

## 9 Political Activism

Alick, who had a fleeting experience of Aboriginal politics at Yarra Bank meetings in 1938–39 was drawn more fully and inevitably into the Aboriginal political world through his contacts with Doug Nicholls and others from the late 1940s, despite Alick's natural inclination of not being a political person. As he recalled in 1998, through Doug Nicholls' Gore Street church 'I got involved with some of his political meetings' although, as Alick quickly added, 'politics were never mentioned in church'. The 1950s became particularly lively at the state level as Aboriginal people challenged the assimilation policy, and this continued in the 1960s as the Aboriginal political scene across Australia 'heated up', taking Alick along with it.

With the death in 1942 of William Cooper, Doug Nicholls, along with Bill Onus, Margaret Tucker and others, became prominent political leaders and spokespersons for the Victorian Aboriginal community. By the 1940s, Victoria's Aboriginal Protection Board, then over seventy years old, was moribund. It did not meet or report to parliament; its management of Aboriginal affairs, such as it was, was handled by a few public servants. Children were continually removed from their parents and reserve lands were continually being whittled away and sold off to white farmers. Little wonder that Aboriginal people termed it the 'Aboriginal Destruction Board'. The Board also pursued an outdated policy of refusing to recognise Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent', who formed the vast majority of the 2000 Aborigines in the state, as being 'Aboriginal'. By the 1940s it came under sustained criticism from all quarters, especially Aboriginal people led by Nicholls, Onus, Tucker and others. In particular they challenged the Board's failure to provide adequate housing, health and educational services to Aboriginal people, to bring them to the standards enjoyed by other Victorians.

In a set of 'Objectives and Demands' issued in the early 1950s the Australian Aborigines' League also called for the Victorian government to end its policy of denying that Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent' were Aborigines or that they had special needs. It demanded the government take 'concrete responsibility' for the needs of 'Castes' (that is, Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent') outside the Lake Tyers reserve, without 'policing, interfering or overseeing' them. In particular, the statement called for urgent attention to their health, housing and educational needs. The 'Objectives and Demands' wanted the Lake Tyers reserve's title and property returned to Aboriginal people, and an end to the control of the residents' lives and movements, especially specific food rationing and their sterilisation, 'unless under the terms of their own free request, and not then until they have been examined by at least three independent doctors'. The claim of sterilisation is alarming, but little evidence has emerged about its incidence in Victoria. The League also wanted Aboriginal participation in the reserve's management and future. The statement also called for changes to the Protection Board, including the provision of elected Aboriginal representation.

Alick's political skills were heightened by association with Nicholls, the Secretary of the Aborigines' League. In his 'spare time' Alick toured with Doug Nicholls: 'Doug had a little Ford Escort in those days and we'd go to country towns pushing the political movement on Aboriginal people'. As awareness of the Aboriginal situation grew among the white community in the 1950s, Nicholls was in much demand as a speaker at Rotary and Apex clubs and church groups. Alick accompanied him to these meetings too, acting as his companion and driver. Alick wrote in 1993: 'I went along with him to these meetings. Doug did most of the talking'. But in 1997 Alick added, 'we'd go into the country and he'd give talks and eventually I learned to talk from him. [I would] give a few more little talks, but mostly I was his apprentice'. They also visited such places as the Ballarat Orphanage to check on Aboriginal children who had been removed from their families by the Aboriginal Protection Board. Alick once remarked that there were about a dozen living there most times they visited.

Alick knew Bill Onus, President of the Australian Aborigines' League, well although he was closer to his brother Eric. Bill Onus often promoted the Aboriginal political cause through cultural performances, boomerang throwing and social activities, which was attuned to Alick's community-building penchant. There was a strong vaudeville music tradition at Lake Tyers from the 1930s, and Margaret Tucker and others gave musical performances during wartime to raise money. Tucker organised the first Aboriginal Debutante Ball in August 1949, nineteen debutantes being presented to the Governor, Sir George Knox, and Lady Knox. Alick was to partner a debutante, the only non-Aboriginal person to do so, but that was the night he had to close the sale of his hamburger 'joint' and he missed out.

In April 1949 Onus organised a 'Corroboree Season 1949' at Wirth's Olympia on Easter Saturday, prefacing the program with the words: 'the object of this presentation of an all-Aboriginal entertainment is to show Australia that, given an opportunity, the Aborigine is quite capable of development along cultural lines'. Onus' preface also referred to the decimation of Aboriginal people since colonisation, and the need for a 'new deal' where, if given 'an equal chance', Aborigines would shine. He signed off the program, 'Bill Onus, Organizer and Producer (President of Australian Aborigines League)'. This 'Corroboree Season 1949' presented Aboriginal singers; including Margaret Tucker ('Princess Lilardia'), Edgar Bux, May Lovett and Joyce McKinnon; musicians such as Ted ('Chook') Mullett and his Gum Leaf Band; whip cracker and rodeo star Billy Bargo; and a comedy by Jacky (Eric Onus) and Jemmy (James Scott) 'the Brown Boys of Mirth and Melody'. It is unclear whether Alick saw this particular show although the program was in his archives. He certainly saw other such Corroborees on a smaller scale that Onus organised over the years.

