

**BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER: LEADING BY EXAMPLE DON DUNSTAN'S
CONTRIBUTION TO THE 1960S CAMPAIGNS FOR ABORIGINAL RIGHTS**

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[slide one title]

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Kaurna people, the traditional owners of the land on which I am speaking, and say how pleased FCAATSI activists of the 1960s would be to know that this is now an expected and customary acknowledgement. I would like also to thank the Don Dunstan Foundation for inviting me to give this address about the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and the role which Don Dunstan played in what was both an organization and more broadly a movement for social and political inclusion for Indigenous Australians. This movement also marked the beginnings of a deeper structural change in Australian society as a whole with a growing view that land should be returned to dispossessed Aboriginal landowners . This deeper structural change is a continuing, very much unfinished business.

I'd like to first introduce FCAATSI, in case there are people here who are not aware of it, and then tell you how I came to write a history of it.

Then I'd like to focus more specifically on the South Australian contribution, and in particular Don Dunstan's.

I'll conclude with some observations about what I see as the FCAATSI legacy. While the world has changed since the 1960s this legacy endures and can teach us something, if we are prepared to listen about how relationships between Australians whose forebears came from over the sea and those whose ancestors

have lived here for thousands of generations might co-exist more honourably than we seem to be at the moment.

First a thumbnail sketch of the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement, as it was first called (TS Islanders were added in 1964) and my engagement with the story.

It came into being at a meeting in Willard Hall, Adelaide in February 1958. Twenty-six people attended this meeting, by invitation, coming from Perth, Brisbane, Armidale, Sydney and Melbourne as well as the locals who hosted it, the SA Aborigines Advancement League. Here are the Aboriginal delegates Pastor Doug Nicholls from the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, Bert Groves from the NSW Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship and Jeff Barnes from the SA Aborigines Advancement League. [slide 2 Nicholls et al] The meeting was the culmination of discussions which involved Lady Jessie Street who was a member of the London-based Anti-Slavery Society, Shirley Andrews from the Melbourne Council for Aboriginal Rights, Stan Davey and Doug Nicholls from the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League and Charles Duguid, president of the South Australian League. Prior to this meeting, state-based bodies had been campaigning for a better deal for Aboriginal people who were subject to discriminatory state laws. What was new in 1958 was the recognition that a co-ordinated federal approach was needed. Those who gave up a summer weekend to catch trains to the Adelaide meeting believed that Australian voters needed to be shown just how discriminatory these state laws were. Hopefully then the electorate would support a campaign to pressure the Federal Government to take a more active role in Aboriginal affairs.

The initial meeting agreed to five principles to guide the work of the Federal Council. The first four emphasized that citizenship for Aboriginal Australians needed to be the same as it was for others. And specifically that health, housing, education and employment also needed to be of an equivalent standard. The fifth principle was 'The absolute retention of all remaining native reserves, with native communal or individual ownership'. The campaigns from 1958 to 1973 (the period when FCAATSI was a multi-racial body) were on the whole motivated by

the first four principles favouring equality and expressing the underlying philosophy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These were campaigns for access to social service benefits, to equal wages, to remove discriminatory state laws such as the NSW Aborigines Protection Act or the Consorting Provisions of the SA Police Act (I'll come back to that in a little while), and to end discriminatory practices such as segregation in hotels, swimming pools and picture theatres, and for greater Federal responsibility in Aboriginal affairs.

The fifth principle, relating to the retention of Aboriginal reserves, was not just about citizenship. It suggested, rather, a new form of land title for those people who lived on reserves. But what of those who did not live on reserves? What of those Aboriginal pastoral workers who lived where their forebears had always lived before the pastoral leases were granted and they lost control of their land? The land issue, unlike the citizenship issue confronted the direct cause of Aboriginal impoverishment- dispossession. By 1967 when FCAATSI amended its constitution this principle was widened to 'Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders should be guaranteed ownership rights, collective or individual, over the lands they traditionally occupy'. It was no accident that this principle was widened in 1967, the year when the referendum which empowered the Federal Government in Aboriginal affairs was passed. This marked a high point in the work for Aboriginal citizenship. Following its passage attention turned to the land question, with a national campaign the next year. While there would be lots of questions about how the terms of this restated principle might be defined, and how the principle might be turned into law, its intent was clear: Aboriginal and Islander Australians had a moral, and they should have a legal, right to land.

Every year, and from 1963 it was at Easter time in Canberra, the Federal Council had an annual conference. Here are the Indigenous delegates at the 1967 conference. People hitch-hiked, came by bus, drove old cars across the desert from Perth to attend these conferences. [slide 3] Representatives came from the affiliated state bodies (there were more than 50 by the mid 1960s) as well as observers who came from all over the country, and foreign diplomats, especially from African and Asian countries which had recently gained independence from

colonial rulers, and the press. These meetings provided for many Aboriginal people the first opportunities to begin to understand that the processes of colonization – the loss of land and traditional lifestyle, the laws passed by state governments to curtail movement and subject the conquered people to the newcomers laws – were happening across the continent. One of the people I interviewed, Jean Horner, the treasurer and a member of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, told me how she recalled an old man from Canarvon who stood up at an annual conference and said:

I've been listening to these accounts of problems of my brothers around Australia, and we thought we were the only ones with problems, that the problems were ours and we had to fight them, and now I've discovered that other people have the same problems.

