

The Age:

After 40 years, Pastor Nicholls' 'magic question' lingers

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IN THE days before the 1967 referendum, 40 years ago tomorrow, Aboriginal activist and former Fitzroy wingman Pastor Doug Nicholls was in Canberra lobbying right to the siren for a yes vote to amend a pair of bewildering constitutional clauses. The changes, he had long argued, would finally allow recognition of Aboriginal Australians.

But, asked an ABC reporter, "in real terms" — what would that mean? "That's the magic question," he answered candidly in a scratchy soundbite, before returning to the script. "I think it's a matter of democratic right. There should be no legislation set up to discriminate (against) us."

The changes would allow the Commonwealth Government to make laws to help us, he said, and to spend money on us.

Since she was a little girl, Pastor Nicholls' daughter Pam had at various times accompanied "the gentle pastor" on his campaign — at the card table he would set up outside the MCG to collect signatures from footy fans, or riding the bus to Canberra with petitions appealing for Aboriginal rights and recognition.

But not this time. By 1967, she was preoccupied with raising her small daughter and infant son in what she hoped might be a radically altered society.

Raised in relative privilege, she had come to know the disadvantage of another Aboriginal Australia as a witness of her father's increasing politicisation following a 1957 trip to the Warburton Ranges in central Australia. "I wish I hadn't seen the pitiable squalor, the sights of my people starving — the most shocking sights I have ever seen," he said of the trip. "Never, never can I forget."

Teenage Pam was among the first to view the film he brought back, images that jolted many white and black Australians into activism when they screened at meetings in church halls throughout the late '50s and early '60s. They're indelibly with her too. "I can picture it even now — these young children eating raw meat. And the flies"

She recalls this as the moment her father — footballer, tent boxer and sprinter — resolved to become a champion of Aboriginal rights. He would master this arena too, eventually becoming Sir Douglas, and the first Aboriginal state governor before his death in 1988.

Today Pam Pederson, her 40-year-old son Adam Lampton — now working in Aboriginal social justice — and his teenage daughters, can only give as fractured and ultimately unsatisfactory an answer to "the magic question" as any of the academics and activists who have pawed over it for 40 years. What did the referendum mean to Aboriginal people? They can, however, answer a different query, one which opens a

window on that broader question. What did Pastor Nicholls' own kin inherit from his efforts and those of his contemporaries?

On the broadest level, Pam Pederson is persuaded that the constitutional changes brought by the 1967 vote, and the message the 90 per cent yes vote sent, were powerful and enduring. She sees their spirit underpinning the agenda she pursues through her involvement with Reconciliation Victoria.

She sees it feeding reforms like the creation of the Children's Koori Court, on which she sits as an elder, and the concept of a County Koori Court, which she will soon help explore as part of a new reference group.

"I've been very fortunate because of who my parents were," says Ms Pederson. "I didn't look at obstacles, I just went and did it." She recently retired after a career as a secretary in a law firm. "I was a goer. But that is the way I was brought up. We had a very strict upbringing."

Ms Pederson grew up in a household where activism, academia and art would frequently collide. Guests included artist Albert Namatjira and boogie woogie pianist Winifred Atwell. She helped run her parents' Northcote hostel, where young Aborigines from the country could stay, study and work. It has left a keen appreciation of the benefits such basic support brings.

"It's wonderful to see how they are today. Grown up, got children, working. Because they had the opportunity."

But she is dismayed by the slowness of change; by the entrenched disadvantage of rural and remote Aboriginal communities from Shepparton to Alice Springs. By the knowledge that in Melbourne's suburbs, her granddaughters endure the same racial taunts she suffered. The elegant grandmother proudly recalls sorting her abusers out behind the shelter shed. Things have not changed so much, her granddaughter Allira observes.

Adam Lampton, a referendum-year baby, sailed through childhood largely unconscious of his colour. He recalls how he learnt of it when, as a talented young footballer, it was screamed at him from the boundary of a suburban oval.

In his lifetime, says Lampton, the most powerful moment of social reformation didn't come from a vote, but from a gesture by St Kilda's Nicky Winmar. "That was the best thing that ever happened.

"Racism will never go, I've just got to put up with it because I'm a black man. But I'm used to that. I walk around and I'm proud to be Aboriginal. And with me is my grandfather. He was a man of honour and I have that in my head all the time. It keeps me above water."

Lampton works with young Aboriginal men, including those who fall foul of the system. His great surprise was the realisation of how few indigenous people had the skills to stand in a court and speak with assurance; to interact with people in uniform.

He is dismayed at the gulf between the white mainstream and Aboriginal life. He ranks better education of white people about black culture as a priority — right up there with better indigenous health, housing and education.

"With my daughters, I want to see them grow up and be involved in the non-indigenous world. I can see a change we are getting there."

Locating the legacy of the referendum within the mythology surrounding it is difficult, says Monash University historian Bain Attwood. The potency of the changes are, he says, in symbolism rather than content.

On paper, they amount to the deletion of a handful of words in the constitution, handing power to pass special legislation for Aboriginal people to the Commonwealth; and to new words allowing Aboriginal people to be counted in the national census.

Their significance, Dr Attwood argues in a new edition of a book he co-authored on the referendum, "is to be found less in the words and more in the stories or narratives that were told about these and the changes demanded by those who campaigned the longest and hardest for the referendum".

The vote was not the watershed it is often represented to be, he says, though its symbolic recognition of citizenship gave a context for a campaign to advance Aboriginal causes. The Whitlam government seized the referendum as a mandate to implement sweeping changes.

But 40 years on, Dr Attwood says that a principal reason why Pastor Nicholls and his contemporaries mounted their fight has been overlooked.

"This amounted to a call for a political program of special rights which has arguably never been implemented."

The 1967 referendum: Race, Power and the Australian Constitution, by Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, is published by Aboriginal Studies Press.

<http://www.theage.com.au/text/articles/2007/05/25/1179601670558.html>