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—SCHOLARSHIPS

Sheila Rowley

—TEACHER EDUCATION

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STUDENT ACTION FOR ABORIGINES

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THAT something should be done for the aborigines had long been a point of agreement in the student body. It had been taken for granted for so long that the issue had become as "dead" in student community as it was outside the university . . . "dead" that is, for most practical purposes. The topic was mentioned time and time again, but lacked any dynamic impetus. The process by which this was changed, resulting in the S.A.F.A. tour is an interesting one.

On the 6th May, 1964 students of Sydney University demonstrated in support of the negro civil rights movement. Some of the U.S. press reacted bitterly, charging us with hypocrisy in that we were only too willing to indulge in the anti-Americanism so fashionable in student circles, yet we completely ignored our own racial minority—the aborigines. Many students (myself included)—brushed aside this criticism on the grounds that those students who had demonstrated outside the U.S. consulate would be just as willing to demonstrate for aboriginal rights—the principle after all was the same. There was one uncomfortable flaw in this rationalisation—we HAD demonstrated on the question of negro civil rights—a protest for aborigines was quite hypothetical.

It was with this background of a half formed sense of guilt that the Sydney delegation proposed a motion at the Conference of the Australian Student Labor Federation, that the National Executive should co-ordinate a nation-wide demonstration on National Aborigine Day. Even the normally most politically active University of Melbourne had a relatively limited success in its demonstration. In Sydney however, the A.L.P. and Labor clubs (affiliated with A.S.L.F.) had only to mention the possibility of such a demonstration and the idea caught on. An organising committee met regularly—it was made up of delegates from ALL political and religious clubs plus interested individuals.

In the wake of this demonstration, a lecture on civil rights was held at the university—it was after this lecture that a group of half a dozen students and staff met and discussed the formation of a more permanent organisation. The idea of a bus tour of aboriginal settlements evolved and through a misplaced but understandable analogy, was immediately called a "freedom ride". (A term which S.A.F.A. members were later to avoid as too flamboyant.)

The initial circular distributed to 29 clubs and societies at Sydney University on 16/7/64 stated:—"On Commemoration Day students and police working in customary close co-operation won world notice for their joint demonstration against racialism. This was fine as far as it went, but what now? How can we show our sympathy and support for

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our own coloured minority, the Aborigines?" At this stage no real aim for S.A.F.A. had emerged—"sympathy and support" can be interpreted many ways.

About half the societies contacted sent delegates to this initial meeting—an executive was elected and the organisation passed completely into student hands. The executive of four distributed a leaflet principally to the clubs and societies—a method of organisation which proved successful in this initial stage. After some time these delegates plus many others became involved in S.A.F.A., *AS* individuals and it was possible to establish a separate club.

After only limited preliminary thought, the functions of S.A.F.A. were beginning to emerge. To quote this circular of late July—"While our initial impact on the country towns and aboriginal settlements is likely to be short lived and therefore possibly ineffective, it is hoped that student action of this kind will draw public attention to the problem." The next general meeting was very well attended and S.A.F.A. was on its way.

A long standing undercurrent of student concern about the aboriginal question had been reinforced by a half formed sense of guilt after the demonstration for negro rights. Dissatisfaction at the limited nature of the Parliament House demonstration had been supplemented by a vague notion of the U.S. "freedom rides"; it amounted to a concept of "students in buses on a civil rights cause". The American freedom riders were in fact attempting to integrate interstate bus terminal facilities—a function far different from that conceived for S.A.F.A. Nevertheless the notion of student action in the U.S.A. was significant, in combination with the above factors, in gaining student participation for this social movement.

It was at this stage that the idea of a social survey evolved. As far as I can see it was suggested simply to fill the gap in case we did not have sufficient knowledge of instances of discrimination before we left. The survey was to become a bone of contention between the two largest groupings in S.A.F.A. The idea was adopted enthusiastically by those members who (for the most part) came from the Christian societies, it was accepted somewhat begrudgingly by the members from the left wing political clubs, whose marginal propensity to demonstrate is higher. At one stage it was suggested that no demonstration should occur during the vacation and that only a social survey should be carried out. This was supported on the grounds that (a) we did not know enough about the problem (b) because of the possibility of a "backlash" against the aborigines. This motion was overwhelmingly defeated for, it was argued, even if we did not know "enough" we knew the situation existed, and furthermore if there was to be a "backlash" it would not be against the aborigines but against US, as students, as youth, as city-ites, etc. The policy finally adopted for the tour was equal emphasis on demonstrations and social survey.

From the outset we were faced with a problem of finance. We held several lunch time folk concerts at Sydney University, plus one public folk concert. In addition we printed and sold Christmas cards depicting an aboriginal motif. After initial press statements we received several donations and since the tour we have had a steady stream of donations.

Nevertheless the bulk of the cost was borne by the students who participated. Reports of the tour will no doubt appear in many places—here I have been concerned principally with S.A.F.A. as a student movement, which drew together Communists, Christians, Liberals and Jews, all with the same self righteous indignation and a half-formed concept of passive resistance. It proved to be the most effective student movement for many years.

The fundamental achievement is that the aboriginal question is now more of a live issue (in student circles at the least), instead of being taken for granted as it has been for so long. Furthermore, the enthusiastic reception accorded us by the aborigines shows that the stories of apathy are not quite true. The fact that the aborigines in Bowraville are boycotting the Raymond picture theatre (which has a three foot high partition separating a so-called "Dark Centre") is very significant. It is difficult to see this snowballing into a mass movement—the aborigines do not have the necessary articulate leadership (with a few exceptions). It is important for other bodies to keep the issue alive, for it is in the spirit of controversy that progress is made; as Martin Luther King pointed out so well, 'time itself is neutral'. Even an all but exclusively white group as S.A.F.A. can have an impact and it seems very important to have similar bodies to S.A.F.A. set up in other universities.

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