

## 14. Onto the streets

There were two important national demonstrations in the first half of the 1980s which brought together Aboriginal people from key areas across the country. The first, in 1982, used the occasion of the Commonwealth Games being held in Brisbane to focus the anger that Aboriginal people felt towards the Queensland state government which kept them trapped under century old 'Protection' laws but at the same time, changed the land laws to make it impossible for them to gain recognition of their rights to land. These demonstrations focused national attention on the State of Queensland. The continuing racism of policies about Aboriginal and Islander people was paralleled when the conservative state government attempted to shut down all political dissent by banning street marches and other forms of peaceful protest. The interests that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities both shared were brought starkly into focus. In many ways this powerful experience – of high support between Aboriginal and Islander communities and between them and white Australians – ushered in the national perspective which made the Federation of Land Councils possible.

The second of these big demonstrations, three years later in 1985, was organised through the networks established by the Federation. This was the protest held on the steps of Parliament House in Canberra to protest at the federal government's betrayal of its promise to enact national land rights laws. As frustrating as the government decision was, the Federation's nationally organised mobilisation generated new strategies to make the demands for recognition of land rights visible not just around Australia but around the world.

### The Commonwealth Games, 1982

Kevin through Tranby had already had a long association with Queensland since the mid 1970s. Alf had earlier been excluded from church work in northern Australia by the Anglican Archbishop of the Carpentaria Diocese who had rejected Alf's militant support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights as they developed self-managed cooperatives to free themselves from dependence on the exploitative pastoral industry. So Kevin inherited a staunch tradition of supporting Aboriginal demands for independence and, increasingly, for an end to the oppressive Queensland Act.<sup>1</sup> This was the last surviving legislation in any state from the 'Protection' regimes of the early twentieth century. The Act

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<sup>1</sup> *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (Qld); Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act 1939 (Qld).*

had been amended several times, most recently in 1965,<sup>2</sup> but still interfered in the employment, residence and personal lives of all Indigenous people in the state, most of whom were 'under the Act'. The conservative Country Party state government under Joh Bjelke-Petersen had recommitted Queensland to this Act when it used its power over land law to savagely oppose the attempts by the Whitlam Government in 1974 to establish recognition of Aboriginal land rights in Queensland. To the demand for an end to the Queensland Act was therefore added the explicit demand for land rights in Queensland.

One of Kevin's first roles at Tranby in 1976 had been travelling to North Queensland to stay with members of the communities running co-operatives there. By the early 1980s, he had already developed close friendships with Joe McGinness and then Terry O'Shane and he was in frequent touch with activists in Queensland like Mick Miller in the far north of the state as well as Bob Weatherall, Ross, Lilla and other members of the Watson family and Cheryl Buchanan in Brisbane. So Kevin had built up the links between the newly formed Federation of Land Councils and the Queensland land rights movement, including FAIRA, the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, based in Brisbane, in which Weatherall and Buchanan were involved.

After Noonkanbah, the coming Commonwealth Games which were to be held in Brisbane in September/October 1982, looked like a good opportunity to focus world attention on Australian conditions and particularly on those in Queensland. This was topical for both the Left and the Right in Australian politics. The anti-Apartheid struggles in which Kevin and the Builders Labourers' Federation, along with Gary Foley and many of the Sydney Aboriginal activists, had been involved, had focused attention on the politics of sport. There continued to be bans arising from these campaigns which kept Apartheid South Africa out of all international sporting events. More recently there had been a boycott called by the federal Liberal government on the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympic Games, resulting in Australian athletes marching under the Olympic rather than the Australian flag and undermining the conservative parties' traditional 'keep politics out of sport' arguments. So through 1981, a campaign built up across Australia to use the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane to focus attention on both the Queensland Act and the state government's refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights.

