'What do we want?’
A political history of Aboriginal land rights in New South Wales

‘What do we want?’ was the rallying call for land rights activists in New South Wales in the late 1970s. In her new book, Heidi Norman tells the story of the incredible moment in the 1970s where Aboriginal people, armed with new skills, framed their demands for land rights to suit a sympathetic government.

The 1978 land rights inquiry and the subsequent land rights laws brought Aboriginal people – and the state – into new and different relationships of power. These have been the source of ongoing contestation ever since.

The passage of laws in 1983 was an enthralling process, replete with an unprecedented level of political engagement by Aboriginal citizens and their supporters. It produced political intrigue, deception and disappointment.

The laws heralded a host of possibilities and an entirely new and unprecedented involvement in government, and governing, by NSW Aboriginal citizens. Thirty years later, and with more than a billion dollars in land assets, a near billion-dollar investment fund, and with more than 115 local Aboriginal land councils, the resultant network of councils is the largest Aboriginal representative body in the country.

‘What do we want?’ A political history of Aboriginal land rights in New South Wales reveals the challenges of Aboriginal people adjusting to modernity as land councils struggle to realise the hopes of their members, many of whom continue to suffer chronic disadvantage.

It is a story full of possibility, tensions and difficult entanglement as Aboriginal people, taking up the political demand of self-determination have worked to address their community disadvantage and grappled with the expectations of government and accountability.

About the author

Dr Heidi Norman is a Senior Lecturer in the Communications Program in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the University of Technology, Sydney, a core member of the Civil Society Research Group and Board member History Council of NSW and Dictionary of Sydney. She is a descendant of the Gomeroi people of north-western NSW.

Join Dr Heidi Norman in conversation about land rights activism in New South Wales: its political history and ongoing debates at Gleebooks, Glebe NSW, Tuesday 5 May.

Media enquiries: (P) 02 6246 1605 (E) commsmedia@aiatsis.gov.au