

William cooper and the petition to king george v of england



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William Cooper and the petition to King George V of England

William cooper (1861-1941) was an aboriginal man of the Yorta Yorta people and an important activist in seeking equal rights and better condition for Australian Aboriginals. After retiring from sheering work, he based himself in Melbourne Victoria, and began to campaign for improved conditions for his people throughout Australia. This commenced around 1933 and by 1935 he was honorary secretary of the Australian Aborigines League (Markus, n. d.).

Another Organisation, The Australian Aboriginal Progressive Society (APS) were based in NSW in the 1920's, with the primary aim of defending aboriginal land against seizures by local farmers on the South Coast. (Huggins and Goodall, 92, as cited in Bourke et al 1994) Unfortunately, such movements (also known as 'pressure groups'), were mostly ineffective and lacked power due to the position of aboriginal people in Australian society, which held a view of ignorance and racism. (Hemming, 94). Cooper eventually became a member of the APS in 1937 although he started organising his petition between 1933-35, collecting over 1,800 signatures from Australian Aboriginal people.

In believing that the British Crown Empire had additional powers to be able to intervene on behalf of his people, Cooper's goal was to have a completed petition outlining specific issues delivered to King George V of England. He hoped that the petition would bring about change such as 'better living conditions for all' and 'the prevention of the extinction of the aboriginal race' (National Archives of Australia, 2007-10) Along with other members of

the APA, Cooper recognised that the government was not doing enough for Australian Aboriginals stating “ if we cannot get full justice in Australia we must ask the King” (Markus, p. 50) .

Although completed by 1938 and submitted to the Australian Federal Government for consideration, the petition was never delivered to King George and therefore not acted upon. According to Miller (2013) this happened because aboriginal people were considered British subjects and not Australian citizens at that time. This shows how disadvantaged Indigenous people were at the time, in not being counted as actual citizens in their own country, and therefore not having the same rights as non-indigenous people.

Responses to the petition by some State and Commonwealth officials was sympathetic although generally not favourable. Comments made at the time by people such DR. C. E Cook, (Chief Protector of the Territories) surmised that an aboriginal petition would be pointless and have no value, declaring that “ The vast majority of aborigines were incapable of understanding the significance of pending their names, or comprehending the tenor and purpose of the petition itself” (Markus p. 5, 7). Such opinions and statements made by high ranking officials, supported the type of racist ideology that was prevalent at the time, being one that, “ divides people into groups of different races but serves the interest of the one group” (Golash-Boza 2016 p. 133)

While researching William Cooper and the APA, I was surprised to learn Australian Aboriginal people had been campaigning historically for equal

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rights and treatment since the 1880s, using a legitimate means of voicing concerns. After its first formal meeting in 1925, the APA held street rallies and protests, petitioned political leaders such as NSW Premier Jack Lang, held conferences, and wrote letters to newspapers across the state.

(National Museum of Australia). Unfortunately, most of these activities drew little interest and the letters were rarely published.

Landowners and colonist would not have welcomed additional legal rights being granted to aboriginal people, and at the time of this activity, (1930-37) most white Australians still believed that “ Aboriginal people were inferior and would die out “(Broome 82 p. 167). Furthermore, they would have seen any such a change as dangerous, so would be aligned with comments and articles that confirmed this belief. In researching newspaper archives from the era, stories with headlines such as ‘ Aboriginal Atrocities,’ ‘ Robbery by Blacks’ and ‘ Aboriginal Murderers still terrorizing settlers’ are available. (Trove, National Library of Australia). Such stories ensured that the status-quo was maintained, as stated by McCausland (2004) “ The construction of threats posed by Indigenous people, is a key means of giving a sense to many Australians of belonging, of a rightful place, through a twisted logic where it is non-Indigenous people who are under threat from invasion of their own backyards by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.” (p. 87)

Re-Petition

In 2013 the grandson of William Copper (Alf Turner) relaunched the petition with the aim of sending it to the granddaughter of King George IV, Queen Elizabeth II. At the time several leading government and opposition

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ministers, signed the petition in support of this action. (Miller 2013). At least William Coppers initial dreams and aspirations are being continued today, by his family.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1987

From the early 1980's there were a number of Aboriginal Deaths in Police custody which caused significant concern and alarm among aboriginal communities across Australia. As a result of activism from Aboriginal organisations such as the Committee to Defend Black Rights, Aboriginal Legal Services, as well as the families of the people whom had died and their supporters, the Federal Labour Government announced The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADIC). The outcome of the RCADIC was reported to parliament in 1991 and highlighted many failings of custodial authorities, such as a lack of duty of care and notable defects in exercising appropriate general care. The report also found that the deaths related directly to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in custody. (Cunneen 2006).

