HISTORIANS WHO WRITE about the United States in the 1960s attribute a determining and defining role to the Civil Rights movement.¹ They see in the struggle for racial equality the emergence of contemporary American heroes; a model for other oppressed groups needing a method, a vocabulary, and an ideology; the identification of consciousness-raising as the key to changes in behaviour; and even the beginnings of the elusive essence which defined ‘the ’60s’. According to Milton Viorst, ‘for most Americans, the decade of the 1960s began the day that four freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College ... sat down at the lunch counter and asked for a cup of coffee.’² The Civil Rights movement became a major force in the United States; in the words of William H. Chafe, ‘the most significant social movement in all of American history’ and ‘an inspiration to the world’.³

Although it may be unfashionable at best, and naïve at worst, to revive the concept of the Zeitgeist in an historical context, any analysis of the 1960s calls for a generalization of some kind to explain the paradigm shifts that occurred in so many areas of life. Historians have needed tools to help them to make sense of what Todd Gitlin calls ‘the unsettling Sixties’ and David Farber calls an ‘existential drama’.⁴ Such appellations point to a belief that enough change occurred across society in the 1960s to require any examination of race consciousness to take account of a transition described by David Chalmers as ‘a replacement of local standards and ways

³ Chafe, Journey, pp. 146-8.
of doing things with more open, national ones; and a search for grass-roots participation and community, a dialectical interaction of changing consciousness and institutions, and the explosion of classic social questions into politics and into the streets'.

Racism, or ‘racialism’ as it was known, was as entrenched in Australia in 1960 as anywhere. The history of Australia’s dealings with its indigenous Aboriginal peoples was marked by apathy and intolerance, dispossession, restriction, segregation, and violence. In some states, Aborigines could not vote, own property, take control of their own finances, drink alcohol, marry or bring up their children without interference, mix freely with non-Aborigines, or travel or be paid the same wages as white people. Discrimination against Aborigines was systemic, the domestic component of the dream of a white Australia that had excluded since 1901 all but European immigrants.

If race consciousness in the United States was so dramatically affected by events during the 1960s, to what extent was the pattern duplicated in Australia? The question might seem irrelevant, were it not for the general agreement about Australia’s close relationship with the United States in the 1960s and the propensity for Australian popular culture to follow, however selectively, American trends. Robin Gerster and Jan Bassett perceive the ‘cross-fertilised Aboriginal, women’s and gay rights movement’, as well as the anti-war movement, as an example of Australia’s ‘endemic’ dependence. This argument is too simplistic. Australia’s racial dynamics were a response to developments in Africa as well as America; and transported by way of the Commonwealth and the United Nations as well as directly from the United States.

Historians of race in Australia, particularly of the Aboriginal protest movement, have paid only passing attention to the international context and some, like C. D. Rowley, have downplayed its significance. The more common approach, epitomized by Heather Goodall, is to attribute the emergence of Aboriginal activism to the consistent Aboriginal experience since the earliest days of white settlement. However, although domestic conditions were important, the growth of race consciousness in post-war Australia was also a contested response to international developments:

1 Chalmers, Crooked Places, p. xviii.
5 Heather Goodall, Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972 (Sydney, 1996), which traces the history of land rights struggles.
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black nationalism, decolonization, participatory democracy, and political radicalism. Thus, this essay positions the growth and development of race consciousness among Australians between 1960 and 1972 as a response to changing international racial dynamics in order to portray it as an important component of the Australian experience of the 1960s.

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The sit-ins at Greensboro, North Carolina, excited the Australian imagination in 1960 less than the events a month later at Sharpeville, where a crowd estimated to have been between four and twenty thousand black Africans gathered on 21 March to submit themselves for arrest for non-compliance with South Africa’s pass laws.1 The police alleged that the crowd became disorderly and that shots were fired at the police and rocks thrown against the walls of the police station. Although the prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, was reported in The Age as saying that no order to fire was given, the police fired on the crowd. Sixty-seven were killed and perhaps as many as two hundred and fifty were wounded.2 The South African government issued a statement almost a week later that the police had acted in self-defence.

Although Verwoerd dismissed critics of the incident as the ‘ducktails of the political world’, the international community, horrified, strongly condemned it.3 The Asian-African block moved to put the Sharpeville massacre and the apartheid system on the agenda of the next meeting of the United Nations Security Council, and the prime minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, proposed to the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, that they should do the same in May at a meeting of Commonwealth prime ministers.4

In Australia, newspaper reports of the massacre were overshadowed at first by pictures of Prince Andrew, born on 19 February. As the week wore on, however, racial unrest in South Africa and the apartheid system which bred it turned into a major story that drew a passionate response from liberals, Christians, and the political left. They did not, however, draw an official condemnation from the government.

What the University of Queensland’s student newspaper, Semper Floreat, called the ‘colourless comments on the Sharpeville massacre’ 5 of

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1 Sydney Morning Herald, 22 March 1960, p. 3; Honi Soit, 30 March 1960, p. 7.
2 A South African government statement estimated the crowd at 20,000. Witwatersrand police put the figure at 12,000. Honi Soit, the University of Sydney student newspaper, reported 4,000: The Age, 28 March, p. 4; Sydney Morning Herald, 22 March, p. 5; Honi Soit, 30 March 1960, p. 7.
3 The Age, 28 March 1960, p. 1. For international reaction, see Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates, 5th series, cccxi, House of Commons, 1959-60, 4 April 1960, p. 780.
the prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies, who refused to condemn apartheid explicitly, aggressively, and immediately, were interpreted by many in Australia and overseas as tacit support.¹ When the charge was made in parliament on 29 March by a Labor member, Dr Jim Cairns, Menzies replied that Cairns was being ‘utterly unfair’. Menzies refused to budge from the course he had set on the 23rd when he told parliament that ‘we deplore these recent events in South Africa’ while refusing to make an official protest to the South African government.²

Menzies had even refused in February to welcome Harold Macmillan’s famous ‘wind of change’ speech, made to the South African parliament and interpreted by the Americans as permission to criticize apartheid.³ ‘The wind of change is blowing through this continent’, announced Macmillan in the best-known sentence, ‘and, whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.’ Macmillan made plain Britain’s dilemma by saying ‘it is our earnest desire to give South Africa our support and encouragement, but … there are some aspects of your policies which make it impossible for us to do this without being false to our own deep convictions about the political destinies of free men.’⁴

When the leader of the Labor opposition, Arthur Calwell, proposed on 31 March 1960 a motion of censure on South Africa for the incident at Sharpeville, Menzies offered only to express regret for the loss of human life, sympathy for the bereaved, and hope for a peaceful resolution of disputes. The government implied that parallels might otherwise be drawn overseas between apartheid in Africa and the condition of Australian Aborigines. Calwell’s censure of South Africa, however, in no way diminished his staunch support of ‘White Australia’: immigration policy was defended as an assurance that South Africa’s problems could not occur in Australia. Calwell distinguished between a justifiable race-based immigration policy and an unjustifiable massacre.⁵

The government not only watered down Calwell’s motion, but the final version was also substantially weaker than a motion of the British house of commons criticizing South Africa’s ‘racialist policies’ for denying ‘normal

⁵ On Calwell’s attitudes to race and immigration, see A. A. Calwell, Be Just and Fear Not (Adelaide, 1972), ch. 14.
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human and political rights'. The deputy leader of the opposition, Gough Whitlam, described Menzies’ alternative as a ‘bowdlerized aseptic amendment’. Almost a month later, Leslie Haylen, another Labor member, still lamented the government’s lack of humanity and sense of urgency.

