

The Woman who Changed Our Hearts and Minds: The Style and Grace of Faith Bandler
(September 27, 1918 - February 13, 2015)

“...change can be achieved if the people are taken along also. The ordinary people. We who are ordinary have helped save the world...”



Faith Bandler a very special friend of our family and of all Australians

Three great trees have fallen in the forest in such a short space of time: Gough Whitlam, Tom Uren and now Faith. Even in their passing they seem to have changed the tide of the nation. In thinking about this magnificent threesome we are inspired to do more and to live up to their legacy. I wonder whether this is why there is a change in the mood of the nation. The selfless dedication of these political greats is something that we once again look for in our political leaders.

Faith and her colleagues achieved the greatest triumph of Australian political history. They changed the foundation laws of our Australian Federation – our constitution and they did so in a way that has never been replicated before or since. In 2015 we are suddenly all aware of how hard that is to do.

On the 27 May 1967 out of an electoral roll of 6 million 182 thousand 585 people, 90.77 per cent, or 5 million 183 thousand 113 people voted yes to allow the Commonwealth to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Aboriginal people alongside all other Australian citizens. It was an auspicious day in our national life, the highest yes vote ever achieved in a referendum and I still do not think we understand enough how great an achievement this was and how much effort went into achieve it.

On the face of it the change did not seem much. The referendum simply omitted the words below.

51. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:-

...(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.

~~*127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.*~~

Yet the removal of the words ‘... other than the aboriginal people in any State...’ in section 51(xxvi) and the whole of section 127 began a process of recognition and responsibility that ensured that the whole nation had to take note of Aboriginal issues which were before that time largely ignored.

Faith noted that the successful referendum was really just a beginning. It created a Commonwealth department of Aboriginal Affairs and it created a new series of challenges that had reverberations across her noble band of activists and meant the demise of her beloved FCAATSI (Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders).

Faith wrote that the euphoria of achieving the yes vote soon gave way to a new realism and a new set of political and collegial challenges: “The white public, having responded positively to the referendum, became bewildered when that wasn’t the end of the problem. Indeed, it seemed to be the beginning of a problem, for Aborigines began to make their presence felt- on the evening news and in the morning headlines. Yet these were not the sorts of revelations and images that white Australians wanted to hear- infant mortality rates, imprisonment rates, poignant pictures of Aboriginal parents and children standing barefoot in rags in front of shacks constructed from material from local dumps”. (*Turning the Tide*, pp. 163-4)

The 1967 referendum launched Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics as we know it in Australia today. It was as if the heart and soul of the first nations was opening up and pouring out its trials, tribulations and challenges for all to see on the national and international stage. Perhaps there was a false expectation that the Commonwealth *might heal these now visible wounds and challenges*. If so then it soon gave way to a new and quite hard political realism. The coming era was an era of bureaucracy, professional politics, media and the coming and going of a succession of white Aboriginal Affairs Ministers. The Aboriginal affairs portfolio Robert Tickner once famously judged was a kin to being the toilet cleaner on the Titanic.¹

In this tough new period I got to know Faith on the Board of the Evatt Foundation and she was like a shining light of integrity, grace and style. She was troubled I think because it was an era when the comradery and real community politics of FCAATSI gave way to something else. It was as if the Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander spirit of sharing and doing had given way to professional politics. She turned to writing and to seeking justice for her own mob.

¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/am/stories/s171053.htm>

From 1990-1994 I worked with Faith to achieve Federal government recognition of South Sea Islander Rights. Because of Faith's selfless dedication to FCAATSI it was not well known that Faith's own Dad Wacvie Peter Mussing from Biap village, Ambrym, in Vanuatu, had been forcibly taken to Australia in 1883 when he was 12. Faith began to organise to achieve compensation for what was Australia's slave trade. In 1990 Faith and I planned a Survey of South Sea Islanders in Queensland and Northern New South Wales. Of the 60,000 South Sea Island workers brought to work on Queensland sugar plantations and cattle stations from 1863-1904, we estimated that 20,000 descendants still remained. South Sea Islander families constituted a dispossessed black minority group that suffered discrimination in relation to employment, housing, health, legal services, education, training and economic development. The Evatt Report led to a government investigation by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, published as *The Call for Recognition*. The final result was the 1994 announcement of a package of grants, programs and special funding for Australia's South Sea Islander community. I remember going with Faith to see Prime Minister Paul Keating in Parliament house. She was full of praise for him. She was beaming as we left. Keating had simply asked her: "Faith what do you want?" and when she told him. He said "Consider it done. Go home now. Don't worry about a thing". She knew he would deliver and he did.

This was ONE of a long series of political triumphs that had begun with an old roneo machine in Pitt St with Pearl Gibbs and Jessie Street. It is worth pondering in 2015 the make-up and dynamics of FCAATSI. This was a time when activists paid their own fares, accommodation, did their own printing and distribution. Donations, trade union and affiliation fees were the order of the day. It is amazing to think of the network of grass root activists across the country linking up for the first time. Jesse Street, Pearl Gibbs, Faith, Shirley Andrews, Gordon Bryant, Doris Blackburn, Charles Duguid, Doug Nicholls, Stan Davey, Bill Grayden, Bert Groves, Jeff Barnes, Barry Christophers, Dick Scott, Marjorie Broadbent, Stan Smith, Harold Blair, Joe Mc Guinness, Oogeroo Noonucal (Kath Walker), Harry Penrith, Joyce Claque, Alick Jackomos, Jean Jimmy, Jack Horner, Mick Lingiari and Riley Young and so many others. And of course it was not just the referendum that was on their political radar. Voting rights, equal wages, the first land rights battle at Gove and so much more. Faith wrote about the comradeship of this period and what a group it must have been. "The Queensland travellers would often meet up with the New South Wales people for breakfast in Mittagong, which is about half way between Sydney and Canberra. As the annual conferences were often held over the Easter break, these Mittagong meetings were often on Good Fridays, and picnic baskets filled with fresh buns and thermos flasks of hot tea and coffee were shared". (Turning the Tide, p. 75)

