

## 9 Political Activism

Alick, who had a fleeting experience of Aboriginal politics at Yarra Bank meetings in 1938–39 was drawn more fully and inevitably into the Aboriginal political world through his contacts with Doug Nicholls and others from the late 1940s, despite Alick's natural inclination of not being a political person. As he recalled in 1998, through Doug Nicholls' Gore Street church 'I got involved with some of his political meetings' although, as Alick quickly added, 'politics were never mentioned in church'. The 1950s became particularly lively at the state level as Aboriginal people challenged the assimilation policy, and this continued in the 1960s as the Aboriginal political scene across Australia 'heated up', taking Alick along with it.

With the death in 1942 of William Cooper, Doug Nicholls, along with Bill Onus, Margaret Tucker and others, became prominent political leaders and spokespersons for the Victorian Aboriginal community. By the 1940s, Victoria's Aboriginal Protection Board, then over seventy years old, was moribund. It did not meet or report to parliament; its management of Aboriginal affairs, such as it was, was handled by a few public servants. Children were continually removed from their parents and reserve lands were continually being whittled away and sold off to white farmers. Little wonder that Aboriginal people termed it the 'Aboriginal Destruction Board'. The Board also pursued an outdated policy of refusing to recognise Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent', who formed the vast majority of the 2000 Aborigines in the state, as being 'Aboriginal'. By the 1940s it came under sustained criticism from all quarters, especially Aboriginal people led by Nicholls, Onus, Tucker and others. In particular they challenged the Board's failure to provide adequate housing, health and educational services to Aboriginal people, to bring them to the standards enjoyed by other Victorians.

In a set of 'Objectives and Demands' issued in the early 1950s the Australian Aborigines' League also called for the Victorian government to end its policy of denying that Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent' were Aborigines or that they had special needs. It demanded the government take 'concrete responsibility' for the needs of 'Castes' (that is, Aboriginal people of 'mixed descent') outside the Lake Tyers reserve, without 'policing, interfering or overseeing' them. In particular, the statement called for urgent attention to their health, housing and educational needs. The 'Objectives and Demands' wanted the Lake Tyers reserve's title and property returned to Aboriginal people, and an end to the control of the residents' lives and movements, especially specific food rationing and their sterilisation, 'unless under the terms of their own free request, and not then until they have been examined by at least three independent doctors'. The claim of sterilisation is alarming, but little evidence has emerged about its incidence in Victoria. The League also wanted Aboriginal participation in the reserve's management and future. The statement also called for changes to the Protection Board, including the provision of elected Aboriginal representation.

Alick's political skills were heightened by association with Nicholls, the Secretary of the Aborigines' League. In his 'spare time' Alick toured with Doug Nicholls: 'Doug had a little Ford Escort in those days and we'd go to country towns pushing the political movement on Aboriginal people'. As awareness of the Aboriginal situation grew among the white community in the 1950s, Nicholls was in much demand as a speaker at Rotary and Apex clubs and church groups. Alick accompanied him to these meetings too, acting as his companion and driver. Alick wrote in 1993: 'I went along with him to these meetings. Doug did most of the talking'. But in 1997 Alick added, 'we'd go into the country and he'd give talks and eventually I learned to talk from him. [I would] give a few more little talks, but mostly I was his apprentice'. They also visited such places as the Ballarat Orphanage to check on Aboriginal children who had been removed from their families by the Aboriginal Protection Board. Alick once remarked that there were about a dozen living there most times they visited.

Alick knew Bill Onus, President of the Australian Aborigines' League, well although he was closer to his brother Eric. Bill Onus often promoted the Aboriginal political cause through cultural performances, boomerang throwing and social activities, which was attuned to Alick's community-building penchant. There was a strong vaudeville music tradition at Lake Tyers from the 1930s, and Margaret Tucker and others gave musical performances during wartime to raise money. Tucker organised the first Aboriginal Debutante Ball in August 1949, nineteen debutantes being presented to the Governor, Sir George Knox, and Lady Knox. Alick was to partner a debutante, the only non-Aboriginal person to do so, but that was the night he had to close the sale of his hamburger 'joint' and he missed out.

In April 1949 Onus organised a 'Corroboree Season 1949' at Wirth's Olympia on Easter Saturday, prefacing the program with the words: 'the object of this presentation of an all-Aboriginal entertainment is to show Australia that, given an opportunity, the Aborigine is quite capable of development along cultural lines'. Onus' preface also referred to the decimation of Aboriginal people since colonisation, and the need for a 'new deal' where, if given 'an equal chance', Aborigines would shine. He signed off the program, 'Bill Onus, Organizer and Producer (President of Australian Aborigines League)'. This 'Corroboree Season 1949' presented Aboriginal singers; including Margaret Tucker ('Princess Lilardia'), Edgar Bux, May Lovett and Joyce McKinnon; musicians such as Ted ('Chook') Mullett and his Gum Leaf Band; whip cracker and rodeo star Billy Bargo; and a comedy by Jacky (Eric Onus) and Jemmy (James Scott) 'the Brown Boys of Mirth and Melody'. It is unclear whether Alick saw this particular show although the program was in his archives. He certainly saw other such Corroborees on a smaller scale that Onus organised over the years.

