

{Land Rights News, Vol. 2, No. 4, September 1987}

Alice Springs Summit—Coalition Plans to Education in 1988

Recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty through Constitutional reform is the end in sight.

National Aboriginal action during the 1988 “celebrations” of the 200th anniversary of the British invasion of this country is expected to take a positive approach following a meeting of Aboriginal organisations in Alice Springs in mid-June.

The meeting adopted the theme “We have Survived” to give a constructive direction to the anger and outrage felt throughout Aboriginal Australia. It agreed the theme reflected the strength of Aboriginal culture and the continuing resistance to all forms of suppression.

Many speakers at the meeting pointed out that protest on its own, with no clear aim in mind, could divert the energy of the national movement. While 1988 presents the obscene spectacle of the brutality and arrogance of British colonialism, which should be shown up for what it was, it represented an opportunity for Aboriginal people to make solid gains.

Recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty through proper Constitutional reform - with the aim of fostering Aboriginal self-determination - is the end in sight. Details of action at a national and international level are expected to be firmed up at a meeting in Sydney later this month.

Strength

As Coalition spokesman Pat Dodson remarked: “The strength of our culture, together with our knowledge of the heroic struggles of our forebears has sustained us this far”.

In 1988, he said, Aboriginal Australia had the chance to let the world know that white Australia has a black history.

“But, most importantly, we believe that 1988 is also a chance to enlighten Australia,” Mr. Dodson said. “One of the great challenges to non-Aboriginal Australians will be to grow up and come to terms with us.

“It will be a year when we celebrate the richness and depth of our culture and remember our debt to the old people, who died defending their country.

At the same time, we will develop the groundwork for a better life for the young people who will come after us.”

The coalition meeting reflected the opinions of State and Territory Land Councils and of national bodies, including the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO), the National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Service (NAILS), the Secretariat of the National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Service (SNAICC), State Committees to Defend Black Rights and the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee.

The coalition’s program of action will educate the national and international community and direct a sustained lobbying campaign towards the Hawke Government. The aim is to convince Cabinet that it must meet its responsibilities towards Aboriginal people.

The Government must be urged to use its massive resources to counter the negative propaganda of the New Right and other sectional interests against Aboriginal people.

The international action has already begun. Helen Boyle, from the NSW Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Committee, represented the Coalition at the August meeting of the non-Government United Nations Sub-Committee on Racism in Geneva. Helen told the gathering of organisations of indigenous peoples that there was in Australia a “chilling pattern of institutionalised racism”. And, referring specifically to the infamy of the deaths in custody, she demanded that the Australian Government be made to value Aboriginal lives as highly as others.

Canada

Similar messages and calls for international support have been presented to the June meeting of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Later this year, representatives of Aboriginal organisations will join brothers and sisters from Commonwealth indigenous people’s organisations at a meeting to precede the CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) in Vancouver. That meeting has been organised by the First Nations of Canada. A representative of the organisation, Cree tribal councillor Ron Lameman, addressed the Alice Springs meeting and expressed the support of Canadian Aboriginal people for the Coalition (see story P. 27).

The Alice Springs meeting endorsed the appointment of Kevin Tory (Trade Union Committee on Aboriginal Rights, NSW) as interim national co-ordinator for the Coalition.

Long March

National events already planned for 1988 mix protests against “Birthday Party” events with action which will draw attention to the true story of Aboriginal Australia past and present.

The “Long march” will be the first nationwide protest action. It is to culminate in a massive protest in Sydney on 26 January, when Aboriginal people and their supporters will ensure their voice is heard on the anniversary of the British invasion.

“We expect that Australia will be held internationally accountable for the fact that it is the only former British colony which has yet to make a proper settlement with its indigenous people”, Pat Dodson said.

“But 1988 will be worse than meaningless if we do not lay solid foundations for a proper and just reconciliation between Australia and the Aboriginal people”.