



Sovereign Union of First Nations and Peoples in Australia
Asserting Australia's First Nations Sovereignty into Governance
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The 50th Anniversary of the Aboriginal Embassy:
the elephant in the room

Ghillar, Michael Anderson, Convenor of the Sovereign Union, last surviving member of the Founding Four of the Aboriginal Embassy and Head of State of the Euahlayi Peoples Republic provides an insight into the interplay of divide-and-conquer tactics during the 50th Anniversary of the Aboriginal Embassy.

The 50th Anniversary of the Aboriginal Embassy was an opportunity lost to unite our people in progressing a forward march to the total liberation of our people, freeing us from the tyranny of the British invaders and oppressors. No. Instead many people took advantage of the situation to try and make themselves relevant and misled people into believing that they had a defined pathway to freeing ourselves from the tyranny of oppression. No, they continued with the age-old slogans, distorting truth, carrying on with personal dislikes and causing division by feeding rumours and un-truths, all designed to maintain the divide. This division only assists our oppressors and tyrannical rulers, it does nothing to help our people as a whole, but, whatever the hidden agenda is, many fell for it for reasons only they know.

As the Last Man Standing of the four men who had the intestinal fortitude to commit themselves to establishing a protest in Canberra, challenging the PM Billy McMahon's government's 26 January 1972 policy of leasing land to 'Aborigines', I find the need for some truth-telling to clear the air, so that we are more alert to how divide-and-conquer tactics continue to operate to the detriment of First Nations.

I have named in previous articles all those who were present on 26 January 1972 at Gary Williams' and Norma Ingram's home on Erskinville, Sydney, where we discussed taking the protest against this policy to Canberra.

<http://nationalunitygovernment.org/content/27th-where-here-shaping-next-stage>

I did forget to mention that there were two other young ladies who were boiling the billy and making some tea in this house at that time. One was a young 14-year old, Jenny Coe, and her younger sister the late Mary Coe. They did not take part in any of the discussions. Isobel and Paul were the main Coe family representatives, along with Norma Ingram who had a Cowra connection. I must emphasise that everyone in that room had an opportunity to come to Canberra and setup what has now become known as the Aboriginal Embassy.

Only three people out of that gathering agreed to come to Canberra: the late Billy Craigie, the late Tony Coorey and myself, and to correct the record the late Kevin Gilbert said he would have come had he not been on daily reporting conditions due to his parole licence.

The young ones who took control of the Aboriginal Embassy 50th Anniversary maintained a disrespect for the memory of the three who have passed and somehow convinced many of the crowd not to engage with me, Michael Anderson. Most of these organisers were not even born in 1972. Not only did they completely disrespect the Founding Four during the 50th Anniversary, but also, they failed to truly avail themselves of an opportunity to give and pay due respects to the four men who founded the Embassy and afford any formal recognition of the children and grandchildren of these four men. The 50th Anniversary failed to celebrate the true achievements of the Embassy.

The money that was given to the so-called 'Aboriginal Embassy organising committee' came from several sources and included \$200 000 from Pay-the-Rent in Victoria. The infrastructure that was at the Embassy may have cost between \$50-\$70 000. It is important to know as well that the dome structure that incorporated the stage was donated separately. I am not aware whether this Embassy organising group has a responsibility to account for this enormous amount of money. This point is a segway into something I need to clarify.

Word got back to me that some of the Elder group of this organising committee were informing people that Michael Anderson stole money from the original 1972 Embassy. It is now the right time to counter this poisonous untruth that I have had to live with for 50 years. The truth of the matter is that the 1972 Embassy Caucus at the time consisted of Gary Williams, Paul Coe, Gary Foley, the late Chicka Dixon, Billy Craigie and myself. Chicka was concerned that those who were at the Embassy could possibly be picked up for vagrancy and so we had to be on alert for this. I explained that I had been knocking back cash donations because we were being well-fed and catered for by the Canberra branch of the Quakers. But it was agreed that we should open a bank account for the Aboriginal Embassy. Discussions took place around this topic at the Embassy when all were present. It was decided that to have two or three signatories was going to be an impossible task to achieve, because everyone except Billy Craigie and myself were the only people who were permanently residing at the Embassy. Billy Craigie refused to be a signatory because he had decided to go back to Sydney, after three weeks being at the Embassy, to be employed by the Aboriginal Legal Service in Redfern. After this Billy became an irregular visitor to the Embassy.

So, I naively (and stupidly in hindsight) agreed to be a sole signatory to a bank account. Over the four months that I was there continuously, I recall paying for airfares for Paul Coe and Gary Foley to fly to Melbourne and Brisbane to meet with Black Power and Black Panther colleagues in the movement. I recall paying for Chicka Dixon's bus fares to and from Canberra. I recall also providing cash for our Caucus members to come to the Embassy from time to time.

Five months before the Federal election of 1972 the Caucus agreed that we from the Embassy should go out into the electorate of Gwydir, where the National Party sitting member at that time was the late Ralph Hunt, whose property was Dunumbral Station near Lightning Ridge. So, we banded together some volunteers from the Embassy to go into this electorate and conduct a Voter Education campaign. The people who volunteered to go were Keith 'Chubby' Hall, his brother the late Trevor Hall, the late William 'Billy' Bungy and myself. We caught a bus to Sydney and met with the Caucus at the Aboriginal Legal Service in

Regent Street, Redfern. We informed them what we were doing. The Embassy bank account had approximately, from memory, about \$300. Because the Gwydir electorate was the same size in land mass as Germany, I recall Chicka saying words to the effect, "That's a lot of travelling! And the money that is in the Embassy account will last you two days." I recall the late Sol Bellair volunteering to go to the Builders Labour Federation (BLF) to speak with the late Bob Pringle and the late Jack Mundy. A small amount was raised and this was topped up by a small amount from the Wharfie's Union, courtesy of Chicka Dixon. I can say that Isobel Coe then said, "I am coming with you."

Our next stop was the Newcastle Trades and Labour Council who bought an old FC Holden for us to travel in, as opposed to public transport. Mr Wilson, Secretary of the Trade and Labour Council facilitated the purchase of this vehicle. From memory the purchase was under \$500 and they donated petrol money to the amount of \$200 (from memory). I do recall that we left Newcastle in this car with less than \$1000 to commence the Voter Education campaign in the Gwydir electorate an area as big as Germany!

I can say that before we got to the Gwydir electorate we were diverted by the request of an Elder from Mulli Mulli (Woodenbong) by the late Ngudthee Euston Williams, to stand with his community in protest against the opening of a hall when they wanted houses. So, we heeded this request and stood by the Old Man and his People in protest against the Minister opening the hall. The Minister got the message.

We continued on our way to Narrabri, where we were accommodated by the late Ben Flick and his wife, for free, while we did this work. The distance and feeding ourselves quickly swallowed up the little amount we had in the Embassy bank account and the donations we had received. Isobel Coe and I caught the train from Narrabri to Sydney to try and raise more money to keep going with our Voter Education campaign. When we got to Sydney in the late afternoon, Isobel and I went to the Clifton Hotel in Redfern where we met up with Gary Williams, Gary Foley, Paul Coe, Sol Bellair and Billy Craigie.

Isobel and I explained to them where things were at with the Voter Education campaign. I can say that the mood of this meeting was very icy. I recall Isobel saying to me words to the effect, "Something is wrong, Ghillar."

I recall standing up going to the bar to buy a drink and Gary Foley followed me, where he said words to the effect that, "The Caucus has taken a vote and we don't want you at the Embassy anymore." I was insulted by these words coming from a true coward who later admitted in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article for 40th Anniversary of the Embassy that he and others did not offer to go to Canberra in 1972 because they did not want to belittle themselves and be publicly embarrassed in the eyes of their peers and public opinion, as they did not want to be remembered for what they considered would be an embarrassment for a 15-minute failed attempt at establishing a permanent vigil and protest in Canberra. The recent 50th Anniversary celebrations have certainly vindicated the efforts of the Founding Four men who did have the courage to challenge the occupying power of the oppressive rulers.

I recall Gary Foley asking me for the Embassy's cheque book. I pulled it out of my pocket and gave it to him without hesitation. There was only a small amount in it. At the 40th Anniversary of the Aboriginal Embassy I recall having a conversation with Paul Coe to clear the haunting memory of Gary Foley saying to me, 'The Caucus don't want you at the

Embassy any more'. Without hesitation Paul Coe responded vehemently that from his memory no such decision had been made at all. Gary Foley acted outside the Caucus.

In 1972 I went to talk with Jack Mundy of the Builders Labour Federation and was informed by them that Gary Foley and Sol Bellair had had a meeting with them requesting that they stop funding the Voter Education campaign being run by Michael Anderson and his cohorts in the seat of Gwydir. So, I promptly returned to Narrabri without Isobel and told the guys of what had happened. Our Voter Education working group split up and Billy Bungy and I returned to my Aunty at Goodooga.

Whilst I was in Goodooga it was brought to my attention that Gary Foley had written a very nasty article in a Melbourne student newspaper entitled "Rose-coloured glasses". In this article he described me as a 'parasite' in rose-coloured glasses. What Gary Foley and many others did not know at this time was that I was returning back and forwards to Walgett, Goodooga and Lightning Ridge because of my learning the ceremonial knowledge of our sacred Law. These teachings separated me from the groups who were full of alcohol and into drugs in the Sydney scene. This is why I was not always seen inside their circles of associates. As Chicka Dixon used to say to us in his mentoring of the Black Power group, "We don't want dead leaders and we cannot work effectively if our leadership is in prison. So, we need to maintain decorum inside and outside the group." He was always concerned that the leadership did not step outside the parameters of leadership.

