

LARRAKIA PETITION EXHIBITION NORTHERN TERRITORY LIBRARY, DARWIN.  
SEPTEMBER TO NOVEMBER 2014

It's small but it packs a punch.

That's the 1972 Larrakia Petition exhibition in the upstairs gallery of the NT Reference Library.

A 3.3metre-long digitalised copy of the original document that was taped and glued together bearing 1000 signatures and thumb-prints of Aboriginals from all around Australia, the petition is one of the most iconic remnants of the land rights era.

It is a flawless copy and the stories embellishing it recall heady days of 'black power' in Australia.

With a timeline that begins with the 1963 Yirrkala bark petition and the '66 Wave Hill walk-off, the central theme solidifies in the early 70s when the cause was exploding into the consciousness of timorous and until then mainly ignorant White Australia.

The petition's tumultuous history is thrust into the here and now by narratives written by NT heritage co-ordinator Dr Sam Wells, and chief contributor Dr Bill Day, the anthropologist who provided the 30-minute DVD, which is silent for copyright reasons.

Most of the scenes need no narration and the 30-minutes of footage are compelling and unambiguous. What quickly unravels is a poignant chronology at once stirring in its highs, yet depressing for all the unfulfilled promise of successive federal and state governments made to Indigenous Australians.

Timeline of major developments in the Larrakia claims, excluding the interim passage of national legislation:

- October 1972: signatures from all over Australia are added to a proforma typed petition sent to different tribes and posted back to Darwin, where they are glued and taped together in one formidable document: behold the (original) Larrakia Petition.
- October 17, 1972: the petition is torn during a scuffle with police when an Aboriginal activist tries to hand it to Princess Margaret during her visit to Darwin. Several days later, the damaged document is posted to Buckingham Palace.
- November, 1972: the petition is stamped by the Queen's office and returned to Australia, via the Governor-General's Canberra office in Government House.
- December 1972: the new Government of PM Gough Whitlam, through its new Aboriginal Affairs Minister, responds to a letter from Bobby Secretary, in Darwin, saying that land rights were a 'high priority'.
- August, 1979: NT chief Minister Paul Everingham announces that Darwin is Larrakia land in a formal hand-over of the Kulaluk Special-Purpose lease.
- May, 2011: To mark National Reconciliation Week, the National Archives of Australia choose the Larrakia Petition as the defining document to support Native Title. At the ceremony, one of its

creators, Dr Bill Day, says it is the first time he has seen the petition since he posted it to Buckingham Palace in 1972.

- November, 2013: A copy of the petition is put on display in the Chan Gallery, Darwin, as part of the 'Treaty, yeah?' art exhibition, before being donated to the NT Library, where it is stored, at the instigation of the late great refugee advocate, Vikki Riley.

The exhibition does not have the pulling power of the Masters or a dinosaur display. Rather it's more a snapshot of a significant period in Australian history, with the lens focused on the role of the Larrakia in literally their own very big backyard.

Their bonded spirit of cohesiveness rings like a silver bell and their obvious ability to militate, it must be said, was contributed to in no small way by non-Indigenous Australians, such as Dr Day, and local trade unionists, like Jack Phillips and Brian Manning who were hugely supportive of the Larrakia cause.

Day's presence and front-line involvement is one of the reasons such a display can be assembled in the first place and it's no exaggeration to say that the result evokes similar emotions to a stroll through the Australian War Memorial.

The unusual 30-minute film is fascinating, educational and riveting in its own way.

So far, the exhibition has been favorably received, albeit by visitors mostly.

Several said it should have been bigger, one recommending it for permanent display.

Referring to one of the themes, that Aborigines were effectively refugees in their own country, another comment was:

'If the Japanese invaded, we would all be refugees' (in our own country).

The writer was probably an ex-serviceman wanting us not to forget - which is exactly what he wouldn't do after his visit.

The most appropriate comment for the Larrakia was:

'Don't give up the fight.'

This unusual, informative and moving exhibition is open until mid-November, 2014, and well worth a visit.

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HEMSLEY RAJALA,

October, 2014