

# **A Bagot History**

by  
Dr Bill Day  
2008

From 1913 the Commonwealth Government, through its Northern Territory Administration, applied a policy of control and segregation of Aboriginal people. Curfews, concentration camps and enslavement as domestic servants kept Aboriginal people off the street of Darwin from dusk to dawn while their mixed race children were confined in the notorious Kahlin Compound. Vai Stanton told how the old tribal women would come up to the fence and call the little children over. When the little children came over, 'the old women would hold their little hands through the wire and tell them who they were, who their mothers were, where they'd come from, what their skin was, what their totem and dreaming was' (Gilbert 1978:5-25).

By the time a cyclone destroyed most of the Kahlin Compound in 1937, plans had already been made to build a new hospital on the old Compound site. Mr White, the Assistant Chief Protector of Aborigines had recommended a property of 369 acres known as the 'Eight Mile' or 'Wilson's' next to the Ludmilla Creek that would make a suitable site for a new Aboriginal compound because it was beside the sea where Aborigines could fish or travel by canoe and also 'close to centres of totemic and ceremonial significance.' However, the surviving Larrakia people expressed concern because they had heard that they were to be moved a long distance from the sea and away from their places of work (Wells 1995a:26).

The Chief Surveyor reported that there were 50 to 60 acres of good cultivable soil on the property, about 200 acres were gravelly and stony, and the balance was poor. Some land in the reserve was thought to have been used earlier for rice production by Chinese, who were known to have grown the crop at various swamp sites around Darwin. The surveyor reported that the property was heavily wooded and carrying abundant supplies of both firewood and building timber, with white cedar trees scattered through the jungle growth. He also noted that there was a plentiful supply of good gravel and a large deposit of pure shell which could be used to manufacture lime for building purposes. The property had belonged to Isaac Daniels who died in 1919. The property was then inherited by George McKeddie and William Grant who sold the land to L B Wilson in 1929. With the Crown Land at Ludmilla Creek added to the newly created reserve it had an area of 743 acres [300 hectares] (Henderson 1984; Wells 1995a:27).

Dr Cook, the Chief Protector of Aborigines and Chief Medical Officer in Darwin believed the new reserve would help control the spread of unauthorised Aboriginal camps around Darwin. He

claimed that ‘these camps exist at the present time owing to [the Government’s] inability to patrol the locality effectively. With the stricter supervision which must follow [the creation of Bagot Reserve] these camps will disappear and aboriginals now in the vicinity of Darwin will be concentrated under supervision.’ He also maintained that without control, the scattered camps ‘would be a menace to troops resident on the proposed aerodrome’ (C. E. Cook to Administrator, 29 February 1937).

Other Darwin politicians were worried that the new Aboriginal reserve was to be too close to the new RAAF Base, although the Bagot Reserve land was purchased in April 1937, four days before the RAAF Base proposal. Politicians debated in federal Parliament, ‘the reserve is too near the aerodrome where three or four hundred of our young men are to be trained for the Air Force...we should not set such a temptation in the way of our young men... The natives and half castes should be accommodated many miles away from Darwin and not close to the centre of town’ (Stone 1974:182)

Cook’s plans for Bagot included an administration section and industrial block, a hospital and clinic, a residential section, bakery, dining rooms and kitchen and a school to cater for up to sixty pupils. There were separate living quarters for single males and females and married couples. In addition there were barracks to house twenty ‘native police,’ a laundry and other service buildings (Administrator’s Report 1937:27).

The Bagot Administrator’s house was designed by government architect, B C G Burnett who made a significant contribution to Darwin’s architecture from 1937. The impressive louvred building on concrete pillars was built on Bagot Road, near the reserve gate, in around 1938. Until it was demolished in recent years, the house was the only remaining modified Type B in Darwin. Many people still remember the building as the home of the last superintendent, Les Wilson.

The living area, sports fields and gardens were cleared and construction done completed by Aborigines from the Kahlin Compound, until all residents were transferred to Bagot by May 1938. After the children from the Kahlin Home were moved in 1939, the senior girls were placed as far away from the newly-established RAAF Base as possible while the junior children were billeted in dormitory style barracks fronting Bagot Road (Wells 1995a:27). However, accommodating the half-caste children on the reserve was against the government policy to keep them away from Aborigines (Cummings 1990:38). For this purpose, a fence was erected to separate the Compound from the Home (Wells 1990:80). Samantha Wells quotes a visiting missionary who wrote:

Our house was situated between the half-caste community on one side and the native quarter on the other...They were packed into these huts like sardines. You would be surprised at the number these of people these huts could hold. Most of the huts have a door but no window...There were two separate schools at the compound, one for the half-caste children and the other for the native children (Rotuman nd 7-8).