The Federation, with its strong interest on international links, through the World Council of Churches as well as through Kevin's links with co-operative and political movements around the world, hoped to mobilise those international networks to organise a boycott of the Games. In April 1982, the Federation sent Les Malezer and Bob Weatherall to Africa to try to convince

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2 *Aborigines' and Torres Strait Islanders' Affairs Act 1965* (Qld).

the Commonwealth countries that the racially discriminatory Queensland government should be boycotted. There was a disappointing response to this Federation call – by this time Malcolm Fraser, the Liberal Party Prime Minister, had made strong public statements condemning Apartheid South Africa and so the Commonwealth African countries were reluctant to impose a boycott, despite the Aboriginal appeal. The Federation turned its attention to building media attention and nation wide Aboriginal support for the protests planned at the Games themselves.

The Bjelke-Petersen Government passed draconian security legislation, banning street marches and indeed, any gathering of individuals which could be defined as a ‘political gathering’. The years of abuse of public civil rights by Queensland’s conservative Country Party government had been enacted very visibly in these new public order laws. So the broad civil liberties movement, not only in Queensland but across the country, was organising to support the Aboriginal protest. At the last moment, Bjelke-Petersen attempted to short circuit the coming protest by announcing a complete redefinition of Aboriginal Reserve land to become local government areas, but, as every aspect of these new land categories remained under the control of the government, this move fulfilled none of the Aboriginal demands for independence and ownership.

Kevin mobilised his many links in New South Wales to bring people to Brisbane for the Commonwealth Games demonstrations. The whole land rights network was alerted across the state and not only the Aboriginal activists like Barbara and Karen Flick were preparing to go, but so too were the long time trade union supporters like Rod Pickette and Hal Alexander. Many of the Tranby students and staff wanted to go and were organising all sorts of transport to get there.

I was a part of all those events. I remember I was flat out trying to finish my doctorate – a scarecrow living on coffee and cigarettes. Paul couldn’t get time off from the hospital to come to Brisbane but he shouted me an airfare so at least one of us could make it.

Cookie and Brian Doolan were going to drive, leaving late on the night of the Grand Final Rugby League game. Cookie’s team lost, so he’d had a few beers before they left – quite a few beers – so he slept heavily while Doolan drove into the night. Cookie remembers Doolan waking him, groaning that he couldn’t drive another inch. When Cookie had woken up enough to see, he says Brian’s eyes were hanging out, so he agreed he’d better take over the wheel. When he’d woken up enough to see the road signs, he found Brian had already got them to the border with Queensland, and so he only had a few hours comfortable drive to bring them in to Brisbane.

In the weeks preceding the Games, a huge camp had blossomed in Musgrave Park. This big park in inner city south Brisbane had long been a place where Aboriginal people had taken temporary shelter if they had just arrived in the city or had been newly released from gaol. Although often harassed by the police, Aboriginal people had continued to come to Musgrave Park for refuge, temporary shelter and as a familiar meeting place. It had come to have powerful symbolic significance as a place in the heart of the city which was nevertheless claimed by Aboriginal people.

I met up with Kevin when they arrived at Nikki's house. Nicole was an old nursing friend of Barbara Flick's and had a house near Musgrave Park. So she was putting a lot of us up on her lounge room floor. Cookie told us he'd driven most of the way while Doolan dozed in the back, so we all felt sorry for him and made him tea while poor Brian shuffled off to get some more sleep.

Musgrave Park had become the nerve centre of the organising which FAIRA and other Queensland Aboriginal and civil rights groups were doing for the Games. There was extensive union support in Queensland, NSW and nationally, to assist with transport and food for the thousands of people who were going to be camping out in Brisbane.

There were a series of major gatherings in the park, with high profile national figures lining up to talk. Senator Neville Bonner, a member of the conservative federal Liberal government, feared the marchers would be subject to police violence, but he was compromised by his party allegiances. Senator Susan Ryan received a better response. Then Labor Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, she pledged that the ALP, if it should win government under Bob Hawke in the coming elections, would ensure that Queensland joined all Australia in the new government's implementation of the firm Labor Party policy for national land rights. But the strongest applause was for the Aboriginal activists from Queensland, like Mick Miller, and those who had travelled such a long way to be there, like Gary Foley.

The government had dismissed most applications to march but it had approved two. The first one was held on Sunday 26 September 1982, when 3000 Australians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, gathered in Musgrave Park and marched along the approved route, although they made a series of unauthorised sit-ins on the street along the way to voice their protests. Two days later they marched again for the only other authorised march, but they faced continuing police harassment.



