

THE DECLINE OF A MOVEMENT

by MICHAEL MANSELL

There was a time when Gary Foley's call to hit the streets ran a chill down your back. When Paul Coe told us we were a sovereign people, not a minority, we all believed him. And when Marcia Langton addressed a rally against the back-drop of colourful Aboriginal flags of protest, her denouncement of racism against Aboriginal people stirred us to a rage.

Now the streets are silent. The rage seems to have subsided.

There is plenty to protest about. The Howard government attracted the million disgruntled, racist supporters of Pauline Hansen. After watering down native title in the Wik fiasco, Howard refused to apologise to the stolen generations, was cool to reconciliation and his Ministers openly call for a welfare response to Aboriginal issues. Foley/Coe/Langton would once have been outraged and rallied the Aboriginal nation. Now the Cape York leadership, on hands and knees, begs Howard to stay on so we can be further neglected by his policies. What went wrong?

It seems to have begun in the late 1980s. The Aboriginal demands were not just for land and self determination. Greater access to education and jobs in the public service were also part of the black movement's plank. The problem was that those who marched in the streets because they had nothing now became hesitant to protest. Having got jobs and access to universities, this group did not want to risk losing the gains. The Aboriginal protest movement had lost many from its ranks.

The political base remained though, among the hundreds of Aboriginal legal and health services, land councils and other community organisations. These loose knit localised bodies fed into national grass roots structures like the National Aboriginal Child Care, Federation of Land Councils and National Aboriginal Legal Services. The local political base became national, and gradually international, with Shorty O'Neill, Paul Coe and Burnum Burnum informing the world of the Aboriginal plight.

Federal governments turned their attention to what they perceived as an uncontrollable political movement. ATSIC was installed. Sold on the grounds it represented a new, fully funded and independent national Aboriginal and Islander body, the then Labour federal government committed to listen to the voice of ATSIC. In one fell swoop the feds undermined the community structures, de-politicised Aboriginal affairs and gained its own advisory body.

ATSIC instantly became essentially administrative, having to cope with its monopoly of funding of Aboriginal needs and being the sole body to have access to the powerful federal governments.

ATSIC was starved of the talent that existed in community organisations who

chose to stay on rather than enter ATSIC, for to do so would have jeopardised the local organisations ability to survive.

By the time Mabo came along the writing was on the wall- the national community groups had disappeared and ATSIC, totally engrossed in administration, had no idea what to do. It took a national meeting at Eva Valley in 1993 to organise a political group to represent Aborigines, and ATSIC was reluctantly admitted to that group later on.

When John Howard brought the conservative agenda to prominence in 1996, Aboriginal affairs was targeted by the Coalition for open hostility. Reconciliation Chairman Pat Dodson was moved on, as was his brother Mick from the Social Justice Commission. Lois O'Donohue was replaced as ATSIC head, and Noel Pearson found the doors to the offices of Coalition Ministers firmly closed. This was the clean out of perceived ALP cronies, and the message was firmly picked up by a nervous ATSIC which, in order to save its own neck, began sacrificing Aboriginal organisations.

Now, Minister Wilson Tuckey can seemingly move at will against the Aboriginal tent embassy. The greatest symbol of Aboriginal resistance, and reminder to Australian governments of the ugly side to years of neglect, is again under threat. ATSIC's response was to grant funds to a Brisbane conglomerate to review the tent embassy.

It is true that more jobs, better education, inroads into poor housing and at long last a reduction in the number of deaths in custody, are real advances. But there is more to it than that. In fact, while Aborigines can say we have advanced socially the same cannot be said for our political or economic development. And the improved access has not produced a single activist! The universities tend to spit out "programmed" Aborigines, ones who dare not think but can reel off what they were taught in rote.

Aboriginal organisations are now run by technicians, not activists. Where once funding was "compensation", it is now readily taken as "public" monies. Popularity has replaced political direction. No longer is strategy based on Aboriginal rights but on how to impress middle Australia. This has allowed the Aboriginal protest movement to be captured, harnessed and driven wherever public opinion takes it. Having lost all sense of political independence, we resort to blaming community people for getting the dole for free as the source of our woes.

Showing signs of resistance, making a stand, establishing a reform agenda are part and of Aboriginal political development. Yet we have to rely on Cathy Freeman, proudly holding her people's flag aloft against all protocols, to symbolise our rejection of having to be jacky-jacky Australians. The single, most dynamic young Aboriginal leader Murandoo Yanner, has been sidelined by white law.

Poor old ATSIC. When the Minister split ATSIC's functions in two there was nary a whimper from the highly paid ATSIC Commissioners. Now Ruddock is picking off ATSIC's leaders, ATSIC's protest is one of silence. Not a

protest. Not a sign of resistance. If ATSIC cannot show some sign of activism then it is time for the body to go, and something better put in its place.

Indigenous TV shows shy away from politics. ATSIC subsidised the multi-million dollar AFL to display Aboriginal culture at its games. Aboriginal leaders want us to be good Australians. The better we imitate white people, the more successful we are seen to be.

Where once the Australian flag was seen by the Aboriginal protest movement as representing white domination, now ATSIC proudly displays it beside the indigenous flags in all its offices. The Aboriginal flag that symbolised the black struggle lost much of its meaning when it was officially recognised under white law.

Suddenly, the Aboriginal movement had become acceptable.

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