

Individual Research Essay—*Change and Continuity*

Special Category: Indigenous History

How has Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism changed throughout the twentieth century?

With questions around the *Voice* referendum dominating the media, this essay critiques continuity and change in Indigenous Australian activism. Providing a chronological overview of Indigenous Australian activism over the twentieth century and arguing that major changes to the struggle for Indigenous Australian rights and freedoms have come about through contributions of significant individuals and movements.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism has largely used the same methods to lobby for the same causes since its beginnings, though largely through the actions of significant individuals has adapted to fit into modern Australia. Actions in the early twentieth century set the standards for Indigenous activism. Later, individuals including Faith Bandler and Charles Perkins popularised more broadly spread communicative methods to influence voters in the leadup to the 1967 Referendum. Upon the 1967 Referendum, Indigenous affairs and activism were consolidated in national attention, a turning point in national attitudes towards change. Further political activism was developed through other individuals, such as Dr. G. Yunupingu and Eddie Mabo. The threads of continuity and change within these methods can be seen with the upcoming referendum for *The Voice*, which draws upon the activism of the twentieth century, but further incorporates modern methods to further its public presence. Indigenous Australian activism has used similar methods since the twentieth century, but due to the actions of significant individuals, has continued to evolve up to the modern day.

Early action for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and freedoms set the standard methods and subjects of protest for Indigenous Australian activism. Founded in 1924 and focused on granting land rights and full citizenship, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association was the first Aboriginal-run welfare organisation established in Australia, providing a blueprint for Indigenous rights organisations and the issues they fought for. Further, there was a direct call for an, ‘Aboriginal representative in the federal parliament... to watch over his people’s interests and advise the federal authorities’ (Maynard, 1929). This serves as the original call for an Indigenous Voice to parliament, mirroring the topic of the

referendum in 2023, showing how the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association introduced topics to the mainstream which are still in discussion today. Further, the 1938 Day of Mourning acted as a large-scale introduction of civil disobedience as a method of Indigenous Australian activism. Held on the 150th anniversary of the First Fleet, the demonstration was instrumental in the recognition of Indigenous perspectives on colonisation, receiving national and parliamentary attention and being described as an, ‘Aboriginal Viewpoint’ (*The Age*, 1938) through the media. Civil disobedience is still a widely used method of activism, with demonstrations in all Australian major cities this year in relation to the referendum, and the Day of Mourning being a precursor to the modern *Invasion* and *Survival Day* movements. Further, the day of mourning represented an, ‘... appeal to the Australian nation... to make laws for the education and care of Aborigines...’, (*The Age*, 1938) acting as a first call for what would further be lobbied for in the 1967 Referendum. Early Indigenous Australian Civil Rights action set the standards for organisational activism and civil disobedience and served as the foundation for methods and issues of protest up to today.

At the middle of the twentieth century, significant Indigenous figures Charles Perkins and Faith Bandler pioneered the use of wider spread communicative activism and increased national awareness of Indigenous Australian affairs in the leadup to the 1967 Referendum. Charles Perkins led the Freedom Rides through rural New South Wales to spread awareness of rural Indigenous quality of life and encourage procedural change (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, n.d.). The Freedom Rides of 1965 increased awareness of Indigenous affairs both nationally and internationally. The Freedom Rides had the short-term effects of legal change—seen through the change of policy regarding Indigenous Australians swimming in public pools in Moree—and widespread attention. Further, the Freedom Rides had a lasting impact through the influence they had on the outcome of the 1967 Referendum, brought about by the newfound awareness of the Australian public to the poor quality of Indigenous life. In the leadup to the 1967 Referendum and as a key member of the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship, Faith Bandler helped with public education on Indigenous issues. She aided in the distribution of leaflets imploring the public to, ‘Vote *Yes* for Aborigines’ (Bandler, 1967) and further acted as a voice for change on television, stating on Channel 7 that, ‘The time has come when Australia can no longer tolerate legal racial discrimination against its Indigenous people’ (Bandler, 1967) in an effort to persuade viewers to vote in affirmation of the Referendum. The influence of their efforts

helped in achieving the over ninety percent 'Yes' vote for Indigenous Rights in the 1967 Referendum (Australian Electoral Commission, 2012). The combined awareness spread by the communicative activism of Charles Perkins and Faith Bandler introduced Indigenous Australian civil rights issues to wider Australian public and ultimately supported the 'Yes' result of the 1967 Referendum.

The 1967 Referendum marked a turning point in the attitudes towards Indigenous Australian civil rights issues and cemented Indigenous affairs as a national issue. The Referendum itself provided a new format for Indigenous Australian activism, but further, the vote itself and the methods of activism used in the leadup showed wider, non-Indigenous support of the issue. As the first referendum directly regarding Indigenous Australians, the 1967 Referendum was the first instance of Indigenous activism being brought to the entire population, cementing the Indigenous civil rights movement as a national issue and further broadening awareness to the cause of the Referendum. This awareness is further evident through the methods of activism used in the leadup to the vote. Before taking place, a petition organised under the leadership of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders was used to gather one-hundred-thousand signatures in support of the Referendum going ahead. The sheer number of signatures in support of the Referendum being put to a vote indicates the wider Australian support for the Referendum the issues it represented. Influence of non-Indigenous activists further highlights this extensive support for the Referendum. An example is with Jessie Street, who served as a White voice in the fight for Indigenous rights. As she was a more appealing figure to some Australians, she was incredibly effective in establishing non-Indigenous Australian support for the Referendum. Further, she was instrumental in putting the vote ahead through the petition, quoted to have said to Faith Bandler, 'You can't get anywhere without a change in the Constitution, and you can't get that without a referendum. You'll need a petition with one-hundred-thousand signatures. We'd better start on it at once' (Street, 1956). Street represents a larger portion of non-Indigenous individuals lobbying for change through the Referendum. The support for the Referendum from the public is ultimately shown through the proportion of votes in favour of the change, with over ninety percent of Australians voting 'Yes' (Australian Electoral Commission, 2012). The 1967 Referendum and the subsequent methods of activism used to promote it indicate a positive change in national attitudes towards supporting Indigenous affairs.

