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BLACK FLAG BURNING

On June 9, 1982, **National Aboriginal Day**, fifty eight local councils in N.S.W. flew the Aboriginal flag. For a short time it flew in Nowra, but not because the Shire Council had given approval. It was raised on a flagpole outside the Council Chambers by three members of the local Aboriginal Legal Service in response to a statement by the Mayor, Alderman Greg Watson, which was published in a local paper *The Shoalhaven and Nowra News* on July 7. It read:

"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 Mayor had also stated that he would be prepared to take down and burn any but the Australian flag if it were run up any of Council's flagpoles.

The Aboriginal flag flew for forty minutes **Upside down as the international signal of distress**. It was then removed by a Council Ranger, folded, and returned to the ALS people, who then left.

Carl Egan, owner and managing editor of *The Shoalhaven and Nowra News*, was there for the event, complete with photographer. His behaviour during those 40 minutes was hardly that of a disinterested and dispassionate reporter of the news. He engaged in headed exchanges with the ALS people over their raising the flag and their refusal to remove it.

The Mayor was at home in the shower while all the action was taking place, but he was quickly summoned by a telephone call from a *representative of the local media*. Unfortunately, he arrived too late to perform his flag burning ritual on the

actual flag flown. The forward planning of Mr. Egan came to the rescue. He just happened to have a *replica* and lighter fluid handy.

A smiling and triumphant Mayer was then photographed with the burning flag. The photograph was published on the front page of Mr. Egan's next edition on the 14th July. The banner headline over the photo read: **MAYOR BURNS BLACK FLAG — Strong Stand By Civic Leader.**

Calling the flag a *revolutionary piece of cloth*, the Mayor is quoted as saying that he burnt it to draw attention to the *special treatment* handed out to the Aborigines at the expense of white Australians.

He continued:

"Those claiming national days should embark on civic projects such as cleaning of empty beer cans and flagons from city parks, and other public places.

The edition of 21st July indicated that there was considerable local and national support for the Mayor's action. The front page banner read:

MAYOR UNDER THREAT — BUT WON'T BACK DOWN

Beneath the headline was a photo of the ever-smiling Mayor clutching a stack of what was purported to be supportive mail. Inside the paper was a selection of these letters, under the heading **Mayer wins widespread support.**

Good on you mate. What a sad breach of betrayal the black flag is to those thousands of Australians who gave their lives to keep Australia free for all — M.D. Whyalla, S.A.

Do they ever stop to think what would have happened to them if the white man had not fought for them in the great war?

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the white man had not fought for them in the second world war. Do they honestly think the Japs would have listened to their weak, petty arguments for land rights — Mr. B.P. Ulladulla.

The Mayor also received letters of support from people in **Bourke, Alice Springs, Toowoomba, Katoomba, a retired Army captain from Balmain,** and a telegram of support from **The State President of the Victorial Branch of the RSL, Mr. Bruce Ruxton.**

The editorial of this edition stated, in part, that:

"The issue is not about racism at

all. Rather it is one of equality. . . . It is not difficult to understand the apparent anger of some people in our community who think there is an imbalance in the granting of rights and privileges and that this should be both highlighted and corrected. The Aboriginal race is no more special than the ethnic people who have come here from many parts of the world. It is not unreasonable to claim equality for all and whatever entitlements and privileges are possible should be given to all.

When interviewed by the Sydney Morning Herald on July 26, Carl Egan said: *"Did you know that if you marry a dark woman then you can get a special housing loan?"*

The event had been none too subtly shifted from an overt racist act to a statement about inequality, with blacks as the 'haves' and whites as the 'have nots'.

The national outcry against the flag burning incident, including a call for a public enquiry, prompted the Race Relations Research Group in the University of N.S.W. School of Sociology to undertake a survey of

Sociology to undertake a survey of Shoalhaven Shire. The group, under the direction of Dr. Alex Kondos, sought to assess the attitudes of Shoalhaven residents to the incident, their opinion of the Mayor's involvement, whether they thought Aborigines should be allowed to fly their flag, how they viewed black/white relations in their community, whether they felt the incident had had an effect on those relations and, the degree of community support for a public enquiry.