By the 1938-9 wet season the Bagot Reserve was established enough to plant rice on about four acres, presumably in the area still known as the 'ricefields' (or 'Chinese ricefields') beside Dick Ward Drive just to the south west of Totem Road.

The transfer of Aboriginal people to Bagot was not fully implemented before an expansion of the military presence at Darwin at the start of World War II. Then in August 1940 the buildings at Bagot were handed over to the Army to be used as a hospital and military camp. The Aboriginal residents were evacuated to a number of places, including Berrimah and Belyuen, at that time known as Delissaville. By October there were only a 'few aged and infirm aboriginals, rationed and living in houses along the beach frontage of the Bagot Reserve.' These people were to be removed as soon as a site on the West Arm could be prepared. (E. W. P. Chinnery to Administrator, 4 October 1940). After the bombing of Darwin in February 1942, Aborigines were moved to 'control camps' down the track as far as Mataranka. Others were trained by the Army in units for coastal surveillance or worked as domestics.

After World War II the Native Affairs Branch resumed control of Bagot for training and labour programs, designed to achieve eventual Aboriginal integration with the general community, but the reserve showed the effects of five years of military occupation. An officer of the Native Affairs Branch complained that 'most of the arable land ... had been ruined by the activities of the Army and the A.W.C., who have removed vast quantities of gravel from the area. In point of fact the greater proportion of the Reserve is a desolate waste and one huge gravel pit.' The Superintendent of Bagot, Mr V. J. White, wrote that the runways and roads associated with the RAAF base had been built with the gravel excavated from Bagot (Letter to Acting Director, Native Affairs Branch, 23 November 1945).

In 1946 Mr White chose the old RAAF camp at Berrimah, although 'in a state of disrepair,' as the most suitable location for the Aboriginal people returning to Darwin (Wells 1995b:280). During this time, Bagot was occupied by 'half-castes' until 'full-bloods' were moved back from Berrimah



Under the heading, 'Darwin: town of discontent,' a southern newspaper reported on a series of strikes by Aboriginal workers in 1951 (*Argus* March 9). One leader of the strike, Lawrence, was sentenced to three months and another, Fred Nadpur, was banished to the desert community of Haasts Bluff. The paper commented, 'Until a few months ago many aborigines were living in virtual squalor and in relative deprivation in the Berrimah compound [where the strikes began], a few miles from Darwin. Happily, Berrimah is passing and the new Bagot Road compound is a sign of a new mind and a new will in administration.' By strictly enforcing an entry permit system on the reserves, the administration hoped that Aboriginal people could be controlled and isolated from the union organisers blamed for stirring up the strikes.

In 1953 after the passing of the NT Welfare Ordinance, full-blood Aboriginal people were declared to be wards of the state, with their names recorded in the 'stud book,' as the Register of Wards was known. The Director of Welfare became the guardian of all wards whose lives were paternalistically controlled. In Darwin they were expected to live at Bagot to be trained in line with the new assimilation policy. The federal government wrote, 'As they progress towards assimilation, it is our intention that they should live in and with the rest of the community and that there should be no "native" quarter in Darwin' (cited in Woodward 1974:36). As part of their training the residents raised pigs and poultry and planted market gardens and tropical orchards at Bagot.

During the 1950s and for much of the 1960s approximately 250 people lived at Bagot until the population stabilised to between 300 and 350, although the numbers rose to as many as 400 when visitors were in town (Woodward 1974:56; Bauman 2006:131-2). Some families whose fathers worked outside the reserve lived in 'model homes' and were photographed dining around their neatly set kitchen table to demonstrate their progress from 'transitional housing' to an ability to live as a suburban nuclear family. Other men and women lived in the single quarters, receiving a small 'training allowance' and eating in the communal dining room. Children attended school on the reserve and participated in interschool activities and eisteddfods. A preschool and health clinic was also established. Sports teams represented the reserve in basketball, football and many other sports. Open days were held annually. In the early sixties, the Wanderers Football Club team was known as the 'Bagot Reserve' side. Later in the 1960s the Reserve gained recognition through the work of its pottery students who were trained in the community pottery shed. Community-run night patrols confiscated any alcohol that might be smuggled onto the reserve, despite it being illegal for wards to consume alcohol prior to 1964.



**Above left: Nipper and Josephine Rankin at home at Bagot. A Commonwealth Government photograph to demonstrate the success of the assimilation program at Bagot in the 1960s. Right: Bagot Superintendent Les Wilson discusses plans with Bagot residents.**

Meanwhile, after Darwin was declared a town in 1959 there was increasing pressure from politicians to move the Bagot Reserve. In that year the Mayor of Darwin, Mr J. Lyons, was quoted as saying: ‘The way Darwin is growing leaving Bagot where it is would be like putting it in Smith Street. What a furore that would cause. It is high time Bagot was moved’ (*NT News*, 2 January 1959). Another prominent local politician stated in the NT Legislative Council, ‘to put the natives further into the bush would be in their own interests,’ adding, ‘The town of Darwin is extending and we do require places within easy access to the city where people can live’ (Hansard, 13 January 1959).

