

# **ONE STORY OF AUSTRALIA'S CONNECTION WITH NELSON MANDELA**

**By Barbara Miller 9.12.13**

With the passing of Nelson Mandela, the world mourns but also celebrates the life of an extraordinary man of great vision, great passion for justice, a model of humility, forgiveness, grace, dignity and perseverance. He was a courageous leader, a world statesman, a man of great maturity and compassion, one who made the hard decisions with love. As the accolades pour in from everywhere, we know the world is richer for his life. Not only is he the father of South Africa but he is a father to all those who choose reconciliation instead of bitterness, love rather than hate and understanding rather than fear.

There are undoubtedly many stories of the lives touched by Nelson Mandela. There are undoubtedly many stories of people and nations who worked to change South Africa's apartheid policies and bring freedom and dignity to the people. One such story is told via an extract from my book about an Aboriginal pioneer for civil rights in Australia – William Cooper.

It is interesting that Nelson Mandela chose Australia as the first country to visit when he travelled overseas because of the anti-apartheid stance of the Australian government and many of its people. One of the first international leaders to visit Nelson Mandela in prison was former Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Fraser who continued in international affairs after his prime ministership.

“At the same time Malcolm Fraser, as the chairman of the Commonwealth eminent persons group, whose goal was to dismantle apartheid in South Africa, helped to clear the way for peaceful change.

As part of that role, he pressured the South African government to fast track Mr Mandela's prison release.”<sup>1</sup>

**EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 7 – ‘HOW I GOT INTERESTED IN WILLIAM COOPER’ IN  
“WILLIAM COOPER, GENTLE WARRIOR: STANDING UP FOR AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES AND  
PERSECUTED JEWS” BY BARBARA MILLER**

## **SPRINGBOK TOUR**

Certainly it was my time at the University of Queensland (UQ) that had an influence on me becoming an activist for social causes. While I participated in events protesting against the war in Vietnam and against conscription, one event particularly crystallized my support for Aboriginal rights. It was the 1971 Springbok rugby union tour of Australia. The Springboks were an all-white team from South Africa, symbolizing the apartheid regime's refusal to allow black South Africans the right not only to participate in sport but in all areas of life. This was an opportunity to make known our opposition to the policies of that regime and possibly help change its policy.

The UN General Assembly in 1968 urged boycotts of sporting contacts with South Africa. Such boycotts hit Britain in 1960-1970 and also Australia in 1969-70. During the 1971 Springbok rugby union tour, protests were held around Australia where the Springboks were playing. In Brisbane, where I lived, they were staying at the Tower Mill hotel on Wickham Terrace.

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<sup>1</sup> Rowland, Michael “Nelson Mandela: Australia's role in ending apartheid” in <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-06/top-figures-recall-australias-role-in-ending-apartheid/4750262>

It was a cold winter's night of 22 July 1971 when 400 of us, mainly students, were confronted by 500 police. There would have been more protesters but many bought the official line that "sport and politics don't mix".

Trade unionists did not take part in the protests but did make life difficult for the Springboks with the Liberal government of Prime Minister Billy McMahon providing Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) transport as civilian carriers would not transport them around. McMahon also made Enoggera Army Barracks available for the extra police Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen brought in. The Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) black banned plumbing works at the Ballymore rugby ground so the game was moved to the Exhibition grounds. The BWIU also stopped the production of police batons and the AMIEU prevented the transport of police horses to the demonstration.

However, as we faced the police that cold night, we didn't know what was in store for us. We knew that Joh Bjelke-Peterson had overreacted and called a State of Emergency in Queensland eight days before the game and had suspended civil liberties for a month. This was not a good omen! The legislation gave police a free hand and Qld became known for many years as a "police state".

It was just idealistic students like me, some of our lecturers and Aboriginal people who lined up to say no to apartheid in a peaceful demonstration. Suddenly the police moved forward and forced us to run down a steep hill in the dark of night. We couldn't see what was in front of us. It was dangerous. The police quickly followed, punching those fleeing and using batons on the surprised and scattered group. It was a frightening experience. Somehow I managed to escape unhurt. Others didn't. I don't know how many arrests or hospitalisations there were.

