

Black Power and gay liberation: an interview with Gary Foley

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Gary Foley is an activist, academic and actor, who for more than forty years has been a leading voice of resistance for the Aboriginal movement in Australia. One of his missions is to ensure that the Aboriginal experience is not written out of Australian history. I met with Gary Foley in an inner suburban café in Melbourne. He tells me the café is named after a blaxploitation movie character, which amuses him as most frequenters of the café are white mothers and their babies. We spoke for more than two hours. What follows is an edited version of the interview. We began by discussing a letter he wrote to CAMP (Campaign Against Moral Persecution) back in 1975, when he was publicity officer for the Aboriginal Medical Service. In the letter he writes, 'We, as an oppressed minority group, would like to express our solidarity with your group in our mutual struggle for recognition and fundamental freedoms'. I asked him to reflect on this.

GF: It's an important statement of principle.

CDC: Yes.

GF: From our side of the fence, there's what it was.

CDC: So I'd like you to think back on that time. What might have prompted it?

GF: Well, I'm just a human. I'm sort of half guessing that it would have had something to do with, by that stage, the long association I had with John Newfong, who worked at the medical service with me.

CDC: What was his role?

GF: He was the Oscar Wilde of Black Australia. He was the most brilliant Aboriginal writer that's ever lived. And he was. I'm not sort of exaggerating when I say he was Oscar Wilde, because he was that sort of character. And even though, from when I first moved to Sydney in the late '60s, there'd never been a serious problem with homophobia in the Aboriginal community in Redfern when I lived there – and most of the gay men in our community were openly gay and nobody tried to hassle them, I mean partly because of extended family networks, you know – it didn't matter...if somebody picked on somebody, then they had a lot of brothers and sisters and cousins and relatives who, you know, made sure that sort of shit didn't happen.

CDC: So, people were out? They were openly gay?

GF: John Newfong was premier among them. He was the first Aboriginal professional journalist in Australia. He worked for the ABC, the first Aboriginal to work for the ABC. He worked for all the mainstream media organisations – he even worked for Murdoch at one point, *The Australian*, in the early days of *The Australian*, when *The Australian* was good. He worked for people like Adrian Deamer and all these mainstream editors, legendary editors of that era – he worked for *The Bulletin*. When you think about it, he had a double-barrelled obstacle to overcome, which was that he was both Black and gay. And yet he forged his way

into professional journalism in Australia on his sheer ability and he became one of Australia's best writers...

And I mean, when I first met John, the thing that impressed me most about him, was he's such a brilliant guy...I had tremendous respect for Newfong and at certain points in the mid-'70s, there were certain homophobic elements raising their ugly heads.

CDC: How did they get raised?

GF: Oh, just some of the younger punks in our community. Not necessarily in our community but in a broader sense as well. John used to cop shit whenever he left our community and worked in the mainstream. And I think...in a general sense that was probably the background of me sending that [letter].

CDC: Was he active in gay liberation?

GF: ...No, no, for a similar reason to many of the really smart Black women in our community...I think John concluded that the primary emphasis of our efforts should be on what's happening in the Koori stuff because we were the most oppressed community in Australia. Still are. I mean, why it stuck in the throat a bit this morning when I was listening to that asshole premier of Queensland, up there praising up the bill they've just passed, saying this is a great day for human rights in Queensland. And I mean, what they did to Lex Wotton and what they're doing on Palm Island and the whole sort of drift of the Queensland government in terms of Aboriginal stuff makes any claims to be a progressive [state] laughable. So you know, we're still at the bottom of the heap. We were then and we still are. And there was also the importance in the late '60s and early '70s of ensuring unity within our own scene first and foremost. And that's how come...if you look at the twentieth century, that period in the late '60s, early '70s is the period when Aboriginal political stuff made the greatest advance in the last 200 years. And it was the defusing of that momentum and the undermining of that momentum in the long run, by deliberate government

policy, that fucked that. And now we're back worse off than we were in the '60s.

CDC: But tell me about the connections between the movements during that time?