A memorandum suggested the ‘scrubland and swamps [on the reserve] provide the seclusion ideal for drinking and gambling orgies and other forms of anti-social behaviour. The very nature of the land prevents adequate supervision by authority’ (quoted in Wells 1995b:225). Knowing the use of the bushland as an initiation area and burial grounds, as well as fishing and recreation, Julie Wells (1995b:226) notes: ‘The activities which the Branch describes as "anti-social" and for which Aborigines used the bushlands would have been portrayed quite differently by the Aboriginal protagonists.’ Others observed that it is hard for non-Aborigines to see the mangroves and tidal flats as useful areas. ‘Aborigines find a lot of food in these areas. This is still true today. Often the only fresh food available to them is what they can hunt or gather’ (Brandl 1983). In 1982, a North East Arnhem Lander from Naymil/Datiway clan group living at Bagot, said that a Gunabibi ceremony site behind Bagot was used during the 1950s and although no longer active is still out of bounds to all women and children (AS.81/147, in Cooper 1985).

In 1961 the Administrator, Roger Nott, wrote to Canberra suggesting that most of Bagot Reserve should be revoked to provide land for a suburban subdivision; however, Nott proposed that some

land be retained 'for the immediate and future needs' of the Aboriginal settlement.' His letter set out his reasons:

Because the Government has a considerable capital investment at Bagot and having regard to the fact that a large group of people now regard this area as home, many of whom will not move from the settlement into the normal community, I do not think that we could justify movement of the settlement to an area outside the Darwin town area even if a suitable place could be found. Moreover large numbers of the natives from Bagot now undertake employment in the Darwin area and with the Settlement situated as it is, these persons can travel to and from their jobs by normal transport. If the settlement were moved further out of Darwin, quite obviously special arrangements as presently apply at Amoonguna, would have to be made to transport these persons to and from Darwin each day.



**Above: Bagot school in 1950s.**

In these circumstances I think we should consider retaining the present built up area of the settlement, including the garden area, and should provide a small green belt around this area to give opportunity for possible future development and to provide some insulation from the proposed housing sub-divisions. If this were done, the area of the Reserve would then be approximately 84 acres [34 hectares] which, in my view, would be sufficient for the immediate and future needs of this settlement (cited in Woodward 1974:56).

A report by Judge Woodward (1974:55) documented the debate over the future of Bagot as recorded in internal government correspondence from the 1960s. Woodward (1974:55) believed 'it is worth setting out the history [of Bagot] in some detail, since it illustrates the way in which

Aboriginal interests can be lost sight of when other requirements become pressing.’ Woodward (1974:62) noted that the alienation of the Bagot land ‘highlights the strength of the Aboriginal case for more land in the township of Darwin.’

The federal Minister, Sir Paul Hasluck replied: ‘I could not justify cutting up some hundreds of acres of the Bagot reserve for housing, if in thirty years’ time the only land left for the next generation of aborigines was to be a long way out in the paddocks that nobody else wanted... I suggest that we have to look at the proposal for the future development and use of the reserve for aborigines and not simply a proposal for taking away some of it’ (Woodward 1974:57). Hasluck believed that the reserve was set aside for Aborigines and if land was lost there had to be some form of compensation. However by December, 1962, he wrote: ‘I have approved the excision of part of Bagot Reserve in successive stages so as to provide blocks for building purposes on the condition that one in three of these blocks is kept for the purpose of housing aborigines. Our policy against segregation would require that one block in three was set aside throughout the whole sub-division and not in any one section of it. If there are 120 blocks of land, 40 blocks of land have to be kept for aborigines.’

By 1964, Hasluck was no longer the Minister for the Interior. The new minister, Mr C E Barnes, issued a statement which said:

Since its establishment, Bagot had served a very useful purpose, providing a home for Aborigines working in Darwin, and acting as a transit centre for those coming to the city for medical attention or special occasions.

For these people the Reserve had had its own hospital, school and other facilities. There was currently a programme for improvement of the buildings and facilities, and for the construction of individual homes where Aboriginal people could gain experience of normal home life under some guidance and be fitted to become fully responsible tenants in the general community...For this reason, and in keeping with its overall assimilation policy, the government had arranged with the Northern Territory Housing Commission that houses for Aborigines should be dispersed throughout new Darwin suburbs and that at least one house for each three blocks in the Bagot subdivision will be made available for Aborigines.