**Figure 14.1: The Commonwealth Games demonstrations: 'We have been carrying Joh long enough'.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.





**Figure 14.2: Mick Miller speaking to a rally during the Games.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



**Figure 14.3: The (illegal) street march at the Commonwealth Games, Brisbane.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



**Figure 14.4: Marcia Langton surrounded by other demonstrators carrying Aboriginal flags.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



**Figure 14.5: Tranby students with the Flag at march (visible in the background in Fig 14.1).**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.



At the close of the Games on 7 October, as the Queen officiated only blocks away, the Musgrave Park crowd formed into rows to move onto the streets in an illegal march. Aboriginal activists announced on the loud speakers that they were going to fill the front lines of the march. They wanted no-one else there to distract attention from the key goal of land rights and freedom for Aboriginal people from the hated Queensland Act. They vowed, as one activist said, 'To march where and when they want'. All the marchers knew they were facing mass arrests, and in the preceding days, after calls over a local radio station, \$8000 had been raised to pay bail for those arrested. Kevin Cook and Gary Foley held half of the bail money each – they planned to keep away from any area where they might be arrested so that they would be able to bail people out as soon as they were put into the cells, so they wouldn't have to stay under the control of the distrusted Queensland police. Cookie moved over to the side of the road, waiting where he hoped it would be safe so he could move as soon as the expected arrests began.

I moved off the road, taking notice of the call for all whites to get out of the way and leave the front lines to the Aboriginal and Islander marchers. But as the lines started to form up, Karen and Barbara Flick caught sight of me and called out, 'Hey, get over here. You're with us!' So I raced over to link arms with them and we all moved off towards the main street. The streets were echoing with chants of 'Land Rights Now', 'No Police State' and 'End the Racist Queensland Act'. Within minutes, the police moved in, seizing marcher after marcher and throwing them all into the waiting paddy wagons to be hauled off to the city watch house.<sup>3</sup> Our turn came and the three of us were shoved into a waiting van with dozens of others. Shouting orders, the police waded through the crowd, grabbing whoever they could reach.

Kevin was watching anxiously from the side of the road when a mate rushed up and shouted that Foley had just been arrested. 'He can't have been', Cookie remembers gasping, 'he's got half the bail money!' Then a big cop barged into Cookie, shouting at him to move on. Without thinking, Cookie turned and shouted back: 'Get fucked!' The next thing he knew, he'd been lifted bodily and hurled through the open door into a wagon – with the rest of the money!

Inside the watch house, there might not have been any more violence, but the police derided and humiliated us wherever they could. Everyone who was arrested was kept in jail for over eight hours, with no food at all for the men. We women were given cups of a thin Salvation Army curried soup. Hungry as we were, many of us felt afterwards that we would have been better off without

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3 Personal observation. Among many papers to cover the story, *Daily Sun*, 8 October 1982. See 'The Koori History Website' for an accessible selection of scanned newspaper clippings and photographs: <<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1980s/82games/gamesdx.html>> accessed 10 January 2013.

it. Kevin was one of the very last released, with the bail money handed over intact – eventually – but too late to have made it any easier for anyone to be released! They ended up letting us all out on our own recognisance – knowing that none of us would come back and that they weren't going to put any effort into bringing us back. The whole thing had been a show to bolster the Bjelke-Petersen Government's pretense of defending public order!

The demonstration might not have stopped the Games but it had been shown across the television screens of the world as the reporters who were covering the Olympic Games rushed to film the police carving through the demonstration in the government's denial of any right of assembly. Moreover the demonstration called even more attention onto the discriminatory abuses of civil rights to which unions and all civil society organisations had been facing in Queensland, along with Aboriginal and Islander communities. Ultimately, it heightened the scrutiny able to be brought to bear by investigative journalists like Chris Masters with the ABC *Four Corners* program 'Moonlight State' in 1987 and led to the Fitzgerald Inquiry into possible Police Misconduct (1987–89) which exposed the extensive corruption within the Bjelke-Petersen Government.

Perhaps most dramatically in the short term, it contributed to the momentum which swept the ALP, led by Bob Hawke, into federal power in 1983, bringing with it the pledge to implement national land rights for Aboriginal people in every state.

