

## 13. National networks

Aboriginal voices were heard powerfully at state, national and international levels in the 1980s. This was largely because there were networks of support and solidarity which were operating. In the earlier chapters about land rights activism we have seen the way that local campaigns in NSW developed into regional networks of grass roots organisations and that these in turn provided the base for networks across the state. Similar processes had occurred in many other states during the 1970s but there were few bonds between grass roots communities – or even land rights activists – across state borders, despite the earlier existence of national peak rights bodies like FCAATSI, the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

From the early 1980s, Kevin played a central role in establishing and fostering new networks which crossed state borders. Emerging in 1980, these became the Federation of Land Councils, most active till 1985 and the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations, which continued into the 1990s. The Federation and the Coalition in turn developed links with international networks. Ultimately, these national and international networks shaped the responses to the Australian High Court's Mabo decision in 1992 and then the federal Native Title Act in 1993.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter Kevin talks about his memories of how those early interstate networks got started. In a series of interviews for this book, many of the people from across the country who worked with Kevin in the Federation and the Coalition have explained how these networks looked from their point of view and what they were all trying to achieve.

This chapter is not so much about what the networks did, as about how they worked. Tracing the story through networks gives a new way to look at the contributions of people like Cookie and his fellow activists: their time, energies and thought was turned to building and consolidating not just the formal organisational structures, useful though they were, but the human relationships which underpinned them. And while the relationships between them have been the focus of their recollections, they each took seriously the idea that they served a specific local and regional community.

This involved very different types of relationships to those developed only in formal, organisational meetings or in bars, which had been the frequent meeting places of the men who were the leading activists in past years. While women like Kath Walker had been well known to a broader public, the majority of

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<sup>1</sup> *Native Title Act 1993* (Cwlth).

Aboriginal political leaders had been men.<sup>2</sup> This changed in the 1980s, when networks more often involved activists sharing time and friendships as they travelled long distances on shoe string budgets, talked frequently on the phone, stayed with each others' families, camped out and shared cheap hotel rooms with each other in order to meet face to face across the enormous continent. The very informality of many of these networks, and the experiences which generated them, meant that men often worked closely with men and women with women, in an echo of continuing traditional relationships. But Kevin, notably among a strong group of active people, was in constant touch with women as well as with men and fostered supportive home backup for the people with family responsibilities who nevertheless took up the arduous demands of travelling, either across the nation or overseas.

These person-to-person relationships explain the emergence of the networks which built on them – the networks of collaborating organisations which had friendships at their base. Taking this approach allows us to understand at least some of the underlying reasons those networks came into existence, flourished and changed.

## Getting started: 1980 to 1983

When Kevin came home from the Coady International Institute at the beginning of 1980, he brought a strong sense of the value of networks between activists of all sorts, as well as between their organisations. His work in NSW in both Tranby and in the land rights campaigns had all involved building stronger networks between local campaigners and between groups across regions.

There was already a model for regional bodies which had emerged in the 1970s from the federal drafts for land rights in the Northern Territory which had set up the Central and the Northern Regional Land Councils, conceptualised partly on the basis of shared traditional cultural relationships but also on the basis of contemporary economic and social associations. Their role was expected to be both to support and to lead the activities of the local communities of each region. These two NT bodies, formed in 1974, had continued to operate but they were separated by long distances and flooded with the demands of the first few years of the NT land rights procedures; they had not formed strong bonds between each other. On this model, however, Aboriginal people in North Queensland and in the north of Western Australia had set up regional political campaigning bodies, the North Queensland Land Council and the Kimberley Land Council, both of which operated totally independently of the deeply conservative state

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<sup>2</sup> As 1930s and 1940s activist, Pearl Gibbs commented, at times bitterly (interviews with Heather Goodall, 1981).

governments which controlled property law. These two bodies were outspoken advocates of Aboriginal demands for land rights in Queensland and in Western Australia.