I asked Faith to deliver the speech to launch the Brisbane Institute on March 2, 1999. The simple remarks she made were so important at that time. She and I were coming home to a new city with new hopes and possibilities. Pauline Hansen and One Nation had come and gone. But it was in everyone's mind. When Faith spoke with her elegance, grace and dignity you could hear a pin drop. Any doubters about what that new little think tank would do over the next two years soon dropped away. It was a great period inaugurated by Faith in which she reminded us that while there was a minority in our community with racist and bigoted opinions, the vast majority were fair minded, progressive people who had supported Oodgeroo Noonucal's campaign to recognise Aboriginal people in 1967.

One of the memorable things Faith said that evening was "change can be achieved if the people are taken along also. The ordinary people. We who are ordinary have helped save the world...". She also said "We must always remember that Governments can legislate but not necessarily change the hearts of people". *Faith did change the hearts of people!* I think that summed up the spirit of all of her work and that wonderful grass roots movement that she personified. We need to go back to that spirit and once more change peoples hearts and the Australian constitution. Faith and the other giants who have recently fallen should inspire us now to renew our efforts to

recognise the first nations of this country. We ordinary people can change the world and the constitution.

Thinking about Faith, the tremendous political, supportive partnership she had with her husband Hans and their home on Kissing Point Road on Valentines Day reminds me of the meetings I would have as Executive Director of the Evatt Foundation with Faith. "I need to talk to you about something" she would say. Then she would lead me out of the office on Bridge St and we would walk over to a big old fig tree in the Botanical Gardens near the Conservatorium. Under the shade she would spread a blanket and sit down with her usual perfect dress and sometimes slip off her shoes. "Now we can talk" she would begin. I learned so much under that Fig tree.

Launch of The Brisbane Institute
Remarks of Faith Bandler A.M. D.Litt.
Customs House, Brisbane, March 3, 1999

When I was asked by my friend Professor Peter Botsman to come today, to say a few words here, I hesitated and asked him to give me a few days to think about it.

Each day of late I have almost despaired as I have watched the devastation of peoples' communities in so many parts of the world and also the problems we are confronted with here at home.

There is nothing like a challenge to pull you out of despair.

When we plan for the future we should survey and scan some of those places which in the past might have proved too painful to pursue.

There are many who feel secure only in a homogenous society. But change can be achieved if the people are taken along also. The ordinary people. We who are ordinary have helped save the world from destruction in the near past, and today we must save Australia from isolation as a nation.

Just for a moment we might glance into the past.

Although I was born on the Southern side of the Queensland border I have deep roots here.

My father was kidnapped as a child from his island, Ambrym which is one island of the eighty that make up the nation of Vanuatu. At the age of 13 he was shipped to Mackay and set to work on the sugar cane farms. He was too young, was not fluent in English, and did not and could not sign a work agreement, although some would believe otherwise.

My grandmother owned a house in Hutton Street, Albion, and this is where my mother's beginnings were.

I spent a brief time in this city at the beginning of the war, and it was here, in this city, that I watched the barrels of beer being rolled down Queen Street by the soldiers who wanted to quench their thirst after dark.

The early and not so early legislators created a devastating regime for Queensland's indigenous people, and similar cruel circumstances were introduced in all other states for Indigenous Australians.

This State may now show the way forward by making genuine amends. It is a good time now, and let us take some encouragement from the fact that those who would divide us because of our origins are now diminishing in strength. Their progress has been arrested.

Queensland can clean the slate. After all, under Oogeroo Noonucal's leadership at the 1967 Referendum, 89.21% of Queensland voters approved the Commonwealth's recognition of Aboriginal Australians. Not a bad result.

Queensland must reveal its caring spirit and concern itself with the people's everyday needs; their health, their children's health and education, caring for the teachers and everyone's physical and emotional security; their places of employment, where mutual respect between employer and employed should be apparent. Those things are important. They are the bricks that build a secure State.

Some today are threatened by globalisation and feel they are losing control of their lives. Those are matters for debate.

In moving forward, old certainties must be reclaimed. Old definitions must not be lost.

How can Queensland show its people that greater affluence does not necessarily bring fulfillment, indeed it can contribute to destruction of the environment. The truth is, many are becoming alienating with some business' drive for materialism.

Certainly there is no need for retreat, but there is need to examine our priorities, like: Integrating with other States and with the world; Stopping the tide of prejudice; Teaching about the care of this beautiful State with its lush environment and preserving our share of this earth from further destruction.

We must always remember that Governments can legislate but not necessarily change the hearts of people.

Brisbane and Queensland can become the pace setters for social change. They can be great centres where the arts will flourish and society's wealth and scope for fulfillment will reach every citizen.

The members of the Board of this Institute are some of Australia's most able citizens. They carry a commitment and a dedication to their responsibilities and it is my belief, they will make a contribution to the people of this State.

The Brisbane Institute will help make this great State an epicentre of political, intellectual and artistic life.

This Institute will provide a forum for public debate. The Romans used the market place. Brisbane has this very beautiful Hall. Let us strive to ensure it has the vibrancy of the market. Market places, after all, are where many of the world's concerns are debated.

I want to say this. While the Brisbane Institute functions for the benefit of this City and meets its intellectual needs, its own need for resources must be met. So please give it what support you can.

Let us remember the past, to earn the privileges and opportunities of the present, and face the future with confidence.

