

FEDERAL COUNCIL FOR ADVANCEMENT OF ABORIGINES AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS

REPORTS & RESOLUTIONS

of the

8TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON
ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

held at

Telopea Park High School

CANBERRA A. C. T.

Friday 16th April to Sunday 18th April

1965

:: :: :: :: :: :: ::

"STUDENT ACTION FOR ABORIGINES" REPORT

Prepared by Mr. Charles N. Perkins.
(Chairman)

Student Action for Aborigines (S.A.F.A.) stemmed primarily from the demonstration carried out in mid 1964 by Sydney University Students against America's treatment of the race issue. Onlookers at the demonstration challenged the students to "look at" and "do something" about Australia's Aboriginal question firstly. It brought home to the students the fact that they must get their own house in order before they queried someone else's.

The demonstration and its effects became the stimulus for Student Action for Aborigines. In June 1964 a number of the staff and students of the Sydney University met over coffee and discussed the possibility of a "bus ride" similar to the one carried out in America.

A General meeting was proposed the following week and from this came a Committee and Executive with myself as its chairman. Our immediate aim was to increase the interest of the general University body in Aboriginal Affairs.

The apathy we encountered at the University of Sydney was widespread. From the very beginning our task to interest people in such a problem was difficult and slow. Nevertheless we slowly built up our organisation and influence in the University and began holding regular meetings and concerts.

In September we set up a number of sub-committees with a variety of functions. One committee established contact with all Aboriginal leaders, existing Aboriginal Welfare Committees in the various country towns, most Churches, Town and Shire Councils and people of prominence in the towns. The purpose was to solicit their support and interest and to ask for any advice they may wish to offer. Another committee planned the route to be taken, booked a bus, formulated plans for accommodation, food and the time schedule of the tour. A general meeting decided that the tour would take place for the two weeks before Orientation week at the University, that is late February. The route would be through the main towns-Orange, Dubbo, Walgett, Moree, Warick (Queensland), Lismore, Kempsey, Tarree and thence back to Sydney.

The Executive advised the F.C.A.A., the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, The Aboriginal Welfare Board and the Aborigines Progressive Association of the proposed tour and received advice they wished to give. Throughout the planning for the tour, which extended over seven months, as much contact as possible was kept with all leading Aboriginal people (State Wide) and all bodies dealing in Aboriginal Welfare. Student Action for Aborigines did not "come out of the blue". It is a registered club at the University of Sydney and to become the same it involved months of hard work, planning and much frustration.

Membership of S.A.F.A. is confined strictly to the Universities. It can only be composed of students and staff because it is essentially a University Club. Members come from all political, religious and recreational clubs in the University of Sydney: including - Newman Society (Catholic Group), Sydney University Jewish Students Union, A.L.P. Club, Liberal Club, Jazz Society, A.B.S.C.O.L. (Aboriginal Scholarship Group at the University), Aboriginal Affairs (N.U.A.U.S. Section) Anglican Society, Folk Society, Labour Club, Student Christian Movement, etc.

The Aims of S.A.F.A. are:-

- (1) To arouse to public attention the fundamental Aboriginal problems in health, education, housing, etc.
- (2) To break down social discriminatory barriers to the extent possible by student action.
- (3) To stimulate the interest of the Aborigines themselves in resisting discrimination.

To achieve these aims we adopted the principle of passive (non-violent) resistance as laid down by Martin Luther King. We intended to demonstrate via peaceful picketing in any situation or to any group which practised racial discrimination.

We found discrimination in many towns but were only able, due to the time factor, to demonstrate in some places, e.g. the Walgett R.S.L. Club, Moree Baths, Kempsey Baths, Bowraville picture theatre, hotels and cafes, etc. These are only some of the more outstanding examples and if it is felt that discrimination does not exist in these places a trip there will show it in its actual blatant form. S.A.F.A. never set out to solve any problems in the areas visited. It merely set out to do a

sociological survey on Aboriginal health, housing, population, occupation, attitudes (plus white attitudes) and education. Also it wanted to, and achieved with some success, highlight via press, television and radio, the fact that the majority of Aboriginal people were living in a depressed socio-economic environment. It highlighted that discrimination and prejudice do exist in many areas; in some cases e.g. Walgett and Moree and Kempsey backed up with physical coercion if necessary.

The significant feature of the tour was the support, morally and physically, received from the Aboriginal people. Ninety-nine per cent of the people gave us full support. Wherever we went we consulted them first about the situation and whether they wanted our group there or not. The response of the people was justification for our efforts.

The whole tour was a great strain. We slept on the ground or on board floors and ate out of cans for two weeks. The tension on the group was high at all times, and only five hours sleep at night was the maximum ever hoped for. It was definitely no pleasure jaunt.

The "follow up" work necessary to such a tour is already under way and will take the form of:-

- (1) Constant contact with leaders and individuals in the areas visited.
- (2) Contact maintained with the established Aboriginal welfare groups in the areas to encourage them and if necessary ask them to solicit more Aboriginal support.
- (3) Helping via personal contact the establishment of Aboriginal welfare committees in various towns. E.g. as in Boggabilla at the moment.
- (4) Planning of a holiday camp in Sydney for 100 outback Aboriginal children. This does not include individual members forming groups to do the same - this has been done already.
- (5) More students participating in A.B.S.C.O.L. and helping raise more money and create greater interest in Aboriginal Affairs.
- (6) Work camps at various settlements, towns etc.
- (7) Possible establishment of scholarships on a secondary or tertiary level which is aimed specifically at the country people.
- (8) Delegations to political and public figures dealing in Aboriginal welfare.
- (9) Distribution of literature and information to Aborigines in the country to interest them in such bodies as The Foundation For Aboriginal Affairs, A.A.F., A.P.A. and N.A.D.O.C.
- (10) Distribution of sociological survey made, to all people dealing with Aboriginal welfare. This survey could stimulate more extensive surveys needed to assess more statistically the actual situation.
- (11) Stimulate interest in Universities in Aboriginal welfare not only on the Anthropological level but on present day social levels as well.
- (12) Bodies similar to S.A.F.A. are being established in Queensland, S.A., and Victoria and at U.N.E., N.S.W.

S.A.F.A. Does not consider itself a "Freedom Ride" in the American sense of the words. We do not associate ourselves in any way with the terms. Secondly we realise there were some minor aspects of the tour which could be modified. We realise that tension has been heightened in some towns but this is inevitable and I believe it is "creative tension". The problem is out in the open now and is stark reality whereas before it was suppressed and not considered at all. People accepted that Aborigines were second class citizens and that they were happy in the tin shanties that many of them live in.

The main opposition we found in the towns came from the hooligans, and racists (clergymen and church people included). The position has not been put back 10 years as some people claim. I feel they have only begun to realise the true situation and rationalise by claiming such a point. It is virtually impossible for the situation to be any worse in many areas.

Student Action is another added and vital attack on the Aboriginal problem. The whole situation surrounding Aboriginal affairs in Australia is quite desperate. Something dynamic needs to be done immediately. The problem is not diminishing or static. Racial discrimination must be legally punished. Complete education must be made possible and available to all Aborigines in Australia - tribal and otherwise. The dignity of the individual and respect for his culture and race must be respected legally and socially.

In conclusion, I might add that constructive and imaginative thinking and action must come from the Aboriginal people themselves. This, coupled with Commonwealth responsibility for Aborigines (because it is a National problem and the Commonwealth has the money and resources) would lead the way to a much fuller and promising future - not only for Aborigines but for all Australians.