In other words, the houses for Aboriginal families were to be provided scattered anywhere around Darwin and not the one in three of the new Ludmilla sub-division houses as originally promised - in

compensation for the reduction of the reserve from 300 hectares to 23 hectares, surrounded on three sides by a new suburb. Woodward (1974:62) notes that ‘none of the three conditions was...observed. In fact few of the blocks were retained for Aborigines...’ Wells (1995b:229) suggests that the failure was partly because ‘Aborigines at Bagot repeatedly made clear by their actions that they were not particularly interested in moving into Darwin away from kin and friends. As Judge Woodward (1974:62) continued, ‘It is difficult to see how it was ensured “that Aborigines would benefit from the sub-division.” The simple truth of the matter was that the scattered integration of Aborigines was not what they wanted. They lost a large area of useful land and have nothing to show for it.’ Woodward (1974:62) concluded, ‘It also shows that the general Darwin community owes some land to Aborigines on the basis of past understandings.’

On June 9<sup>th</sup> the *NT News* reported: ‘NEW LOOK FOR BAGOT - TO HAVE JUST ON 400 HOMES.’ The article continued:

The residential subdivision to be created around and to include most of Bagot Welfare Reserve will contain 367 residential sites. The breaking up of Bagot Reserve – a major bone of contention in the NT Legislative Council and elsewhere for a number of years – was announced by the Minister for Territories, Mr Barnes, last week...the new subdivision will probably be called Ludmilla after the nearby creek.

As a token gesture, the streets of Ludmilla were given names of Aboriginal identities like the painter Mawalan, the dancer Mosec, the resistance fighter Nemarluk and the strike leader Nadpur. Harney Street was named after the Native Affairs patrol officer and author, Bill Harney. Even the mounted policeman, Tas Fitzer, got a mention.

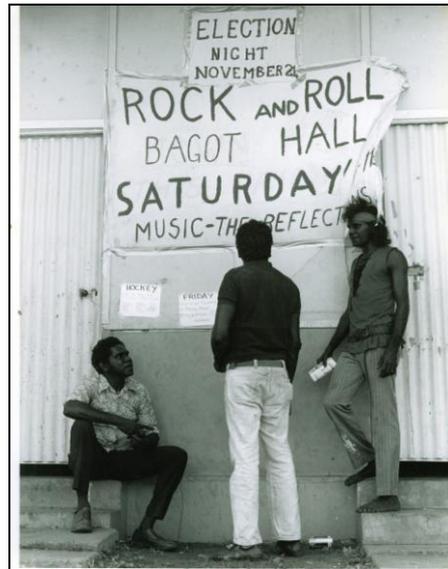
In the early 1960s Bagot provided leadership for the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR) with guidance from Darwin unionist working on the waterfront. Partly as a result of the protests of NTCAR, in 1964 Aborigines were given full rights as citizens instead of being classed as wards of the state. Frank Hardy in his book *The Unlucky Australians* describes a meeting held at Rapid Creek to revive NTCAR in 1966, led by Davis and Dexter Daniels, Phillip and Clancy Roberts and Robert Tudawali. Others came from Bagot in a union bus or walked to the meeting (Hardy 1968:39). Hardy writes that visiting Bagot was ‘a humiliating experience for whites and the Aborigines they want to visit.’ He had to wait at the gate under a sign ‘BAGOT ABORIGINAL RESERVE. UNAUTHORISED ENTRY FORBIDDEN,’ while someone passed on a message.

Until the mid 1970s, Aborigines on all NT Aboriginal Reserves remained under the control of the Director of Welfare Mr Harry Giese, assisted by conservative settlement councils. Respected author and journalist, Stewart Harris (1994:xi), described in his diary a visit to the Bagot office in 1975:

Inside, there is a white man – blue shorts and long white stockings...I was saying Davis had brought me to learn what's been happening at Bagot. Then the white bloke, who has a bloody officious manner, asks me why I want this information. Have I got a permit? Or I will have to leave...The white bloke gets my application form for the council. If I don't go he will get the police. He is the executive officer. It is the first time I have had any problems on a reserve anywhere. Davis and I go...Is this place really 'freer' than it was a year ago?

When the land rights movement began in Darwin in 1971, activists were barred from the reserve. Bill Ryan told the *NT News* (20 October 1972) that 'an application to hold meetings at Bagot Reserve had been refused.' He added, 'At previous meetings at Bagot there has always been someone from Welfare or a European listening and the people haven't been able to speak freely.' Ryan also called for the resignation of the Reverend Lloyd Kent as secretary of the Bagot Social Club. Rev Kent replied that 'members of the Bagot Council were quite competent to make up their own minds and had declared their opinions firmly. They had voted against completely opening up the reserve to other people and looked to Bagot as a place to which they could retreat from outside pressures' (*NT News* 24 October 1972).

