

## 15. International networks

Aboriginal people had been speaking up on the international stage since at least as early as Anthony Martin Fernando had walked the streets of Italy in 1913. He had spoken in Geneva in the 1920s in the first days of the League of Nations and then demonstrated in London in the 1930s against British settler brutality towards Aboriginal people. The forces of Imperial power had of course been very evident to Aboriginal people: they had been appealing to the British monarchy from the earliest days of the British invasion. And when William Cooper had spoken to the press in the 1930s, he had pointed out the parallels which Aboriginal people saw with the theft of the land of Native Americans and with the Nazi racial discrimination faced by the Jews and others in Europe. There had been Aboriginal involvement with left-wing international networks in the 1950s and 1960s: Ray Peckham from north-west New South Wales, for example, had travelled on a Youth Study Tour to the Soviet Union and the first Australian delegations to the People's Republic of China had been the Aboriginal representatives who went there in 1972.<sup>1</sup>

Since that unprecedented trip in 1972, however, although Aboriginal activists had been very aware of Maori activism in New Zealand and the anti-Apartheid struggle in southern Africa, there had been very little travel outside Australia by Aboriginal spokespeople. The co-operative movement at Tranby had continued to host visits from Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands like Vanuatu, where the leaders of the Nationalist movement like Walter Lini and Barak Sopé had supported the Tranby co-operative goals. But there had been very few trips overseas by Aboriginal activists which meant there was simply no experience in the major forums of international debate like the United Nations. So the trips made to the Coady International Institute by Tranby student Charles French in 1964, on a Sydney University scholarship and then by Kevin himself in 1979, again through Tranby, were unusual and important sources of information and contacts.

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The mid 1980s saw a new wave of very targeted Aboriginal interventions into the formal structures of the international community. Kevin Cook was in the centre of this re-emergence of an international voice, although he seldom travelled overseas himself. The push into international representation reflected

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1 Fiona Paisley 2012, *The Lone Protester. AM Fernando in Australia and Europe*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra; Maria Nugent 2012, "'The queen gave us the land': Aboriginal people, Queen Victoria and historical remembrance', *History Australia*, 9(2): 182-200; Andrew Markus (ed) 1988, *Blood from a Stone: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines' League*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards; Goodall 1996, *Invasion to Embassy*.

all three major influences in Kevin's life: his commitment to Aboriginal land rights networks, his union experience and his networks through the national liberation movements' connections to co-operatives.

In retrospect, what is often stressed about this period is the flowering of the links between indigenous groups in many different countries. But we can see from Kevin's involvement that there were at least three different sets of contacts – indigenous organisations, unions and the churches – which all came into play to enable indigenous activism to be heard so strongly.

Memories can help us see even more about the processes. Hearing from Kevin and his activist colleagues we get more of an idea of how it felt to be setting up these links. Firstly, it was a huge learning task for the people who eventually became well known as international representatives of Australian Aboriginal people on the world stage. Secondly, they were often stricken with anxieties and self-doubts, as well as concerns about whether they were really representing the broad collective opinion well. And finally, despite the glamour supposedly attached to overseas trips, it turns out that most Aboriginal activists were reluctant to travel away from home. The imagined 'globetrotting spokesperson' disappears in the details of how these trips were actually accomplished when funds were always short and the reception which Aboriginal people might receive at an overseas forum was not by any means assured.

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When Kevin returned from Canada, he maintained contact with the many people he had met there from the co-operatives and liberation movements in Latin America, the Philippines, India, South Africa and Zimbabwe. But his energies were focused on putting into practice his ideas about adult education at Tranby and in the community and with the rapidly escalating campaign to achieve land rights in New South Wales. He was working at this local level with old friends like Barbara and Karen Flick and William Bates, under the direction of senior activists Jacko Campbell, Isabel Flick and Tombo Winters. Yet, as the last chapter has shown, not only his work at Tranby but his support for the Aboriginal campaigns in other states, meant that he turned to his role with the Australian Council of Churches to achieve the funds and the networks to deliver that support. The ACC was eager to take an active role in the World Council of Churches meetings and Kevin, as Chair of its Aboriginal Advisory Committee, was one of the people the ACC called on to travel to those meetings. He made some of these early trips with his friend and fellow activist, Barbara Flick, including a trip to London where they connected with the British Land Rights Support group and were able to add to the mounting international pressure on the NSW government to deliver on the land rights promises of its policy.



