that Cookie was watched over for that period of time to see how he'd go. And he made people feel confident that this was a serious thing, and that we were going to get some results. There was always a feeling that this was going to take us somewhere!



Figure 10.9: Bush meeting, Menindee, 1982, to establish the Western Regional Land Council, a campaigning body set up a year before the Land Rights Act was passed.

Courtesy Barbara Flick family collection.



Figure 10.10: At the Menindee meeting: Kevin Cook speaking, left, *Thartu* (Big Will) Webster (standing, centre) and William Bates (seated, right).

Courtesy Barbara Flick family collection.

When we started the hard negotiations with Frank Walker and we realised the reality of compromise and negotiation with state government, we might've been a bit flat. I know we worried a lot about whether we were part of those before who had sold-out our mob. I certainly felt like that from time-to-time. And we took a lot of pressure, but I think Kevin probably took more than the rest of us, but he handled it very well. I don't know how, but he seemed to be able to make really big people sit down and shut up.

Kevin: That's because I was five foot nothing! And I'm still five foot nothing!

Barbara: Maybe! [laughter]

Those bush meetings were important, because there was everyone there and there were opportunities to talk outside the meetings as well as in them. People could sit around the camps and talk, while they were getting stuff ready and then later on when they were making Johnny cakes around the campfire ... And kids were there. Any age could come. It wasn't sort of 'delegates only' type meeting or conference, you know.

Kevin: That Menindee meeting had everything. It had the atmosphere. It had kids. It had old people. People from the cities, from country towns all over New South Wales. And just by smelling what they were cooking, you could nearly tell where they came from. You know, like the goanna was there, the kangaroo, emu was from this other place, you know. And you just stuffed yourself full of really great food. But you know, some people had hardly been out of Wilcannia. But they were so articulate, the way they spoke. And they knew exactly what they wanted.

They wanted a piece of land that was *theirs*. And that was what made me sit up and take notice of how we couldn't stuff it up.

William Bates

William Bates is a man with Malyangapa, Wadikali, Pantjikali and Paakantji connections who has taken a major and sustained role in land and heritage campaigning in western New South Wales. Here he talks with Kevin about the Menindee meeting.

William: We set the Regional up before the Act – we were at the Menindee Mission... and you were there, talkin' on some of them tapes, Cookie... we was always taping them meetings...

That's when we was fighting first to get a Land Rights Act and then after a while we were trying to work out what should be the contents of it. We formed

a land council and a working committee to start pushing and dealing with the government. That's when Frank Walker started talking to us. Peter Thompson was always there with us too, you know, pushing with us.

Kevin: It was a really very *disciplined* dispute... nobody got out of hand, and it went for six years...

William: John Terry was at that Menindee meeting too, when we set up the Region. He was the lawyer working with WALs but he was doing land council work for us then. We was talking about how we wanted the Region to work. What it was meant to do was to concentrate on land. And we wanted to give people a chance to talk it over face to face. The most central place for people to have meetings was Menindee Mission, and we'd get two or three hundred people there at times. Big lots of people.

Kevin: When I first started getting into politics, if people had a big meeting they might have it in a hall or something. There wasn't so many big meetings on the riverbank or out in the bush. The people in the west got that going really strongly in the land rights campaigns. They were not just focused on the Land Rights Act, but about getting *land* back.

William: Oh yeah, I'd rather meet under the trees on the riverbank any day than sit in a hall or inside a building. And I mean even today.

Kevin: Well Menindee started it all up didn't it, really? Like cooking up and food and all that! Like everyone'd smell something cooking they'd go over and have a try of that and then on to the next one. Bachelors like me, well I'd be into *all* of the tucker!

William: Yeah, we had food in the hole, *hungis*¹ sometimes. Eric Wilson, one of the WALs lawyers, he'd be there in his little Renault, driving around!

Kevin: William you used to get all the meat didn't you?

William: ... After they sacked Bill Galvin!²

Kevin: ...[laughter]... Yeah! That's right, he was the cop there then and he used to throw it in the back of the copper's car, didn't he, the paddy wagon? And he pulled up and threw it out to you! The first time he done it I was like ... speechless!

1 Maori term for the type of cooking mentioned – buried in a hole, surrounded by hot stones and sealed to steam.

2 Galvin was a police officer in the far western region, before becoming NSW State Police Aboriginal Liaison Officer. Western Aboriginal people got on well with him and he reciprocated by assisting to hunt bush tucker.