While I disagree with the word riot, one account describes it like this:

"On the night of the (police) riot, the numbers of students, Aboriginals and academics outside the Mill was swollen by plain clothes police who acted as agent provocateurs. With no warning, the line of uniformed police marched forward and ordered the protesters to clear the footpath. The demonstrators were forced to flee down the steep and pitch-dark hill into Wickham Park. The police follow attacking with fists, batons and boots as their plain-clothes colleagues join in. Some protesters escaped by jumping an eight-metre high embankment into the busy traffic of Albert Street below. Others were simply thrown over." <sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, one of the student protestors was Peter Beattie, much later to become an ALP Premier of Queensland. He describes this event as the birth of his political conscience. <sup>3</sup> I did not know him at the time, though I knew Matt Foley who was later to become an ALP parliamentarian. I knew Matt from my association with the Aboriginal Legal Service in Brisbane which was set up with funding from the Whitlam government about two years later.

On the night of 22 July 1971, Peter ran into the nearby Trades Hall to get away from police but was followed in and jumped on and held to the floor by three police. He was taken under armed guard to the orthopaedic ward of the Royal Brisbane hospital for observation of suspected spinal injuries. Though he was the one assaulted, he was charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. <sup>4</sup>

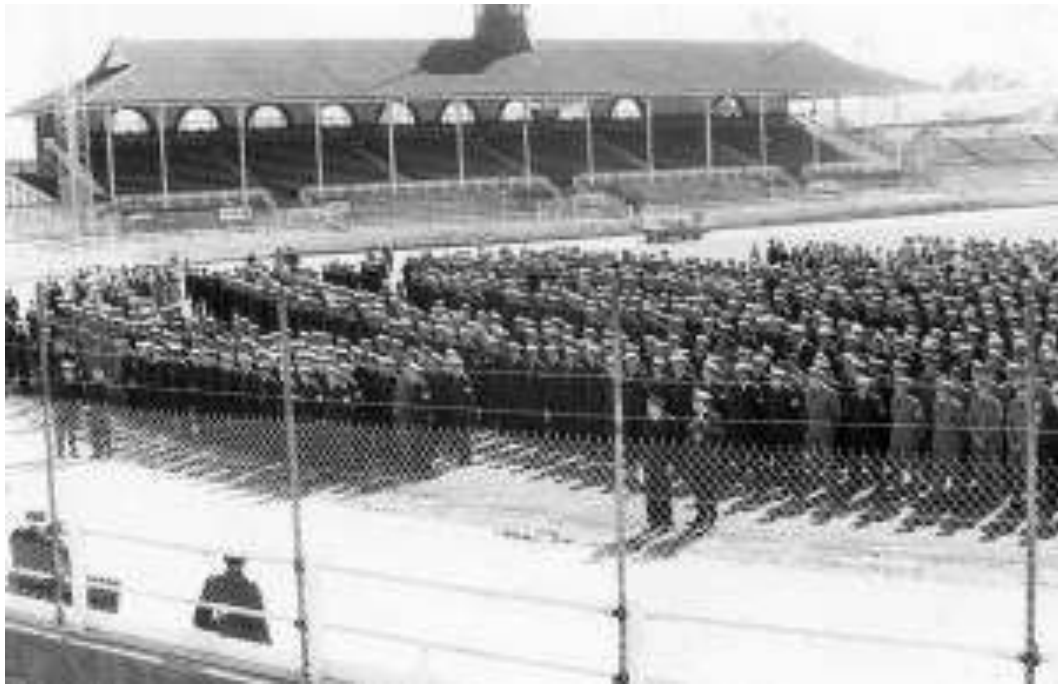
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<sup>2</sup> <http://woollydays.wordpress.com/2010/10/02/the-courier-mail-and-the-1971-Brisbane-Springbok-riot>

<sup>3</sup> ABC broadcast 'Rewind' 26 September 2004 with Beattie and others interviewed by Alan Hall

<sup>4</sup> <http://woollydays.wordpress.com/2010/10/02/the-courier-mail-and-the-1971-Brisbane-Springbok-riot>

The following night we were again demonstrating at the Tower Mill peacefully protesting and the police did not repeat their tactics. The next day was the game and, because of the protests, the crowd was down to about 6,000 instead of the expected 30,000. Somebody's hip pocket was hurt!



