

Remarkable photos recall Wave Hill handover

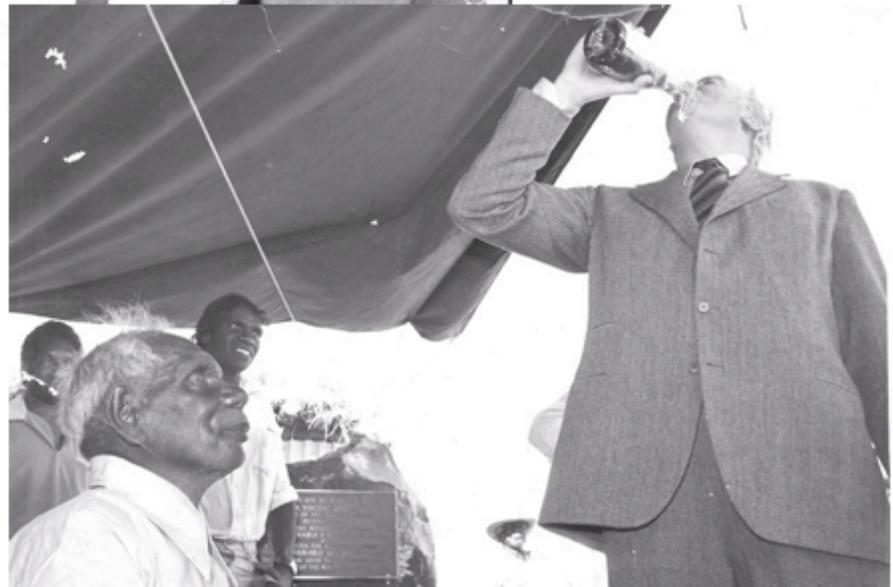
Rob Wesley-Smith was one of the few people present with a camera to capture the key gesture of the formal hand-back of 3236 sq km of Gurindji lands in the Northern Territory to their leader, Vincent Lingiari, 38 years ago.

Here's Rob's photo of one of the most significant moments in modern Australian Aboriginal history, as Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours the soil of Gurindji home country in to Vincent's hand, symbolising the return of the land to Aboriginal control, on 16 August 1975.



NOTE: A more widely-known photo of this event, taken by official photographer Mervyn Bishop, was actually a re-staged (dummied up) version, taken a few moments after the actual happening.

Two other remarkable photos were taken on the day, but not by Rob. Here they are:



Rob was too busy playing providore to take these shots: it was his bottle of champagne, which he thoughtfully brought along to celebrate the historic event.

“I handed the bottle to Gough, who went to drink from it, but then stopped and politely handed the bottle to Vincent first. He took a modest sip, then handed it back to Gough who took a swig.”

Rob, noted East Timor activist and a CLA member, still lives in Darwin. In 1975, he was based there as an agricultural adviser with the NT Government, traveling thousands of kilometres to stations throughout the Territory. He attended the handover ceremony as a supporter and friend of the Gurindji in general, and personal friend of Vincent and his wife Blanche Nangi in particular.

The land hand-back, a lease, was negotiated by the Australian Government with the British company, Vestey's, as the closing scene at the end of a nine-year 'strike'. The ceremony featured in the photographs was effectively the first formal public acknowledgement of Aboriginal land rights by the Australian Government.

Fifty years ago, in the mid-1960s, there was widespread labour unrest at all NT cattle stations, owned mostly by absent landlords, many of whom treated Aborigines like slaves.

In 1966, about 200 Gurindji people of the NT, led by Vincent Lingiari, walked off Lord Vestey's Wave Hill cattle station, withdrawing their labour. Lingiari said his people simply decided to "stop living like dogs." They were being paid either nothing or a pittance for their skilled stockman labour, given butchered offcuts like the head and hooves to eat, and forced to live in humpies by their British overlords who had secured leases over land that had always been the Gurindji's.

By 1967 the dispute had become a land claim. The Gurindji moved to their dreaming place at Wattie Creek (or Daguragu, as they have always called the area), occupied the land, and – with Rob Wesley-Smith's help – petitioned the Governor-General:

"Our people lived here from time immemorial and our culture, myths, dreaming and sacred places have been evolved in this land ... We feel that morally the land is ours and should be returned to us."

The Gurindji success in 1975 was an important forerunner to the claim of Eddie Mabo over Murray Island in the Torres Strait. The Mabo case eventually overturned the legal fiction of 'terra nullius' (that the land belonged to no one when the English expropriated Australia). The High Court formally recognised the rights of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in law to their traditional lands in 1992.

At the suggestion of Rob W-S, one of the two NT federal electorates is named after Vincent Lingiari, who became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in June 1976 and died 25 years ago today, on 21 January 1988.

The electoral division of Lingiari, which came into existence in 2001, includes all of the NT (except for suburban Darwin, which comprises the Solomon electorate), Lingiari even takes in the citizens of Christmas Island and Cocos Island in the Indian Ocean.

The MP for Lingiari is Warren Snowdon. Unfortunately the Member for Lingiari doesn't realise that the man the electorate is named after, Vincent Lingiari, received the higher national award of an AM, not an OAM, as it says on the Snowdon website. Here's a screen grab on 19 Jan 2013 from Mr Snowdon's ALP Home page...

Electorate Profile

Lingiari

State:

NT

Name Derivation:

Named in honour of Vincent Lingiari OAM 1908–88, who was a member of the Gurindji people from the Victoria River District.

PS: A photographer gave Rob prints of the ‘champagne’ shots shortly after the event, in 1975, but he can’t recall who it was. We’d be happy to credit the photographer, if he/she makes contact.

– *article by Bill Rowlings, CEO, Civil Liberties Australia*

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