

The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study of Racism in Shoalhaven

SECTION 1: PEOPLE IN QUESTIONS :

Male Female

8. What is your age group ? 18-24 25-34 35-49 50-64 65 plus

9. Are you working, unemployed or retired ? Working Unemployed Retired

10. What is your occupation ? (If retired or unemployed please give your previous occupation).

Would you like to make any comments ? LIKE THE MAYOR OF SHOALHAVEN I AGREE WITH THE BURNING OF ALL RUBBISH.

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The Burning of the Aboriginal Flag: A Study
of Racism in Shoalhaven

by

The Race Relations Research Class,
School of Sociology, University of New South Wales,
1982

RACE RELATIONS
Andriadis et al

THE BURNING OF THE ABORIGI-
NAL FLAG, A study of racism

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h, W. Crockford, M. Davis
Framp, A. Gorman, L. Hilton,
Taylor, J. Tighe.

A. Kondos

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- *Our thanks also to Mr. Keith Berg of the South Coast Register for his assistance in providing background of a local nature.
- *Our special thanks to the 618 citizens of Shoalhaven Shire who provided the data on which this report is based.

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MAYOR BURNS BLACK FLAG

Strong stand by civic leader

An Aboriginal flag, similar to one which was illegally flown from a Shoalhaven City Council flagpole, was reduced to ashes by the Mayor, Ald. Greg Watson, on Friday.

Ald. Watson burnt the red, yellow and black flag outside the City Administrative Centre.

Officers from the South Coast Aboriginal Legal Service had earlier on Friday morning hoisted an Aboriginal flag, to protest at council's refusal to do so, in recognition of National Aboriginal Day.

"Disrespect" claim

"Those involved in raising the flag did not have the courtesy nor the intestinal fortitude to ask permission to do so," Ald. Watson said.

"It would have given me great pleasure to remove the flag from the pole while they were there as they showed disrespect for the Australian flag which was flying on an adjacent pole," he added.

The men from the legal service who were involved in the protest were field officer, Mr. Gerry Moore, office manager, Mr. Edward Blaxome and Aboriginal Legal Service solicitor Mr. Irving Wallach.

Reading from a prepared statement, Mr. Moore said that the Shoalhaven City Council had displayed the Aboriginal flag on Friday.

that the Aboriginal flag be flown last Friday. Council's City Rangers, one of them off duty, were called in to handle the situation.

ABUSIVE

They arrived after the flag had been raised to be met by abuse by one of the legal aid officers.

One of the rangers, Mr. Bruce Waller, asked Mr. Gerry Moore if he had received permission to fly the flag.

"Why do I need permission? It is a public flagpole," Mr. Moore said.

"It is National Aboriginal Day and that is why I put the flag there," he added.

"You can just sit there like a little dog and wait for the Mayor to come and pull it down," he added.

At the time, the Mayor, Ald. Watson, was

"The Shoalhaven & Nowra News." Mr. Carl Egan, asked Mr. Moore to show restraint, saying his abuse of Mr. Waller was "extremely offensive".

Mr. Waller replied by saying that he could not understand Mr. Moore's attitude.

"When you are in trouble with your people at South Nowra I do not hesitate to come to your aid on request," he said.

Mr. Moore refused a second request to lower the flag.

POLICE ORDER

The flag was finally removed by rangers only after the activists had refused to do so after being told by Inspector Bill Parker and Sgt. Neville Whelan of Nowra Police.

Watson appeared on the scene and proceeded to burn a replica of the Aboriginal flag.

"The revolutionary Aboriginal flag has no more right to be flown from a council flagpole than that which represents the revolutionary Aboriginal flag in Australia," Ald. Watson said.

"After being challenged by the Aboriginals to do so, I do not hesitate to do so," the Mayor said. "I am convinced that the flying of this flag is a prepared to burn it if it meant that to get the message across," he added.

"This action in flying the flag was not a challenge to the Australian flag, but a challenge to the Australian flag," he added.



**More photos . . .
Pages 3,
4 and 5**

INTRODUCTION

"Any request by the Aboriginal community to fly their flag at the city administrative 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."

(Shoalhaven City Mayor, Alderman Greg Watson, "The Shoalhaven & Nowra News", 7.7.82.)

"Refusing to fly the flag would have been provocative; but actually burning it was a racist Ku Klux Klan like action showing utter contempt for the goals of the Aboriginal people."

(Ms. Carmel Niland, President, Anti-Discrimination Board, Press Release, 20.7.82)

"I think it's the one and only positive step the Mayor has ever taken."

