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## Support vs. Solidarity: White Involvement in the Aboriginal Movement

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### Abstract.

The Aboriginal movement has been one of the most outspoken Australian social movements for nearly a century despite the small Aboriginal population, due partially to the support of many non-Indigenous Australians. This relationship has not always been an easy one, and Aboriginal activists have alternated between welcoming diversity and preferring a more closed movement. This paper looks at the involvement of non-Indigenous people in one Aboriginal movement organisation, the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group. The non-Indigenous members of the group were carefully selected by Indigenous activists who have had previous negative experiences with white supporters. All group members were acutely aware of the potential for reproducing colonial power relations, and so the white women in the group made conscious efforts to remain in the background. This strategy allowed for Aboriginal leadership; however it came at the expense of real solidarity and engagement between white and Aboriginal group members.

## **Introduction**

The past century of Australian activism has been punctuated by movements focused on labour, women's rights, and more recently, the environment, but one movement which has remained strong for nearly a century is the Aboriginal movement. While Indigenous people make up less than 3% of the Australian population (ABS 2006), their movement has been both long-lived and very vocal. This is likely due to the long involvement of non-Indigenous people in the movement, though this diversity has not been without contention. This paper examines some of the tensions presented by the inclusion of non-Indigenous supporters in an Indigenous movement, exploring the limits of 'supportive' roles and arguing for meaningful relationships of solidarity.

The desire to carefully 'manage' non-Indigenous supporters of Aboriginal groups is long-running. As early as the 1920s, groups such as the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association recognised the need for Aboriginal leadership, ensuring that the executive board was made up of Aboriginal people and white<sup>1</sup> members played a supportive role (Maynard 2007). White members of the Aboriginal movement have wavered between support and dominance throughout the century, most notably in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), which ruptured in 1970 following intense debate about the role of white people in the organisation (Taffe 2005, chapter 7). Aboriginal groups are presented with a challenging decision between diversifying—with the risk of white dominance—or remaining homogenous—with the risk of limiting their voice (Petray 2010).

Some published works illustrate the tensions faced by Indigenous people working with white supporters. For instance, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (quoted in Jones

2003, 44) regularly dealt with ‘emotional well-meaning “do gooders”’ who did not actually listen to what Aboriginal people had to say. Gary Foley (2000, 75) shares this sentiment, describing patronising and paternalistic attitudes from people who claim to support Indigenous struggles. These supporters are likely to frame Aboriginal activism ‘in ways that suit their own needs and perceptions’ (Amadahy 2007, 7). Other Indigenous activists feel that white supporters are unwilling to accept the violent colonialist history of which they are part, but that acceptance is necessary for a successful coalition (Birch 2004, 19; Foley 2000, 80). Still others find that non-Indigenous supporters require too much attention and education (Amadahy 2007).

It is not just Aboriginal people who are aware of the complex history of Australian race relations, however. Many white supporters are conscious of their positions of racial privilege and do their best to avoid replicating colonial power relations. To return to the example of FCAATSI, some of the most outspoken supporters of restricting white leadership were themselves white members of the group (Taffe 2005, chapter 7). This paper looks at a more recent example of white involvement in the Aboriginal movement in Townsville, focusing on those white supporters who struggle to avoid ‘taking over’. I question the difference between working in *support of* and working in *solidarity with* a social movement. The majority of the white women involved in the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group (TIHRG) were very careful to remain in supportive, rather than decision-making, roles. This was a conscious effort to avoid becoming dominant members of the group, but I argue that it reduced the potential for meaningful solidarity to develop between Indigenous and white group members.

## **The TIHRG**

The Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group has its origins in the Community Justice Committee, formed in response to the 2004 death in custody on Palm Island. In mid-2007, as the officer responsible for the death was preparing for trial, the group changed its name and became more broadly focused on Indigenous rights generally. I joined the group as a white supporter and researcher, using it as a primary field site in my research on Aboriginal activism in Townsville between May 2007 and late 2009. I worked as a ‘critically engaged activist researcher’ (Speed 2006), using my role as an activist in this group as ethnographic field work.

The TIHRG was described by the chairperson, Gracelyn<sup>2</sup>, as ‘a group of deadly Indigenous and white women’, and though its numbers varied between meetings there was a dedicated core of members who regularly attended meetings and participated in email discussions. The white members of the group were all personally invited, most by Gracelyn. She explained that she has worked with too many domineering white people to take chances so she carefully hand-selects the people she would like in the movement. As a result, the white membership of the group consisted mainly of academics and local feminists.