Kevin had barely settled back into Tranby again after returning from Canada, when the Western Australian land rights struggle flared into national headlines when the Kimberley Land Council (KLC) supported local Aboriginal land owners at Noonkanbah who were opposing mining on their sacred lands. The WA government in 1978 had decided to push through mining exploration on the Aboriginal-owned Noonkanbah pastoral property, against the wishes of the Yungngora owners. This land had only recently been returned to the Yungngora community by purchase through the one section of the federal land rights apparatus which was able to operate to acquire land outside the NT.

In mid 1980, after a bitter two year struggle, the mining companies despatched a convoy of trucks to begin the long journey from Perth to the Kimberley – with government-provided police protection – to deliver the drilling rigs needed to begin the exploration. In an inspired decision, the KLC organised a demonstration by the Noonkanbah community to take place in an open paddock near the mine site. This occurred thousands of kilometres removed from the urban streets where most demonstrations took place but film of the Noonkanbah march was beamed out into television sets across the world, and its symbolism of chants, banners and placards was instantly recognisable.

*Peter Yu*, then a young activist involved with the KLC from the start, remembers: In those days we had nothing in the Kimberleys. Basically we were just one or two people and a lot of senior people in the community who were giving the direction with a lot more hope and trust than anything else, I suppose.

Kevin began to look for ways that Tranby and the NSW land rights campaigners could mobilise support for the KLC as well as for the activist North Queensland Land Council where his old friends like Joe McGinness were based. One strategy was developed by a supporter of the land rights cause, Guy Morrissey, an art dealer from Paddington. With the support of renowned artist Arthur Boyd, who loaned new work to be exhibited, Morrissey was able to encourage well known artists to donate works to be auctioned to contribute to funds for land councils. The audience for this and later land rights auctions was developed not only from the expanding land rights support movement, but also from the trade union networks which Kevin had been building on through Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights. Kevin here talks about the fund raising auction Morrissey had organised in the Paddington Town Hall, an area of Sydney known both for its interest in art and for its middle class affluence.

*Kevin:* We made \$21,000 and so out of that. We gave \$7000 to the Kimberley Land Council and \$7000 to Mick Miller from North Queensland and we kept \$7000. Well, that \$7000 lasted us and we still had money in the bank, which we gave to Deaths in Custody when we finished. And the amount of people we got to that art sale was incredible, we filled the Paddington Town Hall. Not only were we raising money, but we were getting the message out! We gave them the Aboriginal flag from Tranby that they raised at Noonkanbah. So we knew what was happening all over Australia.

At this time too, Kevin found another source of support and communication. He had already joined Gary Foley as a member of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee of the Australian Council of Churches (ACC),<sup>3</sup> taking up Bob Bellear's membership when Bob needed to focus on his law studies. When eventually Gary also had to take up other commitments, Kevin became Chair of the committee, a role he fulfilled for the next ten years. The people Kevin had come to know so well at Coady International Institute in Canada had showed him how valuable the networks of churches and related organisations like co-operatives could be in supporting and expanding the political movements of the Philippines, India, South Africa and Zimbabwe. A substantial number of Aboriginal activists from each state were invited onto the ACC advisory committee. As Kevin recalls, this decade in the ACC was an important one in allowing him to work with sympathetic churches to support Aboriginal advocacy organisations.

*Kevin:* I think how we got everything through was with the Australian Council of Churches. Now what we'd been saying in the NSW land rights movement was that we had to get the trade union movement, the churches, and other groups, other forward-thinking groups, to support us.

So I went in there to the ACC and here we were – we had a line right to the Australian Council of Churches. And soon as we got in it, we were able to direct funding to Aboriginal organisations that would never, ever have been funded. Particularly like the Kimberley Land Council. And there were a number of other groups who would never have got funded, only through us. We didn't fund the medical centres or things like that, because they were getting funded already.