Bill Onus operated a boomerang factory and art shop at Belgrave in the Dandenongs, which became another focus for Aboriginal people or those sympathetic to the cause. As Alick recalled: 'Bill was a great boomerang thrower, he would stand outside his shop a couple of feet from the glass windows, throw the boomerang and it would come back into his hands'. It was Bill Onus who taught Alick to throw,



Bill Onus shows his wares at Belgrave to 'Young Jimmy' Sharman and Alick around 1960.

a skill that later became important to Alick in many ways. Alick, Eric Onus, Bruce McGuinness and Stewart Murray ran the annual boomerang contest at Northcote Oval to raise money for Aboriginal welfare. Alick was often a judge, and later remarked, 'the trouble was that the white blokes used to win the championships' and eventually whites took over the event.

Bill Onus' shop and factory also provided a political education for Alick and others, for Bill was a deep thinker and a frequent speaker on public platforms in the Aboriginal cause. ASIO kept a file on him and this prevented him from making money in the USA throwing boomerangs. In these Cold War times Onus was claimed to be a 'Communist', simply because he had spoken to Communist (and Christian) meetings about the Aboriginal cause. A number of Aboriginal people worked for Onus in his factory, including his brother Eric and his wife Winnie, John, Joe and Bruce McGuinness, Harry, Mervyn and Iris Williams. Alick and Merle became very close to Eric and Winnie, and visited them frequently at Belgrave. It was perhaps at such gatherings

that Alick learned to play the gum leaf, possibly from Herb Patten, another skill Alick later used to good effect.

The Australian Aborigines' League remained the only Aboriginal body into the 1950s, but in May 1957 it was joined by a dynamic new organisation, the Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League (the League). It emerged from a controversy in 1956 about the appalling conditions of Aborigines at the Warburton Ranges Mission, Western Australia, who had been displaced from their Maralinga lands during atomic testing after 1947. Doug Nicholls travelled to the West with a West Australian Senator, Bill Grayden, and filmed their living conditions backed by the Melbourne-based 'Save the Aborigines Committee'. Some committee members — Nicholls, Gordon Bryant MLA, women's and peace activist Doris Blackburn, and Church of Christ Pastor Stan Davey — formed the Aborigines Advancement League, to promote Aboriginal welfare and rights in Victoria and across Australia. Alick was there from the outset although he took a back seat to such prominent people. As he remarked in 1996: 'we [Merle and I] were involved right from its inception. I'm not a foundation member but I was there when it first started — with my wife and family...we were the Indians...Nicholls, Davey and Bryant were the chiefs'.

The League focused on welfare, but was not shy of criticising Aboriginal policy in Victoria, or elsewhere in Australia. It certainly attacked the assimilation policy of the newly formed Aborigines Welfare Board in Victoria, which superseded the Protection Board in 1958. The League defined its role in 1959: 'to work towards the complete integration of people of Aboriginal descent with the Australian community with full recognition of the contribution they are able to make'. It defined 'integration' as the ability of a minority to retain its identity. Aboriginal self-reliance, and self-respect, were other key aims.

The League created a unique infrastructure and provided further opportunities for many people, including Alick and Merle, to assist the Aboriginal community. It raised sufficient money to employ Doug Nicholls as a full-time field officer, which freed him from his paid work at the Northcote Football ground. He was to organise practical help for Aboriginal people, such as emergency assistance, employment and legal advice. Nicholls also increased his public addresses

to churches and service club meetings. Stan Davey, honorary full-time League secretary, and other voluntary white workers, operated out of 46 Russell Street, Melbourne, and then 336 Victoria Parade, East Melbourne. These offices provided a centre for those living in and visiting the city and complemented Nicholls' Gore Street church. These premises also became a focus for Alick's life as he continued his part-time voluntary work for the community. In 1993 he described his role as 'voluntary welfare and field officer'. He was also a member of the League's Management Committee and on the Executive of Aboriginal hostels, which ran the Girls and Boys hostels in Cunningham Street. Merle was there beside him in most activities, leading some herself.

The women were the prime fundraisers. Gladys Nicholls commenced an Aboriginal Children's Christmas Tree Appeal in the mid-1940s which she organised for the next thirty years. To raise funds she established three opportunity shops in Brunswick Road and St Georges Road, Fitzroy, and held regular street stalls in High Street, Northcote. Merle and other Aboriginal women assisted. They were the driving force behind the push for a children's centre in Northcote,



Alick as Santa at the Aboriginal Children's Christmas tree run by the Advancement League

which failed to materialise due to a lack of a government permit. The building became a boys hostel instead, run by Aboriginal hostels Ltd. Gladys Nicholls, Merle, Geraldine Briggs and her daughters Margaret Wirrpunda and Hyllus Maris, and others, formed the National Council of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women.

