

The Gurindji Strike

Gough Whitlam: *Vincent Lingiari, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever.*

Vincent Lingiari: *Let us live happily together as mates, let us not make it hard for each other ... We want to live in a better way together, Aboriginals and white men, let us not fight over anything, let us be mates.¹*

On 16 August 1975, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured a handful of red soil into the hands of Gurindji elder Vincent Lingiari. The act symbolised the legal transfer of the Wave Hill station to the Gurindji people. The first time the Commonwealth government handed Aboriginal land back to its original owners, the moment marked a new stage in the national land rights movement. Even so, the formal transfer consisted of only a limited portion of their Country. It took another 45 years before the Gurindji's [native title rights and interests](#) over their Country was formally recognised in Australian law.

Background

The traditional Country of the Gurindji people covers the Victoria River area in the Northern Territory. Contact with Europeans first occurred in the 1840s and 1850s but gradually intensified. In 1883, the Crown granted about 3,000 square kilometres of land to pastoralist Nathaniel Buchanan – ignoring the rights and interests of the Gurindji – who established the Wave Hill cattle station. The introduction of cattle and bullocks degraded the environment, disrupted Gurindji land management practices, and led to violent conflict between colonists and Gurindji. Pastoralists exploited the labour of Gurindji and other First Nations peoples to extract profit from their landholdings.

Conditions

Exploitation increased after the cattle station was purchased by Vestey Brothers, an international meat-packing business. Owned by the English Lord Vestey, the company refused to pay their First Nation workers in wages. Complaints led to the Government conducting several inquiries, which recognised the scale of the problem. In 1937, the Report of the Board of Inquiry Appointed to inquire into the land and land industries of the Northern Territory of Australia found that:

It was obvious that they [the Vestey's] had been ... quite ruthless in denying their Aboriginal labour proper access to basic human rights.²

A 1946 report commissioned by the Vestey family (but never published) confirmed these findings. It found that children as young as 12 were forced to work, sexual abuse was common and living conditions were deplorable. The Gurindji were housed in humpies constructed out of corrugated iron and lacked floors, lighting, sanitation, running water, or cooking facilities.³ Billy Bunter Jampijinpa, who lived on the station explained:

¹ Cited in Nevanka McKeon, 'Vincent Lingiari & Gough Whitlam: The Story Behind the Image', *NITV News*, 2 March 2016

<<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/03/02/vincent-lingiari-gough-whitlam-story-behind-image>>.

² Cited in Martin Hodgson, 'Lingiari's Legacy: From Little Things Big Things Grow', *ABC News*, 26 August 2011 <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-08-26/hodgson-from-little-things-big-things-grow/2855942?nw=0&r=Image>>.

³ See Ronald Berndt and Catherin Berndt, *End of an Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory* (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987).

We were treated just like dogs. We were lucky to get paid the 50 quid a month we were due, and we lived in tin humpies you had to crawl in and out on your knees. There was no running water. The food was bad – just flour, tea, sugar and bits of beef like the head or feet of a bullock..⁴

In the 1960s, Dexter Daniels, the Aboriginal Organiser of the North Australian Workers' Union, pressured his union to fight to improve conditions. The union applied to the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission to amend the pastoral award to remove sections discriminating against First Nations peoples. In 1966, in the face of strong opposition from the pastoralists, the Commission agreed. However, it delayed implementation of the new, non-discriminatory award for three years.

The Strike

The Gurindji were done waiting. On 23 August 1966, Lingiari led 200 Gurindji stockmen, house servants and their families off the Wave Hill Cattle Station. The following year, the Gurindji moved their camp to the nearby sacred site of Wattie Creek / Daguragu. It was here that they began their 10-year struggle.

Initially white media and politicians saw the strike as a fight for fair wages and conditions. However, the Gurindji were clear from the beginning. They wanted their land back. The Gurindji drafted a [petition to Australian Governor-General Lord Casey](#), asking for a lease of 1,300 square kilometres around Daguragu. They exclaimed,

We, the leaders of the Gurindji people, write to you about our earnest desire to regain tenure of our tribal lands in the Wave Hill-Limbunya area of the Northern Territory, of which we were dispossessed in time past, and for which we received no recompense.

