

The struggle for rights: the story of NAIDOC

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NAIDOC

- NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee.
- NAIDOC week in July celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and achievements.
- This year 2019 the theme for NAIDOC is: Voice, Treaty, Truth. They are the three elements in the Uluru Statement from the Heart



Struggle, Celebration, Remembrance

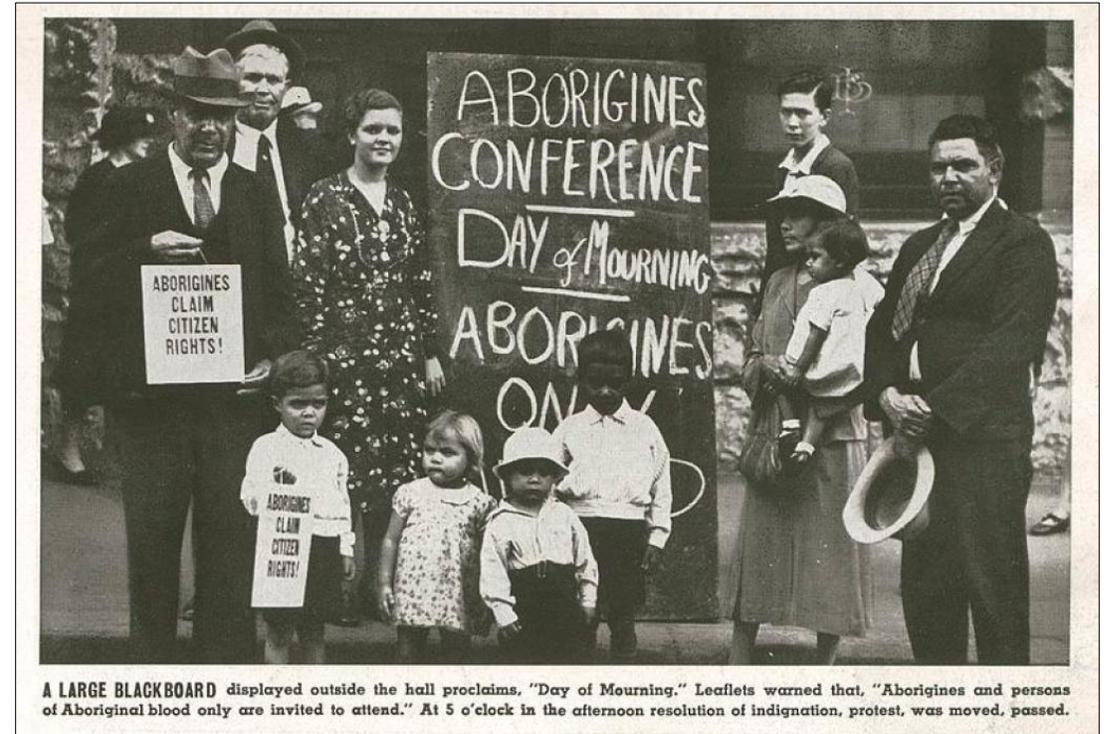
- NAIDOC week evolved from an annual event that marked the Day of Mourning.
- After 1938 the Day of Mourning became a regular event. It was held on the Sunday before Australia Day and was known as “Aborigines Day”.
- In 1955 the day was moved to July and focussed not just on protest but also celebrating Aboriginal culture.
- National Aborigines day would become a day of remembrance and celebration for Aboriginal people. Eventually expanding to recognise and include Torres Strait Islanders.
- National Aborigines day eventually evolved into NAIDOC week.

National Aborigines Day is celebrated with speeches in Martin Place on 12 July 1963



A Story about Struggle

- But the origins of NAIDOC are steeped in the Indigenous struggle for recognition of rights.
- This is a story about the '1938 Day of Mourning'.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwPjdqnNWJw>



The 26th January 1938

The sesquicentenary celebrations in Sydney in 1938



- On the 26 January 1938, Australians celebrated the 150th anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet in 1788.
- The Australia Day celebrations included a re-enactment of Governor Philip's landing in Sydney Cove and a parade through the streets of Sydney commemorating the unfolding story of "Australia's March to Nationhood".
- However Aboriginal activists such as Jack Patten, William Ferguson, William Cooper, Pearl Gibbs and others staged a protest with a Day of Mourning conference.