By the early 1960s the Advancement League was supported by 36 branches across Melbourne and Victoria, which were also busy fundraising for clothing, bursaries, holiday programs and building projects. By 1965 the League boasted 2000 members. A survey identified that 88 per cent were professionals or white collar workers, and Protestant Christians and Jewish people were also over-represented. It published its own magazine called *Smoke Signals* in 1957 which ran till the 1970s. The League finally opened its own offices in Northcote, named the 'Doug Nicholls Centre' in 1966, raising 80 per cent of the capital itself. Alick was a key person involved in the fundraising. The League's new building soon became a focus for Aboriginal community and political life. Bill Onus donated a boomerang-shaped plaque, which read: 'This centre is erected to honour humble Australians and to provide a meeting place for those who believe that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'.

Alick became more overtly political working alongside Doug Nicholls. Alick was a social and welfare organiser by nature, a role he never gave up, but one now complemented by greater political activity in the Aboriginal cause. He also developed a greater awareness of politics in general. He was a Labor man by instinct — being the son of a Greek migrant who associated with Aboriginal people from Fitzroy — and also one by background, having a poor Depression boyhood in Collingwood and Carlton. Alick recalled in 1998 of pre-war politics: 'I didn't take *very* much interest, but even then, I was a Labor man, although I wasn't *voting*'. While in Sharman's boxing tent he often talked Socialism with Rud Kee, Sharman's tent manager, and he recalled in 1995 that 'I was socialist inclined'. Alick greatly admired Gordon Bryant, the federal Labor member for the seat of Wills in Coburg from 1955 to 1979. Besides being a founder of the League, and its first President, Bryant was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Whitlam Government in 1972. Labor's 'It's Time' slogan in its

1972 election victory always appealed to Alick who applied it particularly to a new deal in Aboriginal affairs.

Knowledge of 'over-policing' also politicised Alick. He recalled several incidents for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in the early 1990s. In the early 1960s Merle and Alick visited her aunt who lived in the transitional Aboriginal housing settlement of Rumbalara at Mooroopna. They spent the night there and the next day the police arrived and threatened to arrest them for staying without permission. Fortunately, someone brought in Charlie Huggard, who worked for the Welfare Board as the settlement's manager and rent collector. Huggard identified Alick and Merle, and 'we were allowed to stay'. A few months afterwards Alick was with Sharman's boxing tent at the Shepparton Show and while on the line-up board noticed the police arresting an Aboriginal friend, who was in the audience: 'After the show I went to the police station and said I was a friend...I asked why he was arrested. They said "Drunk and Disorderly". I said he wasn't. The police said "he doesn't have to be drunk for us to arrest him"'. Alick also related another story about having breakfast at the Builders' Arms Hotel in Fitzroy, an 'Aboriginal pub', during an Aboriginal Congress meeting in the mid-1960s. 'Charlie Carter from Lake Tyers was at a separate table. The police came in, grabbed Charlie and others and put them in the panel van and took them to Fitzroy Police Station and charged them with drunk and disorderly. It was about 9 a.m. [and he hadn't been drinking]'

The Australian Aborigines' League's activities continued to foster Alick's political education. It survived into the 1960s and became the all-Aboriginal branch of the Aborigines Advancement League. In August 1962 the Australian Aborigines' League Executive (but not Alick), met with Ray Meagher MLA, Acting Chief Secretary, to call for more Aboriginal housing, education scholarships, and to discuss yet again the future of Lake Tyers. At the Annual General Meeting in May 1963 Bill Onus reported on a visit to Lake Tyers, and the 'Save the Lake Tyers Campaign' Committee sent a vote of thanks to the League for its financial and moral support. It reported that a list of nine demands had been sent to the government. The meeting also heard a report from Rex Harcourt of the Batman Re-enactment Committee of the proposed celebrations for late May. 'Batman' was

to be flown in a helicopter to the Yarra. There was to be a presentation of a boomerang by eight prominent Aborigines to the 'Aborigines Friend of the Year', a boomerang-throwing contest, an essay prize, and several other competitions with proceeds going to the boys hostel. These re-enactments did not appear political, but they were. Aboriginal people admired Batman as the one person who had dealt with them over land, but by the late 1960s Doug Nicholls wanted to give the treaty back as the promised ongoing payments had not been made. By 1972 he was asking for a trust fund of half a million dollars by way of reparation.

In May 1963 Alick was unanimously elected as President of the Australian Aborigines' League. He was, with Arthur Burdeu (President 1936–42) the only other non-Aboriginal member ever allowed into this political organisation. Significantly, Alick was nominated by Bruce McGuinness, who was one of the more radical members, indicating widespread acceptance of Alick's role in the Aboriginal community. Alick remained President for three years.

Little is known of the Aborigines' League's day-to-day activities in this period, as the minutes of the group are missing, even from Alick's personal papers. There is no evidence of any controversy or trouble about his presidency. Indeed Colin Tatz, a lecturer in Politics and Economics at Monash University, and later the Aboriginal Advancement's League's nomination on the Aboriginal Welfare Board in 1965, recalled that Alick was

a born mediator. He was the born referee given his wrestling career, the referee or the guy in the corner who knew when enough was enough and when to break up the fight and when to let things continue. He had a wonderful sensitivity for when things were about to go wrong in a room and he would try and defuse it before it got to that kind of situation.

While President, Alick stimulated community sentiment and a pan-Aboriginal feeling by editing 'Aboriginal News' and organising annual Aboriginal balls. He also organised three Aboriginal Congresses.