**Figure 15.1: Cookie and Barbara in London.**

Courtesy Tranby Archives.

Through the 1970s, the political focus around the world had turned to the concerns of the 'Fourth World', that is the indigenous peoples who were trapped inside nation states, like Native Americans, First Nations Canadians and Indigenous Australians. At the Coady Institute in Canada, Kevin had been very aware of the political movements of indigenous North Americans but he had also been meeting Adivasi from South Asia, a number of indigenous people from the Philippines and from Latin America and as well those from the activist groups in Africa – none of whom were well recognised as indigenous by the better organised movements in the 'First World'.

Only one international body had a legally binding convention of the rights of indigenous peoples – this was the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention 107 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), declared in 1957. The ILO, established in 1926, was a forum for representatives of unions, employers and governments from every member nation. Very aware of the long history of labour exploitation involved in slavery and indenture under colonialism, the ILO assembly had recognised that indigenous people were particularly vulnerable to economic and labour exploitation. Yet while working conditions were the focus of Convention 107, it was related to far wider issues of civil rights and freedoms. Although there was no representative place for indigenous

peoples *as* peoples, they were welcomed at the ILO as members of union or other delegations, as long as the formal delegations were prepared to give them some of the representative positions to which they were entitled.

In the early 1980s the ILO began the process of revising and updating Convention 107. At the same time, the United Nations (UN) – which is a related but quite separate organisation to the ILO – also began to consider a declaration which would recognise the overall rights of indigenous peoples, and attempt to combat discrimination against them. A UN Declaration, however, could not be legally binding in the way that ILO Conventions are. The United Nations could not, by its charter, allow representation of any delegates other than those which represented sovereign nations, so ‘Fourth World’ Indigenous peoples had no voice there. However, the United Nations took the first steps towards the drafting of a possible Declaration when it set up a ‘Working Group on Indigenous Populations’<sup>2</sup> in 1982, to which NGOs and indigenous colonised people could send representatives. This group began active meetings only after 1985, and the Declaration was not voted on until 2007, but it became a continuing focus of attention for indigenous people’s movements in many countries.

The ILO process was much more concrete and tightly organised. It had a strict time limit – the new ILO Convention 169 had to be completed to be voted on in mid 1989. As it was also legally binding, it was to become the core of the eventual UN Declaration which added weight to the ILO discussions about how to amend the early convention. The major redrafting work had to be done during ILO meetings in 1986 and 1987, but before these occurred, there needed to be extensive meetings with Aboriginal people around the nation so that when the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) amendments were first taken to the ILO in 1986, they had already been discussed and endorsed by Aboriginal people. So while the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations continued to draw much attention, it was the 1980s redrafting of the ILO Convention – with its meetings in Australia as well as those at the UN itself – which was critical to the real impact of the much later, non-legally binding UN document.

The role of trade unions was of key importance in the ILO and therefore in the revision of Convention 107 to make it the Indigenous and Tribal People’s Convention 169, of 1989. So it was Kevin, with his long established union relationships from his own experience and that of Tranby, who was ideally

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2 There was a long dispute at both the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations (UN) about the use of the term ‘populations’ rather than ‘peoples’. ‘Populations’ was deemed not to indicate political or cultural cohesiveness in opposition to that claimed by the nation state, whereas ‘peoples’ was thought to offer some challenge and therefore its use was resisted for decades. Pat Anderson and Kevin both recalled bitterly that they lost that vote both in relation to the new ILO Convention 169, partly due to lack of support by Australian government delegates but also due to anxieties on the part of the African delegations. Today, however, in 2011, both the ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration have been amended to use the term ‘indigenous peoples’ rather than ‘populations’.

placed to contribute to the process. He had to organise to inform and then consult with Aboriginal people across the country to develop their preferred amendments to the old Convention 107. He did this with the support of Patty Anderson, an Aboriginal member and employee of the Australian Teachers' Federation (now the Australian Education Union, the AEU) originally from Darwin but based in Melbourne in the early 1980s. Kevin was able to draw on the networks of communication which had been established over the previous four years between members of the Federation of Land Councils and then the National Coalition. Tirelessly circulating drafts and taking endless phone calls, Kevin and Patty talked the Convention clauses over and over with Aboriginal people all round the Coalition network to develop a set of amendments to be finally drafted by Robert Blewer and put to Simon Crean, the ACTU President, for approval before they were taken to be negotiated yet again at the first ILO drafting session in 1986.