William: Yeah, we'd built that old bough shed there at the mission and that old copper, Bill Galvin, used to come out and make sure we was okay. And if there was any whitefellas over the other side of the river there gettin' cheeky, well he'd chase 'em away. And he'd ask us if we wanted meat. And if we said yes, well he'd go and get meat for us! I think his boss, the Sergeant there, told him after a while, he said, 'You're not allowed to go and do that!' He used to get the kangaroos and throw 'em in the back of the police van. But old *Thartu*, Willie Webster told him: 'Don't you take no notice of them fellas!', he said, 'I'm the boss of national parks! If you want to go and get meat for us, you can go and *do* it!'

It used to be good those big bush meetings...

Kevin: No-one drank while the meetings were on, eh? I never seen anyone drinking while the meeting was on.

William: No, that's right. And there was lots of old people likes of Vinno Quayle used to be there, old Aunty Lulla. And Aunty Tibby, she'd be at *every* meeting! And old *Thartu*!

Kevin: Yeah, the old fella, he used to come along to every meeting.

William: A lot of old people, old Aunty Lotte Williams. Yeah, the old people liked those bush meetings all right. If you went out and left them in town or didn't help them to get out there, they'd be into you! That's when we formed the first regional land council in the state there at Menindee round at the time. One of the photos I've got at home is *Thurru Miiki* [Edna Hunter] in the corner of the oval there in Wilcannia, and we've got this little bark hut set up there. And she was laying in there, looking at me, and we had a sign on it sayin': 'Western Regional Land Council Office'!

Kevin: And those meetings were a way of catching up too, like when Isabel Flick from Collarenebri was catching up with all her old mates from Wilcannia and people'd come up from the South Coast... You know there was a lot of strong friendships forged in those days! And they're still going on!

William: Yeah! I remember them old people sitting there all day doing this [acts out dealing cards] ... dealin' 'em out!

I had one of them cyclone beds, I was laying back on it watching them... And when they were finished and I sat up on it... Isabel got up there and was rubbing her knees and saying 'Oh jees I'm stiff!' And someone said, 'Get up and let that old woman sit down!' And I said: 'That old woman needs to walk around and stretch her legs! She's been sitting round with her legs folded *all* day!' And she looked at me and bust out laughin'!

Kevin: Yeah they could play, couldn't they, eh!

William: Some of the photos we got on the wall there, at the cultural centre, they got little notes under them saying 'Aboriginal People having meeting'. Meeting alright! Well, they'd be talkin' alright! About all sorts of things and land too.

But say, like Auntie Nancy! I used to rouse on her: 'Next time you come out, you leave that pack of cards at home!' 'No way!', she'd say! The photographs'd say the people there having a meeting, but they'd be doin' *this*! [hand actions of dealing cards] [laughter]



Figure 10.11: Core protesters with Aboriginal flag at the bush camp at Tulladunna in Wee Waa, 1981, where the council had decreed that no one – meaning no Aboriginal people – could camp there. From left, Joe Flick and his wife Isabel Walford Flick, from Wee Waa, Julie Whitton from Toomelah, Boggabilla, Barbara Flick, Joe and Isabel's daughter.

Peter Thompson

Peter Thompson here talks with Kevin about the Menindee meeting in December 1981.

Kevin: Well those meetings in the west were incredibly good meetings, and dry too. Well, kind of – but there wasn't too many people broke the curfew. There was only about four or five people really who drank at Menindee. A couple from Bourke, I seem to remember turning up at the meeting, but they'd had a drink before they got there. They didn't drink actually at the meeting.

Peter: No there wasn't much breaking of the curfew at all. And it hadn't been done much before at all, to have dry meetings. It was a bit of a struggle, and it hasn't happened much since then either.

Kevin: And you'd see everybody shuffling around, you know going to different camp fires to get different sorts of food, goanna and kangaroo...

And see, what we were doing was, we'd have these meetings, then anything that come out of the meetings, we'd take it back to Sydney, do all the Minutes and if any action was needed, then we do that action. Then, if we could get anything done, we'd be on the phone, and ringing up and letting people know what we'd done. It was a pretty good way of doing business. By the next meeting, when you were asked, 'What have youse done, what are you going to do?', you'd be able to say: 'This is what we've done'. And I think the politics were really getting into it then.

One thing was, when I think back about those bush meetings, I think it was a great strategy of having the meetings in country areas, so that people could get an idea of what they wanted.

