

Women for Wik began in May 1997, around the same time as Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, another grass roots organisation which has played a vital role since in the reconciliation debate and with which Women for Wik were closely linked. We also linked with the many existing reconciliation groups like the Women's Reconciliation Council and women's groups in general which were extremely generous and supportive and put their resources at our disposal. Women for Wik started with four women, who reflected the diversity of our support- myself a writer, Win Childs a psychotherapist, who got us all together, Daphne McKeough a Catholic nun, executive secretary of the Oz Conference of leaders of Religious Institutes, and Olga Havnen, an Aranda woman and executive member of the National Indigenous Working Group. We met to discuss holding a public meeting in Sydney .

The success of this meeting generated a wave of similar gatherings in every Australian city and many regional centres, a phenomenal groundswell of support in a matter of months. Our patrons were Judith Wright, Lois O'Donoghue, Elizabeth Evatt, Wendy McCarthy and Stella Cornelius. The public statements and submissions were signed by women like Faith Bandler, Hazel Hawke, Evonne Cawley, Ruth Cracknell, Judy Davis, Jennie George, Margaret Whitlam, Germaine Greer and over a hundred and thirty national women's organisations representing tens of thousands of Australian women from all walks of life.

In an article in the Sun Herald, Sue Williams wrote and I quote 'it has politicised women throughout Australia creating a fervour reminiscent of the heady days of the 70's feminist movement.' In the same article Jane Champion was quoted as saying, 'it made me desperate and furious and determined to let these brave Aboriginal women know that they were being heard, and that many of us were horrified about the pain and destruction of their lives by a heartless and finally evil Australian policy.'

One sign of our success was public attacks by Coalition politicians. After a very successful overflow Adelaide Women for Wik meeting attended by the Mayor Jane Smith, ex-Governor Roma Mitchell among other well known women city leaders, Nick Minchin released a wonderfully patronising press statement saying that Women for Wik were being misled and that we didn't really understand the real issues. When told that a huge contingent of Women for Wik supporters was coming to Canberra in support of our submission, the same politician said, 'God, how horrible!'

I don't think the politicians realised that Women for Wik was run by a couple of fax machines and email addresses in Sydney -that we had no money, no formal organisation, no hierarchy, or office. But they were right to be worried, the extraordinary groundswell of support took everyone by surprise including the Howard government, which had hoped to get through their shameful 10 Point Plan with the minimum of public debate and maximum of impenetrable jargon, so that noone could understand the real implications of it..

This was the legislation which the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination has since found to be racist, a disgraceful first for a western country.

Lois O'Donoghue described it as a peoples' movement, and it was true that the first meeting in Sydney was extraordinarily moving and memorable for all those who attended it. The room was packed to the rafters with women representing churches, the arts, indigenous organisations, all levels of government, legal and medical professions, universities- there were nuns, punks, mayors, politicians, lawyers, housewives, students, writers, media people, painters, businesswoman. At one point I

looked around and saw that nearly everyone was in tears because of the stories we were hearing from the platform. Lois O'Donoghue, Marlene Riley and Jean Carter spoke with great courage and dignity of their own experiences of being taken away from their families as small children, chaired respectively by Caroline Jones, Anne Deveson and Claire Dunn.. I had heard Lea Purcell singing 'Run Daisy Run' on TV and asked her to sing for us- at the end of the song the atmosphere was electric. One Liberal politician left the room in tears, apparently telling someone afterwards that she had never been told of such tragedies in caucus!

The success of this meeting and subsequent ones all over Australia was based on the simple premise that women everywhere by their understanding of the pain and grief mothers and children went through, would be moved to political action. The attendance by so many prominent women made it easier for us to get media coverage.

The Joint Parliamentary Committee on Native Title chaired by that well-known humanitarian Warren Entsch held public sittings to hear submissions about the Wik Legislation in October, 1997. Women for Wik prepared a strong submission supported by 50 national and regional women's organisations including Australian Women Lawyers, YWCA of Australia, Council of Postgraduate Associations (representing 65,000 women) Australian Education Union, Women and the Australian Church to name a few. We also maintained a presence at every sitting from Alice Springs, Cairns to Broome to Canberra.

We thought it might be a good idea to ask a few Sydney women to come with us to Canberra as support, as we had heard this committee was being very difficult.

Within the week, we ended up with four busloads of women, and 15 carloads all sweeping up to the front of Parliament House with banners, horns tooting and a great crowd of Canberra Women for Wik to cheer us in. We overflowed the ordinary submissions room and they had to set up another one with closed circuit TV. The politicians who questioned us with one exception- Daryl Melham, were rude, dismissive, unpleasant and insulting, they were not interested in our evidence or opinions and made that very clear. There were hisses and boos from an audience who were in no mood for this-having just made a four hour bus journey, giving up a days work or arranging for children to be cared for.

At one stage Entsch threatened to throw us all out. After the sitting, women queued up to abuse the rudest senators like Abetz-I heard one woman tell him she'd never met such a rude man in her life. We were all disturbed about the anti-democratic and elitist tenor of these proceedings.

Anne Edgeworth, the Canberra poet, wrote a report on this meeting and I quote, 'the room was packed with women and a few men; women of all ages, Aborigine and Newcomers, all deeply committed-you could feel it like a warm wind in the room... The impression made was that the committee, presumably selected by the Government was chosen to make sure whatever submissions came in, that the 10 Pt Bill would go ahead and the Wik legislation be overruled... a couple of the senators even managed to imply that the speakers were hardly capable of understanding a complex piece of legislation (once again- there, there, little woman, still as active as it was fifty years ago')

Judith Wright sent me a copy of the submission she'd sent and in it she writes, 'This hasty, ill-conceived, ill-considered, ill-advised and morally repugnant attempt by a government already condemned to world censure has resulted in the setting up of proposed legislation (the 10 pt plan) which would be most strongly repudiated by all past members of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee (which by the way included Nugget Coombes) and as a surviving member of the committee it is my duty and

responsibility to voice their repudiation on their behalf as well as my own. The moral status of the nation is threatened and its future endangered by a government which takes no heed of our future and our position in international law, or white relationship with an indigenous minority whose rights are being contravened and whose claims to hold prior sovereignty over this land are denied without the grace of a trial'

The last action of Women for Wik before disbanding, was to obtain the endorsements of over 130 national and regional women's organisations for our Women for Wik statement incorporating the six steps to reconciliation. These six steps were formulated by ANTAR and the National Indigenous Working Group..

In a separate press release fourteen of our woman National Treasures endorsed this Women for Wik statement, including Margaret Fulton, Betty Archdale, Elizabeth Jolley, and Gabi Hollows

Women for Wik was a heartening experience for all of us who were involved , proof as it was that there is widespread support for justice for the indigenous people of Australia- proof too that women, once they organise, can be a formidable political force. It is hard to quantify the effect of those nine months of intense lobbying and meetings, but there is no doubt that ANTAR and Women for Wik helped to raise consciousness in Australia and fire up public debate at a crucial time, hopefully watering down some of the worst amendments of the legislation and encouraging the growth of other reconciliation groups throughout Australia.