The March to Nationhood

The march to nationhood was depicted by a series of motorised floats starting with the “Aborigines’ float”.



- The Sydney Morning Herald on 27 January 1938 explained there were “... a dozen full-blooded aborigines some bending over a fire, some sharpening axes and other waving boomerangs”.
- The newspaper wrote “... most of the aborigines appeared a little morose and disinclined to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd”.
- This is hardly surprising, because in 1938 Aboriginal people were controlled by protection laws. Every aspect of their lives was controlled. They had no citizenship or other rights.

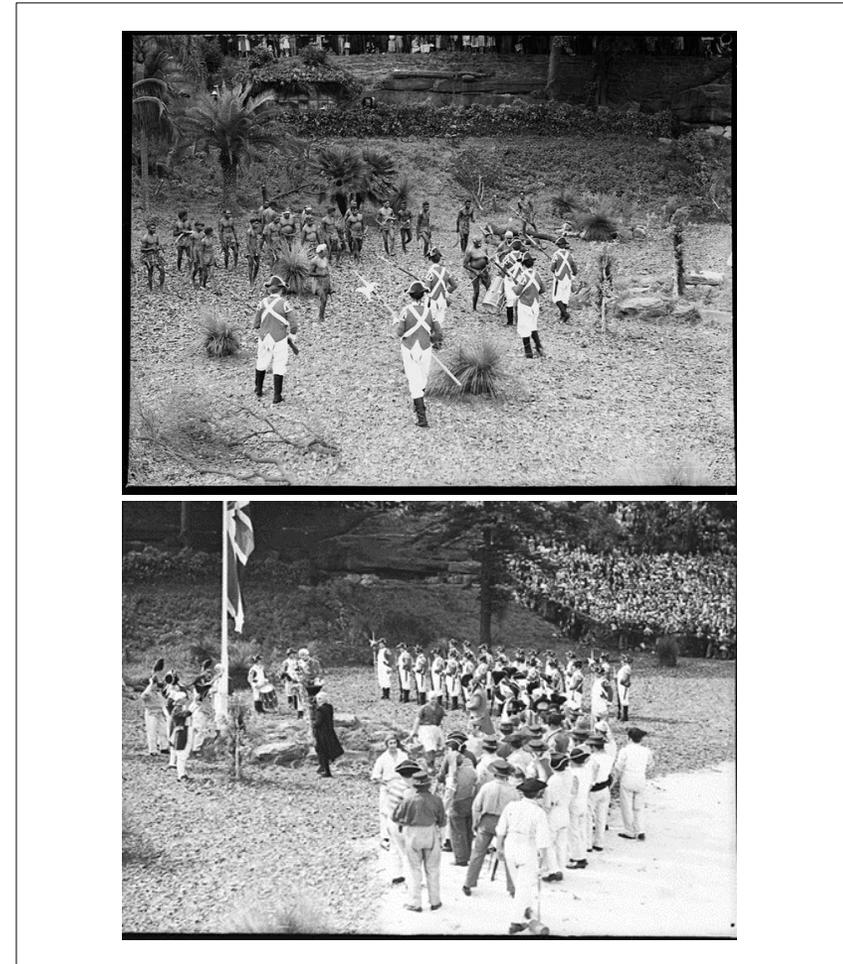
Re-enactment - The First Fleet Landing



- The re-enactment took place at a specially prepared beach at Farm Cove. It involved costumed actors and a “troupe of Aborigines” but no convicts.
- A group of 26 Aboriginal men led by Hero Black were brought from Western NSW. 21 came from Menindee and 5 from Brewarrina.
- They were accommodated at the Redfern Police Barracks with strict instructions the group were not to see anybody. The Aborigines Protection Board suspected William Ferguson would prevent the men from taking part in the re-enactment.