The Australian Council of Churches was an incredibly good organisation to work with at that particular time. You could go into the office and see the coordinator of the Australian Council of Churches and just sit down and say, 'Look these are the issues that we want the churches to support'. And here was one fella that could just send out a fax to every church.

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<sup>3</sup> The Australian Council of Churches changed its name to the National Council of Churches in Australia – NCCA – in 1994.

So then, after a while on the Committee, I took on that job as chairman and I was chairman for ten years. We had ten years of having that direct contact with the churches. I don't think we 'used' them: we worked *with* the churches and it went really well.



**Figure 13.1: Cookie and Tory in Tasmania.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

One example was 1984 when the Labor Party was meeting in Tasmania and they were in government. We had the Australian Council of Churches Advisory Committee meeting in Hobart at that same time. That helped bring a number of people down. After each of the meetings people stayed on for an extra week and went to the other meetings and lobbied all the politicians for that week. It was a long time being away.

When an Australian Council of Churches meeting of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee was on, you could always bet your life in the next two days there would be a Federation or a Coalition meeting. And you'd have an ACC Advisory Committee meeting in Broome or somewhere like that and you'd get most of the participants over there.

You've gotta learn to survive. That was one of the things we learned in the NSW Land Council struggle. That was a good struggle and we used everything that we knew. We used the trade union movement, the churches, and a heap of prominent non-Aboriginal people, to get that through. The Catholic Church played a pretty big role in talking to the members of parliament – and in the Labor

Party there were quite a few Catholic members. So with the parliamentarians, like we were able to do with the churches, we always tried to work with these people. Yeah, but we didn't have much success with the Liberal Party.

Peter Yu has remembered the role the ACC – and Kevin himself – had played in this early period.

*Peter:* We were getting a lot of our money from overseas. Most of our money came through contact with the World Council of Churches, and the Australian Council Churches and all those contacts that Cookie had and put us onto. The only reason we're still going today is because of that period.

But what that also did was also contribute to building the culture of the organisation. It's not only that it kept us alive and able to do something, but what it did was reinforce the spirit and the principles upon which we were established. People in that period, if you talk to Johnny Watson [a key leader in the KLC], they just remember with such pride how we survived on nothing basically. We had people coming to work for us who'd given up their jobs and whatever like that because they saw this thing happening.<sup>4</sup>

I think Noonkanbah played a role in the sense that up to that time, our world view in the Kimberleys was just within that region. And then when we started to get support from the blokes in the Territory like Pat Dodson and Rossie (David Ross) and others down around here in Sydney, it opened up people's perspective. Particularly when there was a public campaign when people started to move around during Noonkanbah to speak in different states, because as an organisation the KLC was really still young, we'd really only just been born...

But I think it was that realisation, not only that people were actually supportive and prepared to do things, but also because people they had begun to get to know like Cookie were down here. That made that connection. People felt comfortable. There's always the situation where people are uncomfortable when they move out of their region anyway, and they'd come down here and met blokes like Cookie who just made everybody feel at home. There was an immediate connection, I think.

People in the Northern Territory had begun to hear about Kevin's role in NSW before they actually met him. John Ah Kit was one: he was usually referred to by Kevin and others as 'Jack' which will be how we will see him in the rest of this book. He was Director of the Northern Land Council from 1984 and later a senior minister in the NT government. He has explained this process.

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4 See later section, this chapter, in which Karen Flick talks further of going across from NSW to the Kimberley to work with the KLC, an experience already mentioned in Chapter 6, on Tranby explorations of learning possibilities.



*Jack:* Before I met up with him, I'd started to check out this 'Kevin Cook'. Who the hell is this Kevin Cook? He was at various functions in NSW. You'd come down there and take over the office of the Land Council and meet up with Judy Chester and Karen Flick who were there in the early days. And these people would say; 'Oh Cookie is not a bad bloke'. So you'd check him out and he was highly spoken of.

Activists like Jack Ah Kit had long been aware of the problems with poor communication between the NT land councils.