(Female respondent, 25-34, unemployed typist)

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

(Male respondent, 50-64, labourer)

"I feel that the Mayor was unfortunately set up and was provoked into this action which was hasty and ill-considered."

(Male respondent, 50-64, retired administrative officer)

On Friday, 9th July, National Aboriginal Day, the Mayor of Shoalhaven, Alderman Greg Watson, in an extremely dramatic and provocative action, reduced a replica of the red, yellow and black Aboriginal flag to ashes. The media coverage and involvement in this event transformed the earlier, officially unsanctioned raising of the Aboriginal flag from a local into a national incident.

The nationwide outcry against this action, culminating in the call for an official public inquiry, prompted the Race Relations Research class in the School of Sociology to conduct its social research programme into the issues associated with these events.

Under the guidance of course director Dr. Alex Kondos, the research group sought to assess:

- 1) the attitudes of the Shoalhaven residents towards the flag burning;
- 2) their opinion of the Mayor's involvement;
- 3) whether they thought Aborigines should be allowed to fly their flag;
- 4) how they viewed black/white relations in their community;
- 5) whether the incident was perceived as having had an effect on those relations;
- 6) the degree of support for a public inquiry into the Mayor's role in the incident.

The programme furthermore had to be conducted within a framework satisfying academic expectations of social research.

Methodology

A short, one page questionnaire was constructed containing the six key questions and four demographic questions. (Appendix 'A'). A systematic stratified random sampling was then employed, drawing on two electoral subdivisions in the Shoalhaven Shire: Nowra and Shoalhaven. A 10% random sample was drawn by the simple expedient of taking every 10th name from the roll. The questionnaire was mailed in two waves, with two weeks intervening. The first wave was directed to Shoalhaven subdivision. The original mailings numbered 1,500. Of these 103 were returned "address unknown", giving a sample of 1,397. 618 completed questionnaires were returned (44.2%). Returned questionnaires were coded for computer analysis using the SPSS 80 package.

Careful comparison was then made of the demographic characteristics of the 618 respondents against 1982 census data of Shoalhaven Shire supplied by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

| | <u>1982 census</u> | <u>Respondents</u> |
|-------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | % | % |
| <u>Sex</u> | | |
| Male | 50.5 | 50.7 |
| Female | 49.5 | 49.3 |
| <u>Age*</u> | | |
| 18-24 | 13.0 | 7.0 |
| 25-34 | 24.0 | 21.0 |
| 35-49 | 20.0 | 26.0 |
| 50-64 | 25.0 | 28.0 |
| 65+ | 18.0 | 18.0 |

*The variation between sample and census in age distribution can be explained by two factors: the sample was drawn from the 1981 electoral roll and the census figures are for 1982; the census figures are for "entire" population, whereas the electoral rolls suffer a loss through people choosing not to enroll, especially amongst younger age groups

These figures show that there was no significant variation between the two sets of characteristics, and the analysis could proceed on the basis that a representative sample had been achieved.

The group was extremely encouraged by the high response rate of 44.2%. Normally, mail questionnaires can be expected to attract a much lower response (around 25%), however, the achieved rate allowed for generalisation of the results to the whole of Shoalhaven Shire.

Local press coverage of the incident was examined and a careful analysis was made of preceding and subsequent issues. We felt that given that there were three separate papers in the area they might be expected to give a fair reflection of community feeling. The following exposition of press involvement and coverage of the incident indicates that the media is not always accurate, objective or unbiased and is on occasions inflammatory and sensationalist. Indirectly this highlights the value and relevance of our own research which indicates, through the pages of this report, that the people of Shoalhaven and Nowra hold attitudes and opinions at variance with those ascribed to them in the press. This cannot be more perfectly illustrated than through a comparison between this survey and the 'survey' conducted by The Shoalhaven and Nowra News, outlined in this report.

The questionnaire allowed a small space for 'general comments' to be expressed by the respondents. It is significant of the depth of feeling in the community that nearly all respondents made use of this section, and, indeed, the entire back of the page to express themselves. Many enclosed news clippings and several appended extra pages to allow enough space for adequate exposition of their obviously strongly held opinions. For this reason, we have included a representative selection of these comments through the report.

Because of the previously noted variance between the results of our survey and the attitudes and opinions ascribed to the community by a section of the local media, the report begins with a study of media involvement.

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Mayor refuses to fly black flag

There will be no official recognition of the black flag by the Shoalhaven City Council on Friday.

FLAG-BURNING IS APPROVED

Mayor's action wins support in survey

By ALEC FIELD
A mayor who set fire to the Aboriginal whelming support...

