

Dream Time Lost

When the first fleet landed at Sydney Cove in 1788 to found a penal colony there were only a few aborigines on hand to meet the newcomers. This time they will be out in force. When the landing is re-enacted as Australia begins a year of bicentennial celebrations, thousands of aboriginal groups will be there to demonstrate. It is just one of the more spectacular protests being organised up and down the country by aboriginal groups angered that other Australians are having a party to mark their dispossession.

There are about 230,000 aboriginal people living in Australia today (less than 2% of the total population). They are by far the most disadvantaged section of Australian society.

Currently, attention is focused on imprisonment. An aborigine is seven times

more likely to go to jail than a white person. More shocking still, it has recently been revealed that almost 100 black Australians have died in police custody since 1980. (That would be over 26,000 deaths for a population the size of Britain.) Many took their own lives. Some, it seems, did not. In the ensuing outcry, the government has set up a royal commission to investigate the deaths.

Although there were earlier waves of aboriginal protest - notably in the 1930s - it was only in the 1970s that aborigines succeeded in mobilising themselves into a nationwide movement. The movement had one key demand: land rights.

The idea was that groups of aborigines should be granted inalienable freehold title over land to which they had traditional ties. The title would be held communally, and, since it was inalienable, the land could be leased but never sold. Land has a special sacred significance for aboriginal people which is hard for Europeans to comprehend. In aboriginal lore, a

person's identity is tied to tracks across the land which follow the paths taken by heroic ancestors back in the Dream Time. Because of these sacred ties, aborigines see land rights as essential for the maintenance of their cultural and spiritual identity. Control over land also facilitates economic independence. It enables aborigines to run their own pastoral enterprises and to receive royalties for mining operations if they choose to permit them.

Throughout the 1970s, first under a Labour government and then under Malcolm Fraser's conservative Liberals, the land rights movement continued to gain momentum. The granting of land rights in the Northern Territory and South Australia were important victories. But conservative state governments - especially in Queensland and West Australia - denounced aboriginal demands.

Queensland in particular sought to confront the movement head on: banning marches and stepping up police



Speaking out: Aboriginal radio in Alice Springs

harassment. Queensland premier Bjelki-Petersen even went so far as to endorse the view that the land rights movement was a communist plot to set up a separate sovereign state in northern Australia which would then invite the Soviet Union onto Australian soil!

Despite the fact that a 1967 referendum had given the federal government the power to override the states on matters concerning aborigines, Malcolm Fraser was not prepared to cross swords with his political allies in the backwood states. Increasingly, aboriginal hopes focused on the possibility of a federal Labour government. Labour committed itself to introduce uniform national land rights legislation that would override recalcitrant states.

In 1983, Labour won power. The new government *did* pass important legislation outlawing racial discrimination and promoting equal employment opportunities. But on the crucial land rights issue they backed down.

By now, Labour had also won power in the state of West Australia, and opinion polls suggested that, if land rights were granted, the state government might fall in forthcoming elections. Under pressure from West Australia and an enormous campaign by mining and agricultural interests, the legislation was dropped.

Abandoned by Labour, there was nowhere else to go. The conservative opposition parties were lending vocal support to the objections being raised by mining companies and farmers. The only chance was to turn to an international audience in the hope of embarrassing the government.

The bicentennial presents a unique opportunity to do just that. According to aboriginal activist Gary Foley: 'We are in a perfect position to disrupt and ruin the bicentenary. We don't have to do anything. The world's media will be here, and we will take them to see the living conditions of aborigines while white Australians are celebrating their invasion.'©

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