

**John Newfong (3/11/1943-30/5/1999), Aboriginal activist, commentator, and public servant left an indelible mark on Aboriginal Affairs.**

As a descendant of Ngugi people of the Moreton Bay region in Queensland, he drew much on the history of his people and how they maintained a continuous connection with land and sea despite European settlement. It was from this cultural background that John drew during the course of his life and it sustained him whilst working in Canberra and Sydney and overseas.

As a print media journalist, he completed a cadetship in the mid-1960s and subsequently worked for *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning-Herald* and *The Bulletin* in the early 1970s. However, he experienced the tension caused by the often conflicting professional and political demands on him. At the time, the Editor of *The Australian*, Adrian Deamer warned him that if he did not acquire and develop all of his professional skills, he would do "...nothing else but write about being black".

According to David Armstrong, *The Australian's* Chief of Staff, John's political activism was the main reason for him leaving the media as "...he eventually felt he was able to do more for the cause". Upon leaving the media, John began to immerse himself more and more in the affairs of FCAATSI and the National Tribal Council.

Whilst his full-time career in journalism ended in early 1972, he continued to periodically write as a columnist or commentator for *The Australian*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Review*, *The National Interest*, *The Sydney Morning-Herald*, and, *The Australian Financial Review* until his death. As a journalist and commentator, he adhered to the "fair and fearless journalism" of the so-called Sydney school of journalism, often drawing the ire when exposing self-flattery and self-seeking actions. His assessment of the issues of the day surrounding federal Aboriginal affairs, was characterised by informative and penetrating analysis which did not flinch from controversy.

As an Aboriginal activist, his long involvement in the Aboriginal movement began in 1961 and ended with his death in 1999. His apprenticeship in Aboriginal affairs was served in the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI), where his political mentors included Kath Walker, Hazel Mace, Stan and May McBride, Celia Smith, and Daisy Marchisotti. At the age of 19, he was elected in 1967 to QCAATSI's Campaign Secretary of the Referendum campaign in Queensland.

After joining ABSCHOL in 1961, he was an active member of the University of Queensland Branch. During the 1960s, his family were one of many Aboriginal families that raised funds for Aboriginal people studying at University among them was Margaret Valadian.

On the national level, he was an active member of the Federated Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), learning much from Faith Bandler, Pastor Doug Nichols and Oodgeroo Noonuckle (then Kath Walker). In 1970, he was elected General Secretary of FCAATSI, and played a central role in organising the Aboriginal protest at Kurnell that year on the bicentenary of Captain Cook's landing. Under his direction, the Kurnell protest was the first Aboriginal demonstration to exploit the television media in order to highlight the plight of Aboriginal people.

At the time, John was also the National Tribal Council's elected New South Wales delegate. The National Tribal Council emerged from the internal split within FCAATSI in 1970 over the assertion of Aboriginal demands for greater autonomy in its administration and policy.

Between 1969 and 1973, he was a Board member of the Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee, the forerunner to the Aboriginal Arts Board. This body was the progenitor of the Aboriginal Publications Foundation, which produced *Identity* magazine.

After the Aboriginal Medical Service (Redfern) was established in 1971, he edited its newsletter as a volunteer in 1975 and 1981. His association with the AMS continued throughout his life, in a variety of roles, as a board member, donor, volunteer, and media adviser.

In 1972, he was co-opted by Chicka Dixon to join the Aboriginal tent embassy and, between February and July of that year, he coordinated the lobby of federal parliamentarians, the press gallery, and the diplomatic corps, thereby building the press profile of the embassy nationally and internationally. In the intervening years, John's central role in the embassy has been overlooked by black and white historians.

Later in July of that year, he was appointed editor of the Aboriginal magazine, *Identity*, where he revamped the magazines' editorial content and production, whilst training his successor. In 1979, John Newfong was again appointed editor of *Identity*, after the circulation he had built up in 1972-73 had fallen because of the disruption caused by a high turnover of editors and constant changes to editorial policy.

He was elected to the National Aboriginal Conference for the SEQ-Brisbane-Metropolitan region in 1977 and was elected QLD State Chairman of the NAC until his resignation in 1979.

Throughout the 1980s, he worked for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) and the Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC) as a speech-writer and media adviser to Charles Perkins, Shirley McPherson, Hon. Clyde Holding and Hon. Gerry Hand.

In 1982, he was appointed to the Board of the Public Broadcasting Foundation, which oversaw the issue of radio broadcast licenses on behalf of the Department of Communications. As a result, Aboriginal radio proliferated during his tenure because of his active support of indigenous broadcasters.

At this time, he was able to use his media skills to advise various government committees which produced the National Aboriginal Health Strategy and other formal submissions and reports on Aboriginal health. In the course of his work in Aboriginal health, he considered himself fortunate enough to have worked with Shirley Smith (Mum Shirl), Archie Kalokerinos, Fred Hollows, Patricia Fagan, Maggie Grant, Jacinta Elston, Ian Wronski, Ken Wanganeen and Naomi Mayers.

To Aboriginal gays and lesbians, he was a significant role model, being the only openly homosexual Aboriginal leader in the Aboriginal movement, he was able to confront homophobia and hypocrisy in the mainstream and Aboriginal communities, with courage and dignity. As a gay public figure in Aboriginal affairs, his views on Aboriginal sexuality in contemporary Australia were reported in the press here and overseas.

Of Aboriginal affairs generally, John Newfong, like many others, saw the emergence of federal Aboriginal affairs as a possible solution to the plight of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders generally in the post-Referendum era. Sadly, in the intervening years, he became disillusioned by the apparent failure of the Aboriginal leadership and successive federal governments, to effect any real change in Aboriginal Australia.

In what he attributed to a "paucity of ideas", the apparent failure of the current Aboriginal leadership of the last 25 years, had only distinguished itself, in his view, by promoting its own interests often at the expense of the Aboriginal people. He perceived the apparent abandonment of the concept of "the common good", which had been a guiding principle of the Aboriginal movement for decades, characterised a significant philosophical shift in Aboriginal Affairs.

In paying tribute to John Newfong, it is hoped that he will be remembered for his dedication to the Aboriginal people and their cause and his belief that Aboriginal people always had been and always will be the masters of their own destiny.

Authorised by Adrian Atkins 2003©

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