

Chapter 4

THE LEAGUE'S FORMATIVE YEARS

The Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (VAAL), like any not-for-profit organisation, faced a massive task to become established and ultimately successful. There was no guarantee that the temporary 'Save the Aborigines Committee', which emerged from the Warburton Ranges controversy in early 1957, would experience a successful transition into a functioning, permanent organisation. Its future could not be known at the time, and was by no means evident in February 1957, as the first halting steps were taken to form the League. How does a fledging organisation overcome that first year or so of operation and survive? First, it must have a mission relevant for its times. However, this is just the beginning. For the League, there were four key elements to its survival: a strong leadership, an effective organisational structure, dedicated volunteers, and effective communication within and outside the organisation.

Three years after it began, in April 1960, the League articulated its mission statement, which covered all Aboriginal people, in five key principles: equal citizenship rights; an adequate standard of living to provide food, clothing and health care of the same quality other Australians had access to; equal pay for equal work and equal industrial protection; education for detribalised Aboriginal people to be free and equal; and all remaining reserves to be retained for individual or communal ownership.¹ This policy was reprinted in each issue of the League's publication *Smoke Signals*, affirming the principles of equality that underpinned the assimilation policy, a view widely supported in the Australian community by the 1960s.

However, the fifth principle worked against the government's assimilation policy. Indeed, in October 1959 the League's Management Committee declared itself unsympathetic to the policy and issued a statement supporting integration: 'For integration to take place Aboriginal groups must have the

opportunity to establish themselves wherever practicable as socially and economically independent and self-reliant people.’ However, the League remained flexible, adding: ‘On the other hand where individuals and families desire to be totally identified with the white community, they too should be assisted to that end.’² Over time, the League’s policy towards assimilation changed and its views evolved from advancement to self-management, which will be discussed in later chapters.

The League’s leadership: Nicholls and Davey

The VAAL began its life with possibly the strongest leadership team imaginable — or at least available in Melbourne at the time. Its president Gordon Bryant and vice president Doris Blackburn were talented, passionate people, who believed that black and white could work together for Aboriginal advancement. But the success of the League lay more with Doug Nicholls and Stan Davey.

Nicholls had assumed a high public profile through his football prowess, his advocacy for Aboriginal people, his reconciling message and his work at Gore Street Church. By the 1950s he had penetrated the mainstream of Victorian society, which enabled him to make tough statements and be applauded for them. Alick Jackomos remarked that ‘Doug Nicholls had access to the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and the State Premiers’.³ Nicholls was consulted by the police on a daily basis when welfare issues or legal matters arose concerning Aboriginal people. In June 1957 he was awarded a Member of the British Empire (MBE) in the Queen’s birthday honours, no doubt largely for his humanitarian role in the Warburton Ranges controversy. Of his award Nicholls commented: ‘this will do much to lift the status of my people in the eyes of the world.’⁴ Other honours followed. In 1962 he became Victorian ‘Father of the Year’; he became the first Aboriginal Justice of the Peace (JP) in 1963; and he was elevated to an Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1968. In 1972 he was given a knighthood, ‘for services to the advancement of Aboriginal people’.⁵

Nicholls’ footballing background along with his cooperative approach were vital in his reception by whites, but so too was his status as a pastor. This was despite his denomination being the less socially prominent Church of Christ that formed less than 0.5 per cent of the Australian population.

The Church of Christ had developed in America as part of the 'Second Great Awakening' from 1790 to 1870. A movement to end separate creeds and restore the Christian Church to the simplicity of its first century, its leaders, Alexander Campbell of the 'Disciples of Christ' and Barton W Stone of the 'Christians', unified with a handshake in Kentucky in 1831. Their ideas spread to Australia in the late nineteenth-century, but mostly via Britain.

Followers believed in primitive Christianity, marked by a strong belief in weekly communion, the literalness of the Bible as God's word, and an emphasis on the New Testament. Salvation through Jesus Christ as saviour was for thinking adults by faith, repentance and confession, not through good works. It was confirmed by adult baptism by way of total immersion in water. The churches not only attracted fundamentalist evangelicals, but those who were fiercely independent types, befitting the congregational nature of the first century of Christianity. Often called 'Church of Christ', the real name — Churches of Christ — revealed a belief in local autonomy and freedom. The denomination was really a loose confederation of small congregations, each governed autonomously by male elders.⁶

Having met through the Church of Christ in 1953, the lives of Nicholls and Davey became deeply entwined, based on their mutual enthusiasm for a Christ-centred religion and a belief in social justice. Davey's early life and motivations were revealed in six remarkable interviews conducted with Francis Good in 1986.⁷ Davey was born in Cottesloe, Perth, in 1922. His family were Church of Christ. After his baptism at fourteen, he became serious about his faith, being attracted to the sense of 'law and orderliness' of Christianity, and the 'sense of belonging' and community which permeated its practice. He became involved with the Oxford Group at the Perth Modern School, where he once debated pacifism and was allocated to the case 'in favour'. The debate went on for days; after delving into scripture and other arguments, young Davey convinced others, and himself, this was the correct course. He was rather a self-righteous young man, once tackling the school's principal on why Melbourne Cup sweeps were allowed at school!

