

## CHAPTER 10

The Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney was the one organization that I wanted to work for when I came out of university. Really, it was perhaps the only one available to me in many ways. I had no other real opportunity of employment so readily available, nor one which would give me experience in the administration and operation of an Aboriginal affairs organization. It seemed a good starting point and one from which things could develop. It would be a basis for bringing about the change I felt was so badly needed in Aboriginal affairs.

It is very difficult to organize Aboriginal affairs in New South Wales because there are so many articulate Aboriginal people and you have to be really on your toes. Many of the people are very much aware of their rights and also there are other clever Aboriginal people who know how to work the system. You have all these things to contend with, which you do not really have in other places in Australia. It was a very heavy responsibility to place upon myself and my wife. However, we felt we were obligated to work at the Foundation for a few years. The thing that stimulated me to want to go to university and get my degree was related to a growing concern for a revolution in Aboriginal affairs. I felt strongly that it was my duty as the first Aboriginal graduate to devote myself to an organization such as the Foundation, where the stated policy was helping the Aborigines to help themselves. In other words, work for the benefit of the people in a meaningful way.

I really did not know what I was letting myself in for and it was a most difficult and trying time. I think it was made much worse by

the ignorance and stupidity of some of the people I had to work with. Fifty percent of the people on the executive were not too bad but the others were nincompoops. These were mainly white people. They were dropouts from society, either because of their own incompetence or from psychological failings within themselves. And often they were motivated by the wrong things, like personal satisfaction, to perhaps show a bit of benevolence towards blacks who they thought should be grateful. Then there was a group of people motivated by Christian ethics who wanted to work amongst the 'depressed coloured people' of the world. They saw a wonderful opportunity, amongst the Aborigines, to shed spiritual enlightenment.

We had to carry these groups of people in the organization and it was very difficult at times to operate with any sense of confidence or knowledge of what you were doing and where you were going.

There was a lack of money too. There was the newness of such an organization operating in such a complex city as Sydney in New South Wales. I, and others like Joyce Mercy (now Clague), Mrs Eileen Lester and Roy Carroll, were literally exploited by this organization although we did not mind this at the time. I felt it had to be done. I was paid just over forty-five dollars clear a week for nearly three years and it was very hard for Eileen and myself. There were no expenses provided for travelling away. I often found myself sleeping in the back of the Foundation's station wagon because of this. They would not pay me any money to buy meals. I had to buy those things out of my own money. Away from home I lived on meat pies and Coke. I thought it was a bit unfair and still feel angry about this. To top it all off, one lady told me I should work for nothing—how romantic!

The work at the Foundation was hard too. We were breaking new ground all the time, meeting the needs of Aborigines in the welfare situation.

We were not able to employ a large staff at all and yet had to meet welfare needs, organize functions, social groups, picnics, fetes, parties, button-selling days, fund-raising ventures, speaking engagements, handing out clothes and counselling people. We had to do everything. In those days I would have worked a hectic ten-

hour day and most of the nights and certainly every Friday night until about midnight or one o'clock, Saturday night the same and Sunday night up till about twelve o'clock. Very often I would find myself doing the cleaning as well. I did this for forty-five dollars a week with no overtime. But I was learning a great deal about administration, organization and people generally, in one of the most complex social areas in the modern world—race relations.

Yet when I came into the fortnightly meeting of the executive somebody who had not been to the Foundation for a month would question me on why I had spent two or three dollars over the budget on some little item of minor importance. I could not understand some of these people. Fortunately some of them did get out of the organization eventually.

I found the situation very hard at that time because the executive made little or no effort to understand my predicament or, more important still, the predicament of our people. Some tried but were not really successful. Whites can never really understand black people and it does not matter how many degrees they have. I was physically trying to keep up the tempo of the place. It was mentally difficult to cope with the strain of trying to make ends meet financially and meeting the needs of the Aboriginal people in the best possible manner. And putting up with some of the people who were on the executive was the biggest burden of all. It was good experience, but I would not go through it again. It was just like my university career. I survived, but thought, 'Well, I won't go through that again.'