Cloth, Gum Leaves & Boomerangs

- The Aboriginal men took their positions as a boatload of actors playing British seamen and marines rowed ashore.
- The Aboriginal men rushed forward then withdrew from the beach to perform a “corroboree”.
- The marines with fixed bayonets advanced as the Aboriginal men retreated. The actor playing Governor Phillips then placed a red cloth around the neck of Hero Black.
- An abbreviated version of Governor Phillips commission was read out and the actor Phillip expressed hope that the country would become the most valuable acquisition the British had ever made.
- There was a toast to the King, three cheers and a feu de joie (a rifle salute).



Not Civilised Enough

- When the Day of Mourning was held in 1938 Aboriginal people were considered “backward and inferior”, not “civilised” enough to be citizens or capable of making progress towards “civilisation”.
- They were not entitled to citizenship rights and the policy of the state government was for Aboriginal people to disappear either by dying out or through biological absorption into the white population.



Dispossession & Control in NSW

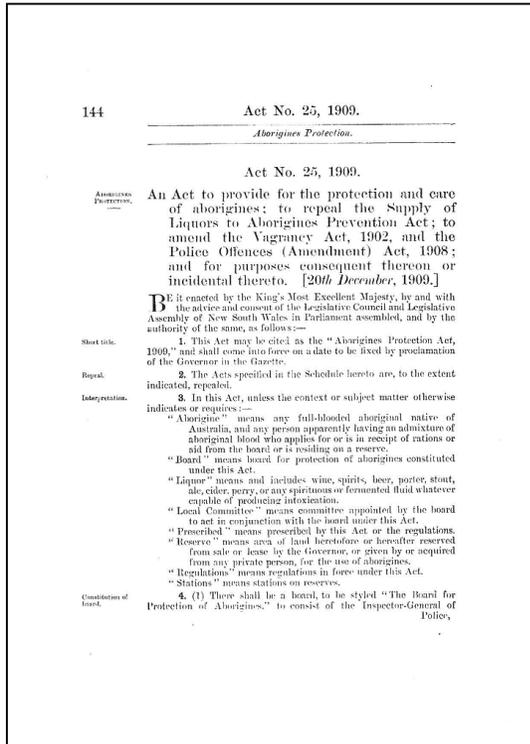
- From the early 1900s the Aborigines Protection Board sought to disperse Aboriginal people off reserves, indenture Aboriginal children as domestics and labourers and reduce the birth rate by taking away adolescent girls.
- In the 1920s Aboriginal people moved off reserves into town camps on the outskirts of white townships. But they were excluded from schools, shops, streets and town boundaries.
- In the 1930s the Protection Board secured powers to remove people from townships and confined them to reserves for “disciplinary supervision” – Concentration Powers.
- Economic depression also forced many Aboriginal people back onto reserves.

The AAPA emerged in the 1920s. Led by Fred Maynard it agitated for land, the cessation of removal of children from families, and protection of Aboriginal girls. It also demanded the dissolution of the Aborigines Protection Board and full privileges of citizenship for Aboriginal people.



The Protection Policy

The Aborigines Protection Board was established to manage reserves and the welfare of Aboriginal people living in New South Wales. It was part of the Department of Police.



- Prior to or beginning in 1901 each state except Tasmania had regimes of protection boards or protectors. These regimes defined who was 'Aboriginal' and regulated and controlled the daily lives of Aboriginal people. Each state eventually formalised their policies and practices of protection by legislation.
- Protection was done through the provision of rations as well as denying basic citizenship rights for example by:
 - restricting or regulating the movements of Aboriginal people,
 - determining where and how they could live,
 - what responsibilities they had,
 - how they were employed,
 - who they could marry,
 - whether they could rear their own children,
 - who they could have sexual relations with,
 - who they could associate with,
 - whether they could own property,
 - whether they could give evidence in court,
 - whether they could vote in elections
 - restricting or regulating access to alcohol.

The Disappearance of Aboriginal People

Biological absorption involved breeding out Aboriginality by the promotion of interbreeding between white and mixed blood Aboriginal Australians and the curtailment of unions between so called “full and mixed blood” Aboriginal people. Therefore over successive generations Aboriginal people would become progressively European. They would be physically transformed into white Australians



THREE GENERATIONS
(Reading from Right to Left)

1. Half-blood—(Irish-Australian father; full-blood Aboriginal mother).
2. Quadroon Daughter—(Father Australian born of Scottish parents; Mother No. 1).
3. Octaroon Grandson—(Father Australian of Irish descent; Mother No. 2).