Political and parliamentary Indigenous Australian activism was further enforced by the actions of Dr. G. Yunupingu and Eddie Mabo, which brought Indigenous affairs to the

attention of the government. Dr. G. Yunupingu's active contributions to the Yirrkala bark petitions brought Indigenous Australian activism to the attention of the Australian government through traditional means. Though ultimately unsuccessful fulfilling its aims of reclaiming rights to the land of the proposed Nabalco Mine, the Yirrkala Bark petitions represent a larger push for writing Indigenous rights and freedoms into legislation. The significance of the petitions is furthered as they were the first traditional Indigenous documents formally recognised by the government, showing that tradition had a place in a Western system of government and the wider fight for self-determination. Later, the Mabo Decision enforced the transition of Indigenous Australian activism into law and paved the way for future decisions. The decision brought Native Title to the High Court, essentially validating the significance of the issue in the eyes of the public and law. Ultimately, the rendering of *Terra Nullius* as false through the Mabo Decision not only officially denounced a long-held colonial myth, but again furthered the legitimacy of Indigenous activism in the eyes of the law. It also showed nationwide and legal recognition of continued Indigenous Australian connection to the land. Further, the subsequent Native Title Act of 1993 helped establish a path for future Native Title and land rights activism, such as that present in the Wik Decision of 1996, which though unsuccessful in achieving native title, arose from two Native Title claims in Queensland. Political Indigenous Australian activism was strengthened by the actions of Dr. G. Yunupingu and Eddie Mabo.

The continuous and changing nature of Indigenous Australian activism can be shown through the 2023 *Voice* Referendum, which combines activist practices from the twentieth century and modern methods maximise awareness for its cause. Early acts of civil disobedience have been echoed with protests and gatherings in major cities. This year's protests seen in the Sydney CBD mimic those seen with the 1938 Day of Mourning, though now drawing thousands in a diverse crowd. Further, the communicative activism seen in the mid-twentieth century is echoed through the television segments featuring discussion of the Referendum's implications. Such segments and call-to-actions mimic the words of Faith Bandler and Jessie Street in the 1960s. The use of a referendum itself further mimics the activism of this period, a direct procedural replication of the events of 1967. Additionally, if successful, the changes to legislation brought about by the Referendum resounds methods and sentiments seen clearly in the actions of Dr. G. Yunupingu and Eddie Mabo. This replication of twentieth century activism not only cements the significance of previous actions in the fight for Indigenous Australian rights and freedoms, but also shows the significance of *The Voice*, as culminating

previous actions and wisdom today implies the great significance of the Referendum for modern Australia. Even further, modern methods have been implemented to promote the Referendum. The vote has its own Instagram page and several guidebooks have been written to help the Australian public make informed choices when voting, such as Thomas Mayo's *The Voice to Parliament Handbook* (2023), ultimately showing the effort being put into promotion and the significance of the vote. Modern Indigenous Australian activism—seen today largely through the Referendum on *The Voice*—calls upon previous activism along with incorporating modern methods to appeal to today's sociopolitical climate.

Over the course of the twentieth century and up to today, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism has continually used the same methods and argued for the same rights and freedoms, though has changed largely due to the contributions of significant individuals. Early activism set the standards for the methods used and changes lobbied for. Later, communicative methods of activism brought about by Charles Perkins and Faith Bandler spread Indigenous Australian activism to the wider population, ultimately aiding in spreading the overwhelming 'Yes' vote in the 1967 Referendum. The Referendum itself showed a turning point in Australian attitudes towards Indigenous affairs. Later, political activism, as seen in the actions of Dr. G. Yunupingu and Eddie Mabo, brought Indigenous Australian activism into legislation. The upcoming referendum on *The Voice* calls upon methods and subjects of various activist events from the twentieth century, combining them with modern methods to widen its reach today. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism has evolved continuously over the twentieth century and up to today due largely to the actions of significant individuals.

Bibliography

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This episode of *First Australians: A Fair Deal for a Dark Race* introduced me to how television broadcasting was introduced as a means of Indigenous Australian activism. The commentary of Bandler herself alongside the explanations of several modern historians aided in my understanding and made the source easy to interpret for its value. This episode also encouraged me to widen my understanding of different, less standard methods of activism and helped shape the content of this essay.

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This article discusses the fight for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament using the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association as a case study. This source allowed me to explore the continuation of discussion around certain topics in Indigenous Australian activism, but also aided me in creating my thesis. This article inspired me to connect the chronological overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism over the twentieth century to the upcoming referendum on *The Voice* today.

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The sources I used from *The Dictionary of Sydney* were a great source of information throughout the process of writing this essay. The website provides a great overview of historical events regarding Indigenous Australian activism and further applies the significance of these events to the history of Sydney as a city, allowing me to contextualise certain events that I was writing about.

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