Peter: Yeah and out on the land that they've had some ties with, like old Menindee Mission and Pooncarie. It helped to put people's mind in the right frame. And we had an older generation there then. People like old Willy Webster and Tibby Briar...

Kevin: And they weren't scared to talk you know.

Peter: Yeah, that's right.

Bushy Kirby, he was another old fellow, he come up from Murrin Bridge and Alice Bugmy. And those people, you know they have been holding back on their hunger for something like this I think, just waiting for it to happen.

These meetings were just the right thing in the right time, at the right place. We had three meetings altogether I think. One at Pooncarie, and two at Menindee, all before the Land Rights Act.

Kevin: Yeah, those old people were all into it in a very big way. And from other places too, all those old people like Gary Williams' mother, Jessie Williams from Nambucca, and those women from La Per, Trudie Longbottom, Mrs Simms and Louise West, when she was alive. ... There was about eight or nine, they go everywhere for a land council meeting. And they were the backbone, you know, they all knew their history.

Peter: And that energy that was there in '81, '82!

And it survived the Land Rights Act, you know. At least for the first seven years of it anyway in the Western Region. It was that energy that gave people the ability to keep focusing on land, even though if we didn't have lots and lots of money, but other areas might have been spending it on day-to-day things. So that the impetus survived in the west and you had a visionary leadership, in people like William Bates. And so in the Western Region, they just spent the money on land. They never spent it on anything else, just land.

The Angledool meeting, July 1982

After a series of meetings on the coast and in Dubbo over the early months of 1982, with further meetings with government, the people of north-western NSW, along the upper Darling, held a meeting at Angledool to set up a regional land council. This was an important meeting, firstly because it was on the land that was such an important part of the family histories of so many people in the north-west. Even more important was the opportunity this gave for older people in those local communities to express their views about land and encourage younger people to act on their behalf to carry on the campaign.

The Angledool area crossed over the boundaries which had marked the bitter split which had occurred in the legal service when the Western Aboriginal Legal Service (WALS) had broken away from the Sydney-based Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) in 1978, largely because the western communities were critical of the way power had become centralised in the Sydney ALS office. This split has been discussed earlier in Chapter 9, which looked at how the legal and political support of the WALS team had assisted emerging land rights movement in the western areas of the state.



Figure 10.12: The bush camp meeting at Angledool 1982, to form the North Western Regional Land Council, again before the Act was passed. The photograph shows George Rose Snr around the campfire with young men from Walgett.

Courtesy Barbara Flick family collection.

The split in the legal service meant firstly that Walgett and areas to the east, like Collarenebri, Moree and Boggabilla, had remained within the ALS structure, served by ALS lawyers based in Sydney. Those which had split away to form the WALs were the communities to the west of Walgett, like Brewarrina, Bourke and Wilcannia. They had set up a base office in Dubbo to support the Aboriginal Field Officers and other staff living in the townships in the western half of the state.

Yet even the division between the WALs and the ALS did not fully explain the polarisation in this region. Most of the Field Officers in both services on the upper Darling were close relations who hailed from Angledool. The split in the legal services had in fact cut across a large and influential family of activists and spokespeople who took different sides not just on the question of criticism of the Sydney-based legal service but on questions like strategic unity. Tombo Winters in Brewarrina and George Rose in Walgett were first cousins and the Flick family in Collarenebri were just as closely related because Isabel Walford,

Barbara and Karen Flick's mother, was also a first cousin to Tombo and George. This meant that Barbara and Karen were nieces to them both. So the decision by George Rose to remain outside the WALs while his cousin Tombo and niece Barbara were so closely associated with it had reflected underlying family tensions as well as organisational issues.

This had made the Angledool meeting all the harder to organise and it made the dynamics of managing it harder still. Yet everyone came along, as Karen Flick, Tombo, Barbara, Kevin, Paul Torzillo and others describe in the following conversation.

Karen: I remember those bush meetings where you'd just go to sit down and have a yarn with people and get strength from each other and you know, talk about the issues and work out where you wanted to go with it, to come up with a bit of a strategy. Before the Land Rights Act eh? And so those were bush meetings or, you know meetings at somebody's house or, or whatever and a couple of the ones that I remember were the regular ones at Dubbo out at the farm. That's what it was like when we first set up the North West Regional Land Council at Angledool.

Cookie was a key player in doing that, because not only did he find the dollars to allow people to meet and sit down but – beyond only the dollar side of it – also, for me anyway, he provide a bit of solidarity and a strategic approach, so we who are out there in the bush knew that we had some other contacts and there was support elsewhere.

