

1982, Shoalhaven Mayor burns the *Aboriginal Flag*

Eleven or so years after the *Aboriginal Flag*'s first public outing in Adelaide, the Mayor of Shoalhaven council in New South Wales, Alderman Greg Watson, with the media support and assistance of Carl Egan, the proprietor of the *Shoalhaven and Nowra News*, burnt the *Aboriginal Flag* on National Aboriginal Day on 9 July 1982. Three days before these events, Mayor Watson was reported in the *Shoalhaven and Nowra News*, stating:

Any request by the Aboriginal community to fly their flag at the city administration centre would be refused. Council has not yet been asked but I have no intention of allowing it to be flown in front of any council building.

(Kondos, 1982 p. 14)

A number of issues relating to race relations and land rights foregrounded these events. At a local level, the Terringa Tribal Council were petitioning for the creation of an 'Aboriginal place' on Crookhaven Head which would involve the transferral of Crown land (formerly a community sports ground) to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Kondos, 1982. See Appendix). At a state level, the Wran Labor government was introducing the 1983 *Lands Rights Act* to the state parliament, which was causing anxiety among non-Aboriginal land owners across the state of New South Wales (Kondos, 1982. See Appendix). Finally, the Council for Aboriginal Unity had initiated a state-wide campaign that petitioned state councils to fly the *Aboriginal Flag* on National Aborigines day (Enright, 1982). In defiance of the Mayor's unilateral statement Bruce Walker, a council ranger assisted local Aboriginal representative Mr Jerry Moore, in a short flag raising ceremony. In defence of his actions, the Mayor was later to write to the Hon. A.J. Grassby, Commissioner for Community Relations on 20 July 1982:

Mr. Commissioner, I said at the time and have repeated on numerous occasions, we are all equal whether black or white as citizens of Australia as such have only one national flag.

(Kondos, 1982. See Appendix)

These events, and the ensuing controversy, were to become the subject of a first-year class study and publication produced by the Race Relations research class led by Dr Alex Kondos at the School of Sociology, UNSW. Entitled *The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven (NSW) 1982*, this paper is the only academic study the author has been able to source that concerns itself with issues relating to the *Aboriginal Flag* (Kondos, 1982). The University of New South Wales School of Sociology study involved an extensive ‘systematic stratified random sampling’ survey in which 10 per cent of the Shoalhaven and Nowra community were sent a one-page questionnaire containing six questions and four demographic questions. A high proportion of the questionnaires (44.2 per cent), representing the views of 618 local people, were completed and returned (the average response rate for similar surveys at the time of the survey was 25 per cent.) The ‘scientific’ methodology of the survey offers a relatively objective, historic record of community attitudes towards the flag and Indigenous affairs in New South Wales during the early 1980s (Figure 6.1). It is important to note that the survey questions did not reference concurrent local and state issues relating to Indigenous affairs. In addition to the survey, the questionnaire made space for ‘general comments’, which nearly all of the respondents used to express their opinions. These comments reveal that many members of Shoalhaven and Nowra community held strong, divergent opinions on the Mayor’s decision to burn the *Aboriginal Flag*:

‘Mr Watson was quite right to do what he did. A PROUD MAN OUR MAYOR’.

(Male, 35–49, employed)

(Kondos, 1982 p.16)

‘Next time, I’ll give him a hand’.

(Male, 50–64, employed)

(Kondos, 1982 p.17)

‘While I think the flag burning was a foolish action, I agree with the mayor’s views on land rights’.

(Female, 35–49, employed).

(Kondos, 1982 p.17)

‘Like the Mayor of Shoalhaven, I agree with the burning of all rubbish.’

(Female, 25–34, employed). (Kondos, 1982 p.1)

‘Flag burning incident apparently resulted after a meeting between a well known press agent in Nowra and the Mayor. The media rep was present at the time’.

(Female, 25–34, unemployed teacher). (Kondos, 1982 p.5)

‘I think it’s a bloody disgrace that anyone should do such an act and must be regarded a racist’.

(Male 50-64, pallet carpenter, unemployed). (Kondos, 1982 p.17)

‘A fascist act at any time cannot be condoned. We are a multi-racial nation, each ethnic group with our own identity.’

