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THE PEOPLE HAD SPOKEN

Descriptor

Though Charles Perkins was certainly a monumental and highly significant figure, what becomes clear in the course of studying the Indigenous Civil Rights Movement is the extent to which combined contributions of other, seemingly less significant and certainly less published individuals became the powerful catalyst for extraordinary and fundamental political change.

The People Had Spoken!

In 1965, Dr Charles Perkins, accompanied by students from the University of Sydney, began a tour of political activism which would come to be known as the 'Freedom Rides'. It was this event that would be the first of many campaigns of political activism that Charles Perkins initiated as part of his effort to bring about changes in the treatment afforded to Indigenous Australians. Ultimately, Perkins' campaigns were credited with the fundamental reform to Indigenous civil rights in Australia which would culminate in the 1967 federal referendum. Yet little recognition is afforded to the real drivers of change: the Australian people. Charles Perkins was the beneficiary of uncommonly fortunate circumstances; and a man whose contributions to the political changes of 1967 have been perhaps magnified through the lens of history. Great fundamental change is never brought about on the merits of extraordinary individuals, but only by the hand of the collective power of the people. Democracy itself was born of the unified will and vision of thousands of Athenian peasants working together to create real change. Great names such as Kleisthenes have such political changes attributed to them, yet a revisionist perspective shows that it was in fact the citizens of Athens whose collective efforts were the true catalyst for the seismic change to Athenian life that we now recognise as the inception of democracy. The civil liberties of Indigenous Australians did not change solely due to the power of one man, but rather the collective power of millions of ordinary Australian citizens.

Charles Nelson Perkins was born in a telegraph station on an Aboriginal reserve in Alice Springs. Despite his humble beginnings, Perkins was thrust from an early age into an exceptional life. At a young age Perkins' talent had been identified. With the encouragement of his mother, he moved to Adelaide for schooling. Perkins quickly proved to be an exceptionally talented football player and was consequently permitted the rare opportunity to play professionally for the English club Everton; and on his return to Australia, the Adelaide Croatian and Sydney Panhellenic clubs. The earnings from his football career allowed him to cover the expense of putting himself through matriculation and a Bachelor of Arts degree at Sydney University. In 1966, Perkins became the first Aboriginal man to graduate from a university in Australia (Trinca, 2014). Retrospectively he stated his reasons for wanting to attend university as: *"I decided this is the way it's going to be from now on. I'm not going to cop second class status any longer. And I thought, why should other Aboriginals suffer like this"* (Perkins in Smith, 2019). Perkins provides an invaluable insight into the drive and passion he held for his movement. In 1963, Perkins helped to establish Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA), of which he would later become President in 1964. In 1965, SAFA began a highly publicised tour of political activism across New South Wales, targeting towns such as Walgett, Moree and Kempsey. Footage from the campaign, which caught much media attention, was broadcast nationwide and exposed the endemic racism and systematic segregation in rural Australia.

Perkins was an undoubtedly extraordinary man with a true passion and drive for creating social change and whose contributions to the Australian Civil Rights Movement were by no means insignificant. Yet, Charles Perkins was a man whose movement came at a time when civil rights was a popular issue not only domestically, but also abroad; thus, his image as a political figure was magnified by a media which tended to gravitate towards him. The enormous political shift in the treatment of Indigenous people within Australia, which culminated in the 1967 referendum could not possibly have occurred simply by

the actions of one man – albeit an incredible man – but rather the united democratic power of the Australian people.

Prior to 1967, Indigenous Australians were treated as societal outsiders. They were accustomed to overt discrimination, segregation and deprivation of civil rights. Throughout Australia it was commonplace to find rural shops and cafes refusing to serve Indigenous people, as well as movie theatres, public swimming pools and various other recreational facilities refusing to accommodate Indigenous patrons (Hagaman, 2017). There was little interest in the state of Indigenous health. Professional studies portrayed Indigenous people as being inferior and primitive and declaring their race to be poised on the edge of inevitable demise. For example, a case study on Indigenous psychiatric patients from 1924 published in the Medical Journal of Australia states in its introduction:

“Contact with civilization, phthisis and other diseases, mixed breeding and general racial decay are the order of the day. In a few years this line of research will be closed for ever. Whatever may be one’s sentimental views on the passing of the primitive peoples, from the scientific or even the utilitarian aspect it will be more than unfortunate if our records are not completed before they vanish.” (Thomas, 2004, pg. 521-523)

This primary extract regarding the scientific outlook as a people not only provides a useful insight into the Australian scientific perspective at the time, but also demonstrates the extent of disadvantage faced by the Indigenous community of the 1930s as even official opinion on Indigenous people was that they were an inevitably vanishing and therefore insignificant population who were certain to be bred out of existence. Though perhaps most egregious of all was the denial of the civil rights and liberties which were automatically afforded to white Australians. Before the referendum of 1967, many aspects of Indigenous Australians’ lives were controlled (and for that matter, suppressed) by state governments – these aspects included: the right to vote in state elections, the right to marry, the right to migrate domestically, the right to own property, the right to legal guardianship of their children, the right to equal wages, and the right to drink alcohol (Meehan, 2018). This poor state of affairs was the result of the fact that the Australian Constitution, until 1967, explicitly excluded any legislation regarding Indigenous Australians – excepting two brief mentions in which they are excluded from the National census and denied access to special Commonwealth laws (Gardiner-Garden, 1997). If these unacceptable injustices were to be dealt with, it would take more than an extraordinary activist, it would require the endemic and system change that could only occur by the will of the people.

