

## 6 The Campaign for the 'Yes' Vote

The task of campaigning for a 'yes' vote for the Aboriginal question in the referendum on 27 May 1967 was primarily assumed by the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, though it had considerable support from churches, the Labor Party and trade unions. It conducted the campaign in much the same terms as it had framed its 1962 petition campaign. In other words, it equated the constitutional changes proposed with the Commonwealth assuming a greater Commonwealth role in Aboriginal affairs, the overthrow of racially discriminatory laws and the winning of rights or citizenship for Aborigines. This was so even though by 1966 the vast bulk of racially discriminatory legislation had been repealed and most Aboriginal people had been granted the set of legal rights associated with citizenship. Why did the Federal Council and its allies represent the constitutional changes in this manner?

For some of the principal figures in the campaign it seems to have become an article of faith. Those such as Faith Bandler, the Federal Council's New South Wales campaign director, had been greatly impressed by Lady Jessie Street and profoundly influenced by her assertions about the provisions of the Constitution regarding Aborigines. It seems she and some of her fellow members in the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship such as Jack Horner, took Street to be saying that these literally denied Aborigines citizenship rights, sanctioned racially discriminatory laws, and barred the Commonwealth from taking responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. They certainly spoke as though they did.

Alongside these figures' apparently limited grasp of the legal terms of the constitutional changes at stake, however, we must place their understanding of the referendum's emotional import. Those such as Bandler had an especially strong personal investment in the matters at stake in the referendum. As her biographer, Marilyn Lake,

has rightly observed, there are often 'subjective, personal investments in one's choice of "fundamental principles"' and 'it is important to remember the emotional bases of powerful political mobilisations'. (For Bandler, the daughter of one of those 'Kanakas' in regard to whom section 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution had been devised in order to equip the Commonwealth with the powers to control, the campaign for the referendum was primarily a fight for the inclusion of blacks in the Australian nation on the same terms as whites.)<sup>1</sup> There is perhaps no better way of appreciating the enormous hopes that campaigners invested in the referendum than viewing an ABC television programme, *The Day of the Aboriginal*, screened a week before the poll. At the end of this, members of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship raise their voices and sing: 'We are going/We are going/We are going/To Freedom...27th of May/Each one say/YES YES YES/For Freedom' (see document 34, pp. 119–20). It is difficult to listen to this and not be moved. ('Vote yes for freedom' was a version of 'We are going to Freedom' that folk singer Gary Shearston had written by adapting a poem by Kath Walker, and was similar to the song 'We Shall Overcome' performed most often and most notably by African-American civil rights activists.)<sup>2</sup>

The bulk of the Council's leadership, which comprised Shirley Andrews, Gordon Bryant, Barry Christophers, Stan Davey, Joe McGinness and Barrie Pittock, better understood the nature of the constitutional clauses at stake in the referendum. They knew citizenship was not a matter treated by the Constitution; they knew Aboriginal people were already Australian citizens by virtue of the 1948 Nationality and Citizenship Act; they knew nearly all of the discriminatory laws had been repealed by federal and state governments; and they knew the constitutional changes proposed would not force a federal government to take charge of Aboriginal affairs. Yet, they still represented the referendum as a matter of federal control, the repeal of racist laws, and citizenship for Aborigines.

Arguably, this occurred because they believed that the Commonwealth government was the primary means of providing a form of citizenship for Aboriginal people which entailed social and economic rights and so was more meaningful or real than citizenship in terms of political or civil rights, and because they were convinced that they had to secure a massive 'yes' vote in the referendum in order to create a mandate for a federal government willing to play a greater role in Aboriginal affairs. At the same time, though, it can be suggested that the way they represented the referendum was determined by the fact that they had inherited a political narrative or tradition which had long tied the calls for a greater Commonwealth role in Aboriginal



In April 1967 a Federal Council deputation canvassed federal MPs at Parliament House to seek assurances that they would support the Aboriginal question in the referendum. Pictured here in Gordon Bryant's parliamentary office are (left to right) Doug Nicholls, Gordon Bryant, Winnie Branson and Faith Bandler. (Courtesy *Canberra Times*)

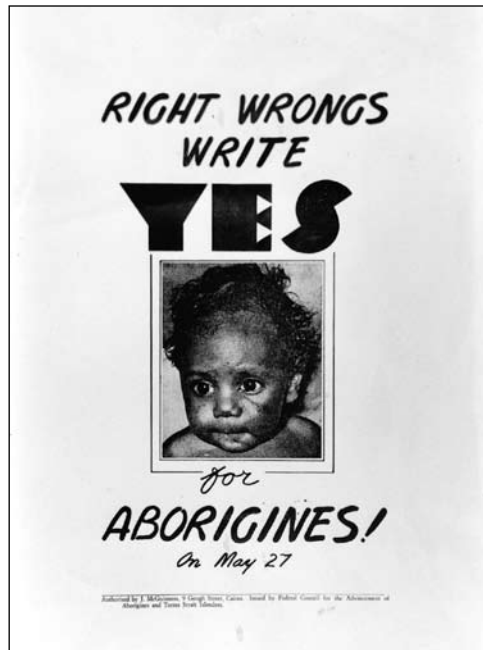
affairs, the overthrow of racially discriminatory laws and rights for Aborigines to constitutional change. In other words, they, too, were true believers.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear, however, that these leaders were conscious of the importance of making an emotional appeal to the voters. Davey advocated a campaign that would be 'a call to the nation' and Bryant insisted that it 'must stir the people's hearts and minds'.<sup>4</sup> More particularly, they realised that 'citizenship' had a strong emotional pull for most voters, all the more so in a white nation that was now ashamed of its international reputation for racism and highly attuned to the demands minority groups were making for civil rights. Moreover, it made sense to represent these constitutional changes in terms of the common rights of citizenship rather than the exclusive special rights which they hoped would be granted Aboriginal people following the Commonwealth's winning of the power to make 'special laws'.

The Federal Council began preparing for the referendum soon after the Commonwealth parliament had passed the relevant legislation (see document 32, pp. 116–17). A 'national campaign directorate' was established in Melbourne, and Bryant and McGinness were appointed

as its heads. The Council had meagre resources but it had financial support from some of its allies. In a whirlwind of activity, it lobbied politicians, held public meetings, organised rallies, distributed leaflets, stuck handbills and posters, and sold badges and buttons. Most importantly, perhaps, it bombarded the media, and won much favourable publicity in newspapers and magazines (see documents 38–40, pp. 121–4) and on radio stations and television channels.<sup>5</sup>

In adopting a strategy to persuade voters that the referendum's Aboriginal question was a matter of 'the greatest importance',<sup>6</sup> the Federal Council necessarily simplified the nature of the matter at stake. The name it chose for its campaign committee — Aboriginal Rights 'Vote Yes' — reveals the essence of the way it went about promoting the 'Yes' case. Its publicity materials suggested to the punters that this matter concerned rights for Aborigines. Leaflets called upon electors to 'Right wrongs: Write Yes for Aborigines on May 27' (see illustration below); posters urged voters to 'Vote Yes for Aboriginal Rights' (see illustration p. 50); and songs were recorded to exhort the electorate to 'Vote "Yes" to give rights and freedoms'. Other promotional materials had the same emphasis. Council spokespersons urged the press to encourage electors to 'vote yes to the question of Aboriginal rights' and to 'vote yes to give the Aborigines full citizenship rights'.<sup>7</sup>



For its leaflets the Federal Council chose images of Aboriginal children to symbolise a new future for Aboriginal people and to make an emotional appeal to white Australian voters. (Courtesy Jack Horner Collection, AIATSIS)