LAND RIGHTS MOVE

Amendments should be made to the Australian Constitution to prevent Governments enacting legislation that would discriminate against all Australians on racial grounds.

The two aldermen will also frame a motion for next week's Local Government conference and bring it to the attention of Country...

The Mayor of the City of Shoalhaven, Alder Greg Watson said in this a Mayoral Minute adopted at Monday night's meeting.

ty Council's delenda should discuss the subject at the Local Government conferer. Goulburn next week.

He said this amendment should be achieved which

Aldermen Wat and the Deputy Mayor Alderman Paul Ea. have been authoris prepare a text for the Prim

Increase in aboriginal complaints

There has been a threefold increase of complaints to the council this year Aboriginal

and 6 per cent offered no opinion. Mr Watson yesterday said the result showed that the majority of Australians resent the quality of white people community.

Backlash

clear backlash government police Aboriginals claims that are to others.



Mr Watson

Flag survey to end soon

A survey to determine community attitudes to the burning of the Aboriginal flag. Ald. Gra...

Meeting next week Land claims shock

The community will be astounded by a report which is to be presented to the Aboriginal claims to a meeting on day night, munity spokesmen yesterday

burra-Orient Point Community Committee. Last year to with Aborigines.

"Neither, it appears will they be able to a representative," said. "But all other men of our community attend should

Land claims fight

Change of mind about petition

committee elected to oppose original land claims at Orient decided not to proceed with calling for a national constitutional change.

Land claims meeting all-rights petition

A petition calling on the Federal Government to conduct a referendum on the issue of equal rights for all is to be circulated over a wide area of Australia.

went to the meeting to hear the final report of a Citizens Committee which had been formed to negotiate with Aborigines on a land claim.

The Chairman of the committee, Mr. John Cheadle, told the meeting that all attempts to meet with the Aborigines, members of the so-called 'Jerringa' Tribe, had failed.

The meeting carried the motion by a large majority. Several people at the meeting supported the Aboriginal land claims.

"It appears that the land claims in the NATIO...

which would ensure equal rights for all. "Neither do we have the facilities for preparing and distributing such a petition," he said.

"We will do this until the matter is resolved to the satisfaction of the community as a whole," he said.

TILKSTEE'S "A petition has now been lodged with Shoalhaven City Council urging it to exercise its right as Trustee and to establish a Committee by Delegation to manage and control the reserve under Section 370a of the Local Government Act."

Mr. Antill said such a committee could investigate the availability of extending present facilities to include more fields, cricket grounds and amenities.

THE MEDIA

- Mr. Carl Egan proprietor of the Shoalhaven & Nowra News supplied a piece of waste material soaked in kero and urged Mayor Watson to set it on fire and show how strong a leader he was, to which the Mayor foolishly responded. The press took photos of the incident and of course it made headlines, and gave all the do-gooders an opportunity to come out of the woodwork and make a big deal out of it.
(Male, 35-49, landscape gardener)
- The whole incident was a set-up by the Nowra News who made up the replica! They (Nowra News) had at least 4 weeks of headlines. The Mayor was goaded into the burning and made an ass of himself.
(Male, 35-49, tradesman's assistant)
- I think both the Mayor and this small group of aborigines were used by a local newspaper who started all this and still is pushing it.
(Male, 35-49, labourer)
- Flag burning incident has apparently resulted after a meeting between a well known press agent in Nowra and the Mayor. The media rep. was present at the flag burning!
(Female, 25-34, unemployed teacher)
- I feel the local newspaper put it to him and gave him the matches.
(Female, 35-49, housewife)
- I think the Mayor has not much sense and was conned by Carl Egan, editor of the Nowra News.
(Male, 35-49, retired bank officer)
- Childish action - no mature thought given to the action or consequences. Influenced by coaxing of media and his personal publicity. Should such a man be Mayor? I don't think so. He has badly damaged aboriginal and white relations in Shoalhaven.
(Female, 18-24, unemployed)
- Media creating controversy to sell papers etc. does not reflect local people irrespective of colour or race we in Australia are all Australian.
(Male, 35-49, salesman)

-The whole incident was instigated by the local press and was a foolish thing for our Mayor to do but I agree Aborigines are supposed to be equal NOT different.

(Female, 50-64, clerk)

-Relations were good until Watson, Hatton MP and Nowra News split local community wide open by claiming Aborigines would be taking over their land.