- A key assumption of the protection policies was that Aboriginal people would disappear.
- The “doomed race” theory assumed that so called “full blood” Aboriginal people would die out. Assimilation theories anticipated that mixed descent Aboriginal people would be biologically absorbed into the white population through interracial relationships.
- WA and NT established processes to speed up biological absorption through interracial marriage.
- Victoria, NSW and SA were more obsessed with the supposed cost of Aboriginal people to the state although they had policies of absorption which divided Aboriginal people into “full” or “mixed” descent with financial support removed from the mixed descent group who were also removed from the reserves.

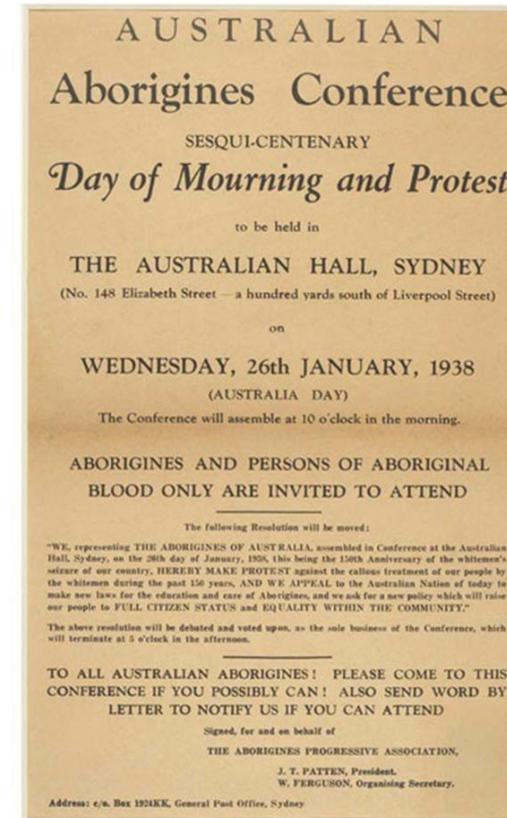
The Denial of Citizenship

- In 1938 the States had responsibility for Aboriginal policy. Aboriginal people were not treated equally with regards to the rights and duties of citizenship.
- There was no comprehensive Commonwealth definition of Australian citizenship although various forms of legislation granted particular rights and entitlements of citizenship.
- “Aboriginal natives” were excluded from basic citizenship rights and entitlements under these legislative regimes.
- “Aboriginal natives” also included people from Asia, Africa and the Pacific Islands. This exclusion was dropped in 1920 under a new *Nationality Act* although they did not enjoy the same rights and privileges.
- But Indians and Asians could access some social security benefits but excluded from immigrating.
- However Aboriginal Australians, Torres Strait Islanders, Papuans and other “Aboriginal natives” were excluded from these benefits.
- The Commonwealth also refined its definition of an “Aboriginal native” to blood quantum. Any person with a preponderance of “Aboriginal blood” was excluded from citizenship rights.
- In the 1940s the Commonwealth passed new legislation relating to social security benefits and continued to exclude “Aboriginal natives” however the category was narrowed to “Aboriginal natives of Australia”.
- By 1947 the exclusion in regards to social services had been narrowed to apply only to Aboriginal Australians.
- In 1948 the Commonwealth created the Australian citizen as a legal entity under the *Nationality and Citizenship Act* however the Act gave no new citizenship rights to Aboriginal people because they were still excluded from citizenship rights and entitlements including welfare benefits by other Commonwealth and state legislation.

The Day of Mourning Conference

- The Day of Mourning conference came together as a result of a dismissive response from the Prime Minister's office to William Cooper's petition to King George VI in 1937. Cooper called on the King to intervene to prevent the extinction of Aboriginal people, to provide better conditions and for the representation of Aboriginal people in federal parliament.
- Jack Patten, William Ferguson and Cooper planned a day of mourning to coincide with Australia's 150th anniversary celebration.
- The conference was held to arouse the conscience of white Australians by highlighting Aboriginal grievances against the policies of protection. The activists also demanded citizenship and land rights.
- Aboriginal leaders who attended included William Cooper, William Ferguson, Jack Patten, Douglas Nicholls, Margaret Tucker, Pearl Gibbs, Jack Kinchela, Helen Grosvenor, Tom Foster and others.

