

Remembering the 40th Anniversary of the Larrakia Petition, 17th October 2012.

In 2011 the National Archives of Australia described ‘the Larrakia Petition’ as ‘one of the most important documents in the history of Indigenous Australian’s struggle for land rights’ (NAA 2011c; Reconciliation Australia 2011b:9). Four years earlier, in 2007, the Larrakia Petition also featured in a National Archives’ exhibition in Canberra and accompanying book entitled, ‘Memory of a Nation’ (NAA 2007:32-33; Reconciliation Australia 2011a:7, 2011b:9) and in Australia Post’s 200 ‘Letters of a Nation’ (www.Auspost.com.au/200years). The petition has also been displayed at the National Library in Canberra.

The Larrakia petition followed an earlier 6-point petition from the Larrakia people and their supporters in March 1972, calling for the McMahon government to establish a commission to negotiate treaties with Indigenous language groups. This appeal was described by Judith Wright as, ‘the first move in the direction of the demand for treaties’ (Wright 1985:14-17; *NT News* March 30, 1972, p.7; Wells 1995:36). Following the failure of the Larrakia bid for treaties, a nation-wide petition addressed to the Queen was circulated calling for land rights, and due to be presented to Princess Margaret during her visit to Darwin in October, 1972.

The *NT News* reported: ‘Plans for the petition and demonstration were started by the Darwin Gwalwa Daraniki group, based on the Larrakia tribe which once occupied the city area’ (‘Plans for Big Royal Visit Demonstration’, *NT News*, October 13, 1972, p.3). Seven months earlier this group had received national attention by raising their flag outside the Darwin Supreme Court on November 7th, 1971, to claim back Darwin for the Larrakia people (*NT News*, November 8, 1971, p.1; NAA 1971; Buchanan 1974:5; Wells 1995:35; Wells 2001:19; Bauman 2006:73; Day 2008).¹

The wording of the petition were in response to the reply from Prime Minister McMahon in June, 1972, rejecting the call for treaties with Aboriginal people, and stating that it was not appropriate to negotiate with British subjects as though they were foreign powers (Wright 1985:15; *NT News* June 9, 1972, p.5; Wells 2001:19).² The petition stated:

The British settlers took our land. No treaties were signed with the tribes. Today we are refugees. Refugees in the country of our ancestors. We live in Refugee camps – without land, without employment, without justice.

¹ See a display of the flag in the entrance to the NT Museum and Art Gallery.

²² A ‘Larrakia Treaty’ was presented to the Aboriginal Land Rights Commissioner at Kulaluk on June 2, 1973 (see NAA 1973a, 1973b; Buchanan 1974:22; Wells 1995:40).

The British Crown signed treaties with the Maoris in New Zealand and the Indians in North America.

We appeal to the Queen to help us, the Aboriginal people of Australia.

We need land rights and political representation now.

Along with petition forms, a flyer was also distributed by the Gwalwa Daraniki group calling on Aboriginal people to demonstrate by camping outside Government House in Darwin during the Princess's overnight stay from the 16th to 17th October, 1972.

After thirty-six signed pages had been returned, the pages were assembled into a scroll three pages wide and more than three metres long (*NT News*, October 16, p.1; Bauman 2006:36). As the day approached, famed Gunwingu artist, Yirawala, announced, 'Give us land, not medals', and issued a statement threatening to return his MBE if his people were not granted land rights (*NT News* October 12, 1972, p.1). In Darwin, the secretary of the Territory Trades and Labour Council, Brian Manning, asked all affiliated unions to support the demonstration and arranged for buses to be provided to transport people from the suburbs (*NT News* October 13, 1972, p.3).

Collecting signatures was not without opposition. On the Bagot Aboriginal Reserve, as it was then, residents signed readily, but a conservative Aboriginal council wrote a stern letter to Bill Day threatening him with prosecution if he was seen on the Aboriginal Reserve without a permit, making clear that no permit would be forthcoming (Day 2011b:27). In Queensland the militant Black Panthers denounced the Queen as 'a puppet' but dutifully returned their signed petition forms.