(Male, 50-64, labourer). (Kondos, 1982 p.18)

SURVEY RESULTS

I. Overall Pattern of Responses:

Before we present a detailed analysis of the data (see Section II below), it is necessary to examine the overall pattern of the responses that 618 people (44.2% of our sample) made in answering the six questions centering on the 'flag-burning' incident:

QUESTION 1

How do you feel about the Mayor of Shoalhaven's action in burning the Aboriginal flag on National Aboriginal Day?

Strongly disapprove	26.9		
Disapprove	17.7		44.8
Neutral	13.0		
Approve	19.2		42.2
Strongly approve	23.2		

QUESTION 2

How would you describe the Mayor's action of burning the flag?

Within the scope of the Mayor's duties	36.3		
Outside the scope of the Mayor's duties	54.0		
No opinion	9.7		
			100.0

QUESTION 3

Should Aborigines be allowed to fly their flag on National Aboriginal Day?

Yes	56.4		
No	39.4		
No opinion ^c	4.2		
			100.0

QUESTION 4

How do you view relations between Aborigines and the rest of the community in Shoalhaven district?

Very good ^f	6.7		
Good	20.9		27.6
Fair	38.5		
Poor	20.3		34.0
Very poor	13.7		

QUESTION 5

What effect do you think the flag burning incident has had on relations between Aborigines and the rest of the Shoalhaven community?

Positive	19.9		
Negative	35.2		
No Effect	44.9		
			100.0

QUESTION 6

Would you agree to a public inquiry into the Mayor's actions?

Yes	33.3		
No	62.3		
No opinion	4.4		
			100.0

Figure 6.1: UNSW School of Sociology, Race Relations Research class study and publication (led by Dr Alex Kondos). *The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven* survey results. 1983.

Racist sentiments like those documented in the survey were not confined to the Shoalhaven district of New South Wales. In response to Aboriginal protests in regard to the 1982 Commonwealth games in Brisbane, the then Queensland Minister for Aboriginal and Islander Affairs told radio New Zealand that Aboriginal people ‘didn’t’ know what freehold title was, that they drank a lot, ate goannas, fish and birds, and that no one liked them very much’ (Watson, 1988 p. 39).

The study *The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven* reveals much about social attitudes relating to both the flag and the concerns of Aboriginal people across Australia in the early 1980s. A few key points can be deduced from the study. A significant proportion of the Shoalhaven community held racist views. This is one of the findings listed in the publications ‘Summary and Conclusions’. The *Aboriginal Flag* was perceived as an affirmation of multicultural ideals. A number of comments in the survey make reference to the flag in relation to Australian multicultural identity. The *Aboriginal Flag*, as a symbol of Indigenous cultural identity, was perceived as a threat to the culture and policies of assimilation. The premise underlying the Mayor’s statement “we are all equal whether black or white as citizens of Australia as such have only one national flag” is an expression of belief in Anglo-Celtic ethnocentric Australian society; one which historically pursued policies of assimilation. Finally, land rights activism and the *Aboriginal Flag* were linked in the public’s consciousness. Flying the flag on National Aborigines Day in front of the community’s council chambers was linked to Indigenous claims and assertions of land rights such as Crookhaven Head land claim.

As documented in the study, Ms Carmel Niland, President of the Anti-Discrimination Board in 1982, in response to the actions and statements of mayor Watson, refuted the claim that flying the *Aboriginal Flag* ‘Showed disrespect for the Australian flag which was flying on an adjacent pole’ (Kondos, 1982 p. 7). Ms Niland asserted that: ‘Fifty-eight Shires and councils in this state were proud to fly the flag on National Aborigines Day’ (Kondos, 1982 p.7). In 1982, according to the 2014 New South Wales Department of Local Governments, there were 177 shires and councils across New South Wales. Less than a third had a policy of supporting National Aborigines Day, by flying the *Aboriginal Flag*. The controversy in Shoalhaven revolved around the temporary raising of the *Aboriginal Flag* on a single day of the year, National Aborigines Day. In Shoalhaven the main protagonist, indeed, the person acting most like an activist was Mayor Watson, the burning of the flag has all