Kevin has mainly talked about the experiences he and others had at the ILO sessions, but Pat has described the role she, Kevin and others played in those early, crucial lead up discussions of the amendments in Australia as well as the Geneva sessions.



**Figure 15.2: With the Victorian Teachers Federation, showing Patty on left, next to Kevin Tory (representing TUCAR).**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.

*Patty Anderson:* So the first time I met Cookie was when he was going to go with Robert Blewer to the International Labour Organisation in Geneva, where they were amending that extraordinary convention, the 107, and now it's become 169. It was an extraordinary convention, because it was really to do with human rights. I would say the backbone of the ILO convention is a human rights issue. It wasn't about freedom of association, like conventions to protect trade unionism. There wasn't anything around in 1957, when they put that convention on the books. The ILO thought that that would be good to have an international convention about indigenous rights, and it was the very first one. And it's stayed on the books all those years. So I think that was about 1984 when I met Cookie.

They decided it would be a three-year process before it got amended. And the ACTU were going to be involved, and so Simon Crean asked Robert Blewer from the Teachers' Union to go as a delegate in his place. So it was just Cookie and Robert Blewer that year.

It was before the heavies like Simon went because all the work had been done in the first part of that three-year period.

Now the ones who went to the ILO had to be from three groups: the government, the union and the industries. All the amendments that got put up were the ACTU amendments and they came out of all that hard work done here in Australia. Blewer and Cookie had been negotiators and they were very good. They talked to the Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations. I sent out all the stuff to everybody on it so we could have meetings. We had a big meeting of the Coalition at the ACTU – we were all there – and Simon Crean was up one end and all of us from the Coalition down around it.

The ACTU were very good over that three year period, particularly that first year. Robert Blewer really did an excellent job with Cookie, they did all that work for Simon Crean. It worked so well because it was through Cookie, with all Cookie's contacts and with me sending it all out and making sure everyone saw it, and the meetings and co-ordinating everything. So Cookie and Robert started it all off.

One of the things was trying to change the words 'indigenous populations' to 'indigenous peoples'. We argued for three whole weeks for that. So that was really important, I think. That was some of the work that had to be done, and then Robert Blewer did the drafting.

Then Robert and Cookie went over there, from the ACTU. Now the following year, the ACTU rep was Terry O'Shane and I went too to make up the numbers. But I'd won an overseas study award year from the old Commonwealth Education, so I worked in Geneva for three months, which was really interesting for me because I was able to find out how all of that worked.



At the same time, I was there for the Coalition, for the three weeks of that second year of getting that new Convention up. So there was myself, Geoff Clarke and Terry O'Shane from the Coalition. Also we were able to influence the industry representation, from the Employers Association. So they sent an Aboriginal bloke there too! He was a bloke from the Northern Territory, Margot Weir's nephew. I think that would've been the first year we had Aboriginal people with the union delegation and with the employers. Not with the government of course, but that was interesting as well.

But they had already got through a lot of work in the meetings with the Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations and it was Cookie's direction and guidance that made all of that happen. So that was an important little timeslot there, with the formation of the Coalition and the work with the ACTU, specially in amending that Convention 107 to Convention 169 at the ILO.

When I was at the Teachers' Federation in Melbourne, I had lot of do with Cookie specifically, but not so much with Tranby. I would come as a visitor from time to time, and knew what was happening at Tranby. But it was mainly that political stuff. Cookie was really supportive and important to me, because I would ring him up and say, 'This is what's happening'. He'd give advice and direction and guidance, but what's good about Cookie is that he would never tell you what to do. He'd say: 'Well, there's this and there's that'. He never said: 'I think you should do X or Y'.

Then he'd leave it up to you to make your choices, make your own mistakes and doing your own learning. But his advice was always quality! That was because he knew the trade union movement really well. Although I'd been a unionist all my life, I'd never really worked in that arena before, so it was really useful to have that bit of guidance and direction. I'd ring up and he'd say: 'Yeah, well, you know he's from the Right...' or this or that. I was always really grateful for that direction and advice.