The 1967 referendum was one of the most significant milestones in the Australian Civil Rights Movement. The referendum called for two amendments to sections 51 and 127 of the Australian Constitution, which allowed the government to make and pass laws specifically for the benefit of Indigenous welfare, as well as to include Indigenous Australians in censuses. Yet, what is often forgotten, is that this referendum was the ultimate culmination in a significant political movement that had begun more than a decade previously. Individual citizens such as Jessie Street had been campaigning for reform of Indigenous rights for more than thirty years prior to the referendum; however, it was not until the true plight of Aboriginal welfare was revealed to the Australian population at large, that the movement gained real traction (Radi, 2002). In 1957, the Grayden report revealed the extent of malnutrition, blindness and disease in the Aboriginal community of the Warburton ranges. The information pertaining to this report was disseminated by the Australian media in the form of the “Warburton Ranges Film” showing shocking images of malnourished children and disease-ridden men and women. This film was broadcast nationwide, even making its way to many politicians. The shockwaves that were the aftermath of the report were powerful enough to stir especially concerned individuals who took it upon themselves to form activist groups. In 1958, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) was formed to campaign for legislative change for Aboriginal people. In this same year, the FCAA ran a petition which called for the amendment and repeal of two sections

of the Australian Constitution, which amassed more than 25 000 signatories (Korff, 2019). The political traction gained by the FCAA as well as several other major civil activist groups proved catalyst for real structural change, all prior to Perkin's movement. By 1962, the initiatives for constitutional reform on the matter of Indigenous rights had begun within the government itself. The Australian Labor Party (the opposition at the time) submitted an urgency motion, seeking a national referendum to include Indigenous people in censuses. (Fairfax, 1962) This political momentum was sufficient to bring about fundamental legal change even prior to the 1967 referendum. By 1965, every state in the Commonwealth officially afforded Indigenous Australians the right to vote and almost all federal and state laws discriminating against Aboriginal people had been repealed (Korff, 2019). Of course, it would be unjust to suggest that the political activism of Perkins and the SAFA organization between 1964 and 1965 were not significant contributors to the changing political climate of the 1960s; however, it is clear that despite the very public nature of their campaigns, theirs was by no means the chief nor even the most significant contribution to this movement. The referendum of 1967 was the apotheosis of a significant political shift which had begun more than a decade earlier and taken the efforts of thousands of Australians working towards a systematic change in the perception of Indigenous peoples. Such was the success of their endeavours that Australians united and returned the largest 'yes' vote in the history of Australian referendums of 90.77% (Williams & Hume, 2018). The people had spoken.

Throughout history, there have been countless instances of nations forever changed by fundamental shifts in their politics. Many seek to attribute great changes to remarkable individuals. Exceptional leaders whose dynamic personalities and extraordinary charisma earn them the respect and attention of masses of followers. Charles Perkins was undoubtedly a remarkable person. His extraordinary drive and talents captured the attention of many Australians and his contributions to the Australian civil rights movement cannot be considered insignificant. Perkins and the 1967 referendum is one of many examples throughout history which embodies the true essence of democracy. Whether it is recognized or not, true political power is born by the collective might of the masses. It is not by the hand of extraordinary individuals that great change is made, but by the hands of the many whose united efforts can often be forgotten but cannot be ignored.

(1724 words)

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This primary source comes from an issue of the Sydney Morning Herald published August 31st, 1962. This source can be considered high useful as it provides primary knowledge of the events of 1962 and as a publication from a prominent Australian News corporation, with the purpose to accurately inform readers, its reliability can be considered high.

Gardiner-Garden, J. (1997). Background paper 11 1996-97, *The Origin of Commonwealth Involvement in Indigenous Affairs and the 1967 Referendum – Parliament of Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/Background_Papers/bp9697/97bp11

This source, as an official article from the Australian Parliament can be considered both highly reliable and useful. The information it pertains to is a factual recount of events and can therefore be considered devoid of passion or bias. As a revisionist perspective, it has considered and evaluated view of events. As a government publication, its reliability can be considered high.

Hagaman, S. (2017). *Dr Charlie Perkins: The Australian hero you should know about*. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org.au/dr-charlie-perkins-indigenous-hero/>

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Meehan, A. (2018). *27 May-1967 Referendum*. Retrieved July 28, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/27-may-referendum.pdf>

This publication from a government-endorsed organisation provides a factual account of events pertaining to the 1967 referendum. As its purpose is to accurately inform readers of historical events, and as it takes into account a balanced revisionist perspective on the true nature of events, it can be considered highly reliable, useful and accurate.

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This secondary source provides a useful and factual account of the events pertaining to the 1967 referendum in Australia.