Bill Onus operated a boomerang factory and art shop at Belgrave in the Dandenongs, which became another focus for Aboriginal people or those sympathetic to the cause. As Alick recalled: 'Bill was a great boomerang thrower, he would stand outside his shop a couple of feet from the glass windows, throw the boomerang and it would come back into his hands'. It was Bill Onus who taught Alick to throw,



Bill Onus shows his wares at Belgrave to 'Young Jimmy' Sharman and Alick around 1960.

a skill that later became important to Alick in many ways. Alick, Eric Onus, Bruce McGuinness and Stewart Murray ran the annual boomerang contest at Northcote Oval to raise money for Aboriginal welfare. Alick was often a judge, and later remarked, 'the trouble was that the white blokes used to win the championships' and eventually whites took over the event.

Bill Onus' shop and factory also provided a political education for Alick and others, for Bill was a deep thinker and a frequent speaker on public platforms in the Aboriginal cause. ASIO kept a file on him and this prevented him from making money in the USA throwing boomerangs. In these Cold War times Onus was claimed to be a 'Communist', simply because he had spoken to Communist (and Christian) meetings about the Aboriginal cause. A number of Aboriginal people worked for Onus in his factory, including his brother Eric and his wife Winnie, John, Joe and Bruce McGuinness, Harry, Mervyn and Iris Williams. Alick and Merle became very close to Eric and Winnie, and visited them frequently at Belgrave. It was perhaps at such gatherings

that Alick learned to play the gum leaf, possibly from Herb Patten, another skill Alick later used to good effect.

The Australian Aborigines' League remained the only Aboriginal body into the 1950s, but in May 1957 it was joined by a dynamic new organisation, the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League (the League). It emerged from a controversy in 1956 about the appalling conditions of Aborigines at the Warburton Ranges Mission, Western Australia, who had been displaced from their Maralinga lands during atomic testing after 1947. Doug Nicholls travelled to the West with a West Australian Senator, Bill Grayden, and filmed their living conditions backed by the Melbourne-based 'Save the Aborigines Committee'. Some committee members — Nicholls, Gordon Bryant MLA, women's and peace activist Doris Blackburn, and Church of Christ Pastor Stan Davey — formed the Aborigines Advancement League, to promote Aboriginal welfare and rights in Victoria and across Australia. Alick was there from the outset although he took a back seat to such prominent people. As he remarked in 1996: 'we [Merle and I] were involved right from its inception. I'm not a foundation member but I was there when it first started — with my wife and family...we were the Indians...Nicholls, Davey and Bryant were the chiefs'.

The League focused on welfare, but was not shy of criticising Aboriginal policy in Victoria, or elsewhere in Australia. It certainly attacked the assimilation policy of the newly formed Aborigines Welfare Board in Victoria, which superseded the Protection Board in 1958. The League defined its role in 1959: 'to work towards the complete integration of people of Aboriginal descent with the Australian community with full recognition of the contribution they are able to make'. It defined 'integration' as the ability of a minority to retain its identity. Aboriginal self-reliance, and self-respect, were other key aims.

The League created a unique infrastructure and provided further opportunities for many people, including Alick and Merle, to assist the Aboriginal community. It raised sufficient money to employ Doug Nicholls as a full-time field officer, which freed him from his paid work at the Northcote Football ground. He was to organise practical help for Aboriginal people, such as emergency assistance, employment and legal advice. Nicholls also increased his public addresses

to churches and service club meetings. Stan Davey, honorary full-time League secretary, and other voluntary white workers, operated out of 46 Russell Street, Melbourne, and then 336 Victoria Parade, East Melbourne. These offices provided a centre for those living in and visiting the city and complemented Nicholls' Gore Street church. These premises also became a focus for Alick's life as he continued his part-time voluntary work for the community. In 1993 he described his role as 'voluntary welfare and field officer'. He was also a member of the League's Management Committee and on the Executive of Aboriginal hostels, which ran the Girls and Boys hostels in Cunningham Street. Merle was there beside him in most activities, leading some herself.

The women were the prime fundraisers. Gladys Nicholls commenced an Aboriginal Children's Christmas Tree Appeal in the mid-1940s which she organised for the next thirty years. To raise funds she established three opportunity shops in Brunswick Road and St Georges Road, Fitzroy, and held regular street stalls in High Street, Northcote. Merle and other Aboriginal women assisted. They were the driving force behind the push for a children's centre in Northcote,



Alick as Santa at the Aboriginal Children's Christmas tree run by the Advancement League