Over 100 Aboriginal people, plus two white policemen and two white journalists attended the conference.



Justice, Rights & Opportunity



- Jack Patten said the lack of opportunity and citizenship rights was related to white Australian attitudes about Aboriginal people being inferior and so incapable of bettering themselves.
- He argued for full citizenship rights "... including old age pensions, maternity bonus, relief work when unemployed and the right to a full Australian education for our children".
- Ferguson spoke of the "dreadful suffering" of people on the reserves and argued for citizen rights including access to health, education, training, and other opportunity including land ownership. Ferguson said that the lack of real opportunity and the denial of opportunity prevented Aboriginal progress.
- Ferguson argued that Aboriginal people were prevented from creating wealth and making a living for themselves. He was scathing of the system of Aboriginal protection stating that Aboriginal people did not need government protection.
- Both Patten and Ferguson called for the Aborigines Protection Board to be abolished.
- Doug Nicholls and William Cooper of the Victorian Aborigines' League supported the focus on the lack of justice and opportunity for Aboriginal people.

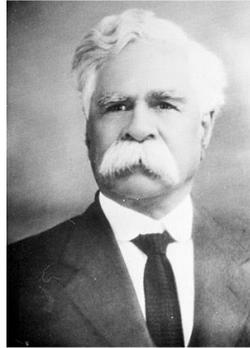
The Conference Resolution



Bill Ferguson



Pearl Gibbs



William Cooper



Jack Patten



Margaret Tucker



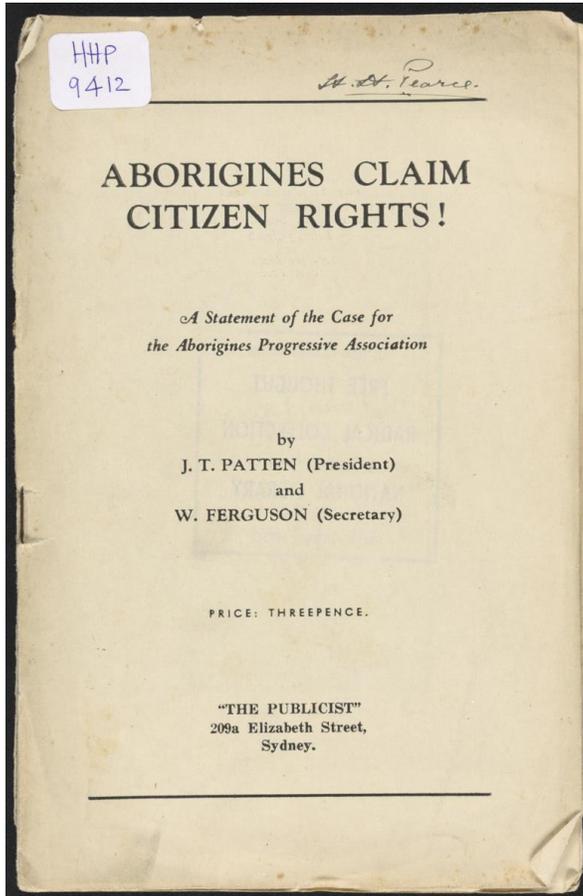
Doug Nichols

The one and only resolution of the Day of Mourning conference was carried unanimously.

“We, representing the Aborigines of Australia, assembled in conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th Anniversary of the Whiteman’s seizure of our country, hereby make protest against the callous treatment of our people by the Whiteman during the past 150 years, and we appeal to the Australian nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizen status and equality within the community”

The Manifesto

Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson launched their Manifesto at the conference.