We had it very hard there. I suppose the only thing that kept me going was the fact that I played soccer and the recreation refreshed me, and that in Aboriginal affairs the Aboriginal people were responding to our efforts.

I met a lot of Aboriginal people and got to know the situation at the grass roots level. I made a point of meeting as many Aboriginal people as I possibly could, no matter who they were, and I began to know whole families scattered across the State. I always tried to see that the service we provided at the Foundation was of a very humble kind that maintained the personal dignity of the people. We did not stand over them in any way.

We had to maintain a good relationship with the people at all times. We were not there to push them around. Even if they were the most desperate welfare cases written off by other agencies, we had to give them what help we possibly could. Some seemingly helpless individuals came back time after time but we always waited and hoped that such a person might eventually do the right thing by himself. Our motto was that the Foundation's work was not for our benefit but for their benefit. We were the servants of the people.

Naturally we got accused by the executive of being exploited by cunning Aborigines but that really did not matter because I think that what we were doing was right.

The fifty percent of the executive who did make a valuable contribution were fascinating personalities and were very good people. I suppose some of the other fifty percent were good people too, but they were out of step with the times.

One white person, the late Mrs Myrtle Cox, was tremendous. Mrs Cox, Ted Noffs and Professor Geddes and I created the Foundation and Mrs Cox brought us all together. She rang Ted and said, 'Look, you've got to contact Charles Perkins.' This was only a few days after I arrived in Sydney from Adelaide to play soccer. I think she saw my photo in the paper and told Ted to speak to me. She brought us together.

She said to me, 'You must speak to Ted Noffs. Mind you, he's a real radical and has some funny ideas. He's a real dynamo and a very interesting person to talk to.'

I said, 'I'll probably get around to meeting him I suppose some time.'

I think the important fact that disturbed Ted Noffs and me in those days, even though I was still at university, was that splinter groups were all over the place and we both felt that there needed to be some central organization. We thought that the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs would be it. We asked Alderman Harry Jensen, then the Lord Mayor of Sydney, to call a meeting. He was the first president, Ted Noffs the first chairman and I was the vice-chairman along with another Aboriginal, Ken Brindle. Professor

Geddes of the Department of Anthropology at Sydney University chaired the first meeting.

I had my suspicions about Myrtle Cox for the first six months. She was so enthusiastic about Aboriginal people. White people are just not like that, generally. It was so uncommon at that time to find enthusiastic white people feeling so good towards Aboriginal people, wanting them to do things by themselves and find their self-dignity. However she was a good person and no history of the emergence of the Aboriginal cause in the sixties and seventies would be complete without reference to her. Right to the very end she was terrific and she was one of the people who built up the Foundation. She will always be appreciated by Aborigines who, even though they have forgotten her name, will always remember her efforts and will always remember her face. Her memory will live on. She collapsed and died at the Foundation, working as usual for Aboriginal people without payment or want of recognition.

I had my difficult times with her too. We had some good arguments which I think we both appreciated. We educated each other. She was not a do-gooder. She would stand up to me on some issues.

At that time I was doing a lot of public speaking and was doing things along with Ted Noffs and other people like us. We were labelled as the two biggest Communists in Sydney. Everytime we were on television it was 'There are those Commos running Aboriginal affairs.'

People like Prof. Geddes played a prominent part in the basic organization that finally established the Foundation.

Naturally, some people disliked me intensely and felt that I was rocking the boat and making too much of an issue of Aboriginal affairs. The old 'chip on the shoulder' criticism was now almost a public attitude towards me.

On one occasion someone wanted to get rid of me and they rang the Foundation and said that a bomb had been planted in the building. I was on my way into the Foundation building in George Street and when I arrived everybody was rushing out on to the footpath, including Mrs Cox. People were hurrying all over the

place. The bomb was going to kill us all, someone yelled. This was going to be the end of Perkins and his gang!