(Male, 65+, retired construction inspector)

As is indicated by the above selection of comments, it was the expressed belief of many of the questionnaire respondents that the flag burning was not the spontaneous, irrational act of a provoked official, but was in fact premeditated and contrived with the co-operation of The Shoalhaven and Nowra News, whose owner and editor, Mr. Carl Egan, was on hand, accompanied by a camera team to record the events. Mr. Egan admitted on the ABC radio programme 'City Extra' that his presence was not coincidental: "I knew the burning was to take place" ('City Extra' 8.11.82). The Sydney Morning Herald (26.7.82) reported that it was in fact a 'representative' of the Shoalhaven and Nowra News who alerted the Mayor, Alderman Watson (who was in the shower at home) to the Aboriginal flag raising, and who also provided the lighter fluid and a replica of the flag for the Mayor to burn. However, when questioned by Margaret Throsby on 'City Extra', Mr. Egan did not deny that he was invited to the event by Mayor Watson - therefore it is not quite clear who invited whom.

Mr. John Hatton, MLA, in a letter to the Research Group (dated 11.10.82) echoes the suspicion that The Shoalhaven and Nowra News was actively involved in exploiting a particularly emotive issue. While Attorney-General Frank Walker said in Parliament:

"Alderman Watson and the newspaper - if I could call it that - seem determined to conspire to wring every drop of ill feeling from the matter."

(Hansard, 4.11.82, Appendix 'B')

Mr. Egan also appears to have been actively involved in a confrontation with Aboriginal Legal Service field officer Mr. Jerry Moore, who had refused to remove the Aboriginal flag from the Council's flagpole (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 14.7.82). The preceding events beg the question, was Mr. Egan present to report news or to manufacture it?

Alderman Watson's assertion that the flying of the Aboriginal flag "Showed disrespect for the Australian flag which was flying on an adjacent pole" (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 14.7.82) simply cannot be supported. Ms. Carmel Niland, President of the Anti-Discrimination Board, refutes this view when she says: "Fifty-eight shires and councils in this State were proud to fly the flag on National Aborigines Day" (Niland, Press Release, Anti-Discrimination Board, 20.7.82). Neither can it be sustained that this is "the revolutionary Aboriginal flag", (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News 14.7.82) as described by Alderman Watson. The Aboriginal people are not in opposition to the Government, their flag is a "symbol of people attempting to gain equality and basic human rights in a country which takes pride in the concept of equality and giving people a fair go". (Niland, Anti-Discrimination Board, 20.7.82).

Further statements by the Mayor were also extremely provocative in their implications:

"Those claiming National days should embark on civic projects such as cleaning of beer cans and empty flagons from city car parks and other public places."
(The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 14.7.82)

It can only be concluded from his actions that Alderman Watson wished to further inflame the situation, rather than defuse it by responsible official action.

Mayor Watson had perhaps foreshadowed his actions when he stated on 6.7.82 that any

"request by the Aboriginal community to fly their flag at the city administrative 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."
(The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 7.7.82)

The Mayor's subsequent actions were quite arbitrary and, says fellow Alderman Lance Sewell, were taken

"without consultation and acting off 'HIS OWN BAT' to the detriment of the Council and the community, he overstepped the mark."
(South Coast Register, 28.7.82)

The Mayor had indicated prior to the incident that he would be prepared to take down and burn any but the Australian flag if it were run up the flag pole (News Leader 12.7.82). Such insensitivity to Aboriginal feelings could not fail to lead to confrontation. Mr. Jerry Moore told the Sydney Morning Herald that it was after reading the above statement by the Mayor in the Shoalhaven and Nowra News that he decided to fly the flag (Sydney Morning Herald, 26.7.82).

In contrast to The Shoalhaven & Nowra News coverage of the incident, another Nowra newspaper, The News Leader, reported the flag raising incident on July 12th, two days before its rival, in a responsible and unsensational manner. Simply indicating that the flag had been run up, but had been removed, folded and respectfully handed back to the Aboriginal representative, Jerry Moore, by the council ranger, Bruce Waller (The News Leader, 12.7.82).

The News Leader's associate paper the South Coast Register reported on July 14th that "a potentially fiery situation was well handled by the Shoalhaven City's Chief Ranger, Bruce Waller" but added significantly:

"It was a pity that a section of the media should seek to denigrate Shoalhaven City and Australia for that matter by having Shoalhaven City Mayor Alderman Greg Watson, burn what was purported to be an Aboriginal flag"

adding "incidents which followed (his unscheduled arrival at the Council offices) were apparently designed for world consumption" and were in fact reproduced in a Hong Kong newspaper and throughout Australia (The South Coast Register, 14.7.82).