The Oxford Group, which practised personal spirituality, mediation and Bible reading, believed in four absolutes: absolute honesty, love, unselfishness and purity. Davey was attracted to something beyond himself — an otherness — which then centred on 'my following of Jesus Christ'. Over fifty

years that description of otherness shifted, but Davey never lost the sense that 'beyond my life, beyond the lives of other people, there's this otherness that is the final arbiter, the final power of life. And I see that as one of compassion, of love, and of justice.' These principles explained his later deep energy for social activism.

Davey became a trainee teacher, worked in his father's newsagency, and began at university before the outbreak of the Second World War. Because of his pacifism, but due to his desire not to embarrass his family, he enlisted in an ambulance unit, worked as batman to the Church of Christ Chaplain in the 16th Battalion, then trained as a radio mechanic, being posted to North Queensland. While training in Melbourne, Davey visited the College of the Bible in Glen Iris — a Church of Christ theological college — and determined to go there after the war. Davey studied at the college for three years under the guidance of Principal Williams, from whom he developed a more liberal view of the Bible than most in the Church of Christ shared. His best undergraduate work on ecumenicalism — the spirit of cooperation across Christianity — gained him a prize. His thinking under Principal Williams' guidance shifted. Especially, he rejected a narrow Christian outlook and the literalness of the Bible: 'He [Williams] placed the scriptures in a historical setting, and gave me freedom to start looking at it for what it produced, rather than for believing every word that was written, was written by the hand of God.'

Davey took a position as the first Church of Christ Youth Director and part-time preacher for two years. He introduced folk dancing to youth events in churches that often rejected church music, and certainly dancing. He discovered he 'had confidence in working with people. I always felt I could pull people together. I could communicate. And I suppose there was a certain sense of power, in that you see people responding.' He married Joan Williams, the daughter of his college principal, and recommenced his pre-war Arts degree at the University of Western Australia, before accepting a call to the Ivanhoe Church of Christ in Melbourne.

Nicholls quickly educated his new friend Davey. The Church of Christ Aboriginal Committee supported a ministry at Mooroopna run by Pastor Eddy Atkinson, Nicholls' uncle, from 1946 until his death in 1953. Nicholls then took over as pastor, travelling up from Melbourne for services. Nicholls took Davey to meet his Yorta Yorta kin who mostly camped in makeshift accommodation on the river bank at Daish's paddock, surviving on fruit

picking and cannery work. Davey recalled: 'I remember the first trip I ever made up there with Doug was in a little black Morris Minor. And I felt quite strange. I was the only white person in the car. And it was quite an adventure. The first time I'd been just with Aboriginal people.' Davey confessed: 'I really didn't know a great deal about Aborigines at that stage.'⁸

Davey's education continued in 1955 when Don McLeod, who had assisted Aboriginal people in the successful Pilbara pastoral strike (1946–49),⁹ visited Victoria. Davey toured central Victoria with McLeod, meeting Aboriginal people. It was an odd mix: Christian man and wild radical from the west. The trip had a profound effect on Davey and the two remained in contact for the rest of their lives. However, they did not hit it off at first as McLeod was antagonistic to Davey's church connections, having seen missionaries in action in Western Australia. Davey recalled: 'we argued and fought all the way. Don had a Marxist approach — a Marxist philosophy' and admitted to having been a member of the Communist Party for a short time. But we had a 'marvellous time' despite the arguments, because 'we always came out at the same end about our concern for the justice and the right for people to be their own people, and to retain their culture'.¹⁰

Davey soon became the most important member of the League's executive. Jan Richardson, Davey's second wife, recalled his boundless energy, which allowed him to work far into the night. He was a quiet man and 'there were only two topics he could talk on and once you got him started he couldn't stop on either of them, one was religion and the other was Aborigines'.¹¹ In the late 1950s Davey resigned as minister of the Ivanhoe Church of Christ, as he found he was doing little church work and a great deal for the League as full-time, unpaid secretary. He became a paid secretary for a while, but his minimal income with a young family led him to teacher training and in 1961 he became a teacher at Bayswater High School. Pat Bryant, JA Davidson and then Elizabeth Edmonds (nee Cafarella) succeeded Davey as secretary but he remained on the executive. Cafarella recalled: 'if I had any queries of any kind I used to ring Stan, and he *made* himself so available, either at lunchtime or recess.'¹²

Nicholls and Davey had other roles, including a federal organisation. A year after the creation of the League, they helped establish a federal body made up of the various non-religious, non-government state bodies working in Aboriginal affairs. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines