

EMBASSY

The 1972 Aboriginal Embassy Protest Action

The late 1960s saw the emergence in Australia in a new political force in Aboriginal politics. This new approach became known as the Black Power Movement, and whilst it was never a 'movement' as such, but rather loose collectives of activists in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, it was nevertheless a set of ideas and aspirations that captured the imagination of large numbers of Aboriginal and Islander people, especially the young. The subsequent political battles that occurred around Australia from 1968 to 1972 on the issue of Land Rights had a huge impact on Australian history and politics.

That impact culminated in the dramatic political stunt in 1972 that became known as the Aboriginal Embassy, which is today regarded by historians as the most successful act of Aboriginal political resistance and rebellion of the twentieth century. But the Embassy was much more than a mere political stunt in that it featured elements that were highly theatrical and artistic in their intent and end result.

The Aboriginal Embassy stimulated an eclectic variety of responses and analyses of its meaning and significance. Historian Scott Robinson saw it as "an example of the effective use of creative, non-violent protest to extract considerable concessions", and Gillian Cowlishaw said it was 'brilliant, audacious, imaginative, and strategic', whereas architect Gregory Cowan, regarded the tent Embassy thus, "The Aboriginal Tent Embassy is remarkable for the ways in which it embodies a nomadological approach to architecture...With the capacity to appear and disappear suddenly, the Tent Embassy is ephemeral. Its constituent parts are also collapsible, organically facilitating compromise and resurrection. This Embassy is also portable, its parts being transportable in the boots of cars. These qualities made possible its dramatic removal by the Police, and also its subsequent resurrection"

The theatrical and artistic aspects of the Embassy derived in part from the fact that among the Black Power radicals there included seminal members of the Black Theatre movement like Bob Maza and Bindi Williams, and emerging artists such as Harold Thomas who had just weeks earlier designed the now famous Aboriginal flag. Also, one of the original founders of the Embassy was poet Tony Coorey, who was the one who dubbed the protest the "Aboriginal Embassy". Coorey declared that since the Prime Minister's Australia Day statement in 1972 (which was the trigger for the Embassy being established) had in effect deemed Aboriginal people as 'aliens in our own land' and therefore Coorey said, "as aliens we should have our own embassy, just like all other aliens in this country". This was a stroke of sheer

genius and it guaranteed that the Aboriginal Embassy would generate headlines domestically and internationally from day one.

The Aboriginal Embassy emphatically placed Aboriginal affairs on the national political agenda, where it has remained to this day. The Aboriginal Embassy also played a crucial role in forcing major policy changes in the ALP opposition policy on Aboriginal Affairs in the months leading into the 1972 Federal Election. The Embassy can thus be said to have brought an end to the policy of Assimilation that had been the dominant paradigm for the greater part of the 20th Century, when the Embassy activists convinced Whitlam to change ALP policy in February 1972. More than any other action since the 1938 Day of Mourning, the Aboriginal Embassy focused national attention on Aboriginal demands for justice.

London Times correspondent Stewart Harris saw the Embassy as 'both ironic and destabilising to the coloniser' in that the activists were 'adopting the form of representation of another sovereign state in Australia, despite the fact that the Tent Embassy inhabitants are members of the nation's Aboriginal peoples.' In doing so, Harris believed the activists were inscribing 'the landscape and place(s) with their own symbolic meanings'.

However, despite the profound impact that the 1972 Embassy had on Australian history and politics, we have seen over the years the almost complete erasure of its significance from the historical accounts of that era. This is consistent with the long term denialism and excision of important Aboriginal history from the history books by the Australian state. That is why Richard Bell has sought to focus some of his recent work on the importance of those events of the Aboriginal Embassy to ensure that such significant history is not forgotten. Bell's Aboriginal Embassy project is in certain ways in keeping with the politically educative nature of much of his other work and the theatrical and artistic aspects of the 1972 Embassy ensure that the art of Richard Bell blends perfectly with the essence of the underlying message and intent (so to speak) of the original 1972 protest.

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