The first was over two days in June 1964 at the Fitzroy High School. Alick stated in his 'Memoirs' that Gordon Bryant gave him

the idea. The Congress was attended by 70 Aboriginal people from Gippsland, the Western District, the Murray region and central Victoria. Lynch Cooper, son of William Cooper, drove virtually from Shepparton Hospital to be there. Non-indigenous speakers presented talks: Gordon Bryant, as Advancement League President; Ray Adams on the Cumeragunja farm project; Philip Felton, as Superintendent of the Welfare Board, and Shirley Andrews and Barry Christophers of the Council for Aboriginal Rights, who spoke on Aboriginal wages and conditions in the Northern Territory. A dinner dance run by Alick was held on the Saturday night, with entertainment by Aboriginal performers.

The Conference was a key moment in pan-Aboriginal action, with four 'Aborigines only' separate sessions, although Alick as President was present. The aim was 'the organisation of Aborigines in Victoria and the forming of regional branches'. The Congress resolved that the Aboriginal Branch of the Aborigines Advancement League (that is, the Australian Aborigines' League) would be the central 'all-Aboriginal' body in Melbourne, with five regional branches at Warrnambool,



With Merle at an Advancement League dinner dance, c. 1970

Cummeragunja, Orbost, Lake Tyers and the Goulburn Valley. Alick was reaffirmed as President of this 'all-Aboriginal' branch, to which there was no objection, confirming once again his unique status in the Victorian Aboriginal community. The Congress urged in particular the rehousing of Aboriginal people within three years and the provision of more social workers.

Alick organised a Second Aboriginal Congress in July 1965. He aimed for 'wide publicity' and informed delegates: 'if you attend with your friends this will demonstrate the determination of the Aboriginal people to press their claims for social justice'. He added, typically: 'bring your Harmony and Musical instruments to the Social evening'. Papers were presented by non-Aboriginal speakers, including Frank Edmonds on the 'Save the Lake Tyers Campaign'; Colin Tatz on Aboriginal health; and Philip Felton on the Welfare Board's housing policy, which was condemned by voices from the floor. The minutes recorded that Alick 'reminded them of the government promise 3 years ago that within 3 years all Aborigines would be housed. This month that time is up. He urged Congress to create urgent and renewed pressure for housing'. The Congress called for the return of all reserves to Aboriginal people, the provision of proper housing, and the election of five Aboriginal members to the Welfare Board. At the end of the Congress, Alick was re-elected President of the Aboriginal Branch of the Advancement League, and a third Congress was planned for June 1966.

The Second Congress decided on half-yearly regional meetings, although in December 1965 Alick confided to Paul Pickford of the Council for Aboriginal Rights (an Anglo-Australian support group) that, 'it is so hard, the committee is so weak, it looks big on paper, but after being elected at Congress, you don't hear from them again, although I write to so many'. Forging unity was also a problem, as Gunai from Gippsland, Gunditjmara from the Western District, Yorta Yorta and Bangerang from the Murray and the Wurundjeri and Boowurrung from Melbourne had to be united. Non-traditional splits also operated. One Aboriginal man in 1964 made a most extraordinary claim to Fran Russell, a white activist: 'Bill Onus is a commo' and 'Doug Nicholls is a red'. It was the Cold War era after all.

A Third Aboriginal Congress presided over by Alick was held in June 1966, at the newly completed 'Doug Nicholls Centre' of the Advancement League in Cunningham Street, Northcote. Forty delegates attended but there were no representatives from the Western District, Mallee or Wimmera. Reports were given on Lake Tyers, by Margaret Tucker on the Welfare Board, and Stan Davey spoke about the Advancement League and FCAATSI. Elections were held, although Alick for an unknown reason did not stand for a fourth term. There is no evidence that his candidature was unwelcome or that he was unhappy; three years was a sufficient term, an Aboriginal person was preferable in Alick's opinion, and perhaps new work commitments shaped his decision.

Bill Onus was elected as incoming President, but Alick remained on the Social Committee to run the Aboriginal balls. The Congress pressed to have two of the five Aboriginal representatives on the Welfare Board recently promised by the government. Stewart Murray and Lynch Cooper were elected, although Murray soon resigned in protest at government policy, much to Onus' annoyance. Two hundred attended the Congress social, testing the capacity of the Doug Nicholls Centre. The report of the social, with its historical illusions, smacks of Alick:

Many former members of the Cummeroogunga [*sic*] concert party that toured Victoria prior to the Second World War, when Cumeroogunga was a thriving settlement, entertained with items and were enthusiastically applauded. Former Lake Tyers people gave various items on the Gum Leaves and were also loudly applauded. The Bracken sisters from Geelong, Miss Rosalin Atkinson, the Briggs sisters, were among the artists who performed to the delight of the audience, as also did Mr. Cyril Fisher of Cherbourg Settlement, Queensland, who is now a student at the Lady Nell Seeing-Eye-Dog Centre. He sang and entertained with the gum leaf.