Characteristically, Kevin ensured that the chance to get to Geneva in 1985 was shared around. He hoped to be travelling to the ILO meeting for the ACTU with Robert Blewer, the Teachers' Federation representative, but he encouraged the NSW Aboriginal Land Council to fund representatives from regional land councils, William Bates and Norma Walford from far western NSW and Delia Lowe from Roseby Park to be NGO observers at the meeting of the UN Working Party on Indigenous People, during the discussions on a future Declaration of Indigenous Rights. But while their fares were secured, Kevin's was still in doubt. When he and Judy Chester drove the Land Council representatives to their plane – the first trip overseas for any of them – none of them knew whether he might be there as well. After they had left, the news came through that Kevin was on the next flight. As William, Norma and Delia left their Geneva hotel in a day or

two, the first sight they had was of Kevin was as he sailed past in a Mercedes with the Teachers' Federation representative. They hadn't realised by then that all the Geneva taxis are Mercedes vehicles. Kevin hugely enjoyed watching their shock. He shared his time between contributing to the ILO sessions, sitting in with the NGO team at the UN, talking strategy and sharing the sights of Geneva as they made their way around the tiny city.



**Figure 15.3: The International Labour Organisation foyer – Cookie with Norma Walford, Delia Lowe and William Bates.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



**Figure 15.4: ILO meeting – Cookie and Robert Blewer at the 'Unions' table.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.





**Figure 15.5: ILO meeting – Cookie talking with Simpson, Delia, Norma.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.



**Figure 15.6: ILO meeting – William foregrounded in NGO group.**

Courtesy Kevin Cook family collection.

Kevin was intensely frustrated at the disinterest of the Australian government delegation, whom he felt were not taking the amendment process seriously. But he found the potential to talk with other unionists and the representatives of Indigenous people in or around the ILO extremely valuable. He was also alert to how challenging the session environment was in demanding strong speaking skills and intensive negotiation around the actual sessions. The experience made him feel that the people to represent the Coalition at the next meeting had to be able to speak formally from the floor as well as carry on the tough negotiations behind the scenes which would be needed in the second and third years to get the Aboriginal position up at the vote in 1989. There were people in the Federation and Coalition whom he thought could do it, even though they were at that stage unfamiliar with these international arenas.

*Kevin:* When you have a look at all the names of the people that were mixed up with the Federation and the Coalition, I reckon they're probably our best orators.

Kevin came back to Australia to continue the consultations through the Coalition, but he started straight away to recruit the people he thought would benefit from the experience and be able to meet the challenges of that gruelling and very public stage.

One of the people Kevin believed combined the trade union knowledge and the capacity to speak well with the grit to hold his ground on principle was Terry O'Shane, who takes up the story:

*Terry O'Shane:* Yeah, the ILO was doing a review of Convention 107, which dealt specifically with the conditions of indigenous peoples. And there'd been representation at UN and other forums by Aboriginal people in Australia but there was never a coordinator or anything. So Cookie rang up and said, 'Oh mate, you're on your way to Geneva. You're going to have to go to the ILO'. I said, 'Oh, Jeeze!'

So I got over there and I got in because I was associated with the Maritime and Seamen's Union in those days – the Maritime Union of Australia today. I knew Simon Crean, of course, who was the president of the ACTU then. And his policy adviser Mike Macleod was there. So I actually went and sat in there with Mike Macleod as an official delegate, representing the ACTU as an Indigenous person.

We were there for three weeks, four weeks. What you've got to understand is that the ILO was made up of governments, employers, and trade unions. And there was no NGO status for anybody. If you were someone outside those three areas, they weren't allowed in. It was a couple of days after we were there and started discussions, that there were these women from Bolivia who were held out. They weren't registered as delegates, but there was no women from Bolivia

in the conference. And the men from official delegations from Bolivia had gone and told the chairman of the ILO session that the women shouldn't be allowed to attend because they weren't official delegates. So I just took my union delegate badge off and gave it to her and said, 'Well, you're now a delegate from Australia. You're welcome to attend. They can't keep me out!'

And that was just the way it went. Because of how we operated here in Australia, we tried to become all-inclusive. We weren't going to then go to an international forum and be restrictive in terms of our participation. If we could assist any group, then we would. And as Cookie said, it was then that people we'd met at the ILO wanted to come to Australia and get to identify who this Coalition was who'd been standing up for them. And of course, out of that, you've had numerous delegations come over here and go through to Tranby and say g'day!