Menzies was unmoved, unswerving in his support for the principle that no Commonwealth country passed judgement on the internal affairs of another. Whitlam dismissed the defence as a ‘legal technicality’, what Macmillan, in hindsight, called ‘obsolescent legal grounds’. The position was consistent, however, with Menzies’ legalistic approach to domestic political issues, with his lack of interest in racial matters, and most important, with his personal delight in the Commonwealth. ‘By Jove,’ he told a meeting of the Australia Club in 1961, ‘I believe in the British Commonwealth with a faith in my guts.’ He feared that if domestic jurisdiction was set aside, the Commonwealth would become nothing more than a ‘sub-committee’ of the United Nations, which he spoke of derogatively in the same speech as a ‘debating society’. In comparison, Menzies described the Commonwealth as ‘nine people sitting together, each of them the head of the government of his own country, discussing matters of common interest, informing each other’s minds, learning from each other’s experience, getting to know something more about the problems of other men.

Although Menzies, in defending the sovereignty of members, also believed that he was protecting Australia from criticism of its restrictive immigration policy, it was the treatment of Aborigines that emerged as Australia’s racial Achilles heel.

Even though Menzies’ approach to South Africa became government policy, it dissatisfied an increasingly vocal community. The Labor member for East Sydney, Eddie Ward, questioned Menzies’ right to speak for Australians: ‘I feel that he is not only out of step with Australian opinion, but he is also out of step with world-wide opinion.’ This was not an isolated view. The University of Queensland radical, Dan O’Neill, criticized Menzies’ failure to see the ‘tremendous importance that the colour question is even now beginning to assume. Beside it, the Commonwealth is already little more than a cobweb of sentiment unswept from a nostalgic corner of the past.

Menzies, while admitting publicly that his stance brought him no

6 Ibid., p. 990.
7 Semper Floreat, 29 March 1960, p. 8.
advantage and privately that it had probably cost him votes, refused to condemn apartheid unequivocally.\textsuperscript{1} Even in 1961, when forced to explain himself, he would only say that apartheid would not work and that he disagreed with it as a policy.\textsuperscript{2} This differentiated him from the prime minister of Canada, John Diefenbaker, whose government did not make an official protest against Sharpeville, but who openly and vigorously professed his personal distaste of racial discrimination in general and apartheid in particular.\textsuperscript{3} Menzies, unwilling to ‘moralize’, as he saw it – perhaps too steeped in the traditions of advocacy with ‘learned friends’ – missed the opportunity to capture the high moral ground.\textsuperscript{4}

The events at Sharpeville focused world attention on race. Black nationalism, itself a force behind decolonization, was changing the balance in world politics. In 1960, seventeen new African states appeared: the sixteen admitted to the United Nations almost tripled Africa’s representation and increased its visibility and voting power.\textsuperscript{5} Three years later, Martin Luther King, in his ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’, compared the momentum sweeping Africa and Asia with the halting pace of change in the United States.\textsuperscript{6} More than any event in the American Civil Rights movement, therefore, Sharpeville became both a byword for racial intolerance and an epithet for change.

Two years after the Notting Hill riots and amidst anxiety in Britain about immigration, a Gallup poll taken in 1960 showed that only fourteen per cent of the population agreed with apartheid and six per cent more were undecided. A similar survey of Australians in 1961 revealed that twenty-two per cent approved of apartheid and nineteen per cent were undecided. Fifty-nine per cent disapproved, however, and some were prepared to say so.\textsuperscript{7} Twelve-hundred people attended a protest rally against apartheid at the Lyceum Theatre in Sydney on 3 April 1960 to hear the new superintendent of the Central Methodist Mission, Reverend Alan Walker, elevate the divisions between black and white in South Africa to a cosmic moral struggle and call for the mobilization of public opinion and

\textsuperscript{1} Menzies, Speech at the Australia Club, p. 3; Menzies to Verwoerd, 2 July 1960, in Sir Robert Menzies, Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events (Melbourne, 1967), p. 199.
\textsuperscript{2} Menzies, Speech at the Australia Club, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{7} Parl. Debs., 5th series, dxxxi, House of Commons, 1959-60, 4 April 1960, pp. 780-1; Gallup poll on South Africa, April 1961, AA, M2576/l 40.
prayer. Walker, who tied evangelism to social conscience, had declared in 1956: 'a church which [was] not wrestling with God in an attempt to lead mankind towards racial equality and peace [was] failing its God and betraying the people.' He organized regular Sunday afternoon meetings called the ‘Lyceum Platform’ to discuss matters of public concern, chose the subjects, and invited the speakers, in this case a senior lecturer in economics at the University of Sydney, Hermann Black, and the president of the New South Wales Labour Council, J. N. Thom. A similar meeting was held in Melbourne on 6 April and a wide variety of church and left-wing groups followed suit. Interest in apartheid did not wane.

South Africa was regularly used in the 1960s by supporters of other causes as a means to stimulate concern, guilt, and eventually action. ‘Has apartheid been over-emphasized at the expense of other racial and aggressive conflict?’, asked Bill Caxton in Semper Floreat. ‘Of course it has,’ he replied. ‘Why is criticism focused mainly on the South African situation? If we’re concerned about righting the wrong in the world, let’s be “fair dinkum” about it and attack injustices, wherever they may exist.’ Between 1960 and 1964, consciousness of apartheid in Australia turned into an interest both in world-wide racial issues and in reopening what was commonly called Australia’s ‘Aboriginal problem’. Inevitably, this led to opposition to the Menzies government, whose stand on Sharpeville typified its attitude to race.

To condemn South Africa, however, was easier than to recognize inequities in Australia. Whereas the president-general of the Methodist Conference, Dr A. H. Wood, a man respected for his learning, praised Macmillan’s attack on apartheid and spoke passionately of the white man’s folly in thinking other races inferior, at a ‘Voice of Methodism’ meeting in April 1960 on the banks of Melbourne’s Yarra River, he suggested nonetheless that the Aborigine should be deprived of liquor for the reasons one would deprive a child. They could not be treated as adults.

Wood’s attitude was common. In the early 1960s, apartheid, not Aboriginal affairs, captured the public imagination, especially of students, the archetypal 1960s’ protest group. Although the National Union of Australian University Students (NUAUS) appointed a national anti-apartheid

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1 Quoted in Don Wright, Alan Walker: Conscience of the Nation (Adelaide, 1997), p. 123.
2 Methodist, 9 April 1960, p. 3; Methodist Times, 21 April 1960, p. 2. On Walker’s religious, political, and racial position, see Wright, Walker, pp. 32, 34, 51, 122, 123. Undocumented records from Alan Walker in possession of the author.
3 Semper Floreat, 24 June 1964, p. 3.
4 Ian Spalding, ‘Why Be Concerned?’, [Canberra, ANL], AUS Papers, MS 2412, box 115.
director in August 1963 and, in February 1964, decided upon an anti-apartheid campaign in Australia, it proved unable to arouse much public or university interest in Aboriginal welfare as a manifestation of Australian ‘racialism’.¹ Events in South Africa and the United States were ‘more colourful’; campaigns for Aboriginal rights ‘trivial’ by comparison.²

The little interest in Aborigines shown at the universities was limited to Abschol, a scheme to provide post-secondary Aboriginal students with scholarships. NUAUS had passed a vaguely worded motion in 1950 that recommended better facilities for Aboriginal education and, the following year, decided to ‘urge the governments of Australia to introduce a comprehensive scheme of financial assistance to Aborigines at all levels of education’. The same year, a small group of University of Melbourne students decided to try to implement the idea and, in 1953, NUAUS requested the Student Representative Councils (SRC) to establish local appeal committees, with the Melbourne Committee to act as organizer.³ Abschol committees had to struggle to raise enough money to sponsor the first students in 1957, and the first did not graduate until 1965.