In the early 1960s Doug Nicholls drew Alick into another important organisation. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines (FCAA, soon changed to FCAATSI to include Torres

Strait Islanders after 1964), was established in Adelaide in 1958 to agitate for Aboriginal rights and justice. In 1962 Alick accompanied Doug Nicholls to an FCAA meeting in Adelaide. Alick recorded in his 'Memoirs': 'there were about 60 delegates from all over Australia including some 10–12 Aborigines, including Kath Walker, Faith Bandler, Chairman Joe McGinness from Cairns and Wynnie Bransen. Many national issues had been raised and discussed and from that day I became more politically minded'. Alick already knew from experience that Aboriginal people were denied access to swimming pools, hotels, toilets in some showgrounds, and confined to the front seats in some country theatres, but at FCAATSI he realised that this situation could be changed. Alick drove Doug Nicholls to several more FCAATSI annual conferences, which were now held each Easter in Canberra. They stopped at Wangaratta to pick up Lynch Cooper. Merle also attended: 'we got to know many people through these conferences. The children stayed with my sister [Elizabeth] or my Aunty. When they were older they used to come'. The three children remember these trips vividly as fun and an education. Esmai recalled that when she was about sixteen 'I went to the meetings and was involved in every aspect of it. I just loved it'.

At the 1964 Conference Doug Nicholls announced that he was stepping down as Victorian FCAATSI State Secretary, and that Alick was his 'preferred successor'. As Jack Horner recalled the incident in a letter to Alick and Merle in 1989, 'there was little formal democratic machinery for election to office, so this was accepted at once, on the personal say-so of Doug. We thought, "if Doug says that Alick is the man for us, that's good enough"'. The Jackomos family made the annual trek to Canberra at Easter many more times. Alick was still Victorian State Secretary of FCAATSI in 1976.

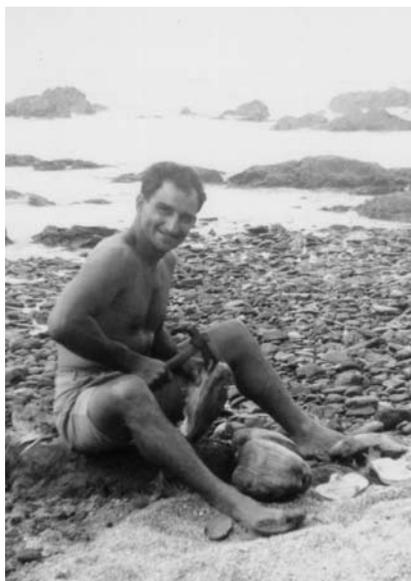
He was certainly 'the man', for Alick was a good organiser and a calming influence in meetings. His daughter Esmai, who saw him at many meetings, said Alick 'played a supportive role, an organising role, but not a dominating role'. John Moriarty, a young Aboriginal delegate from South Australia, who rose to head the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Victoria before pursuing a successful business career, recalled that Alick 'would not embroil himself in any arguments. He'd try and reason his way out, he was a highly intelligent

person...he was very rational, he was very calm...and he was very logical in his approach'. He added that he was 'dignified' and had 'respect' for all peoples.

He had a funny way of looking at people. He'd look you in the face, but when you started saying something he'd look to the side of the person, and up and wouldn't look them in the eye at that particular time. But then he'd say something and then he'd come back to look at you. And that settled a lot of Aboriginals' minds at ease and they never, ever, felt threatened by him.

Alick also ran the FCAATSI socials held after two days of discussions and before the elections. These were extremely important events, because the differences on the floor of the meetings could be fierce, and things were said in anger that needed to be resolved. Alick recalled: 'we had our little barneys during the conference...well you can't get 400 people in a hall and everyone's going to agree...but all those people that came to Canberra were sincere people'. Alick used his showgrounds skills, which were honed running dances with Eric Onus at the Manchester Unity Hall and the Advancement League Balls. Alick recalled that he struck a 'gold mine amongst Aboriginal people because everybody's a born artist'. Acting as talent scout, Alick discovered that Joe and Amy McGuinness could dance Thursday-Island style, Laurie Moffat would play the gum leaf; and Eleanor Harding and other Thursday Island women could sing. Others played instruments, so a concert was organised: 'everybody got up and was united there'. Then everyone in the hall formed a circle and sang 'We Shall Overcome'. At the end of the conference 'everybody would kiss everybody goodbye, and yell "see you next year"'.

From its inception in 1958 FCAATSI lobbied for citizens rights for Aborigines including equal education, health, employment, and wages, and an end to discriminatory legislation. In 1967 FCAATSI added indigenous rights issues to its platform, including the right to retain language and culture, and the right to control land. Although Victoria had few discriminatory practices by the 1960s, Alick and other Victorian delegates vigorously supported an end to legislative discrimination in the northern states and the Northern Territory.



Gathering mussels at Dunwich,  
Stradbroke Island, c. 1960

FCAATSI's push to change the Australian Constitution was fought as strongly in Victoria as elsewhere and Alick as State Secretary threw himself into the fight. The aim was to change two clauses: one that did not allow Aboriginal people to be counted in the Australian census (along with other Australians), and a clause forbidding federal involvement in Aboriginal affairs then controlled by the states.