GF: There was very little. The gay movement was almost invisible at that time. Almost, well, to all intents and purposes, largely invisible. But we would have...encountered gay activists like Dennis and others around the scene, because, in the big demos, the Vietnam War demos, the anti-apartheid demos in '71, then all the different mobs came together, you know. And it would have been in the context of those sort of things, where the connections were being made and you know, as we all talked amongst the lot of us, anti-apartheid, the anti-imperialist crew and the gay mob, as those sort of discussions took place, you know. There was a sharing and an understanding that at the end of the day, the source of all our oppression was coming from pretty much the same sort of direction. There was a general sense of solidarity that was understood amongst some of the key activists in each group. And that's one of the rare expressions. And I can remember writing and I can remember that I wrote them for a purpose, but I can't remember the specific purpose, but I would have thought that it was important that the broader community understand that there were people in the Aboriginal political movement who thought that, at a time when, you know, a time when homophobia was rife. Much worse than it is now. But that's questionable, too, I suppose.

CDC: It's how you measure it, ay?

GF: But I mean, I would argue that the connections came through those larger social protest movements that were happening at the time. Because I mean, all sorts of people were united on some of these key issues, you know. And from memory, my moderately dodgy memory, is that there was space for all voices, all progressive voices at that point, you know, all oppressed and

progressive voices were able to find some sort of a space and communication point...

CDC: There's something that Dennis talks about in his book, a chapter – 'Confrontation and community' – and in that chapter he's talking about ideas of assimilation and how acceptance is just not good enough, in terms of gay liberation. What he's calling for really is rethinking, re-evaluation and an extreme makeover, if you like, of the way in which society and institutions are ordered. Do you think there's a connection there?

GF: Oh, absolutely. I mean, we've always said, in my show at the moment, I pinpoint assimilation as genocide. Whether it's the gay community, or us or any other community, you know, so-called minority. I mean, you know, that's a cop-out. It's not only a cop-out, it destroys your identity. You forsake your identity for some mythical mainstream thing. And you get absorbed and thereby disappear, you know. You go into the disappeared zone. Go back to invisibility...

CDC: Just thinking about the similarities, or you look at *Homosexual* and how visionary it was, in terms of calling for a new social order—

GF: Well, I would have thought, it would be of interest to see what Dennis has to say about this these days. I would have thought that the whole climate of that era, in terms of social political consciousness and activists, it just sort of coincided with that whatever it was, the alleged youth revolt that went round the Western world at that time. I mean, I think that had a lot to do with how we were making connections with the likes of some of the anti-apartheid, the green bans crew, Jack Munday and his mob. And Altman and his crew and Brett Collins and the Prisoners' Action Group crew and the anti-apartheid mob with Meredith and Verity Burgmann. You know, it was just an exciting time to be around, and there was so much happening then. How could you sit down and ignore a hundred thousand people marching a

couple of miles away in the CBD...that was part of our political education anyhow. That's part of the way we became conscious of, you know, oppression and imperialism in places like Vietnam, and colonialism...and it was through connecting with the likes of... some of those luminaries of each of those different mobs. Dennis was another of those sort of people – Dennis and others were of that general crew who we were...that milieu that we were mixing with. And you know, we'd go to their demos, they'd go to our demos. And it was just a...there was a real sense that this was a diverse but unified movement happening. And it was good shit...

But when you think about it, back then in the early '70s – late '60s, early '70s – it was only the same percentage of the broader society that were involved in all this stuff that I'm talking about; this stuff that Dennis was in, and even within our own community, within the Black community, there was only about 10 per cent of us who were the political activists who stirred all the shit and got all the notice. And I suspect it would be the same in the political leaders of the government. The same with some of the other shit that's happened. It's always only a tiny group of people, but because of the times or something, at that moment in history when we were there, we actually made some headway, only to have it all kicked back. They were good times...

CDC: So let me ask you about anniversaries, right? Forty years of Dennis Altman's book.

GF: Well, it's forty years of the Aboriginal Embassy.

CDC: Forty years for the Embassy, forty years of green bans, forty years of Greer's *Female Eunuch*.

GF: The sad thing in the Aboriginal community is that most of the key people in our movement, forty years ago, are dead. The vast majority of them are dead. That's not the case in some of these other...so any anniversary is tempered by that...

CDC: When I spoke to you in Canberra, you said one of the biggest contradictions within your activism at the time was homophobia

within the Aboriginal movement, but John Newfong was really out there.

