
Interview: Marcia Langton

Communists, fascists supported land rights

Marcia Langton is based at Nugget Coombs's North Australian Research Unit, and was the last general secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. She is an anthropologist, and received her degree under Prof. Nicolas Peterson. She is an Aborigine.

Q: I understand there is a move now to get a regional agreement in the northern part of Cape York, is that right?

Langton: Yes. Have you heard of Philip Toyne? He was formerly with the Australian Conservation Foundation, and now he is the deputy secretary of the federal Department of Environment, Sports, and Territories. He is the head of the Environmental Strategies Directorate. Before he took up that position he worked for the Cape York Land Council; he actually donated his time, he was then a professor at the Environmental Law Institute in the Law School at the ANU [Australian National University]. With one of our staff members, Christine Zorzi, they worked in the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) for a number of weeks, taking instruction. They also did a lot of research.

The regional agreements that are referred to in the Native Title Act in Australia were sort of a last-minute addition to the Native Title Act, during the negotiations. The Kimberley Land Council is also working on a regional agreement.

I think the reason why Aboriginal groups wanted regional agreements, was to get governments to agree to hand back land, without a costly court process. That is part of the reason, particularly in places like the NPA, where there are only two small areas of land that are not either under an Aboriginal regime—they're all Aboriginal reserves, for instance—or deeds of grant in trust, or a conservation regime. So you can either have a case of native title claim in court for years, with all the appeals, litigation that goes on, which would cost millions of dollars. Or you could negotiate it. In the NPA, this is possible.

Q: How big an area of land are we talking about?

Langton: Find Cape York on the map: The Northern Peninsula Area is the top of that cape, from the Jardine River north. There is a river above Weipa, that is the Jardine. The only

people who live there are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and there are a few white staff stationed there by departments: teachers, nursing sisters, some contractors sometimes. There are a couple white families on the two areas which I suggested the traditional owners would buy. One of them already wants to sell to Aboriginal people. So it is very straightforward.

Q: Do you know how the Wave Hill walk-off got going [see article, p. 21]? I know there was a support network among churches, anthropologists, and unions, but it is unclear to me how that actually got started. The working conditions were horrible, that is totally clear.

Langton: They went on strike. You had a strike against the Vestey's for equal wages. It was [then-Prime Minister] Gough Whitlam who took executive action and must have negotiated this with Vestey. He obtained somehow a very large lease in Vestey's property and handed the lease over to the Gurindji. Part of the reason why I think that happened, was that this very large network throughout Australia supported the Gurindji, and it would have made the Australian government look like animals if indeed Vestey hadn't given it to the Gurindji.

You had some very famous people supporting the Gurindji, one of them being Frank Hardy, the novelist, who had been a Communist back in the early days of Australia. So Frank being the great novelist, he attracted all sorts of people, because he went up there and stayed with them, and I think it was just an accident that he was there.

Q: You mean he was there when it broke out?

Langton: Yes. He wrote a book then about it called *The Unlucky Australians*. And he got the press involved and he brought in all his union mates. Everybody just contacted everybody they knew, and before you knew it, you just had this huge network throughout Australia with actors, Lady This and Lady That, socialites and so on, all donating money to the Gurindji to keep them going, and then flying them down south to meetings. The Gurindjis became the sort of traditional rebel heroes in Australia. Everybody adored these old men.

Q: On this question of the Communist Party support of Aboriginal issues in the early period: Are there any good histories or highlights you could point me to? I know from the '20s on, they were talking about a separate Aboriginal nation, so they seemed to be very deeply involved.

Langton: I don't think so. What you always had was Aboriginal people going to whomever would help. You are talking about people who are in really dire circumstances. One of the main demands back in the '30s was for food, because people were starving. Aboriginal people didn't know who was who. One of the great supporters of the Aboriginal movement was actually a fascist! And he was interned, in the Melongwa internment camp.