A referendum on the Constitution could only be initiated by government or if sufficient signatures from the public backed a private member's bill to bring pressure to bear on Parliament. Alick was in his element and took to it with gusto — for he was selling something as he always had done since his peanut-selling days in the Depression and life on the showgrounds. As usual he teamed with Doug Nicholls in the work. In 1998 he recalled:

we'd go along to Smith Street outside Foy & Gibsons on the Collingwood side and put a card table up on Saturday morning. We'd get people to sign the petition giving Aboriginal citizenship rights. ...because the shops closed at 12 o'clock we'd pack up and go to the Collingwood Football Ground grandstand entrance...Collingwood supporters are

all black and white or one-eyed [as Alick would know], they'd go straight into the ground, nothing would hold them, but Doug Nicholls would stop them going in, they all knew Doug because he was a great footballer in the 30s with Fitzroy and Northcote. They formed a queue and signed the petition. I sat at the card table while Doug was dragging them, he was the figurehead.

In 1965 Alick's working life took a dramatic but not unexpected turn. He was offered a paid job with the Aborigines' Advancement League, following a decade as Doug Nicholls' voluntary offsider. The League, now with a permanent home at Northcote, felt sufficiently buoyant to offer Alick a position as its second field officer alongside Nicholls. It was a momentous economic decision for Alick, Merle and their three children — aged ten to fourteen — as Merle was in unpaid work as wife and mother. Their income would drop from a very comfortable £100 [\$200] a week to a basic £25 [\$50] per week. Most people if asked to cut their income by 75 per cent would laugh first and then refuse. But Alick and Merle had owned their own home for a decade and no doubt had savings given their frugality. Alick also admitted that the potato business 'was hard and I worked in the open all day. This was alright when the weather was fine, but when it rained I got wet through'. Alick leapt at the offer with Merle's full support, despite the financial sacrifice. In his 'Memoirs' of 1987 he wrote: '[ I ] handed over the business to my brother-in-law' and never regretted the decision for 'this was the work I wanted to do'. In 1997 he again stated: 'Merle used to get \$50 [£25] a week as house money, and that's all I was going to get there, less tax. So it was a big drop, but I wanted to do it'. If there is one thing never to be forgotten about Alick, it is that his commitment to Aboriginal people and the ability to work in with them meant far more to him than money.

There is little record of the daily welfare work he did for the League for the next two years. In general he was involved helping those in household and domestic crises concerning food, clothing, schooling and rent; assisting those before the courts; and driving people to and fro. He wrote briefly in his 'Memoirs':

Much of our time was taken in fundraising by attending service groups, churches telling them of the situation and depending on donations. There were no government grants in those days. Although there was a need all over the state of Victoria, the Gippsland situation seemed worse off and most of my welfare work took me to Gippsland.

Alick worked among the bean pickers, who travelled from as far as southern New South Wales to pick at Lindenow. 'My role was to encourage families to send their children to school, but the families depended on the children's earnings and very few, if any, went to school during the picking season'. Alick also visited the isolated mill towns of Cabbage Tree, Club Terrace and Bonang where there were no community services.

Alick was outspoken on some issues for the League, especially the transitional housing settlement of Rumbalara that he knew so well, because Merle had relatives living there. Ten prefabricated concrete houses were built in 1958 on 'Blue Moon Estate', behind the Ardmona cannery, a kilometre from Mooroopna. The settlement was part of the Welfare Board's 'New Deal' for Aboriginal people. The houses were tiny, only four squares, and were built at half the cost of other Housing Commission homes. They had running water, a fuel copper for hot water, electricity operated by a coin slot machine, but no laundry, and no internal doors. They were an advance on riverbank 'humpies', but smaller and cheaper than the usual Housing Commission home, and inadequate for the size of most Aboriginal families. Design faults and building defects were soon evident, including internal doorways that were too narrow to admit standard furniture. They were also ill suited to extremes of temperature. A Mrs Hyland wrote to the *Age* in February 1967, saying that the Aborigines should not complain of their housing, and should be thankful for what they had. Her letter drew an angry response from Alick who claimed that the houses were 'hot houses', and that the Aboriginal women who 'complained' were widows with large families. They had no other choice but Rumbalara, yet were entitled to live in 'normal society' the same as Hyland. A lucky few were given standard Housing Commission homes in town

but, as Alick remarked later, they were all workers employed in Don Howe's packing-case business or his tomato farm. Howe was a member of the Welfare Board and secured preference for his workers, despite some of those at Rumbalara with much larger families being left with smaller and poorer housing.

Alick was also outspoken in 1965 over the proposal by the Welfare Board to build a transit housing settlement at Morwell in Gippsland to assimilate Aboriginal people into the community and allow the Board to close Lake Tyers reserve. Alick along with Doug Nicholls was interviewed in September on a television current affairs program 'Watch This Space'. Alick reminded the audience that this proposal had been howled down by 47 Aboriginal delegates at the Second Aboriginal Congress headed by Alick in July. He claimed the \$35 000 to be spent on creating housing at Morwell would be better used on refurbishment at Lake Tyers, which some Aboriginal called home, and others wished to visit. He appealed for Aboriginal self-determination over Lake Tyers:

While they were at Lake Tyers they had all this hand-out system, but they've left all this, they don't want it, they've left Lake Tyers, they've got their independence and now they feel that Lake Tyers is there if they want to go back, retain the land, develop it and be independent.