Activists collecting signature for a petition for land rights to be sent to the Queen were also asked to leave the reserve. Bill Day says in his book, *Bunji*: 'Bagot people willingly signed as collectors passed from door to door. Out of step, their council wrote a blunt letter to the organisers warning that anyone without a permit would be prosecuted if seen on the reserve again' (Day 1994:37). Similarly, when organisers booked an Aboriginal band, 'The Reflections,' to play in the Bagot Hall, they first had to cut a padlock and chain barring their entry before the dance could begin (Day 1994:56).



**Above left: A protest outside Bagot Reserve in 1971. Right: A dance was held to celebrate the election of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) in 1973.**

Despite the lack of support by their representatives, Bagot people joined sit-down protests on the crosswalk at the gate to block traffic on Bagot Road on three occasions in 1971 and again in 1973 when a national land rights conference was held on the reserve. Several of the southern activists stayed on at the reserve after the conference, leading to increased tension in times of rapid change. On one occasion, the President of the Bagot Council, Mr George Woodruff, said he had asked the superintendent, Mr Les Wilson, to get the police (*NT News* 27 June 1973). A meeting of the council had been called following protests about the food served at the Bagot kitchen. At the meeting Mr Ray McHenry, Director of Aboriginal Affairs, who had replaced Mr Giese, told the Bagot Council that they could ‘take over the services if they wanted to.’ The *NT News* the next day had a bold headline on the front page saying, ‘BLACKS TOLD BAGOT YOURS’ (*NT News* 27 June 1973).

Instead of a small ‘training allowance’, residents were now entitled to Social Security payments. The dining rooms were closed and alcohol became more freely available on the reserve. Children were sent to a special class at Ludmilla Primary School. In June 1973, the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission held a hearing at Bagot after a similar meeting at Kulaluk. The first report of the Commissioner, Judge Woodward, listed the Bagot demands:

The regular residents at the Bagot Reserve at Darwin have made it plain to me that their only concern is to obtain title to the Reserve so that they can develop it as an attractive and useful community living area. They foresee a mixture of houses and flats, including high-rise flats, with special provision for old-age pensioners. In due time they would expect to see the surrounding fence come down and all residents making use of outside schools, hospitals and other public facilities (Woodward 1973:25-30).

An alternative plan to combine the surrounding suburb of Ludmilla into an Aboriginal Trust, paying rent to Bagot was proposed by a local resident (see the newspaper story on the next page of this history).

*N.T. News*  
*August 3, 1973 page 4*

# ABORIGINAL TRUST FOR LUDMILLA IS PROPOSED BY DAY

**Ludmilla householders have been asked to join a "rent and rate" strike and integrate into a new body to be known as the Ludmilla Aboriginal Land Trust.**

This, and other suggestions, were put to them in a roneoed letter signed by Mr Bill Day, a European supporter of Aboriginal rights.

He said under the present five year plan Bagot Reserve would be completely integrated into the "uninspiring streets of Ludmilla."

He outlined a plan to "integrate us with the stimulating community life of the settlement.

Other points in the plan were:

- Restoration of the original boundaries of the reserve;
- Formation of the Ludmilla Aboriginal Land Trust to cover the whole area;
- Appointment of two non - Aboriginal residents on the trust; and
- Payment of rents and rates to the trust.

Mr Day also suggests that as houses in Ludmilla fall vacant in the normal process they should be offered first to Aboriginal families until at least the promises made in 1965 of one house in every three to Aboriginal families is honored.

The letter was put in letter boxes this week.

Mr Day lives at Mawalan Street, Ludmilla.

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## Semester system for next year?

Northern Territory schools may become the first in Australia to change to the semester system.

The system will be adopted by the Darwin Community College when it opens next year.

The system is now being considered by the Territory Department of Education.

The Department has set up an advisory committee to help decide the issue.

The committee is headed by the executive officer of the Department of Education in Darwin, Mr Mal Brassington.

Other members are the Inspector of Schools at Katherine, Mr Max Glenn, and representatives of school and teacher organisations.

Territory director of Education, Dr Hedley Beare, said if the system was favored generally and it was considered feasible, semesters could be introduced as early as next year.

He is seeking public opinion through the members of the committee.

The committee meets Dr Beare today to recommend how the 1974 and 1975 school years will be divided and decide the term or semester dates.



MR DAY

Above: A NT News report on a proposal to integrate the suburb of Ludmilla with Bagot.