*Jack:* I became a member of the Northern Land Council, representing the Katherine Aboriginal community back in June 1983. It appeared to me fairly quickly, even though it was early days, that the three land councils in the Territory weren't meeting as much as they should have or working together as much as they should have. I had some connections with the mob in the Central Land Council: I had known David Ross and Patrick Dodson for a while and I'd been born in Alice Springs, so I could start working towards making sure we established a relationship with each other.

The three land councils met about once a year back in those days. They had won land rights but they didn't have a common co-operative relationship. We had two distinctive regions but if we were to go anywhere and if we were to maintain a position or formulate a position, then if we had to defend that position – we needed to defend it collectively.

So I thought that that was something that I had to work on and so it was good that David Ross was there at Alice Springs and we started to work closely together. It was from there that we began to look at the federal scene. And we knew that there was a need to ensure that the picture that was painted of the Territory Aboriginal people and the Land Rights Act was a real one. The historical position we were in was one that wasn't really clear to people on the eastern seaboard. This was in 1984, a year after I'd become a member of the Northern Land Council and I took on the director's job in March '84.

*Jack:* The Federation was virtually born out of the Noonkanbah situation. It was always going to come, but that's when it started to consolidate itself. When people started to share concerns and that there was an enormous need for support from right around the country. And then if there were any issues of major importance then we tried to get the meetings around to different parts of the country so that the Federation could be seen to be ensuring that it's not just down in the eastern seaboard, that it's in the Territory, that it's in the west... and to educate what the Federation of Land Councils stood for.



**Figure 13.2: Jack Ah Kit (from Darwin), Clarrie Grogan (from North Queensland) and Cookie at Oenpelli during a meeting in the Top End.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



**Figure 13.3: Cookie and Judy with Gail Ah Kit, Jack's wife, and their children.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Such personal contacts became important in the formation of the new Federation in September 1980, just months after the climax of the Noonkanbah crisis. Pat Dodson has discussed the earlier difficulties on interstate communication and the challenges of building both personal and community relationships.

*Patrick Dodson:* It certainly started out that the Federation's concern was very much with a land focus, with getting land legislation in at the national level, although the agenda moved outwards a bit later.

Prior to that there was always a sense of the support from the south given to Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji in the Top End over the strike in 1965 and the battle to get the title leases for them. And the role that the trade unions played in that background, there's a sense of that support that came, not necessarily knowing where it came from, but it came from the southern states.

But there was no-one in the communication chain though, until Cookie, and those people came through to dispel some of the myths and misperceptions that we had, about what comprised NSW in a sense. Because the previous days it had been the Legal Service that was very much the corporate representation of NSW.

The complexity of it wasn't known to us. It might've been known to a few people but not to the main players. And similarly the complexity of the Territory and the Kimberley and the west and South Australia wasn't known to the people from the south. So there was a mutual learning there and an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses, I suppose, that we all went through.

A lot of the organisational stuff was pretty much unknown in the bush in the early days. Like raising funds and getting the word around. Cookie knew about it from his interactions in the city, but them other old fellas, certainly in the Centre, didn't know about it and so they got a sense of what was happening from the city end of it.

But even if they didn't know all the things about that organisational end, they did have this ability to share with other people, to be concerned about the other people, to provide opportunity so that they could do things with whatever their skills were or whatever the dough that Cookie could bring to bear on those things. So I think that there was a complementarity about the Federation, there was a meeting of the minds in some ways, about many of those things. Which had never existed [before] in terms of the structured movement. Shared things like the movement for national land rights that was part of the Federation's agenda, and the sustaining of land councils as a vehicle to assist people in the advocacy of their rights. The bodies that were supposed to be doing that, didn't appear to be doing those things.

