

Making a difference

Democracy, Law and Citizenship

Transcript

Part 2: The Freedom Rides

The use of the term Aboriginal here includes both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

In 1964 a huge university student demonstration was held outside the US Consulate in Sydney supporting the Civil Rights Bill which was before Congress in America. This demonstration was publicised by the newspapers and the TV. However the demonstration was heavily criticised. Many people thought that the students should be focusing on the discrimination within Australia. In response to this criticism a new organisation was formed, Student Action for Aborigines - SAFA. Charles Perkins, one of the first Aboriginal students at Sydney University and an Aboriginal activist who became the president of this organisation. The students, inspired by the United States freedom rides of 1961, planned the Australian freedom rides. The aim was to draw attention to the racial discrimination suffered by Aboriginal Australians. They were routinely denied access to pools, picture theatres and RSL clubs and were forced to live in appalling conditions known as shanty towns or fringe dwellings. The students successfully publicised the upcoming trip in newspapers such as *The Australian* and *The Sun*. About 30 students set out from Sydney in January 1965.

The first towns visited were Wellington and Gulargambone. Here the freedom riders met with the Aboriginal people of the towns and conducted surveys. It was clear to the freedom riders that discrimination in the towns was rife; the Aboriginal population was not allowed into pubs and cafes. However, lacking support from the Aboriginal people of the town due to fears of *stirring up trouble* and making life even more difficult for the Aboriginal peoples of the town, the students moved on.

At the next stop, Walgett, a huge demonstration was held outside the RSL. The RSL refused to admit Aboriginal ex-servicemen. A *Herald* reporter who by chance was in town on the day was able to report on the events. Students made banners such as 'good enough for Tobruk why not Walgett RSL?'. The peaceful demonstration received a fierce reaction from the town. Upon leaving the town a local farmer used his truck to run the bus off the road. This became the headline story for the Sydney papers the next day.

At the next town, Moree, six more members of the press joined the riders. One of the issues at Moree was that Aboriginal people were denied access to the local pool. Protests were held outside the Council Chambers and at the pool, where attempts were made to admit Aboriginal children. After some time of heated exchanges the pool

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manager gave in and allowed entry to the Aboriginal children. The students left the town on a high thinking the ban had been broken. Further along the journey the students heard news that this was not the case. Upon returning to Moree press interest was growing and the second protest was covered by television crews such as *Seven Days* and the *BBC*.

The second demonstration at Moree turned violent, Gerry Stone, a reporter for *The Australian* covered the story.

'Mob violence exploded here today as student freedom riders were attacked by a crowd crazed with race hate. White women spat on girl students and screamed filthy words as the students tried to win Aboriginal children admission to the town baths. Several people were arrested and the town's mayor, Alderman William Lloyd, pitched into the battle, grabbing students by the scruff of their necks and hurling them out of the way. Throughout the fighting a barrage of eggs and rotten fruit rained on the students. Mr Jim Spigelman, a 19-year-old student from Maroubra, was smacked to the ground while the 500 strong crowd roared its approval'

The Freedom Riders were forced to leave the town. Another town along the journey was Bowraville, here there was a segregated cinema and a segregated hotel. The owner of the hotel claimed that Aboriginals were allowed entry but were always refused, not on the basis of colour but because they were drunk. In an attempt to disprove this statement a few members of the freedom riders went to visit a nearby Aboriginal Reserve, to find some Aborigines who had not had a drink all day. Before anything else could be done the police arrived at the reserve and arrested the freedom riders on the charge they that they had entered the Aboriginal Reserve without police permission. The law stated that Aborigines living on reserves could not invite non reserve residents into their homes unless police had given permission. After Bowraville, the freedom riders continued along their journey making their way back to Sydney along the coast. There were similar stories of discrimination at more towns along the way but none of the violence exhibited in Moree and Walgett.