A one page questionnaire, containing the six key questions, four demographic questions and a four

line space for comments, was mailed to 1500 randomly selected residents.

At the outset of the project, the group contacted the major local papers asking for back issues and for help in publicising the survey, an attempt to bolster the response rate. They were not able to speak to Mr. Egan or to obtain back issues from him. However, he irresponsibly published the questionnaire complete with these instructions to his readers to return the completed form to the paper for forwarding to UNSW.

This course of action was neither requested nor condoned by the Research Group. In fact, on two occasions a journalist on the paper, Alex Field, was informed that the paper's 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 survey was wide open to abuse as any interested party could fill in as many questionnaires as they could afford to buy. This did not deter Mr. Egan from continuing with survey. The results were

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not deter Mr. Egan from continuing with survey. The results were published on November 3, in *The Shoalhaven and Nowra News*, *The Telegraph* and the *Australian* under the heading: **COMMUNITY BACKS FLAG BURNING.**

The article, written by Alex Field, reported that 357 persons had responded and that 69% had approved of the flag burning, 25% disapproved and 6% gave no opinion, and continued:

Alderman Watson claimed the result was a clear indication 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, that are not available to others".

The UNSW survey had a very different result from Mr. Egan's. Of the 620 people responding, 45% disapproved or strongly disapproved of the Mayor's action and 42% approved/strongly approved with 13% neutral indicating that the community was polarised. 54% thought that the Mayor had acted outside the scope of a Mayor's duties and a majority 56% responded that Aborigines should be allowed to fly their flag. The Mayor might then take less comfort from this survey than that of Mr. Egan.

It was the expressed belief of many of the group's 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 Carl Egan. John Hatton, MLA, the Member of the South Coast, echoed that feeling in a letter to the group, as did Frank Walker in State Parliament on November 3, 1982.

The forgoing raises some

The forgoing raises some important questions about media bias and responsibility. There can be no doubt that the sensationalist nature of news coverage in *The Shoalhaven and Nowra News* transformed a local racist action into a media event, exacerbating racial tension and leading to a deterioration in black/white relations. It would appear that the incident was contrived and exploited as a pretext to highlighting the biased opinions of a few influential people concerning Aboriginal land rights.

The issue of land claims seems to have been the major news in Mr. Egan's paper from some time. Headlines such as:

LAND RIGHTS MOVE LAND CLAIMS SHOCK LAND CLAIMS FIGHT EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL — PETITION

abound in the publication.

No claims have actually been made in the area, though several pieces of Crown land are being considered. The main bone of contention is a piece of land at Roseby Park which was bulldozed by private contractors, for a sporting complex causing Aboriginal skeletons to be disturbed and lost. The local Aborigines want the land returned to its original condition as a bushland reserve.

The fact that *The Telegraph* and *The Australian* picked up and ran the articles from Mr. Egan's paper will be no surprise to watchers of the Murdoch Press. **News Limited's** track record is well documented. Marcia Langton in her articles for *The New Journalist* states:

"Murdoch News Limited has waged a vicious racist campaign against the Aboriginal people. Even their most unsubstantiated and generalized statements have been featured as front page articles with sensationalized two-inch headlines".

It comes as no surprise that there

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It comes as no surprise that there was a threefold increase in the number of complaints to **The Australian Press Council** in 1982 from Aboriginal individuals and groups. Or that the number of complaints about local newspapers showing a bias towards their councils doubled.

Events in Nowra would seem to indicate that these complaints are not without foundation. But what effect do complaints to **The Press Council** have? How much power does it have? In 1980 **The Murdoch Organization** withdrew from **The Council**, **Fairfax** and **The Herald and Weekly Times** never joined it, that leaves **Consolidated Press** and the **A.J.A.** as the contributing bodies. If powerless groups are to be afforded some protection against the dangerous actions and misrepresentations of publications like *The Shoalhaven and Nowra News* and those of **The Murdoch organization**, there is urgent need for a press council that works and that has real teeth.

"If it is true that propaganda alone cannot create racism, it is equally true that propaganda is needed to inflame and direct it".

LYNNE HILTON



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