So, there was a very important way in which I think the influence of what Cookie and Tranby were trying to do in the city, actually influenced some of these things in the bush. I remember Cookie would ring up and say: 'Oh, you've got to get someone over to this meeting somewhere. It's really important'. And I'd say: 'Why is it important?' 'Oh, you've just got to get someone over here. Someone should be at this meeting'. That's what Cookie would do because he was good at it. And then we'd have to say: 'Jesus, someone's got to go. We don't know what it's about but Cookie reckons we got to go.' We'd know it was important for us to be seen there – then we'd see Cookie and he'd say, 'Oh, just go along and tell them what you want to talk about'.

Kevin's involvement with North Queensland had even longer roots through the links he had built up in the trade union movement, his early Tranby work with the North Queensland co-operatives and emerging from both of these, his friendship with Joe McGinness and his community. Through the ACC and then the Federation, Kevin became close friends with another Queensland activist, Terry O'Shane, whose sister Pat, a teacher and then a lawyer, was already a well known political figure in Sydney from her work in the 1970s movements. Terry has described how his early meetings with Kevin deepened into the supportive friendship which came to characterise the networks Kevin was fostering:

*Terry:* My involvement with Cookie started with the Australian Council of Churches. There was concern about how to get resources to the right people. You didn't want to be just putting money into some sort of a project that benefited one person, or a little group of people. So Cookie got in touch with me about Queensland, and said, 'Mate, how's all this work?'

And it didn't take long for us, when we got involved at the political level, to sort of gel, because of our similar backgrounds, like my father being a wharfie.

I remember one time I had to come in one weekend for a meeting – he said come a bit early and we'll go for a drive. And he took me down to Wreck Bay. As we drove through, he was just telling me this and that. It wasn't a bad settling down time for me. He must have thought, 'Oh I'll take this lad for a drive and show him my country, and at the same time I'll give him a few clues about how things work, so he'll be a bit at peace with himself when he's doing business with others'. But oh well, I grew up in a different climate, in North Queensland, where the way in which you got on at school was to fight your hardest! So it was a good exercise.

His involvement and my involvement in trade unions taught us a discipline. I think the key point to it all was that his analysis of things was not about it being a black issue – it was much bigger than that. It was about an issue for all of us, it was about justice and human rights and things like that. And so we needed

to involve a much larger portion of the community to achieve what needed to be achieved. Because it wasn't just a thing for blackfellas. It was a thing for all Australians.

I was with another high profile person just recently at a trade union conference. And he got up and asked the ACTU how they can assist us, like what would they do for us? And I thought to myself, 'Well that's exactly what you shouldn't be asking!' You should be saying, 'Well there's an area here we can work together on. And we need your support'. Do you know what I mean?

The trade union movement gives you your influence within the Labor Party, 'cause that's what the Labor Party should be about, the political wing of the trade union movement. And with all due respect to some of my old mates, at the end of the day, the realisation's not there of what the linkages are. Whereas Cookie understood it, you know, in the same way I'm apt to myself, from being *in* it.

As you can imagine it wasn't going to be easy, bringing together people from the diversity of backgrounds. Well Paddy Dodson came out of a Catholic background, he was in the priesthood when he first came along. Jack Ah Kit was out of the North Australian Workers' Union and David Ross coming out of Central Australia. But you had the Tasmanians, who, you know, thought that the centre of the universe was Tassie and you had the West Australian mob who always thought they were isolated. So to bring them all together and say, listen, we need to develop a uniform position. I mean it wasn't easy! And especially not to someone like myself who was a cane-cutter, you know, like this crazy troppo from the tropics! You imagine trying to bring that together and saying: 'Well, we all had our different backgrounds and all had different upbringings but at the end of the day there is a focus. You need to all come together in that one focus. And identify the goal and identify the way in which we go forward on that.' Outside of something like that, we're more than likely go down the street and agree to disagree! But we actually all ended up hanging out together in the end.

*Kevin* thought the quality of genuine friendships was important: What I thought was really good, was the ability for that friendship to develop – you know we came from very diverse backgrounds and had not too much in common at the beginning. And then when you went through it – went through the issues and went to all the different meetings – people started to know how you thought. And if it was a trade union issue they'd look straight at Terry and they'd be waiting for him to say something.