When Jennifer Crew, the director of Abschol, proposed in 1955 that NUAUS should take a stand on discrimination against Aborigines, the proposal was rejected in favour of concentrating on fund-raising for scholarships. NUAUS wished to remain non-political, untarnished by the ‘emotionalism’ of Aboriginal affairs,⁴ and not until 1964 did it take a political stance: by 1967, Abschol had developed a solidly political agenda. The evolution of Abschol during the 1960s from a fund-raiser into an organizer of radical protest illustrates the politicization of race in Australia.

Aborigines were not a political force in the early 1960s. Colin Tatz suggests that their political invisibility can be explained by the lack of a tradition of protest; lack of organization; and unfocused goals and lack of unity of purpose.⁵ Goodall, however, demonstrates the continuity and consistency in Aboriginal land claims, marshalling evidence of direct action in response to dispossession and the removal of children from their families ranging from spontaneous, dramatic physical confrontation between individuals to organized protest through the Aboriginal Progressive Association in the early 1920s and the Australian Aboriginal League in the 1930s.⁶ William Cooper’s symbolic Day of Mourning in 1938, held in conjunction

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1 'Semper Floreat', 10 June 1964.
2 'Lake Tyers Protest March', Farrago, 3 July 1963, p. 3.
3 Crew to Hasluck, 6 May 1955, AUS Papers, MS 2412, box 115; Tom Roper, ‘A Brief History of Abschol’, Melbourne, Monash University Archives, Tom Roper Papers, MON SC 85.
4 Roper, ‘A Brief History of Abschol’.
6 Goodall, Invasion, p. 149.
with the 150th anniversary of Governor Arthur Philip's landing in 1788, had limited impact, however, because it excluded all but Aborigines and was held behind closed doors. Sporadic labour action such as the 1946 Pilbara strike of Aboriginal pastoral workers helped to raise public awareness of working conditions, but until the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines (FCAA) was formed in 1958, there was no systematic organized pressure for change nor any nationally effective politicization of Aboriginal concerns.

The FCAA (FCAATSI after 1964, when the Torres Strait Islanders joined), a body with a national membership comprising representatives from affiliated organizations, provided a focus for Aboriginal protest and a forum for discussion, and promoted unity of purpose among a highly differentiated, even dislocated group. As the Aboriginal movement grew and gradually refined its purpose, FCAATSI also became a staging ground for new directions. As Peter Read explains, when FCAATSI split in 1970 over whether leadership positions should be held only by Aborigines, the underlying issue was the movement's change in emphasis from civil rights, based on black and white equality, to indigenous rights based on self-determination.1

In the 1960s, race was politicized. In Africa and Asia, politicization meant anti-colonialism and black nationalism. In the United States, African-Americans looked to their African origins, even if unconsciously:2 during the early years of Civil Rights in the 1950s – the Brown decision, Montgomery, Little Rock – events in Africa, closely watched, were regarded as an intellectual and emotional link. ‘Sure we identified with the blacks in Africa,’ recalled John Lewis, one of the leaders of the Nashville sit-ins,

and we were thrilled by what was going on. Here were black people, talking of freedom and liberation and independence, thousands of miles away. We could hardly miss the lesson for ourselves. They were getting their freedom, and we still didn’t have ours in what we believed was a free country. We couldn’t even get a hamburger and a Coke at the soda fountain. Maybe we were slow in realizing what this meant to us, but then things started moving together. What was happening in Africa, finally, had tremendous influence on us.3

As decolonization represented the empowerment of the previously powerless, black people around the world saw themselves in a colonial set-

2 Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York, 1977).
3 Viorst, Fire, pp. 102-3.
Jennifer Clark

ting. Even if the experience of African-Americans was not classically a colonial one, they adapted the model to ‘domestic’ or ‘internal’ colonialism. Eldridge Cleaver understood how this could be done; he wrote in *Ramparts* that ‘Black people are a stolen people held in a colonial status.’ According to Robert Blauner, the colonial model acted as ‘a framework that can integrate the insights of caste and racism, ethnicity, culture, and economic exploitation into an overall conceptual scheme.’

The colonial model was more easily applied in Australia, formerly a British colony with an indigenous population. In ‘The Dispossessed’, published in 1964, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, who wrote then as Kath Walker, described the colonial state in graphic practical and intellectual terms:

The white man claimed your hunting grounds and you could not remain,
They made you work as menials for greedy private gain …
A dying race you linger on, degraded and oppressed,
Outcasts in your own land, you are the dispossessed.

The last line would prove prophetic for the Aboriginal movement as the traditional colonial model began to influence the pattern of protest. In the interim, Aborigines would take heart from the visit to Australia in 1964 of the Kenyan minister of finance, Tom M’boya, who compared black nationalism with Aboriginal autonomy and invited two Aborigines to visit Kenya. They came home eager to pursue Aboriginal interests on the world stage.

Australians, keen in the 1960s to draw attention to racial issues, looked abroad for weapons as well as for inspiration. They pounced on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 107 of 1957: its stipulation that ‘the right of ownership, collective or individual, of the members of the populations concerned over the lands which these populations traditionally occupy shall be recognized,’ provided them with a vocabulary. The actions of the Queensland department of native affairs, for example, were unfavourably compared with the ‘police state methods of South Africa’, and the regulations governing Aborigines’ marriage, voting, ownership of property, wages, and use of public facilities such as swimming pools and cinemas were often referred to as virtually apartheid.

When the word ‘apartheid’ was given a new and politicized meaning by the FCAA – ‘discrimination within a country on the grounds of colour’ –

4 *Woroni*, 15 May 1964, p. 3.
the head of the information branch of the department of external affairs, Hugh Gilchrist, complained of the ‘tendency of Australian well-wishers of the aborigines to apply the term apartheid indiscriminately’. Gilchrist may have been referring to the letter to The Times in which Doreen Trainor, a member of the FCAA, described the ‘plight of the aboriginal people’ as ‘parallel with Apartheid’, or to the FCAA’s call for the end of apartheid in Australia. The council’s annual conference passed resolutions in 1961 that explicitly compared Australia with South Africa and warned that unless conditions for Aborigines were improved before the next Commonwealth Conference, ‘we could find ourselves in a similar position as South Africa this year.’ The FCAA proposed to send copies of its resolution to all the Commonwealth prime ministers including Verwoerd. Moreover, the Conference confirmed the debate over South African racial policies as opportune for Aborigines: it was an ideal time to highlight Aboriginal conditions not only to the Commonwealth but to the United Nations Minorities Committee.

The federal government was fearful in 1961 of African criticism of Aboriginal welfare and waited, almost expectantly, for what Gilchrist called ‘the big overseas attack’. After the Australian ambassador to the United Nations, James Plimsoll, warned Menzies and the minister for territories, Paul Hasluck, in May of ‘some talk’ of raising Australia’s treatment of Aborigines at the United Nations ‘now that the question of apartheid had been taken as far as it has’, embassies and consulates were primed on how to handle potentially damaging press coverage or to answer embarrassing questions. One choice was to say nothing: as Plimsoll said of the United Nations, ‘it is better to let sleeping dogs lie.’ The ambassador to South Africa, O. L. Davis, disagreed: ‘It would be unwise to hope that we can avoid criticism in Africa simply by lying low.’