- The Manifesto was sent to the press, national libraries and selected people accompanied by a press notice that a day of mourning would be held on the 26 January 1938.
- The manifesto:
 - explained that the 26th January 1938 was a day of mourning for Aboriginal people because the new Australians took the land by force, almost exterminating the original Australians.
 - asked white Australians whether their conscience was clear in regards to the treatment of Aboriginal people; it asserted that white Australians could hardly claim to be “civilised, progressive, kindly and humane” given the cruel and callous treatment of Aboriginal people.
 - highlighted the hypocrisy of the policy of “protection” because rather than protect, it had degraded, humiliated and exterminated Aboriginal people.
 - stated that Aboriginal people were not asking for “protection” or “charity” or “sentimental sympathy” but were asking for “equal education, equal opportunity, equal wages, equal rights to possess property, or to be our own masters” in other words “equal citizenship”.

Key Points of the Manifesto

1. That white invasion had imposed misery and degradation upon the original inhabitants over the previous 150 years.

2. That the system of Aboriginal protection should be repealed as it was based on the belief that Aboriginal people are “backward and inferior” and require supervision by government.

3. That the Boards for the Protection of Aborigines should be abolished because their almost unlimited power of control deprived Aboriginal people of their citizen rights and reduced the Aboriginal “standards of living below life-preservation point”.

4. That the Labor Parties and the Trade Unions were indifferent to the use of Aboriginal people as cheap labour and had given no real support to Aboriginal people to achieve citizen rights.

5. That the attitudes towards Aboriginal people needed to change to become more enlightened because it was one of racial prejudice and misunderstanding, with the popular press creating perceptions that Aboriginal people are sub-human.



**The Aborigines Progressive Association
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, 1938.**
Front Row: T. Foster (Treasurer), J. T. Patten (President), W. G. Sherritt (Secretary).
Back Row: R. McKenzie, C. Charters, J. Timbrey, Snr. (Committeemen).
(W. Sims unavoidably absent)

Harsh Words but Face the Truth

- Patten and Ferguson admitted the manifesto was “hard words” but they wanted white Australians to face the truth: that the so called policy of “protection” was in fact exterminating Aboriginal people.
- They wanted white Australians to hear the Aboriginal point of view and to see the problems and issues from an Aboriginal perspective.
- They argued that Aboriginal people were not asking for charity or to be studied as “scientific freaks” and were also not asking for “protection” but wanted “justice, decency and fair play”.



The Public Response

- The editorial of the Melbourne Argus on 17 January 1938 said that, while there was an element of truth, other claims in the manifesto would not withstand critical examination.
- The Argus editorial said Aboriginal people “cannot be treated as a modern civilised race” as “they are properly regarded as a dying relic of a dead past”.

“The Australian aboriginal culture belongs to a very early stage of mankind’s development. Aborigines, in spite of their occupation for untold generations of a favoured land, had not at the advent of the white man advanced beyond the stage of being nomadic hunters. Their implements and weapons were most primitive. Agriculture, one of the earliest phases of civilisation, was to them an unknown art. Their scant numbers scattered over a vast area of the earth’s surface did not indicate any desire or ability to occupy their heritage effectively”. (Quote from Editorial of Melbourne Argus, 17 January 1938)

- The Sydney Morning Herald was dismissive of the Day of Mourning stating that any attempt to mar the 150th anniversary celebrations by staging a day of mourning must be deplored.
- But in another editorial on 22 January 1938 The Sydney Morning Herald said the Day of Mourning “... offers deserved criticism of the nation, reminding us that the inevitable clash of white and black cultures has produced a sad disintegration of aboriginal life which we have failed to remedy...”
- The NSW Government largely ignored the demands of the Day of Mourning activists and their efforts at dialogue.
- However the Prime Minister Joe Lyon, his wife Enid Lyons and John McEwen the Minister for the Interior met with a delegation of the activists.

Meeting the Prime Minister

Joseph and Enid Lyons with the Duke of Gloucester, 1934



- A deputation of 20 people met the Prime Minister, Joe Lyons, Enid Lyons and John McEwen, Minister for the Interior in Sydney on 31 January 1938.
- The deputation included Jack Patten, William Ferguson, Helen Grosvenor, Pearl Gibbs, Tom Foster and others.
- Jack Patten provided a copy of a 'Policy for Aborigines' expressed in a ten-point statement to the Prime Minister.
- Together Patten and Ferguson, supported by the other members of the deputation, answered questions from the Prime Minister, Mrs Lyons and John McEwen.
- The Prime Minister received the delegation and policy statement sympathetically, however he indicated there would need to be an alteration to the Constitution or an agreement by all States before the Commonwealth could take control of Aboriginal Affairs

