

**Speech - Kevin Cook (delivered by Kevin Tory)**

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**DRAFT FOR ACTU SPEECH.....**

**KEVIN COOK, draft 1, 18th June, 1993.**

Caring for the land and creating a just society are the central aims of Aboriginal civilization. They have always been so. From the beginning of the British invasion in 1788, our concerns for land and justice determined our actions. We tried to save our lands from greed and destruction, and we tried to save our people from brutality, rape, dispossession and exploitation. You all probably know now about the extreme violence on the frontiers of invasion across the country, and you know about how we resisted with guerilla warfare and passive resistance.

What you may not be so familiar is the story of how we began to reorganise ourselves as soon as we could after the fighting had died down. Historical research into the documents is only now catching up with what our old people, like Uncle Jack Campbell and Big Will Webster have been teaching us since we were kids. And what we tried to do was to get back some parts of our own countries, any pieces we could camp on, squat on and in some places begin to farm. We were petitioning the government from the 1850s and 1860s in Victoria and NSW to get some of our land returned to us in a secure form of title. Some of our old people, like William Cooper at Cumeragunja, put it like this in 1887:

"We want some portion of that land which is ours by divine right".

We succeeded in many places in the south-east of the country, particularly along the coast of NSW and inland on the southern plains and into the Goulburn Valley in Victoria, and in the fertile south-east of South Australia. Some of our lands were secured as permissive occupancy, and some of them we leased. After petitioning the government in many places, they started to act slowly to secure some of the places we were already farming by making them "Reserved for the use of Aborigines". These farming lands never had a manager or white control: our old people farmed them with corn and other crops, with wheat at Cummeragunja and with dairying on some Macleay River lands. We supported ourselves on many of these farms from the 1880s to the 1920s, and around of 25% of the Aboriginal people in NSW were supported in this way, as well as the many Aboriginal people across the state involved in wage labour and fishing through the 1910s and 20s.

But we were pushed off these lands in the 1920s: we lost 13,000 acres of independent farming lands from 1913 to 1927. The growing white population wanted our lands again: this was a new round of "closer settlement" and successful Aboriginal farming was not the sort of "settlement" that the white government wanted. Our people were dragged off their farms in the Murray and Macleay River Valleys by the police and the Lands Department officers, sometimes they were in the middle of harvesting their crops but no matter how they protested, how many trips they made

to Sydney to appeal, how many times they refused cash compensation because they said they wanted their land back, they were pushed aside.... But they did not forget.... and some of those same families are now back on those lands, in 1993, farming and living on the lands their great great grandparents fought for in the 1860s...

We didn't take that terrible second dispossession lying down: we organised a large political network among Aboriginal people in the affected areas of NSW and worked to increase white awareness of our demands. One of the leaders of that 1920s movement was Fred Maynard, a Hunter Valley Koori who had come to Sydney and was an active wharfie. He led the call for enough land for each Aboriginal family to be independent, for an end to reserve revocations, for an end to the terrible taking of children, and for Aboriginal control of any administration which was involved with Aboriginal affairs. Maynard reminded whites that Aboriginal civilisation offered many lessons to them:

your present scheme of Old Age Pensions was obtained from our ancient code, as likewise your Child Endowment Scheme and Widow's Pensions. Our divorce laws may yet find a place on the Statute Book. The members of this Board [the AAPA] have also noticed the strenuous efforts of the Trade Union leaders to attain the conditions which existed in our country at the time of the invasion by Europeans--the men only worked when

necessary--we called no man "master" and we had no king.

Those old people campaigned up until the Depression, when unemployment and the fact that Aboriginal workers were not allowed to get the dole in NSW throughout the 1930s meant they had to reorganise. By 1934, they were back in the public eye again, but faced now with the crushing loss of jobs of the depression made far worse by the government's refusal to allow Aborigines dole, relief work or the family endowment they had been entitled to in the 1920s. They put these issues first, when they called for "Full Citizen's Rights" for Aborigines, but land was made their long term priority demand.