The worry about foreign interest in Aborigines was so great that it affected the form taken by the proposed Institute of Aboriginal Studies. The institute was the idea of a Liberal member of parliament, W. C. Wentworth. In 1961, Wentworth argued that not only did Australia have an

1 Reports and Resolutions Received by the 4th National Aboriginal Conference 31/3/61-24/4/61, St Lucia, Queensland, p. 50, pt. 30; [ANL, Barry] Christophers Coll., MS 7992, box 1; memo by Gilchrist to Australian high commissions, 4 May 1961, AA, CRS A1838/557/2, pt. 2.
5 Plimsoll to Menzies, Hasluck et al., 31 May 1961, UN memo 672, AA, CRS A1838/2 557/2, pt. 2.
6 Plimsoll to sec., external affairs, 3 April 1961, memo 329/61, ibid.
7 Davis to sec., external affairs, 12 Sept. 1961, ibid.
international obligation to support research into Aboriginal life, but he linked it with Australia’s international reputation:

With the development of interest in coloured peoples throughout the world, and the significance that can have for Australia’s treatment of its own coloured people, the Commonwealth Government’s position might be strengthened if it could demonstrate that its policies and programmes for the development of the Aborigines were underpinned by systematic studies and research into the problems of contemporary aboriginal life during the transition from the tribal state to assimilation in the community.¹

The cabinet approved the institute in principle in May 1960 and it was established by act of parliament in 1964. Although political gains were to be made from the display of interest in things Aboriginal, Menzies, on the advice of the cabinet, restricted the institute to ‘scientific, cultural and anthropological’ research and prohibited the study of contemporary politics and future welfare. Cabinet was suspicious of ‘some countries’ who might ‘comb through material produced from an exercise in Aboriginal studies’ and who would use it to Australia’s ‘disadvantage’.² The discussion of the institute exemplified the cultural and political rigidity of the government and the limits to its interest in Aboriginal affairs. Research into contemporary Aboriginal affairs had to await the establishment of the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs at Monash University in May 1965.

Race politics in Australia from 1960 through 1965 were characterized by official disregard of events in Africa on the one hand, and, on the other, by the encouragement of a flow-on effect into the Australian domestic scene from a sizeable minority who sympathized with black empowerment. The Australian government’s resistance to the implications of changing race paradigms was little different from the initial response in the United States of the administration of John F. Kennedy, which was levered into the support for Civil Rights that resulted in Kennedy’s advocacy of the Civil Rights bill. Unlike the Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations, the Menzies government, and to a lesser extent the governments of his successors, Harold Holt and William McMahon, failed to act on racial issues and were never seen as sympathetic to the demands of racial minorities. Pressure to change racial paradigms inevitably had a political edge.

Although both the trades unions and the Labor Party had historically contributed to racial discrimination in Australia by supporting restricted

immigration and the employment of white labour in preference to black, after the Comintern’s call in 1928 for a ‘fight against all survivals of chauvinism, of national hatred, of race prejudice, and other ideological relics of feudal and capitalist barbarism’, they were gradually persuaded to champion racial causes as examples of imperialist and capitalist oppression. The Worker-Student Alliance Committee at the University of Queensland, for example, told students in 1971 that ‘in fact the Australian working class has the same fight on its hands as black South Africans or New Guineans … racism is used by the boss to divide the workers against their common enemy … the capitalist system’. By the mid-1960s, such ideas led not only to funds and protests, but offered an intellectual alternative to the Liberal government’s policy of assimilation. The Communist Party of Australia, for example, announced in 1967 that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders had the right ‘to exist and develop as peoples, to live on their own lands or in the general community, according to individual desires’.

As interest in Aboriginal issues increased and as Aborigines became more outspoken, the government became seriously worried that any agitation by or on behalf of Aborigines was Communist-inspired and therefore subversive. The Australian Secret Intelligence Organization (ASIO) ran checks on prominent members of Aboriginal groups and reported a close and threatening relationship between the Comintern, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), and Aborigines. ASIO argued that the CPA viewed Aborigines as ‘oppressed colonial peoples ready to be organised’ against imperialism. When Aboriginal groups demanded autonomy instead of assimilation, the government saw the CPA at work. Similarly, interest in racial identity, unity, and autonomy was interpreted by ASIO as Communist-inspired militant Aboriginal nationalism.

The hostility to and fear of racial nationalism is partly attributable to the cold war, partly to a desire for racial homogeneity, and partly to the pressure created by the political upheaval in Africa. During the Rhodesian crisis of 1965, for example, when white Rhodesians under Ian Smith, frustrated with the British decolonization process, declared independence on 11 November, the cabinet represented one strand of Australian opinion about the changing racial balance of power. Peter Howson, the Liberal member of parliament for Fawkner, wrote in his diary on 12 November:

2 Worker-Student Alliance Committee, ‘A Call for Action No Repression’ (Flyer), [Brisbane, University of Queensland Archives, Fryer Library, Dan] O’Neill Coll., box 5, folder ‘Strike Leaflets’.
Although we have nominally to support the UK there was a general feeling that for too long we have been "swimming with the tide of majority opinion" on the winds of change. The time has now come when we should support our white brethren in Southern Rhodesia. The editor of The Congregationalist represented the other strand of opinion. He wrote in May 1960 that "the tide of a new order is sweeping down through the African continent with a rush that cannot be stemmed." The difference might have remained hidden, but for the rise of participatory democracy and direct action as political weapons, especially among students.

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The first student demonstrations of the 1960s were all race based. In the first action of its kind since a demand in 1956 for traffic lights on Parramatta Road, students from the University of Sydney demonstrated in March 1960 against apartheid, condemned South Africa, and called on Menzies to take action. However, "the University itself", reported the student newspaper Honi Soit, "fell back into exhaustion profound. A short sharp afternoon's activity seemed to purge participants of whatever interest they had had." In September 1961, 120 Monash University students, who picketed the West End Private Hotel in support of three women from Nauru who were being refused board, carried placards railing against the White Australia policy and the immorality of racial discrimination. In Brisbane in 1962, University of Queensland students demonstrated for a week outside a local hotel until two Indian students were served with drinks. The students did not urge the hotel to break state law by serving alcohol to prohibited Aborigines, but only to coloured people from overseas and Aborigines exempted from the prohibition.

Race politics took a more militant turn in 1964 when twenty-eight University of Sydney students were arrested on Commemoration Day (6 May) after demonstrating outside the US consulate in support of Civil Rights and against the US senate's resistance to passing the Civil Rights bill. That the clash with police attracted more attention than the subject of the protest showed how far the performance of protest was developing its own ritual. A letter to the Sunday Mirror suggested that the Sydney students were treated in the same way as negro protesters at Nashville and Birmingham. The protest began with the empowerment of African-Americans but

3 Honi Soit, 30 March 1960, p. 7.
5 Ibid., 19 Sept. 1962, p. 1.
6 Honi Soit, 9 June 1964.
ended with the empowerment of students. *Honi Soit* asked, ‘how many civil rights did students have in their inevitable clashes with police?’

Racial discrimination was caught up in the changing political climate within the universities that developed out of opposition to the Vietnam War and to the introduction in 1964 of conscription. Even NUAUS abandoned its non-political stance, calling on the government to reform the federal constitution in favour of racial equality and adopting parts of ILO Convention 107 as NUAUS policy. The change took roughly two years. Students, more politically aware, were more willing to embrace political causes directly and they drew into their circle interested parties from outside. For example, in 1964, NUAUS rejected affiliation with FCAATSI; only the Sydney Abschol Committee affiliated. Two years later, however, NUAUS recommended affiliation, recognizing that FCAATSI alone understood the interrelatedness of Aboriginal issues. Similarly, Abschol, bitterly divided in 1965 over the utility of direct action, held in June 1966 its first national demonstration in support of the right of Aborigines to be listed on the census.

The vocabulary for the politicized description of race in Australia provided by apartheid was overlaid in late 1963 and 1964 by the language of American racial conflict. Australians, who knew little about Aboriginal conditions, especially on the missions and under the various state laws, were more easily educated about racial inequality in the United States: for example, the woman who wrote to Jacqueline Kennedy in 1963 expressing admiration for the way in which Kennedy ‘stood up for the darky people’. Any comparison with the deep South, however slight, was intended to lend credibility to Aboriginal concerns and to harvest for the Aborigine some of the sympathy felt for the African-American cause. Whereas the struggle in the United States, especially the work of Martin Luther King, was favourably portrayed in the Australian media, the Aboriginal cause had to counter generations of apathy, if not hostility, as well as the traditional invisibility of Aboriginal discontent. ‘We don’t see the race riots of Sharpeville or Little Rock’, wrote John Sutton in 1963, ‘simply because our aborigines aren’t an organised military group – not because they are satisfied with their position.’