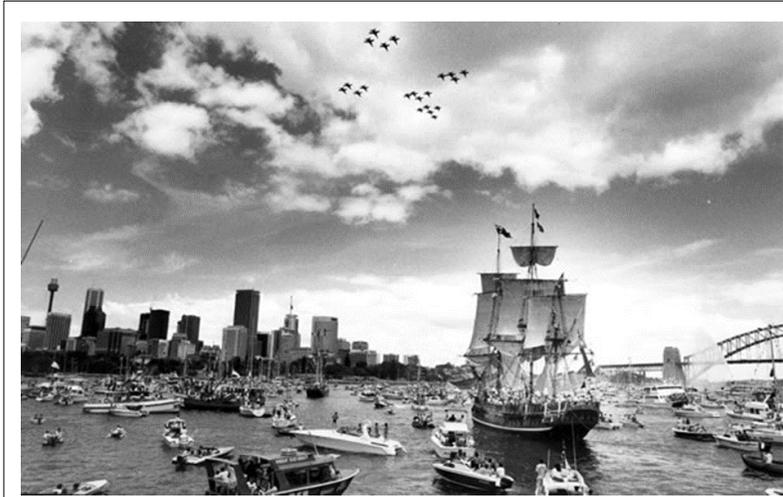
A National Aboriginal Policy

- The 'Policy for Aborigines' given to the Prime Minister sought:
 - a national Aboriginal policy and Commonwealth control of Aboriginal Affairs;
 - a Minister of Aboriginal Affairs to be a member of Cabinet;
 - a departmental head to be in charge of a Department of Aboriginal Affairs
 - an Advisory Board of six people to advise the Department, three of whom should be Aboriginal and nominated by the Aborigines' Progressive Association.
- The Department would raise Aboriginal people to full citizen status and ensure they received entitlements relating to education, work and wages, pensions and benefits, owning land and property.
- This also included equality in marriage and freedom to marry; the same privileges in respect to housing; and that free maternity and hospital treatment be provided to Aboriginal women.
- In regards to land, the policy called for a special land settlement scheme to assist Aboriginal people to settle on the land and to provide them with advice and financial support.
- However the policy also sought the retention of reserves for "aged and incompetent Aborigines" who are unable to take their place in white society.
- Other aspects of the policy related to training Aboriginal men and women as patrol officers and having nurses and teachers working with "uncivilised and semi-civilised" Aboriginal people.

Learnings

- The activists were able to challenge the assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority by claiming the same rights as white Australians.
- “Civilisation” was regarded as a prerequisite for citizenship. However the activists argued that Aboriginal people could adapt to western civilisation and progress if provided with real opportunities and positive support.
- The activists were able to create a public dialogue through connections with white political activists and organisations and also using mainstream media, public speeches and the publication of an Aboriginal newspaper.
- The political connections with unions, feminist groups, Christian groups and the Communist Party provided the resources and the political platform for the Aboriginal activists to pursue their rights agenda.
- The activists argued the importance of the Aboriginal voice and perspective in government policy. Using their experience, and voice they created their own political agenda to challenge white Australians.
- Nothing came out of the meeting with the Prime Minister because in 1937 state governments had resolved to maintain control over Aboriginal Affairs.
- However as a result of the efforts of the Day of Mourning activists, white humanitarian organisations and individuals began to take up the concerns arguing for equality for Aboriginal people and Commonwealth control of Aboriginal Affairs.
- On 26 January 1938 Aboriginal people held a day of mourning and white Australians celebrated. This divide still remains today and is played out every year on the 26 January, although Aboriginal people now celebrate their survival.

What sort of re-enactment will it be in 2038?



- In 1938 there was 150 year celebration under the theme 'Australia's March to Nationhood' and a re-enactment of the landing of the First Fleet.
- In 1988 there was a bi-centenary celebration under the theme 'Celebration of a Nation' and a re-enactment of the voyage of the First Fleet. Tall Ships sailed into Sydney harbour.
- Aboriginal people protested the events in 1938 and 1988.