## **'National land rights': The false promise, 1984 to 1985**

The networks of personal confidence which had been built up in the years from 1980 to 1984 became critically important in 1984 and 1985. The Labor Party policy guaranteeing National Land Rights specified five key land rights principles:

- inalienable freehold title for Aboriginal land
- full legal protection of sacred sites
- Aboriginal control over mining on Aboriginal land
- access to mining royalty equivalents
- compensation for lost land

The new government set up a National Land Rights Working Party and after meeting with it, the Hawke Government yet again recommitted itself to those five principles and began drafting new legislation which would apply nationally. The mining companies launched a heavily funded national advertising campaign

against any extension of land rights, with Western Mining Company magnate Hugh Morgan arguing in 1984 that land rights meant a return to 'paganism'. Divisions emerged within the federal government between those who supported the mining companies and those who wanted to stand by Labor Party policy. Then the WA Labor state government, under Brian Burke, head of a mineral rich state where the 1980 confrontation at Noonkanbah had been characteristic of the government support for mining, argued that Labor would face electoral defeat at the coming state election if the 'Five Principles' were imposed from the federal level.

There was no longer any structure existing at the national level to express a collective Aboriginal view – the Whitlam Government established National Aboriginal Congress had been disbanded and the incoming Hawke Government had set up the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC), which was regarded as having little real power. The Western Australian government succeeded in pressuring the federal government into severely watering down the proposed National Land Rights legislation. When the government revealed its draft legislation in February 1985, as its 'Preferred Model', four of the five principles that the government had outlined in 1983 had been dumped. The new model:

- required no Aboriginal consent for mining on Aboriginal land
- prevented land claims over stock routes, stock reserves and Aboriginal-owned pastoral leases
- restricted eligibility for excisions (the establishment of living places for Aboriginal traditional owners where full land claims could not be granted over pastoral holdings and other alienated land)

The National Federation of Land Councils and the National Aboriginal Conference walked out of the next Land Rights Working Party meeting in protest.<sup>4</sup>

The way Kevin remembers it, the position for people in NSW was awkward but the national Act would in the end have worked out well for the state.

*Kevin:* The Five Point Plan wouldn't have watered down what was in the NSW Act. What it would've done is that the federal Act would've overridden the State Act, and so it could have. But the Act that was going in would've been the Act that we recommended. And although it was above what was happening in NSW, we would be able to keep what we wanted of the NSW Act and then we could've taken the best of the federal Act. Like you know that the freehold title was one of the things that they wanted in the Five Principles. But now that's gone anyway from NSW.

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<sup>4</sup> Koori History Website has a concise and accurate summary of these events: <<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/timeline/histimeline.html>>

The reason why Burke could stop the national Land Rights Act was that he had a state election, and he said: 'Look, squash that or we won't win the election'. They had no state land rights at all in Western Australia, and he was trying to win the election by blocking the national plan. He didn't win the election that year even though he quashed the land rights thing.

It became clear that the government further intended to amend the NT Land Rights Act to make it consistent with this weakened 'Preferred Model'. From being an eagerly awaited victory, 'National Land Rights' had suddenly turned into a bitter defeat. It became urgent then for the NT Aboriginal leaders to call for support and unity from Aboriginal groups across the country. But their pleas could now be interpreted as a self-serving call to defend the NT Land Rights Act at the expense of other states which had no recognition of land rights at all and for whom even the weak 'Preferred Model' might have offered something. In the absence of a credible Aboriginal voice directly to government, the Federation of Land Councils – independent of government and now with strong bonds of personal confidence between its key participants – offered a network which could carry the complex arguments about why it was to the advantage of everyone to defend the earlier version of the National Land Rights model.

Jack Ah Kit, then newly established in his role as the Director of the Northern Land Council, argued in this interview that it had become urgent to strengthen the networks which the Federation had begun to build. He explained that there were divisions among Aboriginal people both inside the Northern Territory and between the 'traditional' northern areas and the more heavily colonised people in the south.

