

COVER FOR PETITION TO QUEEN ELIZABETH II OF ENGLAND 2013

Right a Historic Wrong, Complete Unfinished Business and Become a Part of History

The Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia respectfully petitioned King George V of England to prevent the extinction of the Aboriginal race and to grant Aborigines representation in Federal Parliament. They said that their lands had been expropriated and their legal status denied. By early 1935, nearly 2,000 signatures were obtained with most states represented. The final number was 1814 signatures – about 900 from Queensland, mostly from Palm Island, over 500 signatures from Western Australia, 350 from South Australia, 9 from the Northern Territory and a small number from Victoria and NSW.

The petition was initiated in 1933 by Uncle William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League, the first national Aboriginal organisation in Australia and based in Melbourne. William Cooper forwarded the petition to the Commonwealth Government in October 1937, requesting that it be presented to the King of England via Australian Prime Minister Joseph Lyons. The government informed Uncle William in March 1938 that they could not forward the petition to the King on constitutional grounds. Why? The Aboriginal petitioners were all subjects of the King but not citizens of Australia - having lost citizenship when Australian states federated in 1901.

Not only did they lose their sovereignty, their land and their way of life to the new settlers, but the settlers were citizens and the original inhabitants were not! Also, Section 51 of the constitution meant that the Commonwealth Government had no authority to pass legislation for Aborigines, including legislation giving them representation in Federal Parliament. They only had jurisdiction over the Northern Territory.

This began the struggle that eventually led to the 1967 referendum which successfully changed the constitution so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people could be counted in the Australian census and the Commonwealth could have responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. It also led William Cooper to work with NSW Aborigines to hold the original Day of Mourning in Sydney on Australia Day 1938; and to talk the churches into holding Aboriginal Sunday in 1938, which became National Aborigines Day and eventually NAIDOC that we still celebrate today.

Alf Turner (Uncle Boydie) is the grandson of William Cooper and his dream is that his grandfather's original petition be presented to the granddaughter of King George V, the present Queen of England. This would right a historic wrong. This is unfinished business. Friends of Uncle Boydie have teamed up to support him to gather 1,814 signatures from Indigenous people around Australia and their supporters and to have an audience with the Queen in 2014 to present the petition.

The original list of signatures has been lost in time. We know that time has moved on and we do have Indigenous representation in Federal and State Parliaments though not enough. Also, Indigenous people are not in threat of dying out as a race as some thought in 1938. However, Indigenous people are still dying about 20 years earlier than non-Indigenous people and much more needs to be done to close the gap on all socio-economic indices. Land and legal rights are still issues and we have the current Journey of Recognition to recognize Indigenous people in the constitution and remove racism. The basic essence of this petition is still relevant and it is a plea from Indigenous Australia down the generations that needs to be heard. Please sign it - to respect our elders and become part of history!

By Barbara Miller