Prominent Aboriginal Activist Robert Riley (1954-96) was involved in the commission as head of the Aboriginal Issues Unit. This was considered a welcome inclusion by Indigenous Australians as " Rob's flair, vision and presence meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people around the country knew they could count on this hard-nosed voice at the national level" (Gooda, 2015). Historically, Aboriginal involvement in government related to Indigenous policy had been extremely limited and there had been little consultation since the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission (1973-74)

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Few Australian Royal Commissions have attracted “ stronger and more passionate media attention than the final report of the RCIAIDC” (Bacon, 2005). Reaction to the findings by some media outlets was one of outrage, expressed in newspaper headings such as ‘ Oppression laid bare’ and ‘ It’s a disgrace to our Nation, while making referrals to Australia’s most disadvantaged group. (Sydney Daily Mirror Telegraph 1991). The commission noted however, that prior to its implementation and the publication of its findings, the reporting of aboriginal deaths in custody generally presented aboriginal people as dissident, disruptive or criminal, with an overemphasis on so called ‘ riots’. While acknowledging the positive a role the media played in helping the commission to become a reality, it also found that it (the media), had historically relegated aboriginal people to ‘ the fringes of society’. Aboriginal people also believed that police had exclusive access to media, and that an aboriginal voice was not represented. (p. 21, 22). Today (and probably as an unforeseen development) the advent of social media has provided a vehicle for aboriginal people and communities, to share information, express their Aboriginality and also highlight issues and concerns. In her research paper about indigenous use of social media Carlson (2013) points out that while social media is a *social site* it is also a being used as political site where aboriginal struggles and identities are being played out in the ‘ new frontier’ (p. 164).

From my own perspective and level of cultural competence, the historical view expressed by the media, overlooks the link between social disadvantage and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prisons. Furthermore, it helps to reconstruct and support the notion of a problem that

is solely related to a typified behaviour and attitude of a specific group of the population. Social issues such as lack of opportunity, access to resources, limited cultural and educational support is a major contributing factor, particularly in early developmental stages. Many young Aboriginal people in remote and regional areas of Australia have been subject to disconnection and isolation an early age having an experience of disconnection between themselves and the wider local communities in which they live and are often seen as a ' problem' by institutions such as schools and the justice system. (Gale, Bozen, 2012). This can lead to drinking and offending behavior in which a repeated cycle of legal problem and incarceration becomes self-perpetuating.

In assigning blame for the tragedy of deaths in custody, there are many who would point the finger immediately at front line workers in the justice and corrective services system. While evaluating the actions of people such as the police and security officers is valid, it is also important to consider the lack of cultural awareness and competence within the actual custodial and legal system itself, as a contributing factor. The importance of ' Systemic Cultural Competence' as described by Ranzjin, McConnochie, and Nolan (2009), states that " cultural competence is more than just the attitudes and understandings and skills of individual professionals; it needs to be embedded system- wide, not just relying on culturally competent Individuals" (p. 10, 11)

Although 339 recommendations were made in order to reduce custody levels and address the issue of social disadvantage there is evidence to suggest that the results of the Royal Commission have " not been as expected"

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(Cunneen 2006, p. 39). While the death rates for Indigenous people in custody has been slightly lower than for non-indigenous people since 2003, there were still 247 deaths of Indigenous people in prisons or custody between 1991 to 2016. (Australian Institute of Criminology, Statistical Bulletin 2019),

‘ As a nation we must ask ourselves why we continue to tolerate these numbers and why our governments, despite numerous reports and recommendations, have failed to act. (Morry Bails, President of the Law Council of Australia 2018. As cited in Madigan, 2018, p. 40)

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