*Jack Ah Kit:* The National Land Rights model would've been great for this country. It had been an election promise of the Hawke Labor Government in 1983 and they'd come up with this Five Point model, but then in 1985, before they could implement it, Burke from Western Australia tried to torpedo it. Now we're seeing that bastard doing time in gaol, thank God, for being corrupt, even though he was with the Labor Party...

Then that Burke played us off. He came up with his state election ads about bricking off Western Australia. He had a model too, but the Burke one was about lowering the Northern Territory Land Rights Act. It was about taking rights away from that group of people and then extending a real watered-down version to everyone. Bob Hawke, the Prime Minister at the time, wasn't strong enough to say, 'Sorry Brian. Not on. We can't wear it'.

So we knew we had to fight long and hard to convince our countrymen down the eastern seaboard, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania that: 'What's



this country on about? Taking away rights the Territory Aboriginal people have under the Land Rights Act? Going to the lowest common denominator? To something that hasn't got any teeth in it? We can't do that!

So we decided – the NT mob like Patrick Dodson, myself, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and David Ross – that it was really an important matter to build up relationships with people in the eastern seaboard.

Cookie played an important part in ensuring that we were involved and that we had every opportunity to come down here and put our case.

Because there was a lot of animosity towards Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, there was a lot of jealousy and misunderstanding. And we worked with and through Cookie in ensuring that the National Federation of Land Councils, and after that the National Coalition started to have a focus, and we started to get the message out to people – to radical elements in the Aboriginal community in the eastern states – who were saying: 'The Territory Aboriginal people, they're all right, they're spoilt. They've got their Land Rights Act, they don't care about us.'

It was hard in those days to come and talk at forums, and to ensure that we got the message across to people that we understood that, yes, we may be in a better position than they were. We had a Land Rights Act that was given to us. It was a Land Rights Act that was to be the first, and it was one that we understood was going to be extended to other states and territories within the Commonwealth. But we never got to that, as Whitlam, as you all know, got thrown out of office. But we had to put a clear concise message to Aboriginal leaders in the south, and especially on the eastern seaboard, that Territory Aboriginal people want you to have the same Land Rights Act that we have, to have the same benefits that we have, and that we would continue to fight for that so that we had equal land rights.

It was hard in the Territory too. I found it very hard because there was this misunderstanding out there. People had local or regional historical perspectives, there was never this bigger picture of Australia as a colony being colonised and historically what happened when the country started to get invaded. And the churches and native welfare commissioners... I don't know who developed or influenced this... or whether it came from the elders ... but there was this fear. I lived through it in Darwin in the '50s and '60s where you could be called 'a yellow-fella' or you were 'mongrel'. And if you didn't have the balls to cope with that and if you didn't have your language, then you didn't have much at all – just the colour of your skin.

I saw people have some terrific fights over this, some of them tribal Aboriginal people. They played sport together, but it came down to this lack of

understanding, I think, through not knowing people's background in terms of the stolen generation and everything we know today. And there was this fear of the unknown, especially from the people from the bush that was really a way of protecting themselves. It was hard for me when I went to the land council in 1984, to start working on influential Aboriginal people to get them to understand that we were all one. We had no choice whether we were taken away or who was or wasn't taken away and then what happened to us. And the sooner we came to grips with that – and understand it and respect that – the better it will be, not just in this Northern Land Council area or the Central Land Council area but in this whole country as a nation.

So to try to get some sort of national strength some of these issues on both sides had to be tackled. It had to be done. Because if you looked at the other option, there was every likelihood that the gap was going to be widened further, and somebody, somewhere – whether it was going to be black or white politicians drawing a line between Geraldton and Townsville and saying: 'Everything south of that can go and get lost', because of the historical nature of the colonisation we were in. And that was the last thing that I wanted to happen, and that was the last thing that Dodson and the others wanted to see happen. And looking back I think we made the right decision.

And we had to start getting this round. We had to start showing our faces and inviting people to come to the north and ensuring that we attended the meetings that were happening down south, down the eastern seaboard, whether they were at Brisbane where FAIRA was co-ordinating the meeting or whether it was down at Oyster Cove with Michael Mansell and Jim Everett and others, we'd be there – in Geraldton, Perth, in the Kimberleys... I think that was really good and it gave a focus.

