

The formation of the NT Council For Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR)

By Brian Manning

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I came to Darwin in December 1956 and became friends with an Aboriginal man from Elcho Island who made me aware of the extent of discrimination suffered by aboriginal people, particularly with regards to wages.

I joined the Communist Party of Australia in Darwin in 1959. The following year I was elected delegate to attend the congress of the Communist Party of Australia .

My contribution to the congress included my observations as to the plight of Aborigines in the Northern Territory.

The CPA policy on Aborigines was quite progressive and had been since 1931.

At the congress I met Shirley Andrews, from Melbourne who was a member of the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights (VCAR).

Shirley asked me if I could return to Darwin via Melbourne as another VCAR member, Dr Barry Christophers was eager to meet the Darwin delegate.

I rearranged my return flight and had a four-hour stopover in Melbourne, where I rang Dr Christophers. He was busy at his practice and asked if I could possibly visit his surgery in Richmond. I caught a taxi out to his practice and spent some 30 to 40 minutes answering his questions about the plight of Aborigines in the NT.

He was a passionate and prolific letter writer to the *N.T. News* on issues concerning the health and welfare of Aborigines. He was strongly opposed to the assimilation policy. He loaded me up with pamphlets and other material, which included a copy of the constitution of the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights.

I read the constitution during the flight back to Darwin,

I also read an article in the *Bulletin* which reported how a right-wing group of white supporters in Brisbane had stacked a meeting of One People of Australia League (OPAL) to exclude left-wing people from the committee.

This action proved to be very disruptive and was a clear example of how the Aboriginal rights movement was being manipulated and politicised to the detriment of the objectives of the organisation.

I inserted amendments to the VCAR constitution that required that the executive of the NTCAR should consist of 75% people of Aboriginal descent and at all general meetings, Aboriginal people must be in majority.

I approached Aboriginal people I knew and canvassed the idea of forming the NTCAR and also reported the proposal to the Darwin branch of the CPA, where it was well received.

I soon found that there was no interest amongst Darwin's coloured community but strong interest among traditional people. I became aware later that this was due to the government granting exemption from the provisions of the Declaration of Wards to coloured people. This action effectively divided an earlier movement for rights.

The NTCAR was founded at a meeting of 26 Aboriginal people and two white Australians at Lee Point in 1961, and the draft constitution adopted.

Jacob Roberts was elected president, Terry Robinson vice president, Davis Daniels secretary and myself assistant secretary. A committee of six others included people from different areas.

A press release announcing the organisation's formation was well received and published nationally. The executive printed a leaflet which was mailed to trade unions nationally soliciting support.

We received an encouraging response from the mail-out and the first executive meeting was held soon after. Jacob Roberts had received a personal letter from a person he knew from time he had spent at a seminary in Sydney. The person expressed his congratulations and cautioned that he should be wary of communists trying to infiltrate the council.

Jacob moved a resolution that I should be expelled from the council because I was a Communist.

Terry and I expressed surprise but said this was an issue which should be decided by the Aboriginal members and left the meeting so that the matter could be decided by the eight Aboriginal members present.

After about 30 minutes, Davis sought me out and said that the decision was seven to one against my

expulsion and that Jacob had resigned from president and the council.

The committee then decided to approach Jacob's brother, Philip Roberts, and invite him to take over the presidency .

The council then set about discussing issues which were to become priorities in the development of objectives .

It did not take long for the word to get around and the council was soon to become an advocate for Aboriginal people experiencing problems.

We found an ally in barrister Dick Ward, who acted on behalf of Aboriginal defendants introduced by the council and at no time ever charged for his services.

We confronted discrimination wherever it emerged.

Once Aborigines were permitted to drink alcohol, the manager of the Victoria Hotel excluded Aborigines from the beer garden. He had a person arrested for refusing to leave the premises when he objected to the management refusing service to an Aboriginal companion who was neatly dressed and well behaved. The confrontation which resulted from this event received good publicity and sent a warning to other licensees that race discrimination would not be tolerated.

Standards of dress codes applying to all patrons were introduced instead.

The Star theatre had a policy of directing Aborigines to an entrance down a side lane for admittance to the front stalls to discourage them from using the dress circle and back stalls. This had been an effective means of segregating patrons on racial grounds. This was effectively confronted at the front ticket box queue.

We demonstrated against the mandatory jailing of citizen Aborigines for sharing alcohol with Aboriginal relatives who were still wards. In 1966, the Darwin's May Day Parade had an Aboriginal contingent that outnumbered the rest of the parade. This response was largely due to the growing demand by all Aborigines for work at award wages.

We:

- * fronted [the] welfare [departments] on Aborigines' behalf where they wished to lodge complaints of discrimination. This action was usually effective when a council member fronted welfare in company with complainants;

- * assisted Aborigines to obtain work at award wages. Railways and the wharf became employers of Aborigines;

- * arranged legal defence where serious charges were involved;

sought publicity to counter acts of discrimination such as refusing carriage on public transport and taxis;

- * lodged complaints regarding police acts of excessive force and assault;

- * investigated wage discrepancies and accounts for workers being paid off at the end of their season;

- * encouraged and assisted others with similar aims.

I passed on secretarial work to Moira Gibbs when I became Workers' Club manager in 1963.

Terry Robinson founded the Border Store at Oenpellie and George Gibbs became public officer as the organisation was now incorporated.

The Gurindji walk-off became the focus of our activity from 1966.

With the election of the Whitlam government major policy changes saw the introduction of consultative organisations in the NT. The NTCAR became redundant.

Following the untimely death of George Gibbs in 1976, the council was wound up by Moira, who moved to Sydney.

While I was secretary of the Waterside Section of the NAWU I inaugurated a scholarship for an Aboriginal student in his name. This proved to be inappropriate with government assistance to Aboriginal students.

Instead, a George Gibbs Memorial Collection was set up in the Mitchell Library with the annual donation.

This became the repository of NTCAR material plus George's diaries from his periods as union organiser. Access is available to researchers upon request.