Citizens in Our Own Country

Rosemary Van den Berg
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Abstract
1967 - the year of change, the year of official freedom for Aborigines and the year we were finally classed as citizens in our own country. Yes, the 1967 Referendum changed the status of Aborigines forever. I didn't know all the ins and outs of the lead-up to the citizens of Australia voting for the release of Aborigines from bondage. All I know was, it was a wonderful and decent thing all those people did for us, that is, those who voted for us to join the human race. I daresay there were the diehards who would have been happy to see the Aborigines still under supervision and surveillance in some settlement, mission or other apartheid-like structure. But the majority voted in our favour and we have them to thank for it. And yes, I’d heard and read about the South African apartheid policies and their inhuman treatment of the black people over there. While I can feel sadness for them, I can also feel my own sense of loss and isolation for what I've been through all my life.

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It was very hard being taken away from my mother when I was a little boy of six. It was shameful the way it happened and my not seeing her again made me not only an outcast with my own people, but a homeless, incomplete person. Throughout my life, I’ve always felt a sense of the loss of my people. Although I had Rose, our children and her family nearby, it wasn’t the same as having my people, my mother and other relations close. I tell you, I felt that sense of loss so deeply. It was as if I were in limbo with no real identity. I knew I was a husband, a father and an in-law to Roses’s people, but I never had the chance to be a son, a brother, a cousin or any other relation to my people that was my right of birth, my right as my mother’s oldest son. I missed all that through no fault of mine, my mother’s or any of my people. I blame the rotten government policies of the time and those white people who made those policies. May they all rot in hell for my loss of family and identity and for my being treated as less than human. I will probably go to my grave feeling like this, but I believe I have that right. My loss is profound and I cannot forget.

Nevertheless, to get back to Pinjarra and the 1967 Referendum, that releaser of Aborigines from bondage. At first, it felt strange being a citizen. How was a citizen supposed to act? Did all of us Aborigines suddenly go out and join a church group, did we put our names down as councillors for the Shire, did we swagger around town saying, ‘look at us, we’re citizens now’, and did we join the Masonic Lodge? We did
none of those things. We headed straight down to the nearest pub and celebrated being citizens. Boy that was good, watching the faces of the owner and other whites drinking at the bar as we walked in and ordered a beer, in a glass, from the inside of this place we’d only seen from the outside. It was a priceless moment. To have Aborigines breasting the bar and requesting a beer from the barmaid was good for the soul. I tell you, we laughed at that barmaid and the expression on her face as three or four of us blackfellas lined up, placed our money on the bar and waited to be served. Like white men did, you know? It was an experience I’ll never forget.

Mind you, those Aborigines with ‘the dog tag’ (Citizenship Rights) were used to going into the pub and drinking, but I wasn’t. This was something new to me and I revelled in my new-found sense of equality, my new status as a citizen. But it wasn’t just being allowed to go into the pub and having a drink that made me feel good. It was the sense of being able to do that which added spice to the idea of being a citizen. If I was drunk, disorderly and untidy, then they could deny me a beer, but while I took notice of the rules attached to going to the hotel, dressed right and behaved myself, I was okay. It was my right to drink there.

Another thing, I didn’t forget to enrol to vote either, which was next on the list of things I had to do now that I was a citizen of this country; after all those years I had been reading the newspaper and taking an interest in politics, I now had the right to have a say in how they ran the country. I got Rose to go to the post office to get the necessary forms for me, filled them in and sent them away. Rose didn’t want to vote and I didn’t force her to; that was her choice. But for myself, I wanted to have my say and to do that I had to vote. However, being a citizen made me realise that there were no special rules just for Aborigines to live by. The rules the white people had to stick to were the same ones we Aborigines had to look out for.

No longer did we have to be off the streets by six o’clock at night. No longer did we have the police breathing down our necks making sure we stuck to the policies of the Native Welfare Department. No longer were some Aboriginal people made to give up their kids to be placed in missions or homes where they wouldn’t be able to see them for donkey’s years, and finally, no longer were Aborigines forced to work for miserable, lower wages than white people. Probably, these restrictions didn’t seem much to the whites, but to us Aborigines, it meant a whole lot. We were finally being treated as individual people and not having injustices chucked in our faces because of our race. I’m not saying that these things happened overnight. No way. We still had our battles with racist white people who had to realise that we were no longer under their thumbs. We all had our rights now, our human rights and they had to remember it. It was a start and things could only get better for us all.

In 1968 I had my second long-service leave. Many months before this
happened, Rose and I had made our plans to go north to see if I could find my people. When my brother Kitchener visited me that time, he spoke of our mother and told me how she had died of thirst with no one near to help her. He also told me that if I ever got the chance, I should go back to the Pilbara and look up our lot who would be very glad to see me, especially those who had known me as a young child. Kitchener would be there and would tell our people that I was coming. Unfortunately, he died before this plan was put into action and I had to make the journey without him being there.