But for us in the Territory, in those early years it was getting these European advisers away from these Yolngu leaders and starting to talk to the Yolngu leaders about understanding Yolngu people in the south, Yolngu people who had been taken away with the stolen generation. Yolngu people who were abused. Once that started to happen, once 80 land council members came together with a lot of bosses<sup>5</sup> on it, a lot of understanding developed... A lot of them knew it, but as a council they had to arrive at a position that they felt comfortable with and a position that their leaders were going to advocate, that we need to look after our countrymen in the south. And they in turn need to support us.

Galarrwuy said on a couple of occasions, very strongly, 'We go back to one mother and one father...'. You know, whichever way you come off that, you

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

come off the one mother and one father. And I think that's one of the things that I will always remember as something really important to me. It's been that to bring about a change that was for the good of Aboriginal people.

The tensions Jack Ah Kit talked about were very real for Aboriginal activists in NSW. Barbara Flick, who had taken a major role in regional and interim land councils, recognised the importance of overcoming the divisions which in the past had split the overall Indigenous population. She has explained how she saw this period from the NSW perspective.

*Barbara:* The national links at that time were important too, with the Federation... we were really at the cutting edge of trying to develop policy in many areas, at federal, state and territory levels, for government to consider. And very quickly we gained credibility as negotiators and we tried to develop ideas around national legislation – the 'preferred model'. We were trying to get the best deal for everybody. We wanted to build up unity across the country and get beyond this artificial 'real Aborigines' versus people who live in the city – who somehow weren't 'real Aborigines', all that division kind of syndrome. I think the Federation of Land Councils was important, with people like Jimmy Bienderry from the Kimberley, when the Noonkanbah dispute was on. Before that it had been the Gurindji people from Wattie Creek who had been making those links with people across the country. We thought it needed to be done again and this time both at a personal level – just getting to know each other and to understand each other – but also at a national level, on the organisation side I think, to make those important links.

In response to the threat to the land rights campaigns in all states, the Federation of Land Councils convened a major demonstration on the steps of Parliament House in Canberra. David Ross, the Chairman of the Central Land Council, described at an interview in Sydney the way the demonstration was organised across the country.

*David Ross:* I remember it was organised quite efficiently at the end. The NT Land Rights Act was under attack and the organisation and abilities of one Mr Riley from WA and Dodson and Ah Kit to an extent, who organised the protests up there – along with Cookie and the mob who organised people from this part of the world. All those things were brand new to me. We all rocked up to Canberra in '85 and we had big protest marches and people were trying to break down the doors of Old Parliament House and so on.

Those were the first big convoys out of the Territory and into the southern parts of the country. People talk about the '88 marches and the convoys that came through for that. But I suppose the first lot was in '85 for that big protest. And that was all a big eye-opener to a lot of the old people who were the real

staunch supporters of the Land Rights Act, the land councils, who had really put the effort and the energy into getting the Land Rights Act in place, in the Territory back in them days. And it was under attack. And they wanted to keep it in place, and so people just piled into motor cars and whatever the best way it could possibly be done and headed for Canberra.

And as I say, I don't really know the ins and outs of how things were done, but they were certainly done and it turned out very well. It was successful. The Land Rights Act is still in place today. There were changes but in '87 a couple of years after the original changes that they were trying to put in. But then we moved on after that and had that Federation of Land Council's meeting in Cairns.

Kevin asked David Ross about the relationship between Federation meetings and the campaigns to influence international opinion:

*Kevin:* I think that those early meetings led onto things like that overseas push, when you went over a couple of times didn't you Rossie?

*David Ross:* Eventually – very reluctantly – I did. I suppose my first thoughts and knowledge of overseas trips, especially to the UN and the working group was probably that very important event in '85 before... I only went overseas eventually – and very reluctantly. But the first thing I knew about the UN, not even thought about the working group, was the protest in Canberra.

Then after that me and Dodson drove across from Alice, and shot some nice big, fat turkeys along the way, and that was when we decided, at that meeting, that, yes, these fellas should go to Geneva. Supported by the Federation and what not, through that process.