So after that, we went to the President of the ILO – we organised a delegation, half a dozen of us – and let him know that we were unhappy that while this international forum was discussing a convention that dealt with indigenous peoples, when in actual fact there was no indigenous peoples sitting in the conference, in the UN, and having a say or having an input into the discussions. And so the ILO couldn't actually take it on board. Though we were there, it was because we were actually representing the union movement. We weren't representing indigenous peoples as such – even though we were!

So we got him to agree to give indigenous peoples a time allocation after every day of an hour – I think it was half an hour originally. So he'd formally close the session at five o'clock religiously, even if we were going to progress on that evening. Then he'd ask everyone to stay. And then he'd allow indigenous peoples to speak, just from the collection of people there. There was a group of them – 15 or 20 from around the world – he just allowed them to get up and do a presentation about the issues that they heard being discussed during the day and give their opinion about it. That had a big impact on how things went.

In the end, at the end of the two-year process, indigenous peoples were not happy about all of it. But I thought that we had made a great advantage.

The fact remains this: that we went there. We participated. And we made changes!

And we made changes to a convention that had been in place for 20-odd years or 30 years. And not only did we made changes – I thought they were positive changes! And then it actually made it very difficult for the UN in their Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to have a lesser condition than the new ILO Convention 169, because they were part of the international conditions.

But maybe even more important was it brought indigenous peoples into a forum for the first time, where we'd have been excluded for all the time that it had taken place in the past. So for the very first time we were able to put a challenge to it — and it was successful! We had been successful and we had brought indigenous people into that forum and were being able to express our opinion freely on the floor.

So enormous changes happened, but it happened because of a reason. It happened because there was discipline in the ranks, amongst ourselves. We caucused before we went. And basically, the rules of engagement were laid down for us, *by* us. We were going there to do a job, and we needed to do it and participate. And, yeah, — you use your footwork when you get there, and use a bit of commonsense, and we'll make some progress. And that's what we did!

Kevin's confidence in Terry O'Shane was more than fulfilled and he found the other people he encouraged to travel to these meetings were just as impressive. He was able to see them in action at one of the next meetings, when Kevin was also in Europe for a World Council of Churches meeting and he talked about what he saw.

*Kevin:* You'd just marvel at people's skills level when they went over there. I went over there once to the ILO, and to me that whole experience was mind-blowing. After that, Clarkie and O'Shane were the two mainstays. I went over with World Council of Churches later and there was an ILO meeting going on. So I got to look at Clarkie and O'Shane — they were really incredibly good!

I could see how they manoeuvred — they used it like a trade union meeting! And they not only used that for us but to involve all the indigenous peoples. They did everything from knowing very little about the protocol at first — they had to learn very quick, very quick! And they ended up being able to get up and talk at that level. They'd be up to two and three in the morning trying to scribble down notes for speeches. But it's very daunting, because when you do get up to speak, you're looking up and people are looking at you. There's 30 to 40 interpreters interpreting, and the Aboriginal delegates would be on their feet there, they'd have to think on their feet all the time.

There were some indigenous people there, like the Native Americans, who had the resources that a small country would have, while our mob didn't have much at all. Then you get people who are worse off than us — who didn't understand one thing about the mechanism of how the things worked or even how to get into the session room. And they were lost. I could understand them. I was one of them. But it was just cruel to see them over there and to see what they were

trying to do. Some of them were getting shot because they were protesting about the army putting roads through their country. They were getting shot out of the trees!

Clarkie and O'Shane took away the myths. There was still the protocol there but they were doing things that nobody else had ever done before, and it was just incredible. I always found it amazing to hear about. After they came back from Geneva, I made sure I never missed a meeting cause I'd just hang onto every word!

Going over there was a hard thing to ask people to do. There were a lot of funny stories but there were a lot of serious things going on. And people were just not used to other countries. I can remember people going over to Geneva and I'd get a phone call about three o'clock in the morning. I pick up the phone and it's a reverse charges call. The operator wanted to know: 'Will you pay for this?' And then when they got on, I'd hear: 'I'm lonely!' And I could hear the country and western music playing in the background. 'I feel like coming home.' I'd be saying: 'Please don't do that. You've only got two more days to go'.

And when you're overseas you often think you're not doing a good job. You ask yourself: 'Will I go again?' or 'I don't think we gained any ground'. Everyone tosses those ideas around. But you have to keep at it. You're not going to take a great chunk out of the wall. You might just knock on a door. But you have to be there. And I believe you have to have some continuity – that's what I used to say to O'Shane: 'Terry you'll have to go again'. He'd say: 'I don't want to go'. He used to yell at me! 'I don't want to go!' ... But you know, he loved it.