Police at Brisbane Springbok match (Woolly Days website)

Because the oval was ringed by barbed wire, the protestors demonstrated in nearby Victoria Park with 2,000 protestors faced by 900 police. Led by ALP Senator George Georges, they marched down Fortitude Valley into the city and had the first ever sit-in at Queen Street. Bill Hayden, an ALP Member later to become Governor-General of Australia, was with them and helped keep the march and sit-in peaceful.

That night however, as one thousand protestors gathered at the Tower Mill, Police Commissioner Ray Whitrod ordered the police to drive the protestors down the hill again to absolute mayhem.

In 2004, Alan Hall of the ABC interviewed Peter Beattie and Wayne Goss who also found the 1971 Springbok tour to be a defining moment and watershed experience in his life. Wayne Goss was to become Premier of Qld for the ALP finally breaking the long hold on power of Bjelke-Petersen and then Peter Beattie succeeded him. Beattie was Premier at the time of the interview.

“PETER BEATTIE: The government of the day had just politicised the whole police service. And I felt angry in the sense that I strongly believe that people have the right to protest.

ALAN HALL: The protestors weren't just confronting uniformed officers. Joh had turned the Special Branch into his own secret army. Special Branch documents from the time reveal that its undercover agents had infiltrated the anti-tour movement's rallies at Queensland University.

PETER BEATTIE: Everybody knew if you went to a protest there were always photos being taken. You know, you'd always pose to get your best side. (Laughs) And they had a dossier on everybody.

ALAN HALL: The Special Branch even met with the Nazi Party. They heard of their plans to blacken a member's face at a demo and have them scamper about on all fours eating a banana, while calling

out, "I want to be a Springbok! I am equal!"

WAYNE GOSS: And I've heard the story about the contact between them and the Nazi Party. It doesn't surprise me one bit. I mean, they were in the same part of the political spectrum.

PETER BEATTIE: They did collect information on people and they used it. I mean, information's power and Special Branch kept the records of who they were. They were the most vindictive government Australia's ever had. Unbelievably vindictive."<sup>5</sup>

It would be interesting to find out what photos and records they had of me. We all knew it was happening at the time. This was a defining moment for me as well. The experience made me ask myself, what is it like for Aborigines living in Australia? I didn't really know. So I made a point of finding out. It began a lifelong quest for me. I realized I didn't really know any Aboriginal people except the handful at University either studying or lobbying. So I started visiting them in their homes, particularly the Watson family and I attended some meetings of Aboriginal organisations in West End like the Born Free Club.

I remember my first attempt at a pamphlet on Aboriginal issues. I showed it to Dennis Walker for approval, son of the well-known poet, Kath Walker. To my surprise, Dennis said that it was sexist because I'd used the word 'Aboriginal man' a couple of times. I took this to heart and changed the wording.....

### **ALP NATIONAL CONFERENCE 1973**

Brian Noone was part of a group I was involved with called International Development Action (IDA) and he did the research for IDA on "Australia's Economic Ties with South Africa". I can't remember now whether I was asked or I offered to take it to the ALP National Conference at the Gold Coast in 1973 and to lobby for Australia to cut economic ties with South Africa because of apartheid.

As I didn't have much money, I hitched a ride from Melbourne to Surfers Paradise, Queensland for the conference, a distance of over 2,000km. I stayed at a backpacker hostel and attended the conference. There was a very kind gentleman who was giving people who needed it (including me) lifts in his car back to their accommodation from the conference. I was very surprised to find out it was Senator Jim Keefe from Townsville, a very humble man.

Though I was armed with good information, I needed to have good persuasive powers and a good strategy. After all, I was not a delegate or even an ALP Member and here I was trying to influence ALP national policy. I didn't have an opportunity to speak to the conference or to vote. However, the way opened up for me.

