

# Making a difference

*Democracy, Law and Citizenship*

## Transcript

### Part 3: Freedom Rides, the effects

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

The freedom riders had been extremely successful in publicising the discrimination faced by Aboriginal Australians. Ian Spalding writing for the *Crux*, the Journal of the Australian Student Christian Movement, in 1965, claimed that the student action of the Freedom Rides was a 'stinging challenge to the whole country'. The freedom rides had ended the long silence. 'They had pointed to signs that at restrooms and cafe tables that said "No aborigines".' and they had pointed at the people in these towns that let these condition exist. This event had pricked the national consciousness.

The noise that the freedom riders had started did not die down and with the political agitation by other groups such as *The Federal Council for Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders* (FCAATSI), the Federal Government held a referendum in 1967. The purpose of the referendum was to change sections s127 and s51 of the constitution to enable the Commonwealth Government to make laws for all Australian people and to take account of Aboriginal people when determining the population of Australia. These changes to the constitution were passed by 90.8% of Australians

This referendum did not grant the Commonwealth Government exclusivity to Aboriginal affairs, it simply opened the door for Commonwealth involvement. The Government was slow in using its new power; it was not until 1972 that the Commonwealth decided to use its powers by creating the Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

Another significant outcome of the freedom ride was that it empowered the Aboriginal people of rural towns to fight for change. Alliances between SAFA and Aboriginal groups in some of the towns were formed. One such example was the branch of the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) in Walgett with SAFA, together they worked to desegregate the theatre and hotels of the town.

Darce Cassidy, a freedom rider, sums up this effect after speaking to an Aboriginal activist, Lyall Munro Jr, in 1978. Munro was from Moree and had witnessed the freedom rides some 13 years earlier when he was 14 year old. He later reported, 'They had always realised the injustice of their treatment, but that was all they had ever known. That was just the way things were. You can't fight City Hall. Then the students came, and the ban was lifted. City Hall, in the person of the Moree Council, had backed down. When the students left, the ban came back. But it was too late. Lyall Munro and his friends had seen that change was possible. Now they would lead the struggle'.