In 1964, advocates of change in Australia groping for a vehicle able to generate interest in Aborigines found one. The formation of Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA – originally to be called SNICK, Students’ Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee) applied American ideas to Austra-

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1 Ibid., 12 May 1964.
Jennifer Clark

lian problems.¹ It politicized concern for Aborigines, especially in the universities, more effectively than Abschol ever had and it catapulted Charles Perkins, an Aboriginal student at the University of Sydney, to the forefront of Aboriginal leadership.

According to the secretary of SAFA, Jim Spigelman, the organization was formed after the protest in Sydney on 6 May led to criticism of students for being hypocrites who supported American Civil Rights while ignoring the plight of Aborigines.² In response, a circular was distributed at the University of Sydney in July announcing that ‘on Commemoration Day students and police working in customary close co-operation won world notice for their joint demonstration against racialism. This was fine as far as it went, but what now? How can we show our sympathy and support for our own coloured minority, the Aborigines?’³

The answer was the Freedom Ride of February 1965, when thirty students travelled by bus over 1,300 miles through northern New South Wales. Spigelman explained that a ‘vague notion’ floated around of the American Freedom Rides as ‘students in buses on a civil rights cause’.⁴ According to Perkins, the idea germinated over several months in discussions with other students and a friend and Methodist minister, Ted Noffs.⁵ Even though the origin of the concept of the Freedom Ride is obscure, its development was far from accidental: it represented the absorption through the media and personal experience of international trends in the politics of race.

Noffs, who had a long-time interest in Aboriginal welfare, was one of the main promoters of the tour. As a probationary Methodist minister in 1951, his first circuit was Wilcannia, in far western New South Wales, where he saw among Aborigines examples of physical degradation, exclusion from white society, and unfulfilled potential. By the time he travelled to the United States in 1957 to study at Northwestern University’s Garrett Seminary, Noffs knew all about Australia’s racial inequities. His American experience not only introduced him to the heightened racial tension of the late 1950s but also made him aware of the mood for change. Noffs turned to the United States for inspiration throughout his career, importing ideas that would help to shape Australian youth culture and religious expression in the 1960s: in 1964, for example, he toured the United States looking for ideas for a mission in Kings Cross named the Wayside Chapel, after one of

² There is some discrepancy as to the origins of the criticism. Suggestions range from criticism in the overseas press, a letter sent to an embassy official, and a letter to Honi Soit.
⁴ Ibid., p. 117.
⁵ Phil Jarratt, Ted Noffs: Man of the Cross (Sydney, 1997), p. 201.
Noffs’s casual preaching appointments in South Dakota. The mission became a clearing house for new ideas.¹

Noffs was matched by Bill Ford, a lecturer in economics at the University of New South Wales and even more familiar than Noffs with race politics in the United States. As a graduate student at Chicago and UCLA, he became involved with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) through his student friends, in particular Bob Singleton, who led the first Freedom Ride from California to Jackson, Mississippi. Ford was in Jackson in the late summer of 1961 to hear the Reverend Ralph Abernathy address a crowd of protesters released from jail, and to see other protesters try to clog the courts and fill the prisons. Although he did not take part, he witnessed at first hand the drama, the emotion, and the danger, and he understood what freedom-riding could mean. Ford briefed the Australian freedom riders on what to expect and how to make the most effective use of the techniques of non-violent protest. He told a meeting of thirty-five SAFA supporters planning the Freedom Ride: ‘If you find a segregated swimming pool just go and stand out in front of it. Just stand there. Don’t go climbing over fences or trying to force your way in. The real key to this whole thing is to get some visual image across, to make certain that when you do something the Press, radio and television know about it.’²

Although the American experience was part of the intellectual and emotional heritage of the Freedom Ride, the relationship was ambivalent. ‘I remember at the beginning’, said a nineteen-year-old student, Patrick Dawson, ‘that I would hum “We Shall Overcome” and be shouted down: we weren’t Americans.’³ The American connection, channelled through individuals and fed by the media, was short-lived and would not emerge again until the Civil Rights movement changed both its leadership and direction with the rise of Black Power.

Australian race consciousness operated in the shadow of the great racial movements of the time, making it difficult to forge an original path. Given Australia’s intimate, if understated, relationship with the United States, it would have been un-Australian to do so. The freedom riders, for want of a better name, drew on the American experience to launch themselves along a path of direct action. Thus, it is not surprising to find a report of the ride in Woroni, the student newspaper of the Australian National University, which carried, in a bold, bordered, and centred insert, Martin Luther King’s explanation of non-violent direct action. What King called ‘creative

¹ Noffs advised Perkins to take an American tour which he did in 1967: Peter Read, Charles Perkins: A Biography (Melbourne, 1990), p. 78.
³ ‘The Student Bus’, Outlook, ix (1965), 5.
tension', Perkins called 'constructive conflict'. The SAFA tour explicitly imported American methods and ideology whether the freedom riders intended it or not.

On Perkins's return to Sydney, he wrote ecstatically about the effect of the Freedom Ride: 'The age of talking is over and you've got to stand up and be counted.' In his autobiography, he described the tour as 'probably the greatest and most exciting event that I have ever been involved in with Aboriginal affairs'. The importance was attributed to practical results, including a raised awareness of Aboriginal conditions in the New South Wales countryside; however, Perkins placed special importance on the 'eye conversation' with Aborigines watching in the crowds. The tour aimed at encouraging Aborigines to work for themselves as well as to bring an end to discrimination at the Moree swimming pool, the Bowraville cinema, and the Walgett RSL (Returned Services League) Club. Although it is difficult to estimate the impact of the students' visits, one Aboriginal child, Lyle Munro, who was admitted to the Moree swimming pool as a result of the protest, said that he 'saw the power of direct action that day'. It turned him into an activist.

If Perkins saw a 'magic message' in the ride, others did not. Local newspapers were either critical of the students or simply dismissive. According to a brief report in the Walgett Spectator, the visit there was 'pointless'. The Macleay Argus, on the other hand, was critical: the students were 'trouble-makers' whose 'rude' and 'belligerent' behaviour was shocking. The editor poured vitriol on the 'pack of impudent rabble-rousers' out to 'agitate and antagonise'. His comments were only surpassed by a letter that not only accused the students of impudence but also of being deceitful 'publicity seekers', 'half-baked', and 'unparalleled in their own conceit'. The 'dedicated juvenile mind' was a subject of both hostility and derision.

In the cold war climate of 1965, the criticism implied an accusation of fellow-travelling with Communism, which was commonly believed to create social upheaval as a precursor to revolution. This connection may explain the numerous references to the false motives of the SAFA students, who were described as deceitful, outsiders, uninterested in truth or fairness, peddling preconceived ideas, and manipulative of the local Abori-

1 Woroni, 25 March 1965, p. 4; Sun-Herald, 28 March 1965, p. 87.
3 Charles Perkins, A Bastard Like Me (Sydney, 1975), p. 74.
4 Read, Perkins, p. 105.
6 Ibid., p. 105.
8 Macleay Argus, 27 Feb. 1965, p. 3.
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Aboriginal people, especially the children. Even though the students did exchange their plan to survey Aboriginal conditions for acts of civil disobedience, they were hardly the stereotypical Communists portrayed by their critics.¹

Clearly, the Freedom Ride disrupted an established, if unsatisfactory, pattern of social relationships. To some, disturbance in itself was morally unjustifiable. To encourage Aborigines to seek the power to improve their position was objectionable enough; more galling, their advocates came from the city and from the universities. When King faced similar criticism of what he called ‘the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea’, he replied that in matters of racial equality there was an ‘interrelatedness of all communities’ and ‘an inescapable network of mutuality’.² Even though such an assumption crept into the consciousness of Australians after Sharpeville, its legitimacy was disputed close to home. The positive coverage of the tour given by the city press at the expense of the rural white communities only heightened their sense of victimization.