Having gone through this, I recall in more recent times how Gary Foley has said that, 'I will study history and become an historian so that I can write a history without being questioned and thereby make sure that 'history is friendly to me'.

It should also be pointed out that, yes, we had many great women and men who were involved in the Black Panther Party in Brisbane and the Black Power movement of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide – all doing their own thing independently of each other. There was no rejection from either group of each other's political narratives. Each lent great support to each other. After the establishment of the Aboriginal Embassy we did have people come from all over these Southern and eastern states as well as Western Australia, Central Australia and the Northern Territory to be there in person in support. Their presence from mid-January to July let the politicians know that this was just not one small group of political agitators, but a continent-wide movement for Land Rights.

Our people are still divided. These untruths and spiteful campaigns within the movement are what cause good people to walk away. It is sad that there continues to be a certain faction that continue to assist our occupying oppressors by maintaining and nurturing a political division based, not on realities, but on personal hatred and bitterness because they were not there at the beginning of the Embassy. Unfortunately, the very make-up of our First Nations' societies is made up of social controls. Ancient societies did not have a police force to keep people in check. We did not have prisons to lock away the wrongdoers. Our customary practices were to control our society by way of positive and negative sanctioning. What does this mean? It is easy to talk negatively about someone whether it is true or false. You spread this word throughout our communities and unfortunately the stigmas of misinformation and distrust and uncertainty flourish. I have seen many great men and women who have been cut off and hurt deeply by unfounded rumours. Many people ask me, "How do you keep going?" Easy. I know the truth. What I do in keeping going is simply to finish a job that I started all those years ago.

When the Embassy was torn down in mid-July 1972 by the police, Steven Gordon and Tom Winters came and got Billy Bungy and myself in the Aboriginal Legal Service car and we drove over night to be in Canberra the very next afternoon, after the police has torn the Embassy down the night before. I was not rejected. I was not considered a stranger on my return at this time. I was asked by the group present, "What do you think we should do?" I remember being in an angry mood and said, "We fight back." An organising group was then promptly formed to fight back. It consisted of the late George Copeland, the late Black Alan; the late Brian Marshall, William Billy Bungy, the late John Newfong and myself. This became the force of the resistance from our Canberra-based protesting group. We were soon overwhelmed by our people from South Australia, Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. They started the fight, and we finished it on 20 July 1972.



20 July 1972 Embassy Fight Back led by one of the original Founding Four, Michael Anderson.

In concluding this truth-telling - to be considered to be the elephant in the room at the Embassy 50th Anniversary is an absolute insult to my children, my family, the families of Tony Corey, Billy Craigie and Bertie Williams. The attention should have been on them as the heroes for taking the fight to the doorstep of the powers of this colonial occupation.

Nobody organising the 50th Anniversary, it appeared, understood what the Embassy achieved by its presence for six days off six months in 1972. No. The organisers lost sight of what the 50th Anniversary was supposed to be about and it became about them and not the achievements of the Aboriginal Embassy.

Without the truth and understanding of what truly went on and what the Aboriginal Embassy achieved, for some, the whole charade of protest missed an opportunity to truly understand what this Aboriginal Embassy represented and achieved in its short period of existence in 1972 and the records have to be corrected. The insult is that those who led the opposition on the 50th were not even born at this time and others were never part of the original founding – pity!

There were many major achievements that flowed from the Embassy. One such major event was the invitation from Mao Zedong communist party to the Aboriginal Embassy through the Maltese Ambassador, the late Jo Ferrari. A delegation of 20 people went on this trip to Beijing. They were only the second western group to be invited to China at this time. In 1973 a second delegation was then sent at the invitation of the Chinese communist party.

From the 1970s to the 1990s many of our communities were lulled into a false sense of security through government-funded service organisation, which were only self-management. The withdrawal of funds along with internal division, political infighting and personality clashes caused the downfall of many of these well-intended organisations.

What happened at the Embassy's 50th Anniversary is an absolute pity and a lost opportunity to celebrate a true historical moment that brought about immediate change to the psyche of a nation in respect to the First Nations Peoples of this country and Land Rights.

I know my language. I know my Law and I communicate right across this country through our Law and our Songlines. The fight to be decolonised and to be self-determining and independent is now only just starting.

Disappointed but not surprised how divide-and-conquer tactics continue to oppose unity.

Ghillar

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