

THE BARUNGA FESTIVAL 1988

The Barunga Community is 400 kilometres south east of Darwin and near Katherine in the Northern Territory. The festival is an annual gathering of Aboriginal people held on the Queen's birthday weekend 10 - 13 June, 1988. The senior traditional owners the Barunga Wugularr, Community Council and the Northern Central and Tiwi Land Councils Invited the public to join them at the 1988 festival which was described as 'a central part of a special year of ceremony to celebrate Aboriginal people's survival, the culture and the land, 'the mother of our culture'.

I was given permission from the Northern Land Council and the Barunga Festival to take photographs for the Land Rights News and the Northern Land Council to show in this exhibition.

During the festival several thousand Aborigines came from all over Australia and it became the largest gathering ever held of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. There were sporting events, and art exhibitions and the main dancing ceremony held on a specially prepared ground, called the Bungkul ground.

On the Sunday media from all over Australia were invited to be present at the visit to the festival of Bob and Hazel Hawke and Gerry and Maree Hand. A description of the event is quoted directly from the July Issue of 'Land Rights News' a monthly publication of the Northern Territory Land Councils.

When hundreds of senior Aboriginal men surrounded the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke and Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Gerry Hand, they held a meeting that accorded respect for Aboriginal law and tradition.

The senior Aboriginal men invited the man who leads the Australian law making system to sit down on an Aboriginal ceremonial ground to discuss Aboriginal Issues on their terms. At the same time, Hazel Hawk and Maree Hand accepted an invitation from senior Aboriginal women to sit down in their midst and be welcomed as important women from another culture.

During the meeting with Bob Hawk the Aboriginal lawmen presented him with five practical demands which outlined a consultation process and a need for an indication of the Government's willingness to proceed.

These events at Barunga brought the Australian Government and people significantly closer to an agreement with Aboriginal people. After two hundred years of official neglect, Australia - if public response is any guide - appears ready to face its most difficult task ever. The Prime Minister's in principle acceptance of the demands of Aboriginal people shows that the Government at least has learned some very important lessons.

While Mr. Hawke said Australia was ready, he made it clear that what is to happen depends on the wishes of Aboriginal people themselves and will only go ahead if and when they are ready.

Mr. Hawke's public acceptance of the five demands came at the end of an emotion-charged day. He had been greeted by members of the Barunga-Wugularr community before visiting the sports field and the annual arts and crafts display.

After being conducted to the Bungkul ground, he and Mrs. Hawke, together with Gerry and Mrs. Hand and thousands of spectators witnessed the reality of the Aboriginal theme for 1988 - 'We have survived' - as hundreds of dancers from all over the Northern Territory danced and sang the living proof of cultural survival.

The Prime Minister was presented with paintings from the Top End and the Centre, which expressed attachment to the land and held confidential discussions with the senior men. As he emerged from this historic meeting, Mr. Hawke came forward to make his statement, the Government's response to the demands.

He announced that he had given the Government's guarantee that any formal agreement with Aboriginal people - whether in Treaty or other form – had be initiated and crafted by them.

'The Government will negotiate a Treaty', he said, 'but you, the Aboriginal people, should decide what it is you want to see in that treaty.' Mr. Hawke also committed the Government to assisting in the establishment of a process of consultation. The aim, he said, was to arrive at the end of the process with the organisation of a national convention to discuss the outcomes of the consultation process.

As the meeting had insisted on some form of timetable Mr. Hawke agreed to consider the results of early consultations and release funds for the nation-wide process before, the end of this year.

'We would expect and hope and work for the conclusion of a Treaty before the end of the life of this Parliament', he said.

Mr. Hawke's undertakings have opened the way for Aboriginal people to meet together with some hope of recognition as the original owners and occupiers of this land. Underlining the context of the consultations and future discussions with the Australian Government the Chairman of the Northern Territory and Central Lands Councils - Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Western Rubuntje - then presented Mr. Hawke with a petition framed by Top End fine Centre paintings, which were painted by senior elders during the festival

SUE FORD 1988