His outspokenness meant that Alick inevitably represented the Advancement League on an inquiry into Lake Tyers that Colin Tatz engineered to stave off the Welfare Board's attempts to close the reserve and sell the land for tourism development. Tatz was the Advancement League's representative on the Welfare Board, placed there in 1965 as a reform move by the Government in the face of Aboriginal pressure for a voice. Tatz became a thorn in the Board's side through acute manoeuvring: in February 1966 he proposed an inquiry as a response to the Government's March 1965 statement that it would consider 'any reasonable and sound proposals for future control and administration' of Lake Tyers. Tatz assembled a committee of ten, Alick being an Advancement League nominee. The Committee held eleven meetings over eight months, visited Lake Tyers several times, consulted

with 47 Aboriginal people, took eighteen verbal submissions and sixteen written submissions and called for specialist reports on the farming, timber and employment potential of Lake Tyers. Alick was an invaluable member of the Committee as a trusted friend of the Lake Tyers community over almost thirty years. 'He vouched for me', recalled Tatz; 'I couldn't have done it without Alick's advice on a number of issues'.

Tatz, the consummate politician, predetermined the Board's favourable response to the report on its submission in November 1966. He released the report to the press with a date embargo — the very day the Board was to consider the report — but with no time of the day embargo on it. So journalists read it before the Board and reported on it favourably the morning of the day the Board met at 3 p.m. The Board was confronted with widespread press support for Lake Tyers becoming an agricultural and training centre; a site for reforestation and cattle fattening projects; a refuge for the aged and a rehabilitation centre for 'those families experiencing difficulty in adjusting to an urban, European environment'. The road to ownership of Lake Tyers was now clearer.

Alick believed in and assisted the move to Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs, but the momentum towards this was to have ironic consequences for him. By aiding the formation of pan-Aboriginal loyalties across the state, by running Aboriginal congresses and being State Secretary of FCAATSI, he was eroding regional differences and helping to form new identities. People who stressed their regional Aboriginal affiliations called themselves the 'dark people', eschewing the words 'black' in the 1950s; and even a minority who attempted to merge into the general population by the late 1960s took greater pride in their Aboriginality. For instance, the word 'Koori (e)' emerged as a pan-Aboriginal name by this time. This search for a more defined identity and a heightened sense of a pan-Aboriginal identity placed new emphasis in people's thinking on the binary terms: indigenous/non-indigenous. This binary view of people placed Alick apart from the Aboriginal community in the minds of some, and it became evident in a number of unpleasant situations from about 1965.



Adventures at Pine Creek, Northern Territory, early 1960s

Colin Tatz, who came to live in Melbourne in 1964, actually witnessed one of these episodes, which shocked him, not only due to its nastiness, but it was the moment when he realised Alick was not Aboriginal.

He spoke Aboriginal, he thought Aboriginal, he looked Aboriginal, he was married to an Aboriginal woman, his children were Aboriginal, and I just assumed he was Aboriginal...not that he *ever* posed as an Aboriginal. I just assumed that he was. Because his *idiom* — and I mean not just his speech idiom, his mental idiom, was totally attuned to Aboriginality.

Many others outside the Aboriginal community thought the same. Even some Aboriginal people thought he was Aboriginal. Almost all from the community who knew his origins still warmly included him. Myra Grinter (née Atkinson), who came from the Murray region to work in Melbourne as a young woman in the 1960s, recalled, ‘even though it was explained to us that he was Greek, we never ever

thought of him that way, as far as we were concerned he was Aboriginal, because he fitted in so well. He was very accepting of everything, and was a very caring, gentle man’.

The episode happened at the Advancement League some time in the late 1960s (Tatz left the state at the end of 1970). Tatz recalled that, during a meeting, Stewart Murray ‘stood up and said “Blacks only” would be sitting in on this session. Alick just sat there and Murray looked up and said: “And that means you, Buddy”. Alick stood up and had to leave the room almost in tears’. The blow was perhaps harder to bear as Stewart Murray was a son-in-law of Doug Nicholls. If Nicholls were there he would also have been pained.

Until the 1960s the Aboriginal /non-Aboriginal divide was not important for most Aboriginal people, including Doug Nicholls. The question for them was your attitude and willingness to work with Aboriginal people. As Alick recalled in 1996:

I started following Doug in 1936 with the Australian Aborigines League as a young boy going down to the Yarra Bank. And you might say that I became Doug’s apprentice because I was with Doug for just on fifty years. But we were friends too. We were very close friends.

He was not boasting here but reiterating his credentials, which included marriage into the community when racism against Aboriginal people was rife and his own family disapproved of the match. Also the people he most admired included other Aboriginal community leaders besides Nicholls, such as William Cooper, Eric and Bill Onus, Margaret Tucker and others from a younger generation. He had also chosen to associate his life and work with the Aboriginal community and its history. And never for a moment did Alick ever claim he was Aboriginal. But from the 1960s for some people this was not enough: this minority wanted him out of their organisations once they developed a sense of their Aboriginality that excluded non-Aboriginality.