The Freedom Ride captured the attention of the press and television partly because of skilful media management and partly because Australia witnessed for the first time a protest that, although derived from the American Civil Rights movement, was new to Australia. The media regarded the Freedom Ride as an event of national significance and Perkins as the most interesting Aboriginal spokesman. More to the point, the tour generated drama and conflict, the stuff of which ‘news’ is made. The Sun-Herald, for example, reported ‘wild Moree scenes’ where ‘students were attacked by a mob outside Moree swimming pool’.³

The Freedom Ride was really the high-point of American influence on the Australian expression of racial anxiety. It went beyond the use of language derived from the American Civil Rights movement by trying to represent Aboriginal issues as matters of civil rights. Perkins was even reported as calling for a civil rights bill for Aborigines matching the United States’ Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁴

In March 1965, despite Hall Greenland’s claim in Honi Soit that although ‘weak, primitive, fragmentary and divided’, Aboriginal militancy has ‘begun to emerge’,⁵ after the tour SAFA found it difficult to maintain momentum. Other rides and demonstrations attracted few participants and less media interest. It seemed that freedom-riding had become passé and that Aboriginal issues had failed to attract lasting interest in the univer-

¹ See Brett, Forgotten People, on the depiction of Communists, p. 97.
² King, in Black American, ed. Fishel and Quarles, p. 519.
⁴ Ibid., 28 Feb. 1965, p. 87.
Nothing local stirred the imagination of students as effectively as the struggle in South Africa against apartheid. Perkins spoke almost despairingly in May 1966: ‘university students are completely ignorant of the Aborigines in Australia today; they wouldn’t know an Aborigine if they fell across him.’ Only Abschol remained committed to political struggle on behalf of Aborigines.

* * *

The responsibility for raising race consciousness was taken over in 1966 by the Aboriginal organizations and their allies on the political left, especially FCAATSI. Among the original goals of FCAA in 1958 were improvements in education and nutrition, equal pay for equal work, and Aboriginal ownership of reserves. At the top of the list, however, was the repeal of discriminatory legislation and the amendment of the Australian constitution. Jessie Street, one of the founders of FCAA, drafted a petition advocating a referendum to reform the constitution which, by February 1958 when FCAA assumed responsibility for it, already had 10,000 signatures. A major campaign to promote the petition was launched on 6 October 1962.

Dissatisfaction with the constitution was at the heart of organized Aboriginal protest throughout the 1960s but especially after 1965, owing to the increased public awareness of Aboriginal affairs resulting from the unprecedented coverage on television and in the metropolitan newspapers. Advocates of reform objected in particular to section 51, clause xxvi, which allowed the federal parliament to legislate for ‘the people of any race … other than the aboriginal race in any state’ and section 127 which stipulated that ‘in reckoning the numbers of the people … aboriginal natives shall not be counted.’

Moreover, Aboriginal affairs gained greater prominence in both state and federal parliaments. So much discriminatory legislation had either been repealed or reformed by 1965 that the editor of On Aboriginal Affairs referred to a ‘Legislative Revolution’. Discriminatory sections of federal legislation, such as section 16 of the Federal Post and Telegraph Act which prohibited non-white labour from carrying mail, were deleted, and the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended in May 1962 to allow Aborigines to vote in federal elections. State legislatures were slower to act, partly because the body of offending legislation was greater and more

1 Extracts from tape of an address by Charles Perkins, 1 May 1966, Victorian Abschol Newsletter, 28 June 1966, p. 4.
3 For a full discussion of the campaign to reform the constitution, see Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, The 1967 Referendum, or, When Aborigines Didn’t Get the Vote (Canberra, 1997).
4 On Aboriginal Affairs, x (1963), 10.
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diverse and partly because state governments were less responsive to international opinion. Even so, changes were made governing control of property, personal movement, and the consumption of alcohol. The greatest advances were made in South Australia where the Prohibition of Discrimination Act of 1966, the first of its kind, outlawed discrimination on the basis of race. Not until a referendum was held on 27 May 1967, however, could the most important issue be addressed, that is, the alteration of section 51, clause xxvi of the Australian constitution to permit national control of Aboriginal affairs.

The successful referendum campaign was unique in Australian history. Despite being notoriously suspicious of constitutional change and wary of increasing federal government power, 90.77% of those voting supported reform. Although the victory can partly be attributed to the bipartisan support, the vote did not represent advocacy of sweeping change. It only represented general agreement, especially in areas where Aborigines were not highly visible, that, as a Labor member, Gordon Bryant, suggested to parliament, 'the Aboriginal people of this country had not had a fair go.'

Although FCAATSI and similar groups, mirroring the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] in the United States, worked effectively to change the law, such legislative and even constitutional changes did not easily translate into visible improvements in Aboriginal conditions. The government introduced no new programmes; it acted only in response to international opinion against racial discrimination. The cabinet had directed the departments of external affairs and the attorney-general as early as 23 August 1961 to examine Australian laws for cases of racial discrimination as defined by the United Nations. An inter-departmental committee recommended legislative reform in March 1964 on the grounds that 'racial discrimination was currently assuming increasing importance as an international issue' and that 'criticism could fasten suddenly and vehemently' on offending countries. As Australia was potentially a target, the government’s support for the referendum arose from a desire to anticipate criticism: 'Irrespective of who has control over Aborigines,’ argued Kim Beazley, the Labor member for Fremantle, in May 1964, 'only one government is answerable before the forum of international opinion – the government of the Commonwealth of Australia.'

1 W. C. Wentworth, in a private member’s bill, proposed to introduce clause 117a into the constitution to outlaw racial discrimination. This was defeated.
2 Quoted in Attwood and Markus, Referendum, p. 59. They refer also to similar sentiments by Scott Bennett, Frank Stevens, and Jeremy Beckett.
4 Quoted in Bandler, Turning the Tide, p. 101.
As students became increasingly radical in the late 1960s, as the Vietnam War increased in intensity, and as reports from overseas showed racial intolerance reaching new levels of violence, culminating in the Watts riots of 1965 and the assassination of King in 1968, commentators on Australian racial issues feared for the future. Although there was little likelihood that Australia would follow the United States because Aboriginal and African-American circumstances and histories were too different, Australians had the habit of choosing overseas examples as potential worst-case scenarios. ‘The Negro movement has felt compelled to go over to violent forms of action,’ wrote one unnamed commentator. ‘Must we wait in Australia until Aborigines and Islanders feel the same way?’

The failure of King’s liberal idealism to address, in the United States, the seemingly intractable problems of economic disadvantage, institutionalized rather than legalized racism, and the disabling effects of ghetto life in northern cities led to disillusionment with the Civil Rights movement. For the disheartened and the impatient, the symbol of the raised, clenched fist and the slogan ‘Black Power’ offered an alternative way forward. Critics in the United States and elsewhere focused willingly and fearfully on Malcolm X’s advocacy of violent self-defence and the establishment of the Black Panther vigilantes under Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. There was more to Black Power, however, than incitement to riot.