Some weeks before I started my long-service leave, Rose and I put our plan into action to go to Port Hedland and start my search from there. With money from my leave, we would buy a reasonably good second-hand car and drive up there. Our youngest son Clive, who was out of the army by now, his girlfriend and a nephew of ours would come with us to help me drive. I felt like a kid again going on a long trip into the unknown as we made our plans. I couldn’t wait for the time to come when we would be off on our journey, my journey of discovery and recovery, I suppose you could say. To be on the safe side, we would go along the North West Highway and although this road wasn’t bitumenised yet, to my mind, it wasn’t as isolated as going through Meekatharra and the centre. The Brand Highway wasn’t built yet either, so we had to go through Moora and those towns along that line. One good thing about it was that we didn’t have to rush up there to Port Hedland. We could take our time with travelling. On the day before we left, I was as excited as a kid although I tried to hide my feelings by doing all the common-sense things like checking and rechecking the car. I also made sure we had jerrycans for extra petrol, extra tyres and plenty of food and water, our clothes, blankets and cooking gear, for we’d be camping by the side of the road most of the time. We were going on a long trip and I wanted to make sure we’d get there in one piece.

Early the next morning we made our start. Our Holden car seemed sturdy enough and I really believed what they said about it being Australia’s own car. I believed it would get us there and back with no big problems. We called in at Moora to see my cousin, Rosie Pryor, and her family. Her husband Peter was a good friend of mine from Settlement days and it was good to see them again. I hadn’t seen them for years ever since we left Wannamal, where I had been working on a farm. Then we were on our way again. Except to fill the car up, we didn’t stop again until we reached the outskirts of Geraldton where we camped for the night. After an early breakfast around our campfire we went into Geraldton, filled the car up with petrol and headed north for Northampton, where we filled the jerrycans up, checked the oil and water and made sure we got more water for us to drink, and started out once again. From here on in, we would have to watch how much water we drank. It was a long haul to Carnarvon, along a gravel road, so we had to be extra careful of how we drove. It would be woe for us
if the car broke down.

This didn’t happen until we got to the other side of Barradale. I don’t know what happened. One minute we were travelling along as good as gold, the next we were at a standstill. Something happened to the gearbox. Although us men – Clive, Michael Walley and myself – tried to get the car going, we had buckleys chance of fixing the gearbox. We couldn’t get into any of the gears except reverse. The only thing we could do was to go back to Barradale. We were about twenty miles out and the only gear we could get the car in was reverse. So Clive reversed the car all the way back to Barradale. It took us a while, but we got there. We were lucky a mechanic was able to fix the gearbox the next day and so once again, we were on our way.

Passing through the western side of the Pilbara was like coming home to me. When I first saw those ranges way off in the distance and then up close as we passed them, my spirit was uplifted. This was my country, my place, and I marvelled at the scenery as we passed by. The dry red earth, the spinifex, the ghost gums, the rocky outcrops and the dry riverbeds and creeks were such a sight to me. It brought back vague memories of a time long passed and lost to me, forever, I thought. Although I’d never been to this part of the country before (my country was around Hillside, Marble Bar and Nullagine), I knew, without doubt, that I was coming home. All the greenness, all the thickly wooded hills and the bush, the farmlands and the river which ran all the year round, the estuary and the beaches out of Mandurah, could not look so good to me as did the Pilbara. I knew that this country I passed through was very much like my own further east. I couldn’t wait to reach Port Hedland, find my cousin, Tom Stream, and take the trip to Marble Bar, my homeland. I was going home and I couldn’t wait to get there.

When we came to Roebourne we stopped for a while and made the necessary checks with the car. There were a lot of Aborigines in this town and while I was talking to some, I learned that Tom was still in Port Hedland and was waiting for me to arrive there. Don’t ask me how he knew I was coming up this way. As I remember, I didn’t tell anyone I was coming for the simple reason that I didn’t know where they lived. I couldn’t get in touch with anyone to let them know I would be there, but as I said before, the Aboriginal grapevine is a powerful thing and I wasn’t questioning anybody’s information as to my arrival. It took us about a week to travel, from the time we started out to the time we got to Roebourne. After leaving Roebourne, before I knew it, we were coming into Port Hedland and I was asking directions to where Tom stayed. It was a happy man who saw his cousin for the first time.

A lot of people remarked on how alike Tom and I were and there was a similarity between us. Among other jobs, Tom had worked as a dingo trapper for many years and knew the countryside like the back of his hand. He was a true man of the Pilbara and it showed in his quiet
manner and slow talk. Much like me, I’d say. Anyway, for the next couple of weeks, Tom took me to Marble Bar and Nullagine and all over the place. It was such a spiritual renewal for me and it brought back vague memories of a time long past when I was a little boy with my mother and her people. I knew, without asking Tom, that this part of the Pilbara was where I belonged.

In 1944 Aborigines were allowed to become "Australian Citizens." Aboriginal people called their citizenship papers "Dog Tags." We had to be licensed to be called Australian.