# A TRUE STORY OF GWALWA DARANIKI

BEFORE THE WHITE SETTLERS CAME, THE LARRAKIAS HUNTED AND CAMPED ANYWHERE THEY CHOSE -

FROM LAMEROO TO BINBURRA...



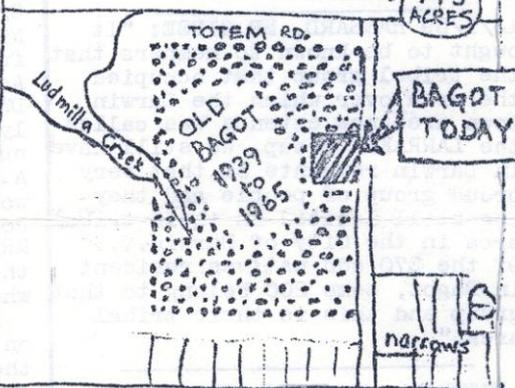
BY 1923 ALL BLACKS WERE CROWDED INTO KAHLIN COMPOUND (WHERE THE HOSPITAL IS TODAY). BLACKS WERE NOT ALLOWED OUT AFTER DARK!

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT WANTED THE KAHLIN LAND IN 1939, THE TRIBES WERE MOVED OUT TO A NEW RESERVE CALLED 'BAGOT.'

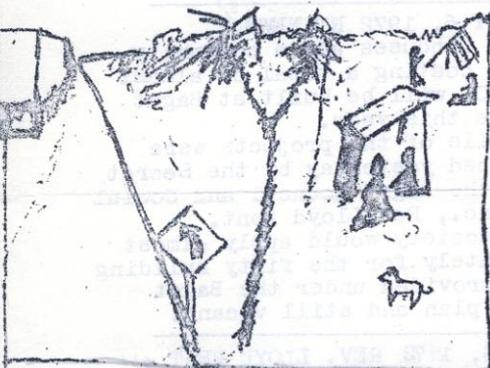


AT LEAST THERE WAS MORE ROOM:

743 ACRES



BUT DARWIN KEPT GROWING. THE GOVERNMENT TOOK BACK MOST OF BAGOT TO BUILD HOUSES AT LUDMILLA. BY 1965 ONLY A SMALL PEICE OF THE RESERVE WAS LEFT. THERE IS ONLY 57 ACRES NOW.



SOME OF THE TRIBES DID NOT LIKE TO LIVE IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP RUN BY WELFARE.



ALL TRIBES CAN LEARN FROM WHAT HAPPENED IN DARWIN. WHEN THE WHITE MAN GETS HUNGRY FOR LAND THEN A RESERVE MEANS NOTHING.

Above: 'The Bagot Story.' A page from the newsletter *Bunji*, October 1972, drawn by the artist, Neil Simpson.

Meanwhile the Kulaluk group was making a claim to the land revoked from the original reserve in 1964, from Ludmilla Creek to the old Bagot burial ground at the end of Totem Road. To make a point, Fred Fogarty from the Gwalwa Daraniki coalition of fringe dwellers nailed large signs to trees along Bagot Road and Totem Road stating: 'Aboriginal land claim - Under negotiation with the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission.' Unfortunately, the Bagot Aboriginal Council did not to present a case to Woodward for the return of the land lost ten years earlier. Despite the lack of interest by the Bagot Council, the Aboriginal residents continued to use the nearby creek, mangroves and vacant land for fishing, food gathering and recreation as they had done when the area was part of the greater reserve. The Interim Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Dick Ward, later recommended that the land taken from Bagot under false pretences should be included in the proposed Kulaluk lease 'for Aboriginal community use.' This area of unoccupied land bounded by Ludmilla Creek, Totem Road, Bagot Road and Fitzner Drive, excluding the old Retta Dixon Home, was granted to the Gwalwa Daraniki Association in August 1979.

By 1981, illegal 'itinerants' camps' were again a problem in Darwin. The Darwin Mayor had campaigned on a promise 'to relocate illegal Aboriginal camps' to Bagot Reserve or Kulaluk' (Wells 1995a:72) and plans were made for two government-sponsored camps to accommodate up to forty 'transient' Aborigines on the Kulaluk lease under the airport flight path (*NT News* October 14, 1981). The accommodation was later planned for the old Ludmilla dump site, where Minmarama Aboriginal Village now stands (*NT News* March 19, March 30, 1983).

After Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Day in 1974, the evacuation of residents and the destruction of facilities caused severe dislocation at Bagot. Checkpoints were set up on the highway at Noonamah to prevent anyone returning to Darwin without a permit and guarantees that they had accommodation (*Bunji* April 1975). While the evacuees were down south, the wartime windowless concrete bunker houses at Bagot were bulldozed. In 1975 Kevin Gilbert (1977:25) asked Vai Stanton, 'Do you think they will use the excuse of the cyclone to exclude Aborigines from the Darwin area?' Vai's reply expressed some of the anxiety felt at the time: 'If they can change the people, send them away from Bagot or Kulaluk or Fishcamp or the Brinken sit-down area [of Knuckey's Lagoon], the people will be further displaced.'

