

The rights for freedom of aboriginal australians history essay



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This essay focuses on the rights for freedom for the Aboriginal Australians who have lived in Australia for at least 40, 000 years. The arrival of the Europeans in 1788 resulted in the significant change to traditional Aboriginal customs and way of life. Up until 1901 colonial governments and communities formally and informally discriminated against Aboriginal people (Rights and freedoms, 1945- the present, n. d.).

Three significant events that focus on this are the ' Day of Mourning, 1938', ' The Freedom Ride, 1965', and the ' Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 1972'. The first of these events took place in 1938, which was the Day of Mourning. On this day of the 150th anniversary of the settlement of Australia by the British, an organised Aboriginal rights movement had been established. On this day the British celebrated. The Aboriginal group did not celebrate but organised a conference and protest in the Australian Hall, Sydney and planned a march from the Town Hall (Rights and freedoms, 1945- the present, n. d.).

The second event was the 1965 Freedom Ride, which involved a group of students from the University of Sydney who began a journey by bus to several country towns in New South Wales. The purpose of this was to gather information, publicize the conditions and discrimination of the Aboriginal people living in these towns. This was lead by Charles Perkins (Rights and freedoms, 2011).

The third event was the establishing in Canberra, 1972, of the Tent Embassy, to protest against a court decision over mining operations on Aboriginal land. Angered by the announcement, Aboriginal groups decided on Australia Day,

1972, that four representatives from Sydney would travel to Canberra to protest the decision (Korff, J., 2012).

The Day of Mourning events began when William Cooper in 1933, who founded the Australian Aborigines League in Melbourne in 1932, organised a petition to be forwarded to King George V. He also sent a petition to the Australian government in a request that they take control of Aboriginal affairs. However, the requests of the Aboriginal community were ignored. This prompted Cooper to take on a different approach, one which would ensure that it could not be ignored. On 13 November 1937, he called for 26th January, 1938 to be commemorated as a Day of Mourning. The purpose was to make the non-Indigenous population more aware of how the Australian Aboriginals had been discriminated against throughout history and to encourage them to meet their requests for equal citizenship (The Day of Mourning, Background, 2012).

While the government acknowledged receipt of the petition, they gave no indication that it would be forwarded to the King. So on November 12, 1937, Cooper called a meeting in Melbourne, at which Jack Patten, the President of the Aborigines Progressive Association and William Ferguson, also a member, described life in the Aboriginal communities. Doug Nicholls, the most senior Aboriginal leader in Australia, also spoke. The following day quotes from their speeches appeared in the Argus, a Melbourne newspaper. At that meeting Cooper called for a Day of Mourning and a protest in Sydney to be held on the following 26th of January. Plans for the observance of Aboriginals throughout Australia for a 'Day of Mourning' simultaneously with

the 150th anniversary celebrations in Sydney, were announced by the Australian Aborigines League (The Day of Mourning, Background, 2012).

The Australian Aboriginal groups refused to participate in the re-enactment of the First Fleet's landing at Farm Cove in Sydney, which was the focus of the British people celebrations. Little attention was paid to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during the celebrations. All colonies except South Australia proclaimed ' Anniversary Day' a public holiday and celebrated Australia's 100th birthday, even if Australia as a nation did not exist at that stage. Australian Aboriginals boycotted celebrations, but very few noticed. They were excluded from public life and largely ignored in such considerations of national identity. When the sesquicentenary of British settlement took place in 1938, organised groups of Australians Aboriginals decided to make a point (Rights and freedoms, 1945 - to present, n. d.).

The Aboriginal groups planned a march from the Sydney Town Hall. When the groups were refused permission to meet at the Town Hall, they decided to march to the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street. Even though this was to be a meeting of only Indigenous Australians, they were refused entry to the Australian Hall through the front door and were forced to enter through a rear door. The meeting was the first really effective all-Indigenous civil rights meeting in Australian history (Rights and freedoms, 1945- to present, n. d.).

Five days after the Day of Mourning, William Ferguson and John Patten led an Aboriginal delegation to meet with the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons. This was the first time an Aboriginal delegation had been received by the Prime Minister. They presented Lyons with a ten-point program designed to

establish equality for Aboriginal peoples. Some of the points that were put forward were, proposals for the takeover by the Federal Government of Aboriginal affairs, aid for education, housing, improved working conditions and land purchases for Aboriginal peoples and also improved social welfare issues (Day of Mourning, 2012).