Before the June 2007 trial of Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley, charged with manslaughter over the Palm Island death (for details of this case see Hooper 2008; Waters 2008), the group had approximately ten Indigenous members and five to ten non-Indigenous members. The group met weekly and email discussions were in-depth. Following the close of the trial and the acquittal of Hurley, energy and numbers dropped considerably with five to seven white women and one to three Indigenous members attending meetings.

## **Speaking Up**

The ability of white people to work in solidarity with Aboriginal groups is still a challenge, if we think of solidarity in Berger and Cornell's (2006, n.pag.) terms as an active concept 'where people with privilege don't sideline themselves but instead endeavor the difficult task of both providing and respecting other's leadership in the movement, based on our complicated positioning and responsibility'. White people who are involved in the Aboriginal movement in Townsville largely fell into two groups. One group of people tried to direct activism, assuming leadership roles and speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people. This group of white supporters were quickly ignored, and often asked to change their behaviour or leave the group.

The other group of white supporters, those whose involvement is longer-lasting, have a tendency to 'sideline themselves'. For example, there was a very clear tendency for the white members of the TIHRG to defer to Aboriginal leadership. When decisions were made, the white women in the group waited to gauge Indigenous opinions before offering their support. There were very few disagreements in the group about strategies and tactics. But when trying to create productive, meaningful partnerships between white and Aboriginal people, Cowlshaw (2004, 68) argues, 'it is not enough to position oneself safely in the wake of Indigenous spokespersons, echoing and endorsing their sentiments'. The unequivocal support offered by white people is nearly as disempowering for Aboriginal activists as being spoken for, as it implies an unwillingness to engage with other ideas.

From the earliest stages of my involvement with the TIHRG, I witnessed the concerted efforts of white group members to be supportive but not overbearing. In the lead-up to the Hurley trial we had regular and long meetings, and in one of these a

non-Indigenous academic, Gail, spoke up twice. This was only noteworthy to me because, sitting next to her, I heard her mutter to herself 'Oh, shut up Gail, you're taking over the meeting'. However, the comments that she made to the whole group before silencing herself were well received and appreciated by other group members. The previous week's meeting had been dominated by another non-Indigenous woman, Karen, who tried to speak on behalf of the group throughout the evening. It is likely that Gail was hyper-conscious of her own role due to that previous meeting, when the white supporters in the group were provided with an example of the other, less desirable, type of white supporter. However, shutting herself up was not helpful because activist groups thrive on diverse input and opinions (Maddison and Scalmer 2006, chapter 5).

### **Indigenous Group?**

Shortly after the Hurley trial finished, the group waned. Whether the decline in energy was the result of burnout after three years of activism, or disappointment about the trial outcome, or some combination of other factors, the group was sagging. In particular, the attendance of Aboriginal women at meetings dropped considerably. But we still met semi-regularly and Gracelyn even invited a new member to join us. Sandy, a non-Indigenous academic, noticed after just a few meetings that the balance between members was decidedly white-heavy. She voiced her concerns to the group and offered, as the newest member, to step back if the group was too white-dominant. Sandy's concerns were exacerbated in the next meeting when Bronwyn, a long-standing non-Indigenous member of the group and supporter of Aboriginal activism for several decades, also noticed the lack of balance in the group. After several weeks of meetings with twice as many white women as Aboriginal, Bronwyn became



disillusioned. 'I thought this was an *Indigenous* group', she said with her eyebrows raised. Unhappy about working with white rather than Aboriginal women, Bronwyn did not see the potential to work in solidarity with the Aboriginal members of the TIHRG; instead, she was more interested in supporting those members, but the overwhelming whiteness of the group made it inauthentic, to Bronwyn, as a legitimate Indigenous group.

However, Aboriginal members of the TIHRG went out of their way to invite these white women to join. There seemed to be a genuine interest in partnership, for instance as Gracelyn sought feedback from white members of the group. She did not want to be told what to do, as evidenced by the exclusion of 'bossy' white people, but she regularly tried to have discussions with the group before making decisions. But productive relationships were hard to achieve because the white women in the group were afraid of recreating colonial power relationships, which meant that Gracelyn's attempts at discussions were typically met with a sense of 'if you think that's best' from the white members. Making decisions as a collective is a key factor in building solidarity (Goodwin and Jasper 2003, 92); shared decision-making gives group members a sense of ownership over the direction of the group. But when half of the members are unwilling to contribute to decision-making processes, it is difficult to achieve solidarity. It was possible for the Aboriginal women in the group to retain the majority say in decision-making while still engaging in discussions with all group members; this happened on a few occasions and all members seemed happy with the results. But the more common response meant that the group was unable to fully explore the possibilities and alternatives.