the hallmarks of an activist media stunt. By pre-empting any request to raise the flag, the mayor provoked members of the Aboriginal community into action. Jerry Moore decided to fly the *Aboriginal Flag* after reading the Mayor's statement in the Shoalhaven and Nowra News (Kondos, 1982 p. 8). Moore's actions are best understood as reactive rather than proactive. The Shoalhaven case study reveals that the idea of the *Aboriginal Flag* was understood by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community to be very powerful. The *Aboriginal Flag*, for the entire community represented a number of controversial issues: sovereign Aboriginal culture and identity, local and state-wide Aboriginal land rights, and defiance of the culture and policies of assimilation and multiculturalism.

The strength of the *Aboriginal Flag's* design, its ability to signify and embody complex issues makes it a powerful vehicle for activism. Ironically, in Shoalhaven, Mayor Watson kicked an own goal; his activism further raised the profile of the *Aboriginal Flag* and the issues it represents on the national stage; in a sense, the flag successfully goaded Mayor Watson into revealing the ugly face and flawed logic of racist attitudes towards Aboriginal people in Australia. In Shoalhaven, in the early 1980s, however, there is no quantifiable evidence that attitudes relating to race relations changed. A year after the flag burning incident, when the survey was held, 42.2 per cent of the population 'approved' or 'strongly approved' the Mayor's action of burning the flag, 56.4 per cent thought that Aborigines should be allowed to fly their flag on National Aborigines day, 44.9 per cent believed that the flag burning incident had 'No effect', and a further 35.2 per cent believed it had a 'Negative effect' on race relations in the community (Kondos, 1982 p. 14). In the absence of either earlier or subsequent surveys, the 1982 survey simply reveals the status of the flag and attitudes towards Aboriginal people and their issues in the early 1980s.

How the *Aboriginal Flag* came to be accepted and even celebrated, is best explored and understood through the events of the 1994 Commonwealth games. Twenty-three years after the flag's conception and 12 years after Mayor Watson's flag burning stunt, a young gold medal winning Aboriginal athlete would change Australia's perception of the *Aboriginal Flag*; and in doing so, contribute significantly to change in mainstream attitudes towards Aboriginal people, their social and political concerns and multiculturalism in Australia. This argument is supported by Harold Thomas. In an interview with *Crux Australis* journal, he stated that the flag has contributed to 'a shift to Australians being more accepting of different people'

(Thomas, 2009 p. 39). Preceding the 1994 Commonwealth games, the fault lines of race relations were brought into sharper national focus by the highly successful Aboriginal protests of the 1988 bicentenary celebrations.

The 1988 bicentenary celebrations

The period 1950–70 witnessed the most intense enforcement of assimilation in Australia's history, a period during which, concurrently, Australian and global race relations were undergoing dramatic transformational change in response to the great global social upheavals of the period: decolonisation and civil rights. The pendulum swung, assimilation became a dirty word; it gave way to the more accommodating idea of multiculturalism. In March 1977, the Hon. Ian Viner, Federal Liberal Minister for Aboriginal affairs gave a speech titled *Aboriginals in Multi-Cultural Australia* which reveals how dramatically the Liberal Country Party policy had shifted in just a few short years since McMahon's ill advised speech in 1972. In his speech, given in one of Australia's more conservative states, Western Australia, Viner states that assimilation was based on a 'false' assumption that to forge a nation everyone' had to conform to a 'uniform straightjacket in the interests of maintaining our British cultural identity'. He goes on to say that:

assimilation did not work because it was an imposed solution. More than that, it was seen to deny to people their heritage, the language and customs that gave them spiritual security and social identity.

(The Hon. Ian Viner, 1977)

If there were Indigenous Australians in the audience, their enthusiasm for Viner's multicultural vision for Australia might have been tempered and conditional. Indigenous scholar, author and artist Sally Morgan (winner of the 1987 Australian Human Rights Award for Literature for her bestselling book *My Place*) expresses a commonly held view among Indigenous Australians:

There has to be a separate role for the first nations people of any country. I am for multiculturalism but my personal view is that when a country, regardless of what country it is, has an indigenous population then those indigenous people