I think the trade union experience was a big help to all of us. See, if you had to do something, you needed all the troops to be behind you. And really what had happened, nine out of every ten times, was that the Coalition had made a decision. It was really healthy that way, too. Because we would have already gone through the arguments to and from and we'd have come to an agreement, then we'd go with that. You'd hear things from Geneva the next day, about what was happening over there. People would ring up and say, 'Look this is what we've done!' And it'd be fantastic, you know? And when they came back, you'd say, 'How did it go?' And they'd always say 'Oh yeah, WE did this and this and this'. You know 'WE can ...'. It was never 'I did this' or 'I did that'.

We happened to get this into place and next time anybody goes over, it makes it a lot easier for them. And not only for us, but for any Indigenous people going across there! Like that woman from South America. O'Shane just said to her: 'You take mine in! Now you're a delegate'. They really *were* with us – and so in they went!



Terry O'Shane also believed the union movement had given people like Kevin and himself valuable experience, but he thought there were deeper reasons.

*Terry O'Shane:* That was never luck. I gotta say this. Cookie, because of his background in trade unions, he knew very clearly the need to forge international links. It was exactly the same rule he applied to having us address the process of reconciliation. Or have Australia address the issues of social justice for Indigenous peoples. We needed to forge those links with the broader community. It was important for us. If they were coming to Australia they needed to talk to us. Cookie forged links so that at the end of the day, when they did visit, the first place they visited actually was Tranby College. Now that wasn't by luck they turned up at Tranby College. If you just took some luck, you'd end up in Kings Cross, or you'd end up in Woolloomooloo! It wasn't luck. It was that someone – Cookie – had an understanding that that was needed to happen, what was going to develop an awareness, not just within the domestic community, but in the international community. And so it was because of that, that we had those links. The trade union movement has been important. But at the end of the day, we take on a responsibility. At the age of maturity, whether it's 18, or whether it's 28 or whether it's 38. And Cookie has taken on that responsibility and he's given that thing direction. That's what's happened. Not for himself, but for all of us.

Kevin drew in a number of people to take the long trip to Geneva. One of the those he recruited was a young woman from Arnhem Land, Jacqui Katona, who like Karen Flick was just finding her way in political life, coming to Tranby as much a student as an interested worker and contributor. Kevin encouraged her to go to one of the UN meetings of the Working Group and saw her confidence and experience blossom. She was to come back to Australia and play a major role in the organisation of later political campaigns and then to become the national and international spokesperson for her community in their battles against uranium mining on their land at Kakadu.

Another of the people on whom Kevin leaned hard to attend meetings was Jack Ah Kit, who began to take on the travel to Geneva late in the 1980s, after the new ILO Convention 169 had been accepted and the focus had shifted onto the UN. By this time, those who had been involved with the ILO over the past five years had a fund of experience which they could pass on. Jack remembers it this way:

*Jack Ah Kit:* Cookie was the one who dobbed us in for a lot of this travelling – he was the mastermind. He'd just sit there – and I'd sometimes wonder if he had a little bit of a draughts board there. On one side he had – Patrick Dodson here, Ah Kit up there, Rossie in Alice, Bob Weatherall there, Terry O'Shane up there. And then he had this other side, with a map with international meetings and so forth ...And he played draughts with us! He'd tell you what he wanted you to

do and where you had to go and, when you said you didn't want to go, he'd say 'Don't fuck around, you've got to go'. And you'd be left saying, 'Oh gee, hang on Cookie'. He'd say he was just delegating, but you can't delegate if you're not the mastermind.

He never moved too far out of Glebe, out of Tranby, he was always hovering around that area. But he had all the contacts and he was genuine in wanting to see Indigenous people in this country united. Because if we weren't united we would be perceived by indigenous communities outside of Australia as a fragmented group of people who didn't really know what they were on about. So Cookie was the organiser. He was the bloke put it all together. He organised people to go and he had all the contacts. That's the role he played, and he played it really well.

There's no doubt in my mind that he sat and he looked and he watched and he started to pull it all together. And that is a credit to him and to Tranby and to Judy Chester! Because somebody had to pull it together. Somebody had to get it organised. There wasn't a lot of concentration on the big picture in the international arena. And this bloke was the one that had all the knowledge and experience.