GF: ...but there was a lot of the gay guys like that in the Aboriginal community. I mean, I've no doubt there were people who were walking around repressing it who maybe I didn't know about but there was such an abundance...the gay guys who were around were quite open and nobody gave a shit. Largely and generally...because in the early days in the late '60s and sort of until about '72 and even prior to the boom, moving around the old Empress Hotel, the old Empress Hotel was one of the toughest pubs in Sydney, in them days it was a wild place. But you'd go in there and there's either gaggles of gay guys hanging around the juke box or just spread throughout the crowd and nobody...this was just a tough pub. The only people who used to get hassled in there were some innocent white fellow who might accidentally wander in. And that was the pub where the coppers...the coppers wouldn't go in there alone. They'd either wait for Thursday night for a flying wedge together and go in as a group of a dozen or so, or go in three or fours at a time. But in terms of gay guys generally, they were as safe in there as any other Blackfella. You know, they were just part of the Black community. They were so and so's brother or sister or whatever, you know. But then later on, because once the Black Power movement became successful, successful in the sense of getting people to take notice and then suddenly a lot of the young mad mob would want to join it and often it was the youngest and the maddest who...the aspiring bank robbers who come in and tell you, you know, we're going to raise money for you, we're going to rob a bank or two. And we thought, we thought about it for a while. That's not the way to go. But people who were more angry and aggro than they were political. It wasn't about people being angry and aggro. We didn't mind people being angry and aggro – we were angry and aggro ourselves – but we had a focus

through which to direct that anger and energy, you know. We were highly focused. We would never have been able to achieve half the things we did if we weren't. And people who weren't focused were more a problem, a hindrance to us rather than a help, you know...

CDC: Is that where you saw the homophobia?

GF: I was conscious of homophobia being an issue because it was probably through meeting some of these crew, because there was another couple of gay guys who were part of one of those little fringe Trot groups, you know. And people in the student movement. We met...well, you know I was involved a fair bit in AUS [Australian Union of Students] around that time and through the student groups we also were, well, at times negotiating alliances and things and just sometimes, often just having the more general political discussions. I mean, this is more how I think I became conscious and aware of some of the issues to do with sexual politics, you know. Wendy Bacon and all these crew were great mates of ours too, you know. We hung round with—

CDC: They were great what?

GF: Mates. Through Uni of New South. That's where Coe went to uni, that's where we first met Wendy Bacon and a lot of her crew. When she was the editor of *Farrago* there when they done her for that obscenity charge, you know. So there was a sort of... and we went to their parties, you know. I mean, a lot of the sort of, the leading luminaries of many of those movements, including the likes of Dennis and that, we all moved in this certain kind of common circles, like the Sussex Hotel on a Friday night. You know, I once poured a glass of beer over Paddy McGuinness's head. The only irony with that is that he was a leftie then. This was long before he became a right-wing lunatic. We were hanging out with Bobby Pringle and Jack Munday and all them crews, and we'd go to the same parties. The London Hotel in Balmain, parties... all these mobs having big parties down at their harbourside

mansions and that. So we were moving and mixing and constantly talking and comparing notes and, you know, raising ourselves and other people's consciousness around us constantly. That's part of what made it so exciting. And then every now and then me and Gary Williams would sneak down to Paddington to the Bellevue where all our actor mates were, Billy Hunter and Maxie Cullen and all the old thespian crew, you know. Thespians and lesbians. You know...

The other interesting thing about John Newfong was that in his own, I was going to say in his own quiet way, but it wasn't quiet and it wasn't a quiet way at all. In his own non-compromising way, he educated a lot of those fresh-out-of-the-reserves young Black aggro men, who [were] at the Embassy, educated them in his own way, just by... John lived with his boyfriend Lawrie in the tents. John was one of the ones who lived, actually lived in the tents for most of the duration of the Embassy. There was him and Ambrose Golden-Brown and some others, but there was John and Lawrie, and no one had a go at Newfong about that, which given the nature of what people thought the Black Power movement was, I thought it was pretty interesting.

CDC: Yeah, Dennis writes about it in the book, actually.

GF: A lot of...I don't know, it's just interesting that a lot of the young Blackfellas who'd come...because all of us who were part of that Black Power thing, all of us came from the bush, different parts of New South Wales, and we met up in Sydney, and just encountering openly gay guys would have been a really unusual experience for a lot of these blokes from Moree and Dodge City in Brewarrina and places like this... John living there with Lawrie would have been confronting [for] them, when they first arrived. But when they then looked to see what the reactions of the other, older crew, like us, was like and they saw that nobody thought anything was abnormal and they either accepted it or they went. Very few went. But just in his own subtle little way, that in itself

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would have been educative...politically educative experience for a lot of young Black blokes fresh off the missions and reserves in New South in that period, in that period of time.

CC: Well, in that period, just being out, you know, was a big thing.

GF: Fuck, yes.