Mrs Cox was terribly upset, nearly hysterical. The police searched the place and could not find anything.

After that sensation I was called before the committee. They asked me to tone down my speaking: 'Don't be so militant, don't upset people,' they said. 'Try to be nice to people in terms of what should be done for Aborigines. You are not the spokesman or the policy-maker for the Foundation.' They asked would I in future refrain from saying anything that would reflect upon the Foundation. (Ted Noffs had earlier resigned the chairmanship because of the same restrictions and other commitments.)

I had numerous speeches made to me on this sort of theme. They were not very happy times after this. People used to bombard me. They would say to me, 'You are going too fast, saying too many things and upsetting good people!' But I did not think we were upsetting enough people, let alone the good people! We had many great battles in the executive committee.

Executive members would say, 'Charles, the trouble with you is that you are too emotional. You show too much feeling about Aboriginal affairs. You must try to be more objective!'

It has always been the white person's claim that Aborigines 'should be more objective'. But if you say something about their families, their sisters, their daughters or their sons or brothers, they become very, very emotional immediately. To me Aboriginal affairs is an emotional issue. There is no crime in this. I am talking about my brothers and sisters, my mother, my uncles and aunties. When people start denigrating Aborigines they are denigrating my family.

I think a bit of sentimentality is badly needed. There is too much objectivity, there are too many facts and statistics in the world today. You can just about justify mass-murder with statistics. The poor individual who has no resources goes down the drain.

They accused me of having this emotional element in my make-up. I appreciated the fact that I did have it. It is something that a lot of white people lack, this feeling for each other as human beings. Emotion often stimulates good feeling, and cold decision

making in a rational manner does not necessarily. People are the important thing.

Mrs Cox and Professor Geddes were the people who came out of all this with flying colours. Sydney's Lord Mayor after Jensen, John Armstrong, who became the Australian High Commissioner to London, was the president of the Foundation for quite some time and was good. A strong man who knew what he was talking about and a friendly bloke. He was a great help.

There was Alderman Jensen himself, the former Lord Mayor of Sydney who kicked the Foundation off. He was a person you could go to and discuss Aboriginal affairs with and probably one of the few intelligent Labor people about in a position of importance at that time. He got to the top because he was an intelligent Labor man. Some of the other Labor men were just lacking in imagination and initiative. They were ultra-conservative. It is much the same today.

I sometimes think there is not much difference in some aspects between the Liberal-Country Party and the Labor Party. You find a certain proportion of Fascists amongst each of them, as you do in any other party. Paternalists are found in either party also. Politics is full of stupid people from all parties.

I was ordered out of several executive meetings and told to stand in the passageway until I was called. That was not an uncommon thing at all. And when I rose to speak I was often told to sit down and speak only when I was asked to. Despite the fact that I had created the Foundation along with Ted Noffs, I was told to remember that I was a mere employee of the Foundation. People who had never seen tribal or rural Aborigines in their lives were sitting in judgement on me and would make these comments. The only Aborigines they had ever met were the ones on the postage stamps and that was as far as it went.

There was one Jew on the executive who I thought, being a Jew, should have understood the Aboriginal question. He was the person who persisted in accusing me of being too emotional. On one occasion particularly, I remember we brought up the Jewish question when someone was being discriminatory against Jews in Sydney. He was absolutely livid with rage. He was uncontrollable.

He could not behave himself. He would not shut up. He would not sit down. He was screaming and yelling at the top of his voice. He was very, very emotional at that time and not objective at all. This is how it was with others too.

We are all very much the same I suppose, when you touch a sore point, things which concern us deeply.

But I was becoming tired of the constant struggle at the Foundation. Not so much helping Aboriginal people but the continual battles with the executive committee and the pressure of raising sufficient funds to continue our vital work. Shortly I would be joining the new Office of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra. Between jobs, Eileen and I travelled overseas for about three months. That is a separate story. My dominating obsession at the time was my disappointment with the Foundation. I had played my part, served my time and now I needed to get into new areas of activity.