New homes were built as Bagot was re-established, until in the late 1970s the reserve was vested in Aboriginal custodians to become a self-governing community for permanent residents and visitors to Darwin. By 1978, vacation activities were being held for Bagot children as part of the Vacation

Care program. A children's activity area and camp on 'Bagot Beach' on the Kulaluk lease also proved to be popular. Later the Youth Diversionary Activities projects group began the 'Bagot Community Garden' meeting twice a week, near the old pre-school. The gardening sessions were open to the public who entered through the gate at the end of Cardo Ct, Ludmilla. A CDEP program ensured that the unemployed residents could be usefully occupied and Bagot settled into steady routine after the upheavals of the previous decades.

In 2007, the Federal Government Emergency Response, known as the 'Intervention' again introduced uncertainty and change through an imposed government policy. When the federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough visited Bagot in October 2007 he condemned the NT Government for tolerating the conditions at Bagot. Mr Brough told the media, 'There is no street lighting, substandard and overcrowded housing and residents are left to cope with problems of blow-ins.' At a meeting in the community hall, he informed residents that if re-elected the Howard government would convert the 23-hectare community into a 'normal suburb' (*NT News* 29 October, 2007; 'Brough decrees make-over for Darwin camp,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 October 2007, p.6).

Under the federal government proposal, a private developer would build 150 houses, a medical centre, shops and other facilities. Some areas would be set aside for Aboriginal people. Present tenants would have the opportunity to buy their own houses, provided they could finance a debt of up to \$50,000 for improvements. Tenants who continued renting would make their payments to Northern Territory Housing instead of the Aboriginal controlled housing corporation, guaranteeing that their rents would rise substantially. Not surprisingly, Brough was heckled by shocked and angry residents.

Fortunately there was a change of government in late 2007, but the uncertainty remained. After the election, a huge sign appeared at the Bagot front gate stating in big letters 'WARNING - PRESCRIBED AREA - NO LIQUOR - NO PORNOGRAPHY' and warning of heavy penalties. The sign adds that enquiries are to be directed to 'The Australian Government's Emergence Response Hotline.' No assistance has been offered to enforce these regulations. The newspaper reported that Bagot had been labelled a 'town camp', subject to alcohol and pornography restrictions. The same paper announced that more than \$200 million had been cut from the NT Intervention program. A Bagot Community spokesperson said, 'They're taking back the money they promised us to begin with. They want to keep us on a shoestring budget living in town camps. Another 50 houses are needed here.' He said, 'There's probably about 50 families and couples waiting for houses. They're currently living with other families.' The newspaper added that 500

residents shared 41 functioning houses. (*The Australian*, 14 May, 2005). So it is that the wheel has turned for the Bagot Community, leaving the long suffering Bagot Community under-funded, controlled by government decree and uncertain of their future.



**Above: Federal Minister Mal Brough announces future plans for Bagot in the Bagot Hall on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2007. Lyle Cooper is on the left of the photo (*NT News* 29 October, 2007; *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 October 2007, p.6). Photo by *NT News*.**



**Above: Bagot housing in 1951 (AIATSIS).**

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# The tragic tale of 'Sammy' and welfare apathy

By a Special Writer  
Sammy was thinking of killing and running.

He was going to run away from the house that had become his private prison; run out into the humid Darwin night and down the streets where happy neighbours were hanging Christmas time tinsel in lighted windows.

The lanky 15-year-old had rolled his few spare clothes in a greasy, torn blanket.

He had unclasped his pocket knife and stood looking at his sleeping mother.

Sammy knew it was Christmas. The old black and white television set -- his window on the world for nine hours a day for the past two years -- was advertising the season of goodwill.

There was no Christmas in Sammy's unhappy home.

For years his only emotional outlet had been anger after days without food. Then he would slam the doors of the empty cupboards and swear to himself in his frustration.

At these times Sammy found the minty flavor of a little toothpaste on his tongue reduced the hunger pangs.

On one occasion, irritated by a madly-itching scalp, he had hacked off his long, matted, unwashed hair.

Tonight he had eaten rice and milk from an icecream container. He was ready.

Suddenly, his mother was awake -- she screamed when she saw the boy standing there -- something in his hand and a strange look on his face.

Sammy was off and running.

After 50 metres he was further from that house than he had been in 12 months; stitch pains stabbed his sides as his under-worked lungs rebelled; the uneven ground hurt the soles of his soft, bare feet, and his shrivelled calf muscles could push him no further.