Two weeks after the flag burning, the Shoalhaven and Nowra News was still maintaining the unrest it had helped create, by indicating that the Mayor, rather than retreating from his stance, was in fact repeating his accusations that Aboriginals received preferential treatment.

"(H)e deplored the fact that Aboriginal people apart from other Australians of varying origins, were seen as 'something special' and were given privileged treatment without any type of reasonable justification."
(The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 21.7.82)

Mr. Egan also reflected this sentiment during his interview on 'City Extra', but was even more pointed in a statement to the Sydney Morning Herald when he said: "Did you know that if you marry a dark woman you can get a special housing loan". (Sydney Morning Herald, 26.7.82).

In contrast to the continuing sensationalism of The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, depicting on its front page an unrepentant Mayor Watson displaying what was purported to be supportive mail, The South Coast Register printed a letter from local member John Hatton. In it he condemns the burning of the flag and says that the picture of the Mayor "smiling down at the burning mock-up, filled him with abhorrence and shame as a citizen of this city and as a former President of the Council" (South Coast Register, 21.7.82). He went on to say that the other national groups, Italian, Greek, French and Irish, proud of their cultural heritage, celebrate their national days. He continued:

"Aborigines are a race with every right to celebrate their National Day, and demonstrate their pride in a national heritage going back at least 40,000 years."

(The South Coast Register, 21.7.82.)

It was also reported that Deputy Premier of NSW, Jack Ferguson refused to open the Shoalhaven Combined Progress Association conference, of which Mayor Watson is the president. He described the Mayor's action as "a provocative act which would contribute to racial tension in the Nowra area" (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 21.7.82). The Federal Liberal Member for Macarthur, Mr. Michael Baume, offered to take his place.

Belatedly, in its 'Page 7' comment, The Shoalhaven & Nowra News stated that the issue "has been distorted beyond all proportion". "The issue is not about racism at all, rather it is one of equality" (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 21.7.82). Therefore the emphasis had, less than subtly, shifted from one of overt racism to the more covert resentment associated with supposed preferential treatment and inequality. According to the scenario painted by Alderman Watson, editor Egan and The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, it is the Aboriginal who receives preferential treatment and the rest of the community who suffer from unequal opportunity.

It would appear the flying of the Aboriginal flag and its subsequent burning were the pretexts sought to highlight these allegations. This trend has continued, with a committee formed in Culburra during September to "press the Federal Government to ensure that there are equal land rights for Australian people, whatever their colour or creed" (South Coast Register, 29.9.82). The Committee's real objective appears to be the prevention of the granting of Aboriginal Land Rights (particularly in respect of the Crookhaven Heads sporting complex) though Mr. Mallard, a spokesperson for the community group presenting the report that preceded the forming of the committee, stated that the group was "non-racial, non-political and non-sectarian". (Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 22.9.82).

Mayor Watson makes no secret of his support for these sentiments, he is reported as saying in the Minutes adopted at the 11.10.82 Council meeting:

"Amendments should be made to the Australian Constitution to prevent governments enacting legislation that would discriminate against all Australians on racial grounds."

adding:

"grave concern has been expressed in the community at proposals of the State government to enact legislation to permit people of Aboriginal descent to lay claim to public and private properties."
(South Coast Register, 13.10.82)

Public disquiet on the Land Rights issue is not, perhaps, a racist reaction, but an indication of the lack of public awareness of the facts involved, the dearth of government information concerning the issue, government inaction exacerbated by the type of action taken by Mayor Watson, and the sensationalist nature of a section of the media's coverage of a sensitive issue.

Some of these points were raised in Parliament in September by Mr. Hatton, MLA. He said the "government must urgently clarify the question of Aboriginal Land Rights" (South Coast Register, 22.9.82).

Certainly this would appear to be the quickest and most efficient method by which the State Government might defuse and prevent the type of incident that took place in Shoalhaven, precluding misconstruction, rumour and speculation.

Not everyone necessarily concurs with this view. Shoalhaven Alderman Gordon Ravell, representing Council at the Local Government and Shires Association, called on the meeting "to request the State Government to delay the Aboriginal Land Rights Bill for at least six months" (Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 13.10.82).

However,

"the committee elected to oppose Aboriginal Land claims at Orient Point, has decided not to proceed with a petition calling for a national referendum on constitutional change",

which would ensure land rights for all, because "there was no financial backing to organise the 20,000 signatures" necessary (Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 13.10.82). This would seem to indicate a lack of support generally.

