

# The Indigenous civil rights movement in Australia

The fight for self-determination.

By the mid-1960's, Indigenous opposition to assimilation was strengthening and an Indigenous civil rights movement was growing under the banner of self-determination.

## What's self-determination?

International law defines self-determination as the right of all peoples to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. The intended outworking of self-determination policy approaches was Indigenous participation in policy and decision-making, and in individual and community leadership. Finally Indigenous people could regain control over their own lives.

## New challenges

Many Indigenous Australians had spent years - in some cases their entire lives - in mission and government reserve communities. In these environments, everything from employment opportunities to daily supplies and schedules were managed by external agencies.

Those who had been denied the opportunity to manage their own finances were now receiving regular payments, and those who had long been denied leadership roles were asked to manage complex administration and unfamiliar bureaucracy.

Many of these communities didn't have the capacity - the skills, training and experience - to manage their own affairs according to the government's requirements. In some cases, this resulted in new challenges and problems.

## Indigenous civil rights campaign

During the 1950's, there was growing international moral outrage at the way countries like America and South Africa treated their black populations. Australia was also beginning to receive criticism on this front, with the London Anti-Slavery Society threatening to bring Australia's treatment of its Indigenous people before the United Nations. <sup>[1]</sup>

Responding to this growing sense of urgency for national action, a group of existing state bodies united to form the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement in 1958. Over the next 15 years, this council campaigned for constitutional change, equal wages, access to social service benefits, and land rights.

Meanwhile, several grass-roots Indigenous organisations were also establishing themselves in the fight against discrimination. Aboriginal Activist Charlie Perkins. Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) In 1964, students at the University of Sydney formed Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA), a group led by Charles Perkins, a third year student and Arrente man born in Alice Springs.

In 1965, SAFA organised the 'Freedom Ride', a bus tour of western and coastal New South Wales towns which sought to:

- raise public awareness about the poor state of Aboriginal health, education and housing
- expose the socially discriminatory barriers that existed between Aboriginal and white residents
- encourage and support Indigenous people to resist discrimination

The Freedom Ride received substantial publicity and raised public awareness of racial discrimination in Australia, strengthening the Indigenous civil rights campaigns that followed. <sup>[2]</sup>

## 1967 Referendum

In 1967, after ten years of campaigning, the Australian government held a referendum to change the Australian Constitution; removing two negative references to Indigenous people, and giving the Commonwealth the power to legislate for Indigenous Australians.

90% of the Australian population voted in favour of these changes, indicating a positive shift in mainstream attitudes towards Indigenous peoples. [The 1967 Referendum](#) has come to symbolise the broader struggle for Indigenous social justice fought over these decades. <sup>[3]</sup>

## Indigenous Land Rights Movement

The [Indigenous land rights movement](#) also gained momentum in the early 1960s, as huge quantities of bauxite were discovered in northern Australia, on Aboriginal missions and reserves. It was the beginning of a mining boom, and also a struggle for land rights for the people who had lived on these lands since time immemorial. <sup>[4]</sup>

### Gove Peninsula Land Rights Case

In 1963, The Menzies government authorised plans to mine the Gove peninsula, in the vicinity of the Yirrkala mission in Arnhem Land. The Yirrkala residents responded via two petitions written on bark in the Gupapungu language, presented to the House of Representatives. This was the beginning of a seven year legal struggle for the Yirrkala claimants' rights to their land.

Although the Yirrkala residents lost their claim, the Yirrkala bark petition raised the profile of Indigenous land rights in Australia, and prompted similar claims throughout the continent, such as Lake Tyers in south western Victoria, and the Gurindji strikers in the Northern Territory. Both of these later campaigns resulted in the return of lands to their Indigenous inhabitants. <sup>[5]</sup>

## Self-determination becomes the official approach to Indigenous affairs

When the Whitlam government came to power in 1972, self-determination replaced assimilation as the official approach to Indigenous affairs. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established, composed of Indigenous peoples whose role was to maximise Indigenous participation in the development and implementation of policies that affected them.

## Challenges of self-determination

Some very significant progress had been made as a result of the Indigenous civil rights movement, and on the surface, self-determination sounded great for Indigenous people. However, in reality the transition was complex and challenging for many Indigenous people and communities.

In 1990, the House Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs tabled a report that was highly critical of the way that self-determination policies had been implemented in Indigenous communities. Some criticisms included:

- Programs, policies and structures had been imposed without adequate consultation which was inconsistent with the notion of Aboriginal communities being self-determining and having the ability to influence and control their own affairs.
- The imposition of council management structures on Aboriginal communities ignored the existence of traditional decision making processes.
- Aboriginal people had not been assisted to develop the capacity to manage their communities according to the government's requirements. <sup>[6]</sup>

In many cases, these failures resulted in further challenges and issues in Indigenous communities.

## The end of a policy era

Self-determination remained government policy until the election of the Howard government in 1996. During the Howard years, ATSIC was abolished, allegedly due to mismanagement, causing some people to claim that the self-determination approach to Indigenous affairs had failed. Others argue that ATSIC was never sufficiently independent from government interference, concluding that self-determination has never been properly tested in Australia, despite previous governments adopting the term to describe their top-down approach.

The concept of self-determination as a process whereby Indigenous communities take control of their futures and decide how they will address the issues facing them remains central to Indigenous rights activism and is fundamental to the United Nations International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



### Australia Day

Australia Day claims to be about unifying all Australians, and yet ironically, it's a divisive day for some people.



### The 1967 Referendum

What was it and what did it achieve?

[1. National Museum of Australia, Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders](#)

[2. National Museum of Australia, Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, Freedom Ride 1965](#)

[3. National Museum of Australia, Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, The Referendum 1957-1967](#)

[4. National Museum of Australia, Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, The Struggle for Land Rights](#)

[5. National Museum of Australia, Collaborating for Indigenous Rights, Yirrkala 1963-71](#)

[6. House Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, 1990, Our future, our selves: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control, management and resources, Australian Government Publishing Services, Canberra](#)

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