The ten-point program was unsuccessful but the Aboriginal protest groups continued their fight. In January 1939, William Cooper wrote to the National Missionary Council of Australia to ask for help in promoting a permanent Aborigines Day. The Council agreed to help with the funding and promotion. The Sunday after Australia Day was chosen as the date. The first Aboriginal Sunday was celebrated on 28 January 1940. This celebration only continued for 15 years. The Day of Mourning is often seen as the beginning of Aboriginal protests using European methods of seeking attention. Although they didn't get the results they were after, Aboriginal peoples were able to draw further attention to their plight, which resulted in additional support for their campaign to achieve equality (Day of Mourning, 2012).

What we know today as the '1965 Freedom Ride' had been inspired by the action of the same name by the civil rights movement in the USA earlier that decade. In much of rural Australia at that time, dispossessed, poverty stricken Aboriginal people were confronted with petty racism within these towns by local people and businesses (Gary Foley, 2012). In 1965, a young Aboriginal student called Charles Perkins, from the Northern Territory, who was a student at a Sydney University, became involved at the university with a group of students from an organization called "Student Action for Aborigines", (SAFA). The group included Ann Curthoys, who would later write <https://assignbuster.com/the-rights-for-freedom-of-aboriginal-australians-history-essay/>

a history of these events, Jim Spigelman who would later become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New South Wales and Darce Cassidy, an arts student who was also a part-time reporter for the ABC. With these members of SAFA, Perkins would go on a bus tour into some of the most racist country towns in northern NSW and into history (Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 2008).

In these towns Aboriginal people were routinely barred from clubs, swimming pools and cafes. They were frequently refused service in shops and refused drinks in hotels. The students demonstrated against racial discrimination practised at the Walgett Returned Services League, the Moree Baths, the Kempsey Baths and the Bowraville picture theatre. They not only challenged these practices, but they ensured that reports of their demonstrations and local town's people's hostile responses were available for news broadcasts on radio and television. Outside of Walgett, Jim Spigelman trained his home movie camera on the convoy of cars which followed the bus out of town at night and ran it off the road. Darce Cassidy recorded the angry conversations and filed a report to the ABC (Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 2008).

Captured on tape was the vice-president of the Walgett Returned Service League Club who said he would never allow an Aboriginal to become a member. Such evidence was beamed into the living rooms of Australians with the evening news. It exposed an endemic racism. Film footage shocked city viewers, adding to the mounting pressure on the government. In Moree (northern New South Wales), which was known to be a town where

segregation was practised, the students focused on the swimming pool. The pool became a scene of tension and aggression as they attempted to assist

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Aboriginal children from the reserve outside town to enter the pool while locals angrily defended the race-based ban (Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 2008).

Overseas newspapers such as the New York Times reported on the Freedom Riders and their reception in New South Wales country towns. Charles Perkins reported these events to a crowd of 200 attending the 1965 Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders conference in Canberra. Conference goers heard that one positive result of the students' activities was that the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board publicly announced that it would spend sixty-five thousand pounds on housing in Moree (Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 2008).

In the ensuing public debate, urban public knowledge of racial discrimination grew, some soul searching went on in the country towns, racial segregation was challenged and in some cases ended, and alternative ideas of inclusion, equality, and full citizenship rights were much debated. When the students returned to Sydney, they followed through by taking their research to the state authorities, contributing to inquiries and the campaign for the 1967 referendum that would grant Aboriginal people equal rights as citizens (Rights and freedoms, 2012).

Furthermore, the outcome of the 1967 referendum stated that citizenship was granted and Aboriginal people had the right to vote, of which is not strictly true. This was granted in 1962, when the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended so that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

could vote. Unlike the situation for other Australians, voting was not compulsory (Rights and freedoms, 1945- the present, n. d.).

The lead up to the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy started in the 1970s, inspired by the Black Power movement in the United States. Aboriginal people were now politically very active. For example, in Sydney, Australia's first Aboriginal legal and medical services were founded and Aboriginal people demanded land rights for the areas that they lived on. Land rights were considered the key to economic independence, and land the base to generate resources and employment. To many it came as a shock when in April 1971 the Northern Territory Supreme Court decided against Aboriginal people and in favour of a mining company to have access to Aboriginal land. Australian common law, the justice concluded, did not recognise Aboriginal land rights (Reconciliation Australia, 2012).