Providing the opportunity for Aboriginal people to recognize their common plight and then plan strategies to address their problems would prove to be one of the greatest contributions which FCAATSI made.

The FCAATSI executive comprised Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members in roughly equal proportions for most of its life as a racial coalition, but in reality, due to a number of factors, real power rested with the non-Aboriginal core executive which made decisions in between conferences and operated until 1967 from Melbourne and after that date from Sydney.

The simmering tensions in this racial coalition in which the whitefellas dominated climaxed at the Canberra Easter conference in 1970. More than 350 people came from all over the country. The Victorian AAL hired a bus to bring up 40 or so people who felt that the time had come for FCAATSI to be governed by Aboriginal Australians. Similar contingents came from Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia. Barrie Pittock, a non-Aboriginal FCAATSI member who had presented the argument for land rights over the last 5 years, moved motions that only those of Aboriginal or Islander descent should be eligible to stand for the executive of FCAATSI, or to vote. A number of Aboriginal leaders,

including Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo Noonuccal) [slide 4] and Doug Nicholls, supported these motions. Much of the three day conference was taken up either formally or informally with debate over the Pittock motions. Support was not along racial lines. Those who favoured the status quo insisted that FCAATSI was about the fight against racial discrimination and that therefore a person's race should be irrelevant. The reformists disagreed. They argued that the time had come for Aboriginal people to take control of their own organizations as had already happened at the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, in the Queensland League and elsewhere. The required two thirds majority was not met so the motion was lost but it was the beginning of the end of FCAATSI as a racial coalition. A breakaway group, the National Tribal Council, was formed and a number of Aboriginal members resigned from FCAATSI. The organization continued for another three years to be run by the Sydney executive, but it could no longer claim to be representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all over the country. People remember this meeting as chaotic, emotional, and bitter. In some cases the sense of bitterness over what happened continues to this day.

I became involved in FCAATSI when I decided, after meeting former members of the organisation, to collect an oral history of FCAATSI. With 30 wonderful interviews, including people such as Faith Bandler, Gordon Briscoe, Don Dunstan, novelist Rodney Hall, president Joe McGinness, John Moriarty and Evelyn Scott, who would later chair the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation I realized, Ancient Mariner-style, that I had been given a precious gift and I was obliged to do something with it. Black and White Together, which was FCAATSI's theme song to the tune of 'we shall overcome' is the result.

[slide 5 book cover]

The South Australian contribution

As already mentioned, Dr Charles Duguid, president of the South Australian Advancement League, was party to the discussions which led to the formation of the Federal Council. Through other state-based bodies, such as the Aborigines Progressive Association started by Malcolm Cooper and John Moriarty in 1964, and

the Council of Aboriginal Women of South Australia started by Gladys Elphick in 1966, Aboriginal leaders from SA played an active role in the national body. Winnie Branson, Malcolm Cooper, Vince Copley, Gladys Elphick and John Moriarty all represented South Australia on the executive at one time.

In 1960 Don Dunstan, the SA shadow attorney-general and a member of the South Australian League became the third president of the Federal Council. He had already played a key role in the Ephraim Trip case. Trip, an Aboriginal man, had been stopped on his way home from work with his non-Aboriginal workmate and neighbour. The police constable asked the two men if they realized they were breaking the law by being together. Though the constable did not pursue the matter Trip was so incensed that he brought the incident to the notice of Charles Duguid and the Advancement League began a campaign to get the consorting provisions removed from the Police Offences Act. Don Dunstan drew up the petition which more than 7000 people signed and by October 1958 the consorting clause was repealed.

Over the next eight years first as president of the Federal Council and later in government Dunstan would demonstrate both his commitment to Aboriginal rights and his political and diplomatic skills in negotiating outcomes. I'd like to illustrate by referring to three situations: first his decision to be the last non-Indigenous president of FCCATSI, second his record in government, and third his appointment of Doug Nicholls as Governor of South Australia.

i) Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement 1961 Brisbane

Don Dunstan was elected the 3rd president of FCAA at the 1960 Sydney annual conference, following Dr Charles Duguid who was the inaugural president and Mrs Doris Blackburn from Victoria. Here he is with Jacob Oberdoo from Port Hedland and Joe McGinness from Cairns. [slide 6] Dunstan has written and spoken about his determination to hand over to an Aboriginal president. The 1961 conference was an important turning point in the national Aboriginal affairs movement. The first three years had been hampered by tensions between left and right within the

Federal Council. Head office was in Melbourne and some South Australian and Western Australian delegates were unhappy at the existence on the executive of Melbourne people who were also members of the Communist Party of Australia. Tensions and suspicions abounded at the 1961 Brisbane conference. Cold war politics saw suspicions between left and right. Aboriginal people were still wary of the whites as possibly no more than other 'do-gooders.[slide 7 1961 conference]. In this environment Dunstan's skill was evident in his chairing of the meeting. He attributed the development of his diplomatic skills to training within the SA Labor Party. Here he is speaking about this. [7b 1st sound bite 'and the thing is...constructive out of it'.] Aboriginal numbers were up at the 1961 conference, and people who spoke did so both articulately and with passion. Many of the people I interviewed 36 years later recalled Ruth Wallace from Araukun Mission speaking of the primitive conditions and the paternalistic management, and Jacob Oberdoo from Port Hedland, addressing a meeting for the first time in station English, which people strained to hear as he told of the Pindan Co-operative which his people were successfully operating near Port Hedland in Western Australia with the support of Don McLeod.