That story, about land being at the centre of all our organisation and action throughout the long history of colonisation, is repeated in Victoria, where many things were very similar. But the story is not too far different in the big, northern states where the invasion happened later. Aboriginal people there were also quickly made part of the work force. Just like NSW Aboriginal people, who were striking for equal wages and conditions at least as early as 1911 at Warangesda, the Aboriginal people in remote areas were aware of how much they were being exploited by white bosses. In 1946, in the Pilbara, Aboriginal stock and sheep workers organised and co-ordinated a massive Aboriginal strike, which paralysed the Pilbara sheep

industry for three years. They were strongly supported by Don McLeod, some unions, the Communist Party and the broader labour movement. Many of these white supporters just saw the demands they recognised, that is the ones about equality of wages and conditions. But the Aboriginal demands went far deeper than that. These people walked off the pastoral properties determined to get some control back over their lives and their land. They began tin mining and with the profits they made they began to buy land, Strelley, Yandeyarra and other properties, where they still live and work. For them, the strike was about land, independence and justice.

In Queensland in 1956, the story was the same when Aboriginal people transported to Palm Island by the Queensland government went on strike against that racist administration. Again, the white supporters of the labour movement tended to see what they recognised from their own experience: the oppression and exploitation of the Queensland Act. But for the Aboriginal people involved, these were big issues, but being taken away from their own country was even more important.... Their sufferings on Palm Island gave them a stake on that land too, but their struggle to end the transportation of the Queensland Act did not let up until that law was finally destroyed.

Even more clear is the Gurindji Strike of 1966. These people were trapped on their own land by the giant British company

Vesteys, and they rose up on strike against that company's refusal to implement equal wages. Again, there was strong support, mobilised by Frank Hardy and taken up right across the labour movement, but many whites just saw the industrial issues. For the Gurindji, the fight was not just for the same wages and conditions that white stockmen got. Instead, it was for the deeper goal of land. They wanted the freedom to build a just society on some of their own land. It took them a long time to convince Hardy and other supporters that that was their goal, but their determination finally got the message through on a national level: Aborigines wanted justice, but that must be based on land as well as equality in wages and social conditions.

So... Land has always been at the centre of our political and social and industrial demands.... from the earliest days of the invasion, through the times of trying to regain some of our lands and build a new life, to the struggles to defend our lands again, and then to begin yet again, to convince our white sympathisers that land was basic to our ideas of a just future.

When, a year ago, the high court brought down its judgement on the Mabo case, it came as no surprise to us. It just said what we had already known, that we have always been the rightful and legal custodians of our lands. It said what we have always said: that *terra nullius* was a lie, told to justify dispossession. We have always known we had what the court is calling "native

title". What is different now is that the high court and the Federal Government are now admitting that fact. The meaning of the high court judgement is that white Australians, governments and people, must now come to terms with that fact....

It cannot be put aside any longer, it cannot just be "extinguished" with some quickie State law the way Kennett and Court are threatening to do.

Because we will not forget, just as we have never forgotten or put aside our need and desire for land over these long 200 years. To put it aside now will just mean it will come up again and again, in the times of our children and their children. We cannot abdicate our responsibility to resolve this question in a mature way. Because Land Rights is not just some passing fad. It did not start as a demand in the 1980s or the 1970s or even in 1966. It began in 1788, and, as I have explained today, we have brought it to your attention in every petition, every dispute, every conflict since that time. We will not forget.

If the meaning of this Mabo judgement is shoved aside and white Australia tries to pretend it does not have to make a just and lasting resolution now, then we will go on needing and demanding recognition of our rightful custodianship of our lands. A failure to address and resolve this issue now will just push some of us into even more desperate actions to try to make you



see how essential this is for us. This is a chance for us to come together and build a better Australia. It must not be seen as a weapon to drive us further apart. If we allow this division to happen we all lose.

There are many ways to handle the implications of Mabo. The actual court judgement gives us hopes of very little land because its terms are very limited and restricted.

But what so many of our parents and grandparents have been struggling for now for so many generations is RECOGNITION of our rightful ownership and of our desire to continue to be custodians for our lands. Then, as we have so often said, we can begin to talk about leasebacks and other arrangements. But the acknowledgement of our standing as rightful owners and custodians must be the first step. ....

These principles, as expressed in the Mabo Decision, offer us an opportunity to create a society truly based on justice and equity. This challenge has been given to our generation. If we fail to deal with it in a mature and compassionate manner it will be recorded in history as an indictment upon us all.