Aboriginal people travelled to Canberra to ask the Prime Minister at the time, William McMahon, to give them title to their land, royalties from the mining operations, a right to consent to or reject further development on their land, and the land to be returned once mining operations finished (Korffs, J., 2012). The Prime Minister promised to look at ways to protect Aboriginal interests, but nine months later, on the eve of Australia Day 1972, announced that, instead of granting Aboriginal people title to their land, his government would ask Aboriginal people to apply for new fifty year general purpose leases over such land. They would also have to prove that they put that land to 'reasonable' economic and social use. Aboriginal people had no title to mineral and forest rights (Reconciliation, Australia, 2012).

Angered by this announcement, Aboriginal people gathered in Sydney and decided that on Australia Day 1972 four representatives would travel to Canberra to protest against this decision. They were Michael Anderson from Walgett, Billy Craigie from Moree, Bert Williams from Cowra, and Tony Coorey from Tweed Heads. The four erected a beach umbrella surrounded by placards in front of Parliament House proclaiming it an ' Aboriginal Embassy (Korffs, J. 2012). A policeman on duty at the time reportedly asked the activists how long the protest would last. When told the Embassy would stay until Aboriginal Australians had land rights, the police officer replied " that could be forever" (Korffs, J., 2012).

Key figures of the embassy, including Roberta (Bobbi) Sykes, Gary Foley and Michael Anderson, also helped to establish the Tent Embassy in the middle of the night on Australia Day in 1972. As well as highlighting significant symbolic goals, the embassy leaders had a list of practical demands that they wanted to negotiate. The demands were rejected and the police removed the tents and arrested a number of activists (Rights and freedoms, 1945- the present, n. d.).

When Parliament resumed in mid February 1972, there were 11 tents on the lawns opposite Parliament House. Leader of the Opposition, Gough Whitlam, accepted an invitation from Embassy organisers to visit the tents and speak with representatives. This gave it further recognition and legitimacy.

Aboriginal journalist and activist John Newfong explained the purpose of the Embassy in an article in the ' Identity'. Dr HC Coombs, chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, also accepted an invitation to speak with

Embassy protestors (Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 2008).

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In March 1972, Embassy leaders addressed 200 Australian National University students, asking for their support for the protest. Canberra university students billeted Aboriginal protestors, joined the crowd on the lawns, and opened a bank account for the Embassy through the Student Representative Council. Law students were invited to examine the legal position of the Embassy. Overseas visitors to the national capital, such as members of the Canadian Indian Claims Commission, visited the Aboriginal Embassy, as did Soviet diplomats and an Irish Republican (Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, 2008).

This year on January 26th, 2012, the Tent Embassy held its 40th anniversary, making it the longest site of political agitation. The Embassy helped in the struggle for land rights and to end racial discrimination, sadly this is still an ongoing struggle (Korffs, J., 2012).

These three events all engaged in a fight for freedom, equality and human rights. These three events all protested for land rights, rights for freedom against discrimination and citizenship rights. Between 1900 and the 1960s there was some progress in the campaign for Aboriginal citizenship rights, but the gains were usually subject to strict conditions. In 1949 the Commonwealth granted voting rights to Aboriginal ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen (Civics and Citizenship Education, 2012).

At the time of Federation, Aboriginals were excluded from the rights of Australian citizenship, including the right to vote, the right to be counted in a census and the right to be counted as part of an electorate. In addition, they were not subject to Commonwealth laws. This then brought together

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various groups of peoples who would be involved in numerous protests over the years within these three events, and be the voice of the Aboriginal people (Civics and Citizenship Education, 2012).

These three events signify what the Australian Aboriginal peoples went through and are still going through. This theme of the struggle for full citizenship rights is a significant and continuing part of Australia's history. Constitutional recognition of Australian Aboriginals is a significant step towards building a nation based on strong relations and mutual respect, which recognises the unique and special place of our first people (Towards Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians, 2012).

The recognition of Aboriginal people in the Constitution is another step in that journey, a step that is critical in our efforts to close the gap (Towards Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians, 2012). Educating people will lead to the understanding of Australian Aboriginals history and the struggle they have been through and are still going through. Only then will reconciliation take place within Australia.

Therefore, by incorporating Australian Aboriginal peoples true past history into the Australian Curriculum will be a positive start for young people to gain knowledge and understanding of our wonderful Australian Aboriginal people, and what they went through. The Australian Curriculum states that it will ensure that all young Australians will be given this opportunity.

Therefore, by gaining deeper understanding and knowledge, they will begin to appreciate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, their significance for Australia, and the impact that these have had, and

continue to have, on our world Cross-curriculum priorities (The Shape of the Australian Curriculum, 2012).