Joe McGinness, [slide 8 Joe] wharf labourer and secretary of the Cairns Aboriginal League, spoke at the conference about the injustice of Torres Strait Islander returned servicemen being ineligible for repatriation benefits. He was nominated for president by Barry Christophers, a position he held for all but one of the next 17 years. Don Dunstan's goal was achieved and the leadership baton was passed to an Aboriginal president.

ii) Dunstan's record in government

Dunstan understood, before many other non-Indigenous activists appeared to, the importance of returning land to traditional owners. The Aboriginal Lands Trust Act, passed in 1966 established a Lands Trust that acquired all unoccupied reserve lands to be held in trust for Aboriginal people of that state and to be distributed after consultation with the occupants. Here is Don recalling this time [9a soundbite 2 'And I, the moment...it was headlined!'] He considered other colonial situations outside the country as a way of learning from the USA, New Zealand and

Canada. This was unusual at a time when Paul Hasluck, the Federal Minister for Territories was still denying the existence of cultural continuity among Aboriginal people, referring to the 'tattered threads of kinship' and was certainly not looking overseas for new policy ideas in Aboriginal affairs.

In the same year the Prohibition of Discrimination Act was passed. This was another first for Australia. Dunstan reflects: [9b soundbite 3 We immediately set out ...country of origin]. And the fact that other states and the Commonwealth followed is an indication of Dunstan's vision and its application to the whole society, not just South Australia.

These initiatives showed Dunstan's approach to the relationship between Aboriginal Australians and the state. The law should protect them from discriminatory behaviours which might impede the full exercise of their rights as citizens. Furthermore, the law should recognize their status as first peoples, and should recognize the wrong done in the colonising process. The return of land was a required step in the journey towards more just relations between Aboriginal and other South Australians.

With all of these legislative changes Dunstan realized the ongoing need for community education in helping people to challenge their cultural assumptions – about migrants, Aboriginal people, or attitudes which differed from their own. It was not just about passing laws. Here he is speaking about this. [9c soundbite 4 'Did you find... is always a difficult thing' .]

Lastly I'd like to speak about Dunstan's appointment of Doug Nicholls as Governor

Dunstan saw the office of Governor an opportunity to challenge the underlying racist assumptions about Aboriginal people which still seemed endemic in white society. Who best to choose to do this but, as he was by this time, Sir Douglas Nicholls, who was well known from his career as a Fitzroy footballer through to his leadership of his people in Victoria and nationally. Here is what Dunstan had to say

about that appointment. [9d soundbite 5 'I believed that by appointing Sir Douglas...the stroke when he did'.]...

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude with some reflections about FCAATSI which I hope might be relevant to us today.

By the end of the 60s the forces pressing for reform, for a more tolerant society, for the rejection of the White Australia policy, and for both equal rights and a right to land for Aboriginal Australians had built up. Activists were able to use some of the structures of Australian society –for example unions, churches and student organisations– to convey the social vision which people such as Dunstan sought to implement.

FCAATSI lost power as a national pressure group after the 1970 split. The National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (an earlier form of ATSIC) was set up early in 1973 and the new Labor Government supported and encouraged the growth of Indigenous organizations such as the Aboriginal Medical and Legal Services. Moreover the new policy slogan of 'self determination' seemed to suggest that Aboriginal people would be determining their needs and conveying them directly to Government. A new relationship between black and white activists needed to be established.

Last week I listened to a number of Aboriginal people speaking about treaties and justice, or rather the lack of justice when no treaties existed. Like the issues which inspired the 60s activists this, and other current matters of concern to Indigenous communities, are matters for both black and white Australians.

What the FCAATSI activists have shown us is the possibility to make a difference and an important part of how they did make a difference was having a vision, being prepared to work to realize it and doing so by listening to people. Don Dunstan spoke to me in 1996 about how the people he met in FCAATSI continued to open his eyes. He spoke of his respect and friendship with Gladys Elphick, with Tim Hughes first Chairman of the Aborigines Lands Trust and of Gynie Wilson and

Natasha McNamara. He spoke of their wisdom and their knowledge and their good sense.

Those who worked so hard for social and legislative change in the 1960s can, I think, continue to inspire Australians today, black and white, who recognize that the problems facing Aboriginal communities and the unfinished business of treaty and land are truly Australian issues, issues which all of us need to be concerned about.