Our people have lived here from time immemorial and our culture, myths, dreaming and sacred places have evolved in this land. Many of our forefathers were killed in the early days while trying to retain it. Therefore we feel that morally the land is ours and should be returned to us. Our very name Aboriginal acknowledges our prior claim. We have never ceased to say amongst ourselves that Vestey's should go away and leave us our land.

Lord Casey [refused the lease](#). He explained:

You should be careful that you do not do anything to break the law in any way or to interfere with the rights of the pastoral lessee.

The Gurindji strike inspired First Nations peoples on other stations. Nearby pastoralists were forced to increase wages and conditions to prevent further strike action. They also pressured the government to break the strike, by cutting off food supplies and threatening eviction. However, the determination of the Gurindji was impacting public opinion particularly in the south of the country. Vincent Lingiari and other leaders were invited to give talks and church, trade union and student groups raised money and campaigned for the Gurindji struggle.

Around the same time, other First Nations peoples in the Northern Territory were fighting for their rights to land. The Yolngu people of Yirrkala and the Larrakia people went to court and sent petitions calling for land rights. These efforts contributed to a drastic shift in public opinion. Songwriters Paul

⁴ Lindsay Murdoch, 'Stockmen Mark Long Walk to Freedom and Land Rights', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 2006 <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/stockmen-mark-long-walk-to-freedom-and-land-rights-20060717-gdnz6t.html>>.

Kelly and Kev Carmody (a Murri man from northern Queensland) later recorded a song celebrating the Walk-Off and the Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari:

Gurindji were working for nothing but rations
Where once they had gathered the wealth of the land
Daily the pressure got tighter and tighter
Gurindji decided they must make a stand
They picked up their swags and started off walking
At Wattie Creek they sat themselves down
Now it don't sound like much but it sure got tongues talking
Back at the homestead and then in the town
From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow
Vestey man said I'll double your wages
Eighteen quid a week you'll have in your hand
Vincent said uh-huh we're not talking about wages
We're sitting right here till we get our land.⁵

The Handback

In 1972, Gough Whitlam led the Australian Labor Party to victory in the Federal election. The new government established the Woodward Royal Commission to examine how Aboriginal land rights could be recognised in the Northern Territory. Although the Whitlam government lost power before it could enact land rights legislation for the Northern Territory, it was able to hand back a portion of the Gurindji peoples' land. The moment is immortalised in [Mervyn Bishop's photograph](#) and [Vincent Namatjira's painting](#).

Legacy

The Gurindji Strike was the first Aboriginal demonstration for land rights that obtained popular support around Australia. The determination and resilience of Vincent Lingiari and the morality of the claims of the Gurindji people were clear for all to see. However, it still took many years for the Gurindji to see the return of their land. It was not until [May 1986](#), that the Gurindji received inalienable Aboriginal freehold title deeds to the station. It was not until 2020, that their native title over 5,500 square kilometres of Country was [finally recognised in Australian law](#). Justice Richard White delivered the determination in front of Traditional Owners on Country, some 800 kilometres south of Darwin:

We're not returning land. What we're doing is recognising that the Jamangku, Japuwuny, Parlakuna-Parkinykarni and Yilyiyimawu land-holding groups have had interests in this land at least from the time of European settlement, probably for millennia.⁶

Jimmy Wavehill, brother-in-law to Vincent Lingiari, spoke after the court's determination:

We gave them our time, and then we had to walk off the station, but we don't mind. I'm looking forward, and you guys, ladies and gentlemen, make me real proud, and real happy with you mob. We are all still friends together, (this is) good for our future in Australia.

⁵ Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody, *From Little Things, Big Things Grow* (1991).

⁶ Shahni Wellington, 'Native Title Rights Recognised Over Famous Wave Hill Station', *NITV*, 9 September 2020 <<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/09/09/native-title-rights-recognised-over-famous-wave-hill-station>>.