When people came to Australia they came in through Sydney and it was through Tranby and his connections with the Labor Party, through his connections previously with the Builders Labourers' Federation that it's all happened. He used to say it was just because we wanted to go overseas!

But we all used to buy him a beer to fuckin' *not* go overseas!

*Jack* continued: What was very important in those early days was that the Indigenous representation from Australia at the UN was really astounding. I'm thinking of Cookie, Geoff Clarke, Terry O'Shane, Mick Mansell, Josie Crawshaw, Pat Dodson, Helen Corbett, Marcia Langton and there were others – they were all very important in ensuring that we had a place at the UN, we had an opportunity to contribute and participate. I went across in '91 with the experienced Indigenous representatives. I saw them hold the floor of the convention for an hour and a half – almost two hours. They had orchestrated a situation where Indigenous peoples were on the agenda one after the other, so they had the then Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Robert Tickner, confronted with these Indigenous people all dobbing in the Australian Government, saying how bad they were treating the Aboriginal people. It was basically having the Aboriginal Coalition, the Federation, the land council and others all putting their case. And they participated in the UN working group – to understand the

processes of the UN and to respect the protocol just amazed me! And they got so much respect from other indigenous representatives, like the Ainu people I knew from Japan.

There was no doubt in my mind that the Indigenous delegation from Australia were the cheeky mob. They took it up to their governments and they couldn't give a damn! It wasn't a case of us just saying: 'Let's go over there to embarrass them'. It was to highlight the problems that were happening back home. And I think that the Coalition and the Federation in the early days played an important role in that.

A lot of those delegations and a lot of the people who went overseas in the '70s and '80s, they didn't know what they were going into. They had an idea, but they were prepared to put themselves on the line for the struggle. And that was something that made me very proud of them. Because it was like me when I came onto the scene in the early '80s as someone wanting to learn. So I admire the way people learned about what they needed to do ... and a lot of us had no understanding of how important it was to let people know in the international community what the situation was like back home.

For a lot of people going over that far was a really big thing. And if you went over by yourself it would kill you. There's nothing worse than that feeling in your body and in your mind and your heart than flying out over Darwin at 36,000 feet and looking down and seeing just on dusk the lights of Darwin, the Melville and Bathurst Islands, and not knowing where you're going to end up, how long you're going for you do know, and wondering whether you're going to come back... your spirit is in chaos.

I often had a little giggle there... Like when I gave Bob Weatherall and Clarkie a big feed in Darwin one time and they were ready to take off. Bob turned around to Clarkie and said: 'This plane we're on tomorrow to Indonesia, do we have to wear parachutes again?' Apart from the funny side of it, that was one of the serious things. They hadn't thought about that: 'If we die, we die, but will they bring us back here to bury us?'

It's a really frightening thing. The people who have been overseas, our ambassadors, it must have crossed their minds: 'Goodness if anything happens to me over here, if I get ill or get hit by a truck my body has got to get home. I've got to be buried back in Australia, where I come from.' It's adventurous... 80 per cent of you is thinking how exciting it is to be on a jumbo jet but when you look down you start to wonder... and you start to run into foreign places where in most cases people are friendly and in some other cases not so friendly. It really is a cultural shock.

That feeling of not knowing if you were doing any good was really just like the work here. The Aboriginal political push, the Indigenous political push in the 1980s that came out of the Federation. It was inspirational but it was also like you were sitting in the corner with the Dunce cap on. You didn't know if you were going anywhere. You didn't know what you were doing – whether it was going to win you any Brownie points anyway.

But we sat there and we persisted. We didn't realise the strength that we had as individual representatives, representing a region of peoples with thousands of constituents. Until we started to realise what power and responsibilities we really had, then we started to play ball and get the show on the road. We were a group of Aboriginal leaders who were wondering how the hell do we stem the tide? How do we turn it back around? Given these arses who'd kicked us around for so long. How did we get on the front foot?

There were some tensions which developed in the broader Aboriginal community around the frequency with which some people travelled and also about the boys-club atmosphere among the group of men who had become such close friends through the Federation and Coalition days. As Jack Ah Kit saw it, the deep personal friendships were important to sustain people in the high pressure environments of the big international meetings.