At the outset of the UNSW's School of Sociology research project, the Research Group contacted both newspaper groups in the Shoalhaven and Nowra area. We were unable to speak with Mr. Egan or acquire back issues of his newspaper from him. (These were later acquired through library sources). However, the editor of The South Coast Register and The News Leader, Mr. Keith Berg, was more forthcoming in this respect. Subsequently, Mr. Berg agreed to publicise our survey into the flag burning incident, and in particular to print an article, written by the group, indicating the aims, relevance and value of social research.¹ This was done to stimulate interest in the survey and, hopefully, to improve the response rate. In addition, so as not to compromise the research project, it was requested that the questionnaire not be published. Mr. Berg respected these wishes.

However, the Shoalhaven and Nowra News irresponsibly reproduced the questionnaire with the following instructions to its readers:

Please fill in the questionnaire issued by the University of NSW, School of Sociology, printed above, and return to "The Shoalhaven & Nowra News", 72 Berry Street, Nowra 2541. All completed forms will be forwarded to the University. Forms may be handed in or posted to this newspaper's office.

PAGE 56 . The Shoalhaven and Nowra News, Wednesday, September 29, 1982

This course of action was at no time requested or condoned by the Research Group. (Though Mr. Egan had not been requested to refrain from publishing the questionnaire). On two occasions, 29.9.82 and 6.10.82

1. See Appendix D

Mr. Alec Field, a journalist on The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, was informed during telephone conversations with the group that the newspaper 'survey' could not possibly be considered either unbiased or objective, particularly as the newspaper had supported and possibly instigated the Mayor's actions. The paper's unstinting support for the Mayor was highlighted on 13.10.82, in an unrelated incident, when it told its readers "The people of Shoalhaven should realise that they are lucky to have a man of the quality of Alderman Watson at the helm". (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 13.10.82)

The newspaper's stated desire to "obtain as wide a cross-section of public opinion as possible" (The Shoalhaven & Nowra News, 29.9.82) was obviously wide open to abuse and the possibility of the narrowest cross-section actually being taken. This possibility has been amply highlighted by the publication of the newspaper's 'survey' results in The Shoalhaven and Nowra News, and also in the Daily Telegraph and the Australian on 3.11.82, indicating that 69% of those who answered the newspaper questionnaire approved of the flag burning, while only 25% disapproved and 6% gave no opinion. Out of a sample of 10,300 (the paper's circulation), a response of 357 is claimed. This represents a return of only 3.5%. The results would, therefore, not even be representative of the paper's readership.

The danger inherent in this unscientific type of 'survey' is that the results are quite possibly inaccurate. Consequently, interested parties may latch onto them to promote their own biased viewpoint. For instance, Mayor Watson said:

"The result showed clearly that the majority of Australians resent the inequality of white people in the community. It is a clear backlash against Government policies that give Aborigines special benefits, including land rights claims that are not available to others."

(Daily Telegraph, 3.11.82)

Of course, the 'survey' indicates no such thing, not only is it possibly biased, and too small a percentage of the population of the Shoalhaven and Nowra district to give a true indication of the citizens' feelings, let alone those of Australia, but the questionnaire asked no specific questions related to 'benefits'. This statement, it must be assumed, is based on some of the 'comments' made by their

respondents. Furthermore, the town may have unique characteristics relating to the white/black dichotomy that are not necessarily duplicated anywhere else in Australia.

Mayor Watson may take less comfort from this, the original University of New South Wales School of Sociology survey, which Mr. Egan and his newspaper attempted to pre-empt.

When Mr. Egan was interviewed by Margaret Throsby on 'City Extra' (8.11.82), the newspaper 'survey' conclusions were discussed. Unfortunately, not a single member of the Sociology Research Group was able to get a hearing on the programme to refute the figures, or present the group's own viewpoint.

It must be added that though half a dozen newspaper questionnaires were sent direct to the Sociology Research Group, by those who indicated they did not trust the newspaper to forward them, we have not as yet received the questionnaires that the newspaper, unsolicited by us, promised to forward to the University. Therefore, it has not been possible to verify the actual numbers received by the newspaper, or their origins.

In the light of the foregoing report on media involvement, it comes as no surprise that there has been a threefold increase in the number of complaints to the Australian Press Council this year from Aborigines and Aboriginal groups, or that the number of complaints against newspapers that showed an alleged bias to their local council doubled compared to last year. This exposition of the media coverage of the burning of the Aboriginal flag at Nowra, indicates that these complaints are perhaps not without foundation.