## **Building the next stage: The National Coalition**

There were many more people and organisations besides the land councils who wanted to defend the national land rights opportunities which the Hawke Government had seemed to be promising. Soon after the 1985 demonstration, discussions started among activists in many places about a way to extend the strengths of the Federation to the broader base of Aboriginal organisations.

In a conversation recorded for this book, Jack Ah Kit talked about how he remembered this process.

*Jack:* I think the Coalition was really important because the Federation of Land Councils was seen to be exclusive to land councils and it was cutting out other people. So the idea came up that we needed to start getting really organised and that the way we could be seen as inclusive was to start the Coalition up. The



Coalition would bring to its membership national Aboriginal representation – across the legal services, across the childcare services, across the land councils. So that we would be seen as more representative and a truly Aboriginal representative body.

We were relaxed and there was no: ‘You’re barred. If you’re not representing anyone, get out of here. You mug...’ you know? A person was qualified to come to the meeting and stand up and talk just by their own Aboriginality. We didn’t disallow that. If a person was representing and had a gripe against the national organisation, from the state childcare, they were entitled to get up and say their bit. But we did have to keep it focused. We didn’t lock anyone out. It was really good at that time to ensure that the message was filtering back and people were understanding what the Coalition was on about. And that it was there to advocate Aboriginal people’s rights and to bring notice to the struggle.

Kevin pointed out that there were plenty of debates in the process of forming the Coalition. But the dense network of communications which had now been set up across the country with the Federation was able to serve the new Coalition even better now that more people had a say.

*Kevin:* We didn’t always agree. We had some really good meetings where people were jumping up and down. But it ended-up all right, it didn’t come to fisticuffs.

One of the main things was the Makarrata, the idea for a treaty. It was being touted around, that was one of the things that was on the go and people came together and disagreed with it and started formulating their own treaties. And so people were having meetings all over the country. And it was that communication, you know? Within days you’d know where the meetings were on and you’d organised for as many fares as possible to get there. It was incredible... the fundraising that you had to do to get them! But we did a pretty good job.

We were always thinking about how important it was for us to get what we wanted to say down pat so that we were all coming from the one direction. There was a lot of work put into getting people to compromise their positions. And there were a lot of people with a lot of different ideas, but when it came to the crunch there was one voice, that’s what we call it, ‘one voice’. And at all our meetings we had one voice. The things that we didn’t agree on, then we came back later and discussed them out fully. And the decisions that were made at the meetings! ... you’d have to sit down and get some materials and have a look at the things that were being discussed.

So all that sort of stuff where the hard work went on. And I think behind the leaders back in those days, where people were pushed up, where their organisation and their councils and their elders who haven’t been recognised because those people, some by choice, some not by choice, were pushed up to

the front line whether they liked it or not and had to represent their people and their people's interests. And they took a lot of flack, but managed to hang in there and continue to be a part of an important push to ensure that we're moving forward rather than sliding backwards.

Jack Ah Kit thought that as well as all these things, humour had got them all through:

*Jack:* And I think the biggest thing – and the beauty of it all – was our sense of humour. When you get to know them a lot of Aboriginal people will tell you about the sense of humour that we're born with, it's like an Indigenous trait, it's handed on. When you live in an oppressed situation for that long, you don't just develop it, you're born with it and it's handed down as with our spirituality, and that gets us through. Because you can be anywhere in this country or outside this country but as long as you're together and you have an opportunity to sit down and discuss the good things that happened throughout the day and the frustration of the day.

But at the end of the day you start talking about humorous things – whether they happened that day or before or whether you've heard it from somebody else. And we look forward to sitting down and having a yarn and joke, and it's something we can all relate to, and that keeps us going. It really does. And any Aboriginal person in this country who's lost that sense of humour is a person who hasn't got much to live for as far as I'm concerned.

Responding to Jack, Cookie had agreed completely.

*Kevin:* That's incredibly good how you've put that. It's like Aboriginal culture, everybody has got a place and a job to do. And the Mansells, Foleys, Coes and that... they were seen as the radicals and they were pushed there, and did a fantastic job. And other people who were just as radical moved in a different direction also had a part to play. And I think everybody was given kudos for what they did. And I think it was a very good team effort.