*Jack Ah Kit:* I think it was a situation where... not excluding the ladies, but it was a brotherhood. It was a feeling of very strong camaraderie. We all knew where we were coming from. We all knew the stories and the situation and the struggle. The stories that went out with our representatives were common stories. There was no bullshit about it being worse in Victoria than what it was in Western Australia. Everyone knew what the message was that had to be passed on to anywhere we went around the world.

That's one of the reasons why it seemed like we were an exclusive old boys club or something, but it wasn't. It was never intended to be. I mean, there were strong Aboriginal women who spoke up and later on started to come on these delegations – Josie Crawshaw, Helen Corbett, Marcia Langton in the early days and a few others. It was about them finding the time to participate and go off onto these trips. But I think with us blokes anyway, it really formed us up into a bunch of brothers. I think I'm right in saying this, but I can ring just about anyone of the Aboriginal leaders around the country who were involved back in the '70s to '80s and even still involved, if so, to a lesser extent. I can track them down and be able to talk to them, and I think that's something I'm proud of.

But Geneva was a good place to be getting to know people from other countries too. That was the other thing that I thought was really important – political people who were just coming in to make contacts – like Ron Layman and others

from the Canadian Indian territories. We'd made the contacts at the UN and then we started to get invitations to go here and there, and participate a lot more. It was always reciprocal, and we encouraged them as much as we could to come into Australia.

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Meeting new people who shared ideals and experiences was an important part of the travel to Geneva for everyone. Tranby was able to be a doorway into the Indigenous networks in all states of Australia through Kevin's role in the Federation and the Coalition. Jack Ah Kit has talked about the way he could direct people to Tranby so they would have an orientation and then from there he knew that Cookie would be able to direct them to the Kimberley or Queensland or Tasmania, wherever their interests seemed to lie. This added to the networks which were operating already, as discussed in earlier chapters, from the old Co-operatives network, from Kevin's time at the Coady Institute and then later with the Australian Council of Churches. For Jack and others it meant they had somewhere to invite people to come, and for Australian activists like Karen Flick, it meant that Tranby opened up a doorway in the opposite direction, to a whole world of activist and indigenous contacts.

Kevin has explained the way he saw the importance of Tranby in this process of interchange:

*Kevin:* Tranby had a really good reputation so you got a very good reputation. Anybody who was anybody used to come and stay at Tranby if they were passing through Sydney – they'd always call in, come and have a cup of coffee and a talk. It was a neutral place. And it was really good.

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But the doorway worked the other way too. Karen Flick has talked about how she saw Tranby as a place to meet and learn about international agendas as well as very local ones:

*Karen:* I got involved at Tranby once the land rights campaigns were underway, and I came down to Sydney with my baby and worked there for a year. That was good because Tranby has always been more than just a meeting place. It was a place that allowed ideas to grow and develop. It allowed people to say whatever they wanted to say, supported a whole lot of people who would not have access to any other forum. And also it opened us up to meeting a whole range of people, not just from other countries, but from other struggles.



Being at Tranby and working with Cookie meant you were getting your strength from people like that, but also knowing that we played a role – just that little bit – in the support stuff. We could play a role through them connecting them to resources and getting their message out.

For me, Tranby allowed me to meet the Maoris and the mob from Vanuatu, from the Philippines and from Kanaky, in fact the whole South Pacific and then Asia. And of course there was a long term connection with Africa through Tranby too. It meant I got to meet people like Eddie Funde and people who were working here locally, but then, people who'd come and visit – you know Oliver Tambo came to Tranby and Bishop Tutu came to Tranby. And then I had the opportunity to meet Nelson Mandela because Cookie gave me his ticket. It was just amazing, I think I cried the whole time I was talking to him and I didn't say an awful lot.

## Bringing international politics back home

Like Karen's story, the international work was connected with the local work for Kevin and all of the people he was working with. Jack Ah Kit has talked about how the ideas about developing an international campaign became more important to the regional land council activists as a means of adding pressure for change at home.

*Jack:* Another angle was coming at it from the international arena with a representation over there. It was working in tandem. And governments were feeling the pressure, and they will continue to feel the pressure because they haven't been able to understand yet that Aboriginal people are not going to go away, they're not going to stop trying to educate all levels of government and the people in this country that there's a few wrongs that have gone on in this country that have to be rights. And when you stop bull-shitting around and seriously start addressing these concerns that we may end up being a very proud nation that can stand up in the international community's eyes and be accepted as a nation that will be seen as doing things for the Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people that we can all be proud of. And that's not happening at the moment.