Stokely Carmichael’s call for ‘Black Power’ was a rallying cry for African-Americans to take pride in their heritage, and to find strength in their identity and beauty in their difference. The outward symbols of Black Power – the bowed head and the raised fist – were part of the process of defining an alternative black identity to the one imposed by the white community and buttressed by King. Black Power was an intellectual manifestation of decolonization: the rejection of the white paradigm of race relations and a demand for independence rather than mere equality. ‘For once’, said Carmichael, ‘black people are going to use the words they want to use – not just the words whites want to hear.’

The appearance of Black Power in the United States posed the question whether a more militant philosophy had a role to play in Australia. Consternation over Black Power was exacerbated among Australians by ignorance, fear of what it might be, and a perception that Sydney and Brisbane could easily turn into Los Angeles and Detroit. Dr Roosevelt Brown from the Caribbean and Latin American division of the World Black Power Movement visited Australia in 1969. ‘Why didn’t we like him?’, asked a

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contributor to *The Beacon*, the newspaper of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church: ‘Because we don’t like the idea of Black Power. We equate it with violence.’1 Some form of this new American philosophy was bound to come, continued *The Beacon*, ‘because it must come. Whether it comes violently is for us to choose.’2 The mistake lay in assuming that Black Power was a transportable package rather than an idea and a logical extension in the United States of what had gone before.3

At the end of a long interview, Brown was asked the obvious question: ‘Tell us ... just exactly what Black Power is?’4 ‘Black Power’, he answered, ‘is the empowerment of the black people or otherwise black people choosing the way of doing things and a way to establish a right and justice for themselves.’ Bruce Silverwood, a Methodist minister and the director of the Aborigines Advancement League, amended the definition thus. ‘Black Power’, he said, is ‘the empowerment of black people to take effective control of their own living.’5

Brown understood that Aborigines and their supporters would choose ‘a particular line’, appropriating the ideas that best suited Australian circumstances. The Afro hairstyle and other political symbols of Black Power became popular, but the Black Panthers did not. The violence of the American movement was summarily rejected, except by a few militants, both as incompatible with Aboriginal philosophies and as ultimately self-defeating. As an encouragement to the trend away from assimilation towards self-determination, self-confidence, pride, and self-respect, however, Black Power matched the political aspirations of anyone rejecting the colonial model and claiming a special place in Australian society for indigenous people.6 As the Victorian Branch of the Aborigines Advancement League explained on 15 October 1969: ‘Since the end of World War II, many of the coloured peoples who lived under white colonial rule have gained their independence and coloured minorities in multi-racial nations are claiming the right to determine the course of their own affairs in contradiction to the inferior state under which they had lived. That is black power.’7

2 Ibid., p. 5.
5 Bruce Silverwood to the Methodist Conference, 15 Oct. 1969, Christophers Coll., MS 7992, box 3.
7 Aborigines Advancement League (Vic), 30 Aug. 1969, statement issued by the AGM, Christophers Coll., MS 7992, box 3.
Although the symbols and language of Black Power were American, the concept of empowerment described by Brown and adopted by Silverwood was a natural progression in the development of race consciousness in Australia. Black Power was a convenient ideological position from which to encourage the rejection of assimilation as destructive of Aboriginal culture. Criticism of Black Power as a US import, or as a manifestation of a world-wide rather than uniquely Aboriginal revolution, underestimates the extent to which race consciousness in Australia was neither isolated from events elsewhere during the 1960s nor a copy of them. Arguably, however, one form of protest can be claimed as a unique contribution to Australia’s increasing race consciousness – land rights and the Tent Embassy.

In the federal parliament on 23 May 1963, Beazley raised for the first time what would become the most vexing political issue in Aboriginal affairs for the next thirty-five years: ‘No Australian Parliament has ever faced the question of whether there is any aboriginal entitlement to land anywhere in the Commonwealth. As the Commonwealth is now 175 years old, it is time that some Parliament faced this question.’\(^1\) Although demands for land rights colour the entire history of Aboriginal protest, they only came to the forefront after the 1967 referendum and, by 1972, the movement had reached what may be described as a moment of truth.

When Aboriginal activists combined the anti-colonial model with a demand for land rights and the concepts of participatory democracy, direct action, and radicalism, they crafted the most effective and original statement of race consciousness of the 1960s. The catalyst for the Tent Embassy was the statement by the prime minister, William McMahon, rejecting land rights in favour of a fifty-year lease for ‘reasonable’ purposes.\(^2\) The Tent Embassy appeared on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra on Australia Day on 26 January 1972, to symbolize the feeling of alienation experienced by Aborigines in their own country. Although the protesters, including Mike Anderson and Billy Craigie, wore Afro hairstyles, raised the clenched fist, and displayed banners that read ‘land rights or bloodshed’, the embassy represented a novel interpretation of Aboriginal colonial status. The ambassadors demanded Aboriginal ownership of land, the preservation of sacred sites, monetary compensation, and statehood for the Northern Territory. Anderson announced the formation of an alternative Aboriginal government including a minister for Caucasian affairs.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) *CPD, H of R*, 23 May 1963, p. 1,796.


\(^3\) Ibid., 28 Jan. 1972, p. 3. In Nov. 1969, fourteen Native Americans expressed their sense of alienation by claiming ownership of Alcatraz and their intention to establish a Bureau of Caucasian Affairs. Australian Aborigines were aware of this event. Peter Collier, ‘Indian Power: Better Red than Dead’, in
The parliamentary debate over land rights in 1972 reflected the intellectual struggles of the previous decade. The minister for the interior, Ralph Hunt, for example, raised the spectre of Communist promotion of the Aboriginal cause: 'land rights would become the big issue ... in view of the fact that Australia was withdrawing its troops from Vietnam.' More interesting, perhaps, is the inability to divorce self-determination from apartheid: 'The thought of separate development of Australian Aborigines', Hunt added, 'is completely alien to the Government's intentions. It does not want a racist society; it does not want apartheid, whether it is voluntary or enforced.' The embassy was forcefully removed in July 1972 by one hundred and fifty police acting on newly gazetted legislation forbidding camping in public places. The supporters, mostly students, who faced the police sang choruses of 'We Shall Overcome'.

The conservative government saw rising race consciousness as an aspect of the cold war, leaving the political left, Communists, the union movement, and the Labor Party to promote change in racial paradigms. The Labor Party advocated the ratification of the ILO Convention and more generous rights to land, while Bryant argued in parliament that Australians needed to adopt a new way of looking at land and its ownership: 'The land issue is not anything to do with the communists,' he said; 'it has something to do with the fundamental principle by which we approach people.'

* * *

Although Aboriginal activists and their white supporters had struggled throughout the 1960s to put Aboriginal affairs on the political agenda, apartheid remained the more compelling example of racial discrimination. When South Africa's Springbok rugby team made a nationwide tour in July and August 1971, anti-apartheid campaigners were provided with a visible target and an opportunity for protest. The demonstrations held around Australia, but especially in Queensland, show the extent to which racial questions, radical politics, and participatory democracy combined.

In Brisbane, the trouble began when the trades unions refused to prepare the usual rugby field, Ballymore Park. When Lang Park was suggested instead and the Electrical Trades Union threatened action, the
trustees refused to allow the field to be used. The government of Queensland then moved to acquire the Exhibition Grounds, at which spectators were seated further from the playing field. When the Queensland Royal National Association, which owned the grounds, refused to allow three matches against the Springboks to be played there, on 13 July the government declared a state of emergency for one month in order to commandeer the grounds.

The premier, Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, was reported as saying that the government acquired the Exhibition Grounds 'in the face of the threat of real violence and defiance of law and order, with subsequent dangers to life and property'. It also hoped to prevent the unions from boycotting the Royal National Association, so disrupting the annual agricultural and pastoral exhibition, the EKKA, due to begin on 5 August. The conservative editor of The Courier-Mail explained that the government's decision had backfired: 'The one thing the violent minority of demonstrators against the Springboks wants to create is a state of emergency somewhere in Australia. State Cabinet yesterday obliged them by deciding to declare one, and make it official ... It is everybody's misfortune that a disruptive minority has been handed a propaganda coup.'

