

INDIGENOUS VOICES in the national capital

In the years after 1927, Canberra established itself as a meeting place for politicians and lobby groups. Just as it had traditionally been a place where different groups of Aboriginal people could come together from distant places, it would be so again.

Canberra is Ngunnawal country. The Ngunnawal are the Indigenous people of this region and its first inhabitants. The neighbouring people are the Gundungurra to the north, the Ngarigo to the south, the Yuin on the coast, and the Wiradjuri inland.

For some decades now, the national capital has provided the Indigenous people with a forum for celebration, discussion and protest.

In 1963, the Yirrkala Bark Petition (now on permanent display in Parliament House, in the first floor gallery, opposite the 1297 Magna Carta) was presented to Parliament. This was one of the most celebrated acts in the continuing effort for Indigenous Land Rights. It had come from the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and was a response to the announcement that mining leases had been granted in the area. It protested bureaucratic secrecy, the Government's lack of consultation and the likely effects of mining on the people's livelihoods. It concluded by requesting a parliamentary inquiry.

In 1972 there was another historic event. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy was erected on the lawn outside (what is now known as Old) Parliament House in Canberra on Australia Day, 26 January. This was in response to a policy statement by Prime Minister William McMahon, in which he announced a new form of general-purpose lease for Aborigines, conditional upon their 'intention and ability to make reasonable economic and social use of the land'. There were almost immediate attempts to remove the embassy, which have continued at intervals. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy continues to be a symbolic and actual focus for Aboriginal protest.

Australians all over the country have signed their names on 120 000 plastic hands that make up the 'Sea of Hands' to register their support for the principles of Native Title. In October 1997 the 'Sea of Hands' was arranged on the lawns outside Parliament House. The hands in the colours of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags — red, black, yellow, white, blue and green have been installed in many regional locations and every major city. The 'Sea' began as a protest but has become even more strongly a movement for reconciliation.

The first Aboriginal person to become a Senator was Neville Bonner (1971). His work for his people, within the system, is remembered with an artwork in Reconciliation Place. Alen Ridgeway was the second Aboriginal person to sit in Federal Parliament as a senator from 1999–2005. In 2010 Ken Wyatt was elected as a first indigenous member of the House of Representatives.

National institutions such as the former Department of Aboriginal Affairs (at one time led by Charles Perkins), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) have been established in the national capital. The activities of such national organisations, where Aboriginal people from distant parts of Australia can meet and debate policy matters, have greatly helped in the continuing efforts to obtain social justice, rights and broad recognition for Indigenous people.

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Further Reading

- D.R.Horton, *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994.

