**Black Power and Aboriginal Arts**

Today, people have become accustomed to the unprecedented international interest shown in all aspects of Aboriginal art and culture. International recognition and success is currently enjoyed by a multitude of Aboriginal artists and performers, ranging from filmmaker Ivan Sen to artist Vernon Ah kee, and musician Gurrumul Yunupingu, to name but a few. This situation has only developed over the past three decades, and what most people do not know is that it did not emerge from a vacuum. To a significant extent it can be attributed to a short period of dramatic change that occurred in the early 1980s in the administration of the Aboriginal Arts Board. Furthermore, that change was created by people who had earlier in the 1970s been closely associated with the Black Power Movement.

In the early 1970s The Whitlam Government established the Australian Council for the Arts and one of units within the Council was the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB). The AAB consisted of a part-time panel of eminent Aboriginal artists (the first Chairman was Dick Roughsey) and a full-time administrative unit staffed mostly by non-Aboriginal project officers. The first administrative Director of the AAB was Robert Edwards, a non-Aboriginal bureaucrat. In those early days of the AAB the only Aboriginal staff member was the legendary Chicka Dixon, who had been a mentor and father figure to members of the Black Power movement at the time of the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy. Because Dixon was an unapologetically political person, he would frequently bemoan the fact that the AAB was dominated by white administrators and he longed for the day when the Board would be run by Aboriginal people.

In fact he complained to me so often that in 1974 I told him not to worry because one day he would be Chairman of the Board and that when that happened I would join him and take over as Director. My statement was at the time intended only as consoling words for Chicka who I knew was extremely frustrated with the Board administration in those early days. Never did I ever think that what I said would become reality.

Ten years later in 1983 my words came back to haunt me when Chicka rang me and told me that the Hawke Government were going to appoint him as Chairman of the AAB. He then reminded me of my promise made a decade earlier; that I would become Director of the Board to watch his back within the administration, and to assist him in developing wide range of reforms that he had been waiting all those years to implement. It wasn’t something that I was particularly interested in doing at that point in my life, but I had made a promise to Chicka, and because he had been a great mentor to me in my youth I owed it to him.

In due course I was appointed as Director and Chicka and I embarked on his grand plan to completely reform the policy and functions of the Board. But before we had even started we had both made a political point by publicly announcing that each of us would only serve one three year term in each of our respective positions. This was because, as we both said at the time, that we believed that power corrupts and that if we stayed longer than one term then we would be corrupted by the power that we had. This was a public undertaking that we both lived up to when three years later we both refused a second term.

Another reason that Dixon had accepted the challenge of reforming the AAB was that the Hawke Government had said that he could select the members of a reconstituted Board. This was to be important if the reforms he proposed were to be implemented. The members selected by Chicka included Poet and activist Kath Walker, Playwright Jack Davis, Kimberley Land Council activist Peter Yu, and the first Tasmanian appointed the AAB, James Everett.

The first major reform we implemented was to ‘Aboriginalise’ the AAB administration. When I was appointed as Director, I had been the first Aboriginal Director of the AAB in its ten years of operation. When I took over I found that I had about twelve staff, only one of whom was Aboriginal. So my first task was to assemble my staff and gently advise them that the new administration believed in ‘Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs’ and that whilst we appreciated the work they had done in the past, we were nevertheless seeking to replace all white staff with Aboriginal staff. After a period of delicate negotiation I managed to replace all non-Aboriginal staff members with Aboriginal staff. The sole white person retained was Chris McGuiggan, who Chicka felt had certain expertise that we could use. So that three months after taking over the Board we had 13 staff members, only one of whom was white. This is the only instance in the history of Aboriginal affairs where a government agency was able to restructure and genuinely ‘Aboriginalise’ its administration.

Chicka and I then got down to the business of changing the way the Board had functioned under its previous white administrators. The first thing we noticed was that the majority of organisations and individuals that had received Aboriginal Arts Board grants in the previous twelve months had been non-Aboriginal. We believed that this was inequitable and unjust, so we introduced a new policy whereby no non-Aboriginal groups or individuals would be eligible for AAB funding unless under exceptional circumstances. Thus, with the stroke of a pen we were able to effectively double the amount of funding available to bona fide Aboriginal projects.

We then turned our attention to what were defined as major organisations receiving large annual grants from the Board and discovered that none of these major bodies with recurrent funding were administered by Aboriginal people. So we advised each of these bodies that future funding would be dependent on progress made on either appointing or training Aboriginal people to take over responsibility for their administration. This was a controversial measure, but over the next three years most of these organisations reformed their operations to create a greater level of Aboriginal control and ownership.

We then set out to identify individual artists, performers and writers who we thought were worthy of encouragement and support and had been neglected in the past. We noticed that there had been a clear bias to what the white administrators had regarded as ‘proper’ Aboriginal people (so-called ‘traditional people’ in northern Australia). We changed that policy to redress the historic imbalance and focus more on artists from southern Australia. Thus the Dixon chaired AAB provided the first meaningful support to artists and performers such as Tracey Moffatt, Lin Onus, Michael Riley, Bobby McLeod, No Fixed Address, and Aboriginal fabric and fashion designers. At the same time we dramatically increased funding to Aboriginal artist cooperatives across northern Australia that involved more than 5000 artists. These art and craft hubs would later generate the art that came to excite and inspire a vast international audience. We also provided funding for the first National Aboriginal Playwrights Conference and for Aboriginal and Islander people to participate in the South Pacific festival of Arts.

But the most important thing I think we did was to lay the groundwork and provide seed funding for the *Aratjara* exhibition that to this day remains the most successful Australian art exhibition to have ever left Australian shores. During the late 1980s and early 1990s the *Aratjara*  exhibition was staged in some of the most prestigious galleries in Europe, including Paris, Kunstammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen Dusseldorf, Germany, the Hayward gallery in London, and the famed Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, Denmark. Both Dixon and myself believed that art and culture was an important way of creating an international awareness of Aboriginal people and their political struggle in Australia.

That is why we gave strong support to international ventures such as *Aratjara*. In 1984 we also provided support to enable a production of the play *Bullies House*, starring Ernie Dingo, Justine Saunders and Tommy Lewis at the Long Wharf Theatre in Connecticut USA. These international ventures laid the groundwork for a growing awareness overseas about not just Aboriginal art, but also the situation of dispossession and deprivation suffered by Aboriginal people.

In more recent times it has become fashionable for the new Black elite to diminish, denigrate or just ignore the achievements of the Black Power Movement that shook Australia in 1972 with the Aboriginal Embassy. But people should have a better understanding of their own history and know that the impact and influence of the radical Aboriginal movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s was far more extensive than many conservative Aboriginal leaders of today would have you believe.

**By Gary Foley**

2nd August 2012