There can be little doubt that the sensationalist nature of 'news' coverage adopted by The Shoalhaven & Nowra News towards the raising of the Aboriginal flag on National Aboriginal Day transformed a local incident into a major media event, exacerbating racial conflict and leading to the possibility of a deterioration in race relations. Furthermore, it would appear that the incident has been exploited as a pretext to highlight the biased opinions of a few influential people concerning Aboriginal Land Rights.

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30 cents

UNI. SURVEY ON FLAG BURNING

Residents
inundated
with reply
paid letters

A research group with the ...
of NSW is assece...
Nowra

HATTON LASHES OUT AT FLAG BURNING

... Member for South Coast has
... Shoven City Council blasting
... of an Aboriginal flag
... publicity.

Mr. Hatton said a picture of Shoalhaven City Mayor
Ald Greg Watson smiling down at the 'burning rock
up' and filled him with abhorrence and shame as a
citizen of this City and as a former President of Coun-
cil.

ABORIGINAL FLAG INCIDENT

Raising of an Aboriginal flag at
Shoalhaven City Council Chambers on
Friday morning as part of a claimed
original holiday was dealt with in a
potent manner.

'Only One
Flag for
Australia'

Also the State Council
decided that because of
the city council's refusal
to condemn the Mayor's
action it would ban all
proposed future
ministerial visits to
Shoalhaven.
The Attorney-General,



... was
... ent of
... Shire, on
... Aborigines
... Aborigines
... marched on
... street.
... received them
... with full ceremony at
... the Council Chambers
... with congratulation.
... and a ...
... welcome
... in fact all
... Presidents of ...
... Shoalhaven ...

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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 ^s | 4.2 | | 100.0 |

QUESTION 4

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

| | | | |
|-----------|------|--|------|
| Very good | 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 |

Several factors indicate that the Research Group had tapped an issue of importance to the people of Shoalhaven. These factors include a very high response rate to the survey and the low percentages of responses in the 'no opinion' categories.

The results of the survey indicate that although the community is polarised in their feelings about the actual incident (42.2% approved, 44.8% disapproved, 13.0% neutral), respondents discriminated quite clearly between this question and that relating to mayoral duties where the majority (54%) placed the action "outside the scope of the Mayor's duties". It would appear that some 5.9% of people approving the Mayor's action nonetheless felt that such action was "outside the scope" of his duties.

There is a strong feeling (56.4%) that Aborigines should be allowed to fly their flag on National Aboriginal Day, which would seem to indicate that any claim by the Mayor that, in refusing to allow the flag to be flown, he was acting on behalf of the wishes of the community, is unfounded.

Although the majority of respondents (38.4%) reported black/white relations to be 'fair', there was a significant response rate (34%) in the combined category 'poor/very poor'. A minority of 27.6% reported relations as 'good/very good'. Some discussion is necessary of the category 'fair'. While some respondents consider 'fair' to mean tending towards 'good', others would consider 'fair' to mean tolerable, perhaps tenuous and tending towards 'poor'. The large number indicating that relations were 'fair' may also suggest that many people used this category as a 'no opinion' category as the question attempted to force a choice by not allowing for 'no opinion'.

The question which asked respondents to assess the effect the incident had had on black/white relations ran into similar problems. The ambiguous nature of the question became clear when it was cross-tabulated with other questions and comments. 'Positive' (19.4%) could

be taken to indicate simply that it had had some effect, 'negative' (35%) could also mean 'no effect', as well as the category 'no effect' (44.2%) being ambiguous in meaning that either relations had not changed or being used as a 'no opinion' category (this question also attempted to force a choice). However, there can be no doubt that the incident has had an effect upon the community. This is clearly indicated by the number of comments by respondents and their tenor. The notion of a public inquiry into the Mayor's actions received support from only 33.3% of respondents: an overwhelming 62.3% were opposed. However, comments indicated that this negative response was, in the main, due to the current economic climate and the costs associated with holding an inquiry, rather than to any strong support for the Mayor.

II. Detailed Analysis:

QUESTION 1: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE MAYOR OF SHOALHAVEN'S ACTION IN BURNING THE ABORIGINAL FLAG ON NATIONAL ABORIGINAL DAY?

(a) Some Comments by Respondents:

-Mr. Watson was quite right to do what he did. A PROUD MAN OUR MAYOR.
(Male, 35-49, employed.)

-I also think it's the one and only positive step the Mayor has ever taken.
(Female, 25-34, unemployed typist.)

-In my opinion he was under extreme provocation emanating from certain members of the legal aid office.
(Female, 50-64, retired cashier.)