There was another dimension however to the friendships outside of the meetings. Kevin's partner Judy Chester felt that the personal relationships not only between Federation activists but their families were crucial in sustaining the communications and support.

*Judy:* I think the important thing about the Federation and later on the Coalition, was because we had so many meetings. And it was the women who were the backbone of the families for the blokes involved. We're all got to be really good friends. We're family. All their kids call me 'auntie'. We've just formed this relationship. And yet I've only met a couple of the wives. But we stuck fats because there was a job to be done.

Terry O'Shane also thought that the roles women played and the lessons he learnt in his family had all shaped how he approached the Federation relationships. But he thought it went beyond even these, to the principles they all shared:

*Terry:* Actually the links for me to the union movement were through my mother, Gladys O'Shane. On the waterfront, from the Waterside Workers' Federation and the Seamen's Union. My mother was very active in the women's committee and she joined the Communist Party, so we had links there too. And Mum was very active in the Aboriginal Advancement League regionally. So my background was with my mum, you know.

But from my dad too. Dad come out here to Australia as a 14-year-old boy and never saw his mother or any other family for another 50 years. He was sent out from Ireland and indentured to a farmer in Western Australia.

I think one of the things that connected me very strongly to Cookie was the way in which he did an analysis of things. It was never done on the basis of race, and never done on the basis of gender. It was done on the basis of what was right and wrong. And it's a thing that I actually related to all the time.

I think it would have come from my family: my mother and father being married – your non-racial household – and I had a mother and two older sisters who could all beat me in a fight. So you never had a gender problem, because they were the ones who grew you up and looked after you. So it was a non-racial, non-sexist sort of house that I grew up in, you know. And so that's just the thing that's happened in my teaching – that's just the way it happened. So when I first ran into Cookie, we just sat down and talked. And I listened to how he analyses things, and then how he develops a strategy from there and a way to plot a course – well, it fitted in to how I believed in things anyway.



**Figure 13.4: The developing connections between activists from different states were visible in the Eva Valley meeting in Central Australia. This photo shows Terry O'Shane (Queensland) and Kevin Tory (NSW) at Eva Valley.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



**Figure 13.5: Eva Valley meeting with Joe McGinness (Queensland), Michael Mansell (Tasmania) and Josie Crawshaw (NT).**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



Because we were never on about the size of us. People sometimes thought Cookie must be ten foot tall and bullet proof! And look at the size of him!!

But we didn't worry about how big we were. We've been talking about the Coalition, which is a very small group. And as Judy articulated, it was the back up – you know the support group that was behind them – was just enormous. There was a lot of dedication in terms of the support group. There was a lot of dedication from the people who were out front. But that's the thing a lot of people don't understand. They think, 'Oh, we'll bowl this bloke over with that person'. But the movement was much bigger than one or two people. It wasn't based on Cookie or Terry O'Shane or Paddy Dodson. It was based on how best we had advanced this issue on behalf of the Indigenous peoples and the broader community. Now, that's an ideal that we don't have a right to walk away from. It wouldn't matter how bad it got, you can't walk away from it.

So our premier activity was not only organising at a national level. There was actual participation in all those little meetings up in far North Queensland. That was the attitude that prevailed right throughout the whole Federation period, you know. Never to be stood over, never to be put aside, never to be aggressive in terms of trying to oppress or push someone down for the purpose of getting our own way. Cookie always said it. It was about creating an awareness and developing a friendship. Those friendships, let me tell you, exist today! They're still here. With the Dodsons and the Peter Yus and all that sort of nonsense, you know.