Sweat dampened his favorite grey school shirt, stiff with unwashed body grease, and fastened with safety pins.

Sammy was hobbling now like an old, old man. He reached the school building where it had all started and curled up in a dark corner to sleep.

Some time next morning the youth found a refuge where he was made to bathe and change his filthy clothes. It had been many weeks since he had showered.

Sammy speaks as little as possible, but his story was told during several days in short, mumbled sentences.

*His self imprisonment began*

during his first year of high school. The youngster appears to be of normal intelligence, but he went through a childhood of being shunted from welfare homes to relatives, to a foster home and back to his natural parents.

All that guaranteed that he was years behind others of his age.

To avoid the school that he hated, and the teachers and welfare officials who did not understand him, Sammy simply stayed home.

During the early months, when friends still called to him from outside, he didn't answer.

He slept in all mornings and when television wasn't on he looked at comics -- the same tattered comics over and over again.

He sketched muscled superheroes on the only paper he had -- the blank parts of old newspapers.

Some weeks he ate well, but stable food was bread and tea, and came from \$10 pocket money each fortnight. He spent that at the hot dog van.

Sammy had found he was afraid to go down to the local shop. Even the dash to the van was an ordeal.

Once, when visitors filled the room in which he watched TV, he found himself shaking and had to lay down on his bed until the trembling stopped.

After that he retreated to his bedroom when visitors came and hid under a sheet when his brother's friends stayed in the bedroom.

Dismissed as shy, stubborn, lazy or dirty, Sammy did not speak and, in turn, was ignored.

He did not simply watch television, he sat transfixed before it in an apparent trance.

A stranger would presume that his wild-looking, yet timid youth, was retarded.

Behind the mask Sammy's mind was active and observant. He had a reason for everything he did - he was hiding the fears of an isolated agoraphobic.

The crises were reached and Sammy was forced to leave home. For him there's no place like home -- thank goodness. His future is uncertain, but perhaps his youth means that he can be healed.

How can he have sunk to such Dickensian depths without help? Without his needs being recognised?

I believe Sammy's plight is an indictment of Darwin's welfare system.

NEXT WEEK -- The private hell of an agoraphobic

ABOVE: To this writer's surprise, there was no reaction to this true story of Welfare Department neglect in the Bagot Community after the above story was published in a Darwin newspaper, *The Star*, in 1984.

11 September 1980

# Aboriginal kids being segregated

## A 'bloody' disgrace, says Bunji editor

Aboriginal children segregated into special classes at the Night-cliff High and Ludmilla Primary schools are receiving an inferior education it was alleged this week.

"It's a bloody disgrace and human tragedy," says Bill Day who works closely with the Bagot community and is editor of the Aboriginal newsletter, BUNJI.

"They are bright and intelligent boys and girls, second generation Darwin-born who have been shoved into an educational rubbish bin.

"A 12-year-old who came to visit me last week could not read a note on my door."

The note said "Back soon."

On several occasions the children have shown their dissatisfaction by simply walking out of the class for the day. Absenteeism is very high at both schools.

"Following the children's constant complaints I have written letters and spoken to parents and teachers," says Bill.

"I have been given conflicting and unconv-

incing reasons for the special classes."

Radio talk back guru Warren Pain discussed the issue after reading (and tearing to shreds) the latest edition of Bunji.

"It's necessary," pontificated Pain, "just as we have special classes for refugees and other minorities."

Bill Day's heated reply is that refugees, for example, are given well-funded and staffed crash courses in small classes which are rarely necessary for longer than six months. The Aboriginal children have been in special classes for eight or nine years in the case of high school youths and Bill maintains the results are still appalling.

An influential parent says that 'it is too soon' for the children and that the classes are transitional.

A teacher despaired that 'it is too late for most of these kids.'

The Minister for Education, Jim Robertson wrote on September 3 that:

"I believe the present system is assisting the parents to fulfil their responsibility to educate

their children according to their individual needs and abilities."

Only one point was consistently made - that is if the parents wanted their children shifted out of the classes, they only have to ask but this has only happened in two cases.

Mr Day, himself an ex-teacher, feels that there is a case for wholly Aboriginal classes, but only if the curriculum was 'black', whereas text books at the present schools are Anglo-Australian orientated.

Mr Day claims that because so many of the students from Ludmilla were running away from the school to his Kulaluk camp, he was considering establishing a traditionally orientated black school.

"I have met kids from the bush who have never been to school yet they are the most cultured, educated people you could meet."

However, in Darwin, Aboriginal kids who will not go to school do not get an alternative to traditional upbringing.

Here it is either 'Dick and Jane' or the pin ball parlour.