-Yes: the only thing that Mayor Watson did wrong when he burnt the flag he did not burn all the black bastards with it.
(Male, 65+, retired store manager.)

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

Strongly Disapprove

Disapprove

Neither Approve nor Disapprove

Approve

Strongly Approve

Col. Cde.

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

Within the scope of the Mayor's duties

Outside the scope of the Mayor's duties

No opinion

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

Yes

No

No opinion

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

Very Good

Good

Fair

Poor

Very Poor

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

Positive

Negative

No Effect

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

Yes

No

No opinion

TO MAKE SURE THAT WE HAVE ANSWERS FROM A PROPER CROSS-SECTION OF PEOPLE IN SHOALHAVEN WOULD YOU PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS :

7. Are you male or female?

Male

Female

8. What is your age group?

18-24

25-34

35-49

50-64

65 plus

9. Are you working, unemployed or retired?

Working

Unemployed

Retired

10. What is your occupation? (If retired or unemployed please give your previous occupation).

Would you like to make any comments?

1

2

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EXTN.



SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY

9th September 1982.

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are a research group with the School of Sociology at the University of New South Wales. Our interest is to assess public opinion concerning the flag burning incident on National Aboriginal Day. As you are probably aware, on July 9th, the Aboriginal flag was raised outside Shoalhaven Shire Council Chambers, by Mr Gary Moore from the Aboriginal Legal Service. It was taken down by a council ranger and returned to Mr Moore. Later a replica was publicly burnt by the Mayor in the presence of the media. We are interested in your opinions on this matter.

We would greatly appreciate your co-operation in completing the attached questionnaire, and returning it as soon as possible in the reply paid envelope enclosed. The information obtained is for research purposes only and is strictly confidential.

Your name was chosen randomly from an electoral roll. Complete anonymity is required so please do not put your name anywhere on the questionnaire. By the return of the reply paid envelope, all record of your name and address is eliminated.

Thanking you in anticipation of your co-operation.

Sociology Research Group

J. Raynor
A. [unclear]
L. Hillier

SHOALHAVEN DISTRICT ABORIGINES

Mr FLAHERTY: Has the attention of the Attorney-General, Minister of Justice and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs been drawn to reported remarks of the Mayor of Shoalhaven Alderman Greg Watson about an alleged survey on attitudes to Aborigines in the Shoalhaven area? Has the Attorney-General made inquiries about that so-called survey? Will he inform the House of the result of any such inquiries and any claims that Alderman Watson has made, based upon the alleged survey?

Mr WALKER: I saw the reports about what was claimed to be a survey conducted by a publication called the *Shoalhaven and Nowra News*, a journal that is gaining sad notoriety for its racist attitudes. This issue goes back to the outrageous act committed by Alderman Watson on National Aborigines Day, when he burned a replica of the Aboriginal land rights flag. That scurrilous incident left a stain on the community that I had hoped might quickly disappear. However, Alderman Watson and the newspaper—if I could call it that—seem determined to conspire to wring every drop of ill feeling from the matter. The sociology department of the University of New South Wales decided to survey the area to assess reaction to the flag-burning incident. A random sample of 1 500 people in Shoalhaven and Nowra elicited more than 600 responses. The responses were compared with figures established by the Australian Bureau of Census to ensure a representative sample had been obtained. One question asked in the survey was: Do you approve of Watson burning the flag? Another was, how would you describe his actions? A further question was, should Aborigines be able to fly their flag? Another was, how do you perceive the relationship between Aborigines and the rest of the community? The next question was, what were the effects of burning the flag? The final question was, would you support a public inquiry into Aboriginal land rights?

The *Shoalhaven and Nowra News* published the survey form that had been sent out and then conducted its own little opinion poll. Some 357 people responded to it, and the paper reported that 69 per cent approved the flag burning and only 25 per cent disapproved. Alderman Watson claimed the result was a clear indication that the majority of Australians resented "inequality of white people in the community", whatever he meant by that. He said it was a backlash against the Government's policies giving Aborigines special benefits, including land rights. My inquiries with the university revealed that analysis of the survey has not been completed, but the indications are of a 50-50 reaction to Alderman Watson's action. The university said it was hardly surprised at the response to the newspaper survey since its leadership was very right wing and its survey was statistically unsound. In fact, a number of people who responded to the university questionnaire said they refused to send a copy of their answers to the *Shoalhaven and Nowra News* as it is a racist rag. The cause of improving race relations in Australia is frustrating enough without such amateurish attempts by the misguided to justify their warped attitudes.