## Moving people in the Federation

The links in the Federation did not only form between the individuals who were taking leadership roles. Instead the Federation was characterised by the extensions of these personal relationships out into community level networks. While the movements of people were constantly limited by funding shortages, the organisations still opened up possibilities for moving people into places and communities into which they had never ventured before. Kevin travelled to Victoria, Western Australia and to Central Australia at various times to be at Federation meetings. He has talked about his growing feeling that this process of travelling and meeting people was a critically important part of building the future. There were misunderstandings and conflicts among those who attended but the meeting at least allowed a space for the beginning of discussions to work out solutions.



**Figure 13.6: Bruce McGuinness, a major activist from Victoria who was active in the Federation meetings, including Eva Valley, speaking in 1983.**

Courtesy Gary Foley collection.

*Kevin:* We got on really well. From the first time when we went up there and met people and they came down to Sydney. The next minute, you'd be on the phone! I think it was because of the communications that enabled us to keep in contact on a regular basis. People were moving around more. Before then people from NSW had never been to the Northern Territory. They'd never been to Alice Springs. So people were going up there, and the people from the Territory were coming down. You'd stay at people's places, and when they came down they'd stay at your place. There was a lot of friendship formed in those early years. ...It brought the people together. Now inside that we had arguments on the way forward, but the end goal was always the same. And I found that quite remarkable, that everybody agreed on where we were going, but we couldn't agree all the time on how to get there.

## Opening the way

Soon after the formation of the Federation, senior NSW community members from the South Coast of NSW decided to make the long journey by car up to Central Australia to meet senior people from those communities in the context of a Federation meeting. Jacko Campbell, his wife Nan and Mervyn and Shirley Penrith drove all the way from Nowra to Alice Springs, and into the memories of the people gathered there from Central and Top End communities. Patrick Dodson has talked about what this meant to people in Central Australia:

*Patrick:* It began with those early trips. Prior to those Federation meetings the only communication between the Northern Territory mob and the cities would've been the efforts made through the trade union movement. That's how the Gurindji campaign worked really. And the disastrous church relationships with some of those mob in Arnhem Land.

So providing the communication link was pretty important. And the fact was that there were *senior* people who came from the south, from this part of the country. I don't think that ought to be discounted, that it was a pretty big thing. You've got all these senior bosses<sup>5</sup> out of the desert, out of the Kimberley and the Top End and then come these senior old blokes from the South Coast, who I suppose just spoke about their life experience. They just talked about the challenges, the difficulties, the loss, the hopes and the odds that they could see to achieving anything.

And it was the commitment, of old Jacko and Nan and all that mob coming by car all the way to Alice Springs that impressed most of the centre mob, and most of the other people... I mean people travel by cars all the time, drive from the Kimberleys to Alice Springs... But the fact that out of NSW came a little old bomb, that Geoffrey Shaw had to fix up, or try to fix up, when the muffler or something fell off it. It left a lasting impression about the commitment of the players there.

Kevin has recalled that trip, not knowing if Mervyn's old car would even get them there, but even more apprehensive of the reception they would get.

*Kevin:* When we went up to that Federation meeting, we didn't know what to expect up there. We went up with Jacko and Mervyn that first time. And then we just kept sending people up there just to continue that link. We wanted to get people to come down, and talk about what was happening up in the Centre and in the Territory and Western Australia and then for us to go there.

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5 'Boss' is an Aboriginal English term for senior ceremonial leader – who therefore has the right to give directions to others.

Everyone was saying, 'Oh people from the south are going to do this, people from the south are going to do that, when they go into other people's territory'. And it *wasn't* like that, you know? We didn't go up there and say, 'Look, we're going to do this and do that' or 'We've done that down here, so you should do this'. It was just good to get that talking between the groups going. And when I say the groups, I mean Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia were one group, then from NSW and Queensland and we had a lot of strong contacts with Victoria, so that was another group, and then there was the Taswegians, so there were another group that more or less linked in with Victoria.