Instead, the white women in the group became, as one member put it, 'the ladies who make tea'. Speaking about the dynamics between white and Indigenous

academics, Cowlshaw (2004, 71) points out that many Indigenous academics are 'protected' from academic arguments because white people defer to their opinions. There is a similar dynamic with many white people involved with the Aboriginal movement. They are so afraid to offend Aboriginal people that they never really become engaged in the movement. Instead, they run errands and donate money and attend protests, but many white people lose interest in this limiting role and become decreasingly engaged with the movement.

### **Solidarity forever**

The attitudes illustrated by Gail, Sandy, and Bronwyn are illustrative of a strange sort of solidarity expressed by non-Indigenous participants in the Aboriginal movement. Solidarity is a multi-faceted concept, including 'the notion that the well-being of the group and/or the well-being of members of the group are of such a concern that potential threats to or opportunities to advance that well-being will produce nearly unqualified participation' (Hunt and Benford 2007, 439). Gail and Sandy both had the well-being of the group in mind, limiting their participation and offering to leave the group in order to ensure that Aboriginal women remained the dominant force in the group.

But solidarity is not just about interest in the well-being of a group; it is also about one's feelings of belonging to that group, 'such that an individual feels as if a common cause and fate are shared' (Hunt and Benford 2007, 439). This is where Gail and Sandy, and other group members like them, were limited in their ability to forge deep solidarity commitments to the group. They lacked the feelings of belonging which would allow them to remain present and active during meetings without sidelining themselves. Jasper (2003, 183) describes solidarity as a sense of 'we-ness',

but most of the non-Indigenous women in the TIHRG expressed more of a ‘them-ness’, separating the Aboriginal women as the ‘true’ members of the group. But, as bell hooks (1997, 499) writes about the potential for solidarity between black and white women within the US feminist movement, ‘We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression’. This assertion was illustrated by another non-Indigenous member of the TIHRG, Anna, who has been active in the local Aboriginal movement for twenty years, because she is able to engage with Indigenous activists. She participated in conversations, disagreed, and thought aloud about issues affecting the group’s well-being, without trying to speak on behalf of anyone and without telling anyone what they should do. In short, she worked in solidarity with Aboriginal activists and her presence was highly valued because of this.

The difference between support and engagement has been eloquently summed up in a saying that is used by many movements and has been most often attributed to Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson (though she says the quote came from a collective process):

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

It is entirely possible to achieve this meaningful engagement despite differences. Maddison and Scalmer (2006, 123), following bell hooks (1997), argue that ‘understanding the value of difference and ways of working *with* difference’, or ‘contingent political solidarity’, indicates that movement diversity is ‘enriched and kept fresh’ thanks to the involvement of diverse members. While Aboriginal people appreciate the support of those white activists who ‘sideline themselves’, these

individuals are almost interchangeable. In the TIHRG, it did not matter which white supporters came to meetings, as long as some did. On the other hand, when non-Indigenous members become deeply engaged with the group, their presence is important and they are asked for by name. It is far more meaningful and productive for the movement as a whole to have white people who work in real solidarity with Aboriginal people.

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<sup>1</sup> I consciously use the term 'white' in addition to 'non-Indigenous', following Kivel (2002). While there are people from many different backgrounds in Australia, most do not need to think about their race at any given time. Likewise, their race is also not considered by others; it is invisible. Referring to 'non-Indigenous' people maintains that invisibility, whereas 'white' begins to draw attention to the way whiteness has been normalised. In this paper, I use 'white' to refer to groups of people but 'non-Indigenous' when referring to individuals.

<sup>2</sup> At her request, I have used Gracelyn's real name in my writings. However, the rest of the names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

#### Bio-data:

Theresa Petray is a PhD student at James Cook University in Townsville, QLD. Her research on Aboriginal activism in Townsville presents her with a continuous struggle between support and solidarity.

#### Suggested Blow-ups:

The unequivocal support offered by the white people nearly as disempowering for Aboriginal activists as being spoken for, as it implies that they are unwilling to engage with other ideas.

But productive relationships were hard to achieve because the white women in the group were afraid of recreating colonial power relationships...