Although the issue underlying the protest was South African apartheid, other issues quickly became as important: the behaviour of the police who attended the demonstrations and the government's decision to declare a state of emergency were interpreted as attempts to restrain dissent. Racial questions then became one aspect of a broader struggle about empowerment and control.

The outcome was a strike at the University of Queensland for the duration of the tour. The editor of The Courier-Mail scoffed: 'It is not clear that dissident students themselves understand exactly what they oppose. Racism, the state of emergency, university discipline and police treatment of demonstrators seem to have led to an emotional upheaval encouraged by those tiresome princes of rhetoric – campus agitators.' Precisely these factors combined in the source of student dissent. Anti-apartheid agitation in Australia was not simply about rights for black Africans; it was about rights in general. Race was a vehicle for dissent as much as the subject of dissent. This explains why so much criticism of demonstrators was directed not at their views on race, but at their audacity, appearance, willingness to disregard convention, and fearlessness of traditional sources of authority: university, police, government, parents, and public opinion. Such rejection of society's norms was inevitably attributed to the influence

2 Ibid., p. 2.
3 Ibid., 27 July 1971, p. 2.
of Communist Party agitators working through the unions in order to de-
stabilize Australian society.¹

Strikers at the University of Queensland, and their supporters at cam-
puses around the country, saw themselves as taking part in an international
struggle against racism and, by implication, against all forms of oppression.
Paul Rienhart's *The Student as Nigger*, which drew an analogy between the
status of Afro-Americans and university students, was circulated around
the country. Students, seeing themselves as the new mouthpiece for radical
political philosophies, expressed their sense of their importance in a
telegram to the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid: 'University
of Q[ueens]ld on strike in protest against Springbok tour and gov[ernmen]t state of emergency. Great morale boost for worldwide anti-
racist struggle if UN cables support for Aust[ralian] universities ... Imme-
diate reply essential as situation critical.'² Paralleling the way in which
American universities became 'structurally anti-war' after the bombing of
Cambodia and the shootings at Kent State University in 1970, the Queens-
land strike aimed to turn over the university to anti-racism in response to
the state and federal governments' perceived acquiescence in apartheid.³

McMahons's attempt to separate sport from politics matched Menzies' attempt to separate Sharpeville from the Commonwealth. Although both
men were widely supported — whereas seventy-four per cent of those
polled in Queensland thought the tour should go ahead, in 1961 sixty-nine
per cent had thought South Africa should remain in the Commonwealth —
the vocal minority was gaining power as the result of spreading their
message by unconventional means.⁴ The disparity between the fifty-nine
per cent who opposed apartheid in 1961 and the seventy-four per cent in
favour of the Springbok tour ten years later, illustrates the extent to which
racial questions were enmeshed in attitudes to social disturbance. Oppon-
ents of the anti-apartheid campaign less often favoured segregation than
resented public displays of agitation.

* * *

The introduction of a new racial paradigm in Australia was slow, con-
tested, and, by 1972, far from complete. The process began in response to
events overseas: black nationalism, decolonization, and opposition to

¹ The anti-apartheid movement drew from the Australian Labor Party, the Communist Party, the Alli-
ance of Revolutionary Communists, the Socialist Union, the universities, the unions, and the churches:
Mark Steer, *The Whole World is Watching: Anti-Apartheid, Queensland, Australia, 1971* (Torwood,
² Telegram, O'Neill Coll., UQFL 132, box 5, folder 'Strike Leaflets'.
³ 'A Statement against Racism', *Citadel*, 1 (July 1971), ibid.
⁴ *Courier-Mail*, 12 July 1971, p. 3.
apartheid in South Africa. Reformers were more interested in the 1960s and early 1970s in the campaign against apartheid than in improving conditions for Aborigines. Unlike the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the Aboriginal movement attracted less support than the general anti-racism agenda coloured by the anti-apartheid movement, which in turn drew into its sphere Aborigines and their supporters.

In September 1971, the administrative director of the Aborigines Advancement League in Victoria, Bruce McGuinness, wrote to the president of the Australian Union of Students (AUS) and co-ordinator of the Victorian anti-apartheid movement, Gregor Macaulay, asking that the anti-apartheid organizations ‘maintain their commitment and swing over to Aboriginal affairs’ now that a South African cricket tour had been cancelled.1 McGuinness specifically asked Macaulay to organize a protest ‘4000 to 5000 strong’ to ‘apply sufficient pressure to focus public attention on Australian racism’.2 Macaulay replied in November that, although the ‘Halt All Racial Tours Committee’ had become ‘the backbone of the various anti-racial movements’, it was difficult to sustain ‘the large grass roots participation that we were able to get at the one point of time around the focus of the rugby tour’. Macaulay’s campaigns against racism included Papua New Guinea, South-East Asia, and South Africa: Aborigines were not mentioned. ‘At this stage’, continued Macaulay, ‘... it would be very difficult for us to arrange a protest of 4 to 5 thousand people unless we had a particular focal point. However ... I believe it will be possible for Abschol to arrange large demonstrations because of the awareness of the problems of racial discrimination we were able to obtain by using the Springbok tour as a focal point.’3

Although geographically isolated from Africa and the United States, Australians recognized, either with relief or dismay that, as racial paradigms were changing, Australia was bound to be affected. Perhaps because Australians looked outwards for information, ideas, and trends, both demonstrators and government believed themselves to be scrutinized by the world. Each in its own way and according to its own philosophy was adapting to ‘the wind of change’.

Race was the first issue during the 1960s about which Australians were prepared to take a stand: it was central to Australia’s 1960s, as defined by

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1 The National Union of Australian University Students (NUAUS) began in 1937. The name was changed to Australian Union of Students (AUS) in 1970 to incorporate students from the newly created Colleges of Advanced Education.
2 McGuinness to Macaulay, 10 Sept. 1971, AUS Papers, MS 2412, box 419, file 20, Race Relations Abschol.
3 Macaulay to McGuinness, 29 Nov. 1971, AUS Papers, MS 2412, box 419, file 20, Race Relations Abschol.
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David Chalmers, because it provided the hook upon which to hang issues of power and control, exploitation, conformity, social expectation, morality, and economic theory. The Australian race narrative, although international in context, was not American in origin, nor an imitation of the American Civil Rights movement: American influence was specifically tied to the direct action exemplified in 1965 by the Freedom Ride and Black Power. The Civil Rights movement offered proven methods derived from admired intellectual positions, notably the passive resistance of King and Abernathy which were grafted in Australia onto the political culture of the Labor Party, the unions, the Communist Party, and the universities. They were resisted by conservative governments which, in cold warrior style, rejected anything that smacked of Communism, social disturbance, or the breakdown of authority. The limited legislative reforms they introduced were in response to a fear of foreign intervention.

At a gathering held on 6 August 1971, the last day of the Springbok tour, one hundred demonstrators heard a black teacher from South Africa and an Aboriginal poet speak from the same platform. They sang the protest songs of an internationally linked generation, including the anthem of the American Civil Rights movement, ‘We Shall Overcome’. The occasion epitomizes the Australian expression of race consciousness in the 1960s. To sing an American Baptist hymn turned protest song, to promote the ILO Convention, to use the vocabulary of apartheid, to admire Tom M’boya and Martin Luther King, was to position Australia within the mainstream of racial reform, even if the practical response to domestic racism was slow and met with staunch resistance. Australia, however, had been forced to leave the isolation represented by the policy of domestic jurisdiction and to face the implications at home of black empowerment in Africa.

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1 Stewart Harris, Political Football: The Springbok Tour of Australia, 1971 (Melbourne, 1972), p. 44.