Patrick explained how these personal, face-to-face interactions had changed the broader community perceptions of distant regions:

*Patrick:* I think that's a real point. It is the human encounter, not the issues. We probably knew what these issues were, but it was these *people*. These people who represented people in some other place, who were there. And in another way it's similar to Rob Riley in Perth because that's the southern part [of the State] from the Kimberley, a personality who represents a whole region of people plus all sorts of national issues at the time. But who created a sense of... well, when you thought of Perth you thought of Riley, and when you thought of Sydney you thought of Cookie, you didn't think about anything else. You just said, well, 'They're the people that you got to see, when you go there'.

It's very much akin to the traditional way of operating. You go and see the people who will then look after you or tell you what you had to do and introduce you to whoever it is and would look after your interests, in a constructive way. So you could talk to them about whatever your business was, and I think that was the link that was made. And that gave that mob then a path from the centre through the Federation affiliates, the land council affiliates, to here. That gave them a path into here. Before that there was no path.

There was no path, there was no road to come in because there was no-one in Sydney. I mean there were people here, but from the protocol point of view there was no-one *there* to open the place, if you're opening a meeting someone from the place has got to open it. So that's what happened then, it was opened for people. It's a very important thing because if you lose people out of these systems you've got to make sure that that path is still opened, it remains open so long as that person is there, once that person is no longer in that situation it gets shut again.

## Learning journeys in both directions

We have already seen that Kevin had encouraged Karen Flick to travel to the Kimberleys (see Chapter 6) which had reflected the strong Tranby commitment to links to far flung communities grappling with similar questions of social justice. Patrick Dodson argued that there was a need for everyone to travel, including the people from Central Australia. He had pointed out that south-eastern people from NSW or Victoria had no idea of the variety and complexity of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory or Western Australia. But he also pointed out that he had not had any idea of how complex and varied Aboriginal cultures and societies were in south-eastern Australia. Only when he came into the south-east as a friend and family member was he introduced to different types of non-urban communities and began to realise that any one or two 'representatives' could not even begin to really reflect the complex nature of the wider communities they were said to represent. He has recalled his own journey into south-eastern Australia.



**Figure 13.7: Travelling to the coast from the Centre, the people whom Patrick Dodson (NT and WA) was able to meet when he travelled in rural NSW included Tombo Winters, shown at home in Brewarrina, in an unusual break from his own travels in this period to other regions and other states.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.



*Patrick:* I reckon the problem is that I never knew anything about NSW until I went to the back country with Barbara Flick. To that little town out in the back sticks there, Wilcannia, next to Bourke. I met all those wonderful people in that place.

When I brought Adrian, my son, through there, he said: 'Do any white people live here?' I said: 'No mate, these are all black fellas around here, they run this place.' He had no idea see, because NSW was over 'here' somewhere, on the coast. This bloody Botany Bay is the NSW symbol. But if you go from Botany Bay and travel all that way, you end up at Dubbo and you go up to Brewarrina or Goodooga and these other places.

That's where you run into all that sort of family section of Barbara's – Sonny Orcher and Old Joe Flick and all that mob. It's a different world there. But it doesn't have a voice. It might have a voice here inside New South Wales but it doesn't have a voice in the national arena. The voice in the national arena is going to be whoever's elected as your ATSIC commissioner – he's going to be your voice. Your voice for so long, before Cookie was around, was Paul Coe in the Legal Service, he was the voice.

So it wasn't until someone like me went through and met all those other people in this other part of the country who have a different set of priorities, that anyone from the outside hears about it. Those are people who don't have the same set of allegiances as the 'spokespeople'. And they have a whole different world view about many things, but that isn't known out there.

Whether you live in Alice or you live in Broome or you live in Meekathara or wherever else you live, you've got no idea – zero, zilch – about the bush in NSW. In the same way that people in the bush in NSW probably don't have any idea about what the go is over there. And what happened when Cookie and Old Jacko and all that mob came up to the Centre was that that gulf was covered. No-one else has picked up the candle since Cookie had to drop out of that.



**Figure 13.8: Joe Flick (Mutawintji Hand Back) when meeting Patrick Dodson.**

Courtesy Heather Goodall.