So for me anyway, Cookie was somebody who was able to bring a lot of different people together and facilitate those meetings and allow that discussion to happen. And it meant we'd be connecting up with people like Jacko Campbell and Nan Campbell and that mob from the South Coast. So it wasn't very many people but it was a good solid group of hard core people who would get up and have a go. These are also the people I think who also did things in their own communities, the ones who challenged all the time and never gave up.

And the important things about the bush meetings were also about sitting down with your family, so you'd have kids there running around, or you'd have old people, or you'd have a game of cards, or you'd have whatever you wanted to have and everybody would just be there sitting around and talking. All these things would be happening at the same time as people would be talking – and that meant you could have all these political discussions and meetings in the right kind of atmosphere. I think that's what worked a lot.

I'd always been involved with things like the Aboriginal cemetery in Collarenebri. I remember going to the cemetery, the Collie Cemetery, and doing all those

things that you did there, like washing the grave decorations and telling your kids whose grave was next to whose. It was just part of life and you always connected with that.

But it was important, whenever I went to some other place to have a look at some other country, I felt you'd have to pay respect. So even when we were camping at Angledool, even though that was home, that was still different because I hadn't been there an awful lot you know. I remember when we were walking up at the Angledool meeting and Paulie was with us and Mum and Barbara and me. My daughter Cullen was a baby and I was carrying her. We stopped under this tree and Mum said 'This is the tree that I was born under'. And you know that was a real revelation about *country* for me.

Tombo Winters was a key leader among north-western people for many decades – a founder of the first rural legal service, an insightful analyst of rural politics, a courageous battler against racism and injustice and a deeply inspiring comrade and friend for Aboriginal people across the region. He also befriended a motley crew of white fellas who turned up in Brewarrina out of interest, offering legal, medical or research skills. He took us all under his wing, set us to work doing things he knew were useful (often not what we had first intended!) and kept us all going with endless good humour and optimism.

Tombo was the one who really pulled this Angledool meeting together, strongly supported by Isabel Flick and her nieces Karen and Barbara, by Julie Whitton from Boggabilla and by others. Tombo brought all the warring Angledool parties at least to the same campsite if not into the fold. And he and Cookie encouraged us all to see it as a big step forward.

Tombo: Now that Angledool meeting, we set up the regional land council there, just before the Act came in I think. People from all over the region came, and some of the South Coast mob, they came up.

Kevin: You chaired that, didn't you? I remember in the afternoon you said, 'I'm just going to get dinner' and you got in the car and you drove off. Then you came back about half an hour later with a sheep in the back of the car! I remember you doing the sheep with the axe.

Tombo: Yeah. Old Joe Flick was there from Collarenebri and Wee Waa. And do you remember George Rose rousing on us all when he was sitting there over the other side of the creek?

Paulie: I remember him or his brother, Teddy Guy Simpson having a go at me at that meeting. I remember George came. You know how there was this little sort of creek and we were over this side and they were on the other side. Just leaning against the car and looking for three hours.

Kevin: He stayed on the other side of the river.

Tombo: He wouldn't come across and stay with the rest of us! That was the time I got all those tents for everyone. I got them from the school and we brought them up in a trailer for everybody to sleep in. I remember that – it looked like an Indian camp! We built a big fire in the middle and it was just like those cowboy and Indian scenes, you know? They were those tents, a little square on the top and then they'd come down. A pole in the middle and they had four little corners.

Kevin: Yeah, I can just see everyone was in tents around this scene. And Essie and Doc Coffey sang the longest version of Frankie and Johnny that I ever heard! [laughter]

Tombo: Yeah, that's right. I can remember. Went on into the middle of the night. They went and camped on the other side of the road.

Despite these tensions, Angledool was a very important symbolic site. Although it was no longer inhabited, it formed a warmly remembered and treasured site in the imagination of Aboriginal people right along the upper Darling. They had been living there on the Narran River until 1936 when, in the grip of the Depression and in the middle of winter, the Aborigines Protection Board had forced the whole Angledool community, against their bitter protests, into trucks to ship them down to Brewarrina on the Barwon River, to an overcrowded and oppressively managed station to live huddled up with people from three other 'concentrated' communities. Barbara Flick explained its significance.