In break time, I managed to meet Bill Hartley of the Victorian Left and told him I wanted Australia to stop Australia's economic ties with South Africa because of apartheid. Because I was living in Victoria, he listened to me. He agreed with my point of view and said Bob Hawke, the head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions and ALP President would be the one to convince and then he could lobby the new Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. Bill spoke to Bob on my behalf. Bob had just returned from an International Labor Organisation (ILO) meeting and was very open to this. As ACTU President, he had supported a boycott of the Springbok rugby tour in 1971. I don't know whether economic sanctions against South Africa may even have been discussed at the ILO meeting. He was

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<sup>5</sup> ABC broadcast 'Rewind' 26 September 2004 with Beattie and others interviewed by Alan Hall

happy to put it to Gough and Gough was happy to support such a policy. I don't know who moved or seconded it but it got approved by a majority of the delegates. What a breakthrough!

I caught the bus back to Melbourne the morning after the conference finished and was happy to hear the announcement over the radio on the bus that morning. Because the ALP was in power, they were able to follow through on that decision and it did affect South Africa's apartheid policy, putting pressure on the regime to change its laws. There were many other international and internal influences that put pressure on South Africa to change but I was glad I did my part. I don't know if any other organisation in Australia besides IDA had been lobbying for this. But it shows the power of one – if I had not gone to the conference, it would not have happened (at least at that time) as it was not on the agenda.

## **BOB HAWKE CONTINUES ECONOMIC SANCTIONS**

Years later, Nelson Mandela chose Australia as the first country to visit when he travelled overseas. He thanked Bob Hawke for his actions in helping to bring an end to apartheid in South Africa. As Prime Minister of Australia, Hawke worked through the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) Meetings in 1985 and 1987 to try to put pressure on the South African government. Facing a brick wall, they needed a strategy that would work.

Hawke was the son of a Congregational minister, had taught Sunday school and preached sermons at Young Christian Movement camps. However in his twenties, he turned away from the church and didn't know if he believed in God or not "but Christian principles were in Hawke's bones."<sup>6</sup> The head of his department was Mike Codd, the son of an Anglican priest whose ministry was in Subiaco in Perth, the same district where Hawke's father Clem ministered.

A couple of days before the CHOGM meeting in Vancouver in 1987, Hawke hit on the idea that was to be a strategy that would finally bring breakthrough. He had been looking for a lever and that was bank loans to the South African regime. Codd did the research and discovered that there were major loans from American and European banks due to be rolled over in about eighteen months. If business in South Africa got a hint that this was under threat because of apartheid, they would put huge pressure on the government. Hawke assembled a small group of CHOGM leaders who would support the plan, keeping it from Margaret Thatcher who would not oppose apartheid.<sup>7</sup>

The whole plan was kept confidential and a secure communications system set up to prevent leaks and spying. But they needed people in the banking industry to say it was workable and to do the negotiations. Hawke and Codd met discretely with Jim Wolfensohn, an Australian who had become an American citizen and managed a small investment bank in New York. They explained the risks to his business and his life if he got involved. He was in. Australian Tony Cole, who eventually became head of Treasury, was appointed to negotiate with European banks especially the German banks who were the biggest lenders to South Africa.<sup>8</sup>

It worked! South African Minister for Finance, Barend du Plessis admitted in 1990 that the banks divestment was 'the dagger that finally immobilized apartheid'.<sup>9</sup> No doubt the long years of internal pressure by blacks and whites including Bishop Desmond Tutu and prayers and demonstrations around the world had helped as well. President De Klerk made the extraordinary announcement in February 1990 that the African National Congress (ANC), who they had delegitimized and violently

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<sup>6</sup> D'Alpuget, Blanche (2010) "Hawke The Prime Minister" Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press P11

<sup>7</sup> Ibid P203

<sup>8</sup> Ibid P204-206

<sup>9</sup> Ibid P207

attacked for years, was a legitimate political party and that Nelson Mandela had been freed from prison after twenty-seven long years. It was only a matter of time till apartheid fell and Nelson Mandela became President, doing his best to bring reconciliation and healing to a divided nation.<sup>10</sup>

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