On October 16th, a rough shelter of corrugated iron was erected in the park opposite Administrator Fred Chaney's official residence with a sign painted by Jack Phillips, proclaiming the simple structure to be, 'Aboriginal Government House'. That evening, the protesters listened to megaphone speeches and chanted, 'We want Margaret!' as the royal party mingled at a Garden Party reception on the floodlit lawns of the Administrator's residence (*NT News* October 17, 1972, p.1; Buchanan 1974:12-15; Day 1994:37; Bauman 2006:36). During the night a police cordon strained to hold back the surging, yelling protesters, leaving no opportunity to deliver the petition until a final attempt the next day.

On the following morning, October 17th, as a procession of black limousines drove down to driveway and through the gate, a courageous Aboriginal stockman was delegated to attempt to

break through police lines with the rolled document under his arm and halt the cavalcade in a last desperate attempt to have Princess Margaret take the petition to her sister, the Queen. A scuffle ensued and the cars continued to the airport unimpeded, while the damaged petition was retrieved.

The battered document was later mailed to Buckingham Palace with a covering letter of apology, signed by Larrakia leader Bobby Secretary and four others, who claimed that there had been no reply to a note they gave to an aide with the Royal Couple, leaving the Larrakia's last hope to try and break through the police barrier. The letter noted: 'We are sorry to send the petition in this condition. We hoped and planned to present it personally to Princess Margaret.' (*NT News*, October 20, 1972; NAA 1973c). However, for other observers the damaged nature of the petition is symbolic of the struggle faced by Indigenous people (NAA 2011a *Your Memento*, Issue 3; NAA 2011b *Your Memento Highlights*, p.5; Day 2011b:28).

According to the National Archives of Australia, in their publication *Memory of a Nation* (NAA 2007:32-33), 'The petition was forwarded to the Queen's representative in Australia, the Governor-General [Sir Paul Hasluck], and was deposited in the National Archives in 1975.' The complete document is available on-line on the National Archives website (NAA 1973c).

In 2011, the NAA stated:

Not surprisingly, the petition has been in a fragile condition for some years, which had made accessing and handling the document difficult. It had originally been lined with sheets of grease-proof paper and repaired with adhesive tape, which had deteriorated. Archives conservators decided that the pages would be better protected if separated and displayed in book form. However, the conservators were also concerned that this treatment should be reversible, so that the petition could be returned to its original 3.3-metre format if necessary (*Your Memento Highlights* NAA 2011b:5).

During the week leading up to the 1972 royal visit to Darwin, police cleared the streets of homeless people. Two men caught up in the October blitz described their experience in the newsletter *Bunji* (October 1972; see also Day 1994:37-38). At the Kulaluk camp, the militant Aboriginal activist Fred Fogarty was arrested in his bed and charged with drunkenness, ensuring he would be safely locked away on the big night (see Day 2011a). Another man described the scene in the lock-up:

...couldn't believe it myself, everyone lying on the floor, sleeping on the seat, couldn't believe it. I thought because of what we did that night, Princess or whoever was here, policeman was thinking they pick up any blackfellas going on the street, going home or not ... Funny things going on here. Sort of make me think (cited in Day 1994:38 from *Bunji* October 1972).

Considering all of the above, October 17th is an appropriate day to acknowledge the anniversary of the Larrakia Petition, that being the day when the final desperate attempt was made to present the signatures collected over the previous several months. This date was the culmination of the appeal for land rights supported by language groups across the nation. Following that event, little interest was shown in the fate of the petition until its significance was recognised by the National Archives of Australia, when it was restored and displayed in Canberra (see Day 2011b; also at www.drilldayanthropologist.com).

In early September 2012, at the instigation of a Darwin civil rights worker, the late Vikki Riley, a proposal was made to the Northern Territory Library that the petition should be returned to Darwin for an exhibition, along with other documents from the period, including original copies of the 64 editions of the newsletter *Bunji* and other items held in the Archives and libraries (see Day 1993, 2012). With the sudden death of Vikki Riley only days after she forcefully presented the plan to the NT Library, an exhibition would also be a tribute to her enthusiasm and drive, now sadly missed.

Very few written histories of the Aboriginal land rights struggle in the 1970s have recognised the efforts of a ragged band of homeless Aboriginal people in Darwin, whose dramatic and desperate protests gained national attention between 1971 and 1976, which were the crucial years in the formulation of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act, 1976*. The return of the Larrakia Petition to its birthplace in Darwin for the first time since it was mailed to the Queen would help to correct this oversight in the historical commentaries and honour all those Aboriginal people who signed it.

Dr Bill Day
21st September 2012

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