Barbara: There'd been a history of New South Wales and Angledool's important to me, and to our family. But its important as well as just one example of things being out of our control, of our grandparents first of all being taken to that place and then being taken away. They were rounded up and taken away from there to Bre, without choice. Children were born there in those missions, under that regime, including my mother. And then, all these years later, we were able to go back and recreate, I suppose, what that place meant to us. To reclaim that part of our history, and to make it mean something wonderful. So, you know, Georgie Rose and Mum and Tombo Winters and those sorts of people that come from there had all gone back to Angledool. And it was a different game, you know because *now* the agenda was *ours*...

Kevin: We had a *solid* camp! We had something that the government couldn't break. You know, they let the land rights issue go for a while, after the Keane Report they just put it on the back burners. But the people – there was too much support from Aboriginal people – and too much from white people as well! And that's one important thing I think, the friendships that built up over that five or six years were incredible.

Barbara: Yes, it was very broad based, very broad.

The much-anticipated Green Paper prepared by Frank Walker was issued on 22 December 1982 but it was not circulated widely and did not actually get published till February 1983.³ The Aboriginal response was anger and disappointment. The Green Paper had major differences with the initial Report of the Select Committee, which had been released over two years before. The government's failure to initiate or take part in any community discussions over that time was reflected in the distance between community hopes and the very partial offerings in the Green Paper. The Organisation of Aboriginal Unity – including Tranby as well as the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Redfern organisations – stated that the Green Paper proposals were 'totally inadequate and insufficient'.⁴

The disappointments over the Green Paper will be discussed in the following chapter, 'Hard Decisions'. But it is important to recognise here that the momentum built up in those bush meetings could not be deflected by the failures of government. Over those two years, Aboriginal communities had generated their own discussions and they intended to keep up their demands.

Some elements of the Green Paper had embodied community goals. It proposed, for example, a three tiered structure which was in line with the outcome of the intensive discussions of the bush meetings, as Peter Thompson explained.

Peter Thompson: that three tier structure was roughly what people wanted, they saw the need for local ownership and that need to organise regionally and the need for some sort of state wide co-ordination.

So the next six months saw intensive lobbying as the Green Paper was hastily turned into a Bill, with still further compromises and problems. There was no reason to cease campaigning – and in fact Aboriginal activists wanted to maintain the momentum of the campaign to try to improve the final Act and then its implementation.

³ Wilkie 1985: 40.

⁴ Wilkie 1985: 44–45.

More and more of the people who attended the bush meetings, especially the older people, saw the broad discussions about land rights and protection of cultural heritage as contributing towards achieving the goals they cared about.

The Mutawintji Blockade, September 1983

This was a time when the Western Aboriginal Legal Service was instructed by Jim James Bates, May Barlow and others to intervene on their behalf with the National Parks and Wildlife Service to stop tourists from visiting Snake Cave at Mutawintji.⁵ Several unsuccessful meetings, led by Jim James Bates and May Barlow, had been held to discuss the importance of Wiimpatja⁶ being involved in protecting sites within the Park. At one stage the NPWS argued that their priority was protecting the Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby by holding tight control over the Park, which meant they had no choice but to exclude Wiimpatja from management decisions. Jim James Bates argued that he did not know there were any wallaby left in the area. NPWS officers responded that they were monitoring the population even though they had not seen any. When May Barlow asked them how they were doing that, the NPWS officers said they had been observing their droppings. All the Wiimpatja at the meeting burst out laughing. Jim James and May were invited to go up in a helicopter to look for these Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby but gracefully declined saying that their feet would never leave the ground. It seemed clear to them that the NPWS was more concerned about the rights of the invisible Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby than the rights of the Wiimpatja to protect their sites of significance.

The issue of control over tourists at Mutawintji flared up again in September 1983, and this became another powerful bush meeting which demonstrated the directions which communities were taking, regardless of the government focus on its legislation. This bush meeting became known as 'The Blockade', because the camp was established to demand Aboriginal control over what was then called officially the 'Mootwingee' National Park, 150 km north-east of Broken Hill. In itself, the Blockade demonstrated that the Land Rights Act, however important it seemed in mid 1983, was never going to be the only way that Aboriginal people could satisfy their interest in land justice. Peter was asked whether the Mutawintji Blockade was separate from the agitation for a Land Rights Act.

5 The name of Mutawintji has been spelled in a number of ways: the National Parks Service used the 'oo' adopted by early settlers to render Aboriginal pronunciations into English, so they spelled it 'Mootwingee'. Aboriginal people tried various ways to alter this spelling, firstly by adding in the extra syllable – with 'Mootawingee' and later by insisting on consistency with their spelling of other Paakintji and Malyangapa words. So 'Mutawintji' is now the accepted spelling and this is the one used throughout this chapter except in quotations.