A similar moment happened at a FCAATSI meeting around 1966. John Moriarty recalled that Alick was excluded. His family threatened to walk out, but a vote was taken and he was allowed to remain.

Merle remembers on one occasion at FCAATSI when Alick and some other non-Aboriginal people were asked to leave. The Aboriginal poet and activist 'Kath Walker jumped to her feet and yelled "if that man walks out of the room I go with him"'. Alick was then asked to stay and as noted above was still State Secretary in 1976. John Moriarty believed that Alick 'was very hurt when he was ejected from those discussions. And many of us felt for him. We felt it was unjust because of the amount of work that he did'. Alick's son Andrew reflected:

Dad understood, but I think that he still would have been hurt. Dad never once said he was Koori...I know a lot of people who have questioned the income that the Jackomos family earns in Koori issues. My father, my family would have been so much better off financially if my father didn't go to work for the Advancement League and kept his business and bought into fish shops and properties, like other members in his family.

Alick himself said little of these painful incidents at the time or later. Such incidents were not included in his many autobiographical writings. In 1997, however, in an interview he remarked: 'I was always accepted in the Aboriginal community. There was never any thought of being non-Aboriginal, you were just a person, you were just one of them'. He added:

Not only with me, but with a lot of white people or non-Aboriginals who mixed with Aboriginals in those days, who married them, the thought [among Aboriginal people] never came that you're not one of us...It has only come in the last ten or fifteen years where people seem to have an animosity against non-Aboriginal people. But the dinky-di Aboriginal people that I knew in those days, any white person that was involved, friends or that; race or colour never came into it.

This was the attitude Alick himself adopted, for he said in an interview in 1981, 'all I preach is that you don't look at a person's skin. I don't consider whether he's Chinese, Greek or any kind of race — he's a person. That's all I care about'.

Others who had not married into the Aboriginal community, or who were without a long history of involvement with the community, suffered more. In August 1969 Roosevelt Brown, a Bermudan MP and representative of the Latin American Black Power movement, visited Melbourne on the invitation of some Aboriginal officers of the Advancement League. Brown fostered their interest in indigenous rights and identity and sparked a public debate. A power struggle for control of the League ensued, which is outlined in *Victims or Victors?* (1985). Doug Nicholls resigned, finding that 'Black power' was a 'bitter word', but soon re-joined as patron. Indeed, in 1960 he had pioneered an 'Aboriginal only' session before each FCAATSI conference. The League issued a statement rejecting violence and black supremacy, defining 'Black Power as the empowerment of black people to make their own decisions'. Bob Maza, Harry Penrith (Burnum Burnum), and Geraldine Briggs from the League's Aboriginal branch and the Victorian Tribal Council, asked all white paid workers and committee members to step down. Stan Davey, a co-founder of the League, was spared this humiliation, having left to work with Aboriginal people in the Kimberley in 1968.

Bob Maza took over as Director assisted by Bruce McGuinness. Myra Atkinson (now Grinter) who was nineteen became a secretary. She recalled of the change:

there was sadness at that happening, but it was also self-determination for us to start handling our own affairs and helping our people to make changes. I got the feeling that they understood and that they were very, very supportive of us... they were people who were really dedicated to seeing big changes, for our part we felt sad because they were like family to us.

FCAATSI experienced a similar split in 1970, but managed to retain white members by keeping FCAATSI and forming a National Tribal Council to which whites could belong and speak, but not vote.

Alick understood these moves but bemoaned the loss of strength as all 28 white branches of the Advancement League folded almost overnight. In 1981 Alick reflected that it was done 'badly' and instead

of telling people to get out, ‘maybe we could have patted the white people on the back and said, “thanks very much”, because they did work hard’. He added in 1996:

you might say some of them were paternalistic or do-gooders. But a lot of them were sincere in helping Aboriginal people ...we lost a lot of that white support. Maybe I’m biased because I’m not Aboriginal. But I think we could have said, “look this is self-determination. Let us do it. But we still need you. You’ve helped us in the past”. [But the support] it just disappeared.

Alick was not pushed out and he continued to work for the League and the community for another thirty years. He was on the League’s Committee of Management during the 1970s. Once he was made a Life Member of the League in 1978, on the nomination of Doug Nicholls, he automatically remained on that Committee. Bruce McGuinness, one of the ‘radicals’ in the takeover, remained a firm friend and supporter. All of Alick’s children worked for the League. Esmai was secretary to Bruce McGuinness for two years during the ‘troubles’ (1969–71) and found it ‘extremely challenging’ and ‘exciting’. Michael also worked as a field officer (1975–77) and as a treasurer and a committee member in the 1980s. Merle was a member of the Management Committee of the League 1970–95, Vice-President 1976–86, and President in 1986. Alick’s Life Membership made him the only non-Aboriginal person to have that distinction. Over the years he became ‘Uncle Alick’ to many of the community, the respected title of elder. So he remained ‘in’, but the spectre of rejection was ever present, and made him thereafter a little wary and always keen to prove his credentials.