**Memoriam to my Friend and Mentor: Bruce McGuinness**

**Bruce McGuinness.tif**

Nine years ago in early September 2003 my close friend, political collaborator and mentor, Mr Bruce McGuinness, passed away in Melbourne after a protracted battle with lung disease. I write this tribute to him partly because in the short attention span of today’s generation the important stories of those who devoted their lives to the struggle for justice are too soon forgotten. It is important to keep telling these stories so they live on in the memory of each generation to one day inspire a new generation of fighters. I also hope to convey to the reader a sense of the humanity and humour of Bruce McGuinness the man, who was not really what most people who did not know him imagined him to be. He was neither the archetypal or stereotypical Black Power leader. He loved fast cars and his musical tastes ranged from Bob Dylan through John Prine to the Rolling Stones, and yet he was in many ways an unreconstructed Marxist-Leninist to the end. But he was also a great believer in the importance of ‘community”, and that the overall political, economic, physical, spiritual, and psychological health of the community was vital for the well-being of the individual within that community. He may have been a man of contradictions, but it was the contradictions and his satirical appreciation of those contradictions that made the man so interesting.

Bruce McGuinness should today be perceived as one of the most important Aboriginal political leaders of the 20th Century. He had been the man who planted the term “Black Power” in the Australian vernacular and national psyche in 1967 when he was an official of the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne. He has been described as the “Ideological Godfather of the Black Power Movement”, but he was also a pioneer in the development of a national network of Aboriginal “community-controlled health services”. Bruce was also instrumental in the later emergence of the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation (NAIHO) in the 1970s. NAIHO was ostensibly a national ‘’Umbrella organisation” that had been established to represent the interests of the new national network of community-controlled health services.

Bruce McGuinness had a long history of political activism which went back to his youth when he had been mentored by his uncle, the legendary Bill Onus. In 1969 when he was working at the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL), he invited an otherwise obscure Caribbean academic , Prof, Roosevelt Brown, to speak at a meeting at the League. The term Black Power was used at the meeting in the context of black control of black affairs and the basic human right of Self-determination. Some at the Advancement League took exception to the term “Black Power” and overreacted in a manner that delighted the Australian media. Consequently newspapers in all States had a field day with headlines about “Black Power” and stories that equated the term with “black violence and “Black racism”. This gross distortion of the ideas of Black Power frightened many whites and almost as many blacks.

Furthermore, it suited the power structures in Australia to frighten Aboriginal people away from ideas that might lead to their regaining control over their own affairs. But in some parts of Aboriginal communities around Australia, the headlines triggered an enormous amount of interest. The thinkers among a younger generation that had under the old assimilation system been given access to a level of education were attracted by ideas of self-determination and political and economic independence. And thus small collectives of young Aboriginal activists in cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide began adopting and adapting ideas of Black Power to the Australian context. What happened over the next five years, culminating in the world famous Aboriginal Embassy protest of 1972, changed the course of Australian history. Thus McGuinness can be said to have been an originator of the Black Power Movement in Australia.

I first met McGuinness at the annual Easter Conference of the Federal Council for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) in Canberra in 1970. It was at this conference that McGuinness was part of a small group that argued for Aboriginal control over FCAATSI. The irony was that FCAATSI was our only national political organisation at the time, but it was not controlled and run by Aboriginal people. The white people who controlled FCAATSI were what we would call do-gooders, who were basically decent people but their paternalistic attitudes prevented them from understanding that Aboriginal people were capable of managing their own affairs. Thus McGuinness and Brisbane activist denis Walker led the charge for Aboriginal control, but they were defeated when the whites used their numbers to defeat the proposal. This led to an attempt to create an alternative national Aboriginal-only body, the National Tribal Council (NTC). That organisation was short lived as the Black Power movement in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne took Aboriginal politics in a different direction.

I had been very impressed with McGuinness and his thinking throughout the FCAATSI and NTC debates, and in 1972 I decided to spend more time around him to develop my ideas and maybe steal some of his, so I moved from Redfern to Fitzroy. By this time Bruce had enrolled as a mature-age student at Monash University, which at that time was a hotbed of student political activism so it was a great place to be. After I had turned up in Melbourne uninvited and broke on McGuinness doorstep saying I was here to learn from him, Bruce informed me the first thing we had to do was get me an income. The next day he took me out to Monash University and instructed me to go along with whatever he was about to do, and I agreed. We then marched into the office of the Monash Sudent Union, where McGuinness demanded to see the President. A young man came out and Bruce said, “You know who I am?”. The President said, “Oh yes Mr. McGuinness! What can I do for you?”

Whereupon Bruce said, “You know what you need?”

The President replied, “What?”

Said McGuinness, “You need a Race Relations Officer!”, and pointed at me and said, “And here he is.”

The President of the Union looked dubious but finally responded, “OK. What do you need?” and Bruce replied “We need a table, chair, phone and a phonebook”

The President looked relieved as he gave us what we wanted, and then McGuinness turned to me and said, “Right. I want you to sit at this phone and ring every college and school in Melbourne and offer your services as a guest lecturer in Aboriginal studies at $30 per lecture”. It worked and that was how I survived my first 18 months in Melbourne and gained extensive experience in the art of public speaking. As it turned out Monash was also a great place to be at that time of student unrest and political activism and both Bruce and I made strong and lasting friendships with people many different nationalities. At the same time we were able to broaden our political awareness on a range of issues, especially the situation of the Palestinian people.

Later that year Bruce made the first film ever directed by an Aboriginal person. That film was called *Black Fire* and was a 20 minute b&w 16mm production which was essentially a collection of random political thoughts, but which 40 years later stands up rather well. Furthermore, the film features cameos by several major political identities of the time, including Country and Western legend Harry Williams and his son Bertie, who was one of the original founders of the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy. Also to be seen in the film is Pastor Doug Nicholls and Monash anthropologist Lorna Lippman.

Bruce McGuinness would go on to become one of the most important Aboriginal leaders of his time. He was a founder of a revolutionary education program at Swinburne College that evolved into the Aboriginal Health Worker Training project called Koori College. He was also the long term Chairman of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS), which led to him becoming one of the founders and key organisers of the National Aboriginal & Islander Health Organisation. He had also been the first Melbourne Aboriginal elected representative on the first national Aboriginal consultative body, the NACC set up by the Whitlam Government in 1972. In all of these roles McGuinness was an inspirational leader who had a strong influence on those around him.

Unfortunately in 1978 Bruce was severely injured in a serious car accident which, whilst it took a bit of the sting out of him for a while, did not stop him from going on to become one of the most influential leaders of the 1980s. In the late 1990s his health took a further serious turn when he was incapacitated with emphysema and he would spend his last five years in a wheelchair. When he finally succumbed in 2003 he died in poverty. There was not a large contingent of national luminaries at his funeral, but there was a rather large contingent of community people; battlers, boxers and workers and the ordinary folk who loved him. Which is how it should have been, and as a man of the people, it is what would have pleased him most.

**By Gary Foley**

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