6 The Paakantji and related language term for 'Aboriginal people'.



Figure 10.13: The people who had strong links to the important site at Mutawintji took the political step of declaring themselves a land council, the Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council, with long-time activist Johnny Quayle in foreground.

Courtesy Peter Thompson.

Peter: Yeah, it was separate, but it was getting pretty mixed up together there. Because in the west, Aboriginal people in general were campaigning for the Land Rights Act. They weren't the mob who, like the old Lands Trust, were saying 'We weren't ready for this'. The Blockade happened the same year as the Act and it was being planned before the Act went through. It had seemed another obvious thing to do to keep up the politics of land rights while the government response to the politics was happening. The idea was 'Don't stop campaigning for land rights now, just because the government's done something! Just keep going!'

It was outside the Land Rights Act in the sense that everybody knew that you couldn't claim a national park under the Land Rights Act, but the aim was to use the mechanisms of the Land Rights Act to organise. So they set up a Mutawintji Land Council, to keep a little structure there.

Now this was a national park that had been managed for a long time without any Aboriginal involvement. But a lot of people had been unhappy about their ownership not being recognised and about not being consulted. Now it was the Broken Hill Centenary, and there were tourist buses running up to Mootwingee

National Park each day as part of the Centenary events. So this seemed like the right time to make it clear that Aboriginal people were the owners, not the National Parks or the Broken Hill Council.

We went out in the daytime and set up camp and made up a lot of posters. Then we went round and put up those signs on the road into the park and on the gates. They said: 'Mootawingee: Closed by the Owners'.

After that, some of us went into town and pasted up the same signs all over Broken Hill, saying 'Mootawingee: Closed by the Owners'. While we were in there, there was a big storm, flattened everyone's tents!

There was a Tranby bus that went out there and the students did a newsletter. And it was another good chance to pull in people from across the state, to be camping out ON country, with a chance to talk out where they wanted to go on Land – whether it was a national park or whatever it was.

In the discussion about the motivations for some of the far western people, Peter and Kevin talked over how land and employment shaped people's view of both the past and the future. Peter argued that watching the changing rural economy over even the previous 20 years in the far west had shaped the way people looked at the demand for land rights.

Peter: Yeah, that was one of the drivers of the land rights movement, for people to get control over land at a local level. And that's probably what drove the government's Lands Trust to try and stop that happening in 1974 and then eventually giving up in 1983.

Kevin: But I think the Land Rights Act has improved the life of Aboriginal people in New South Wales. There are pieces of land where they can now go onto and they've got industries. I don't know if they're making too much money, but they've still got that *land*! And while they've got land they've got something concrete. I've always said, you look at the farmer, if he's got a big farm, he's got standing in that community. And he might be the worst bloke in the world, but he's still got land and standing.

Peter: Yeah. I think that there was a memory that Aboriginal people had in the west too that when the big stations were broken up, their white mates got blocks of land and became the farmers of the next generation, from the 1940s on. But they – the Aboriginal workers – were still labourers. And there was nowhere to work now because all of the big places – where they had needed lots of workers – have been broken up and the new smaller blocks didn't want so many workers. Yet they have the same skills. So there was that memory too and it was very important in motivating people. As well as that idea of equality that

you're talking about, of equal standing which seemed to have been there before when everyone worked on the same big properties. You know, there had been plenty of Aboriginal overseers and drovers, leading droving teams and teams of bore sinkers, tank sinkers, contractors. Or even just labourers working side by side with white labourers. I'm not saying everything was hunky dory but I think there was a loss of equality in the change to things now, where white people have become landholders – even though their blocks were small. And Aboriginal people saw that.

Kevin: Yeah. The loss of work, that was the main thing, they couldn't get a job.

And in a final reflection on how that remarkable year and a half of bush meetings had been possible, the issues of communication and resources came up:

Peter: But the networking was important. It was around a few little hubs and probably Tranby was one of those hubs in the 1970s and '80s. That was one of the places that the networking would be happening. Your work at Tranby, Kevin, made a lot of that possible. Networking's always a vague thing, it's hard to put your finger on, but it was happening! And it wouldn't have happened so well if you hadn't have been at Tranby and where you were sharing resources across the groups to support the Aboriginal Land Council before the Act.

Kevin: Yeah, you'd have to be in the right place at the right time don't you?

Peter: Hm. And be as willing to take as much action as you can.

Kevin: Well, we didn't take a backwards step I don't think, all the time we were there.