

Factsheet

The Larrakia Petition
2022

ANT~~A~~R



The Larrakia Petition

'Gwalwa Daraniki!

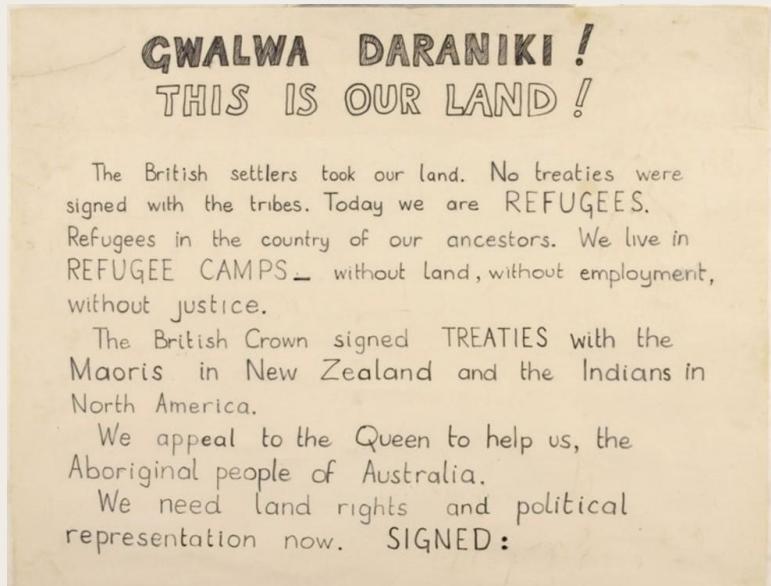
This is Our Land

The British settlers took our land. No treaties were signed with the tribes. Today we are REFUGEES.

Refugees in the country of our ancestors. We live in REFUGEE CAMPS – without land, without employment, without justice.

The British Crown signed TREATIES with the MAORIS in New Zealand and the Indians in North America.

We appeal to the Queen to help us, the Aboriginal people of Australia. We need land rights and political representation now.'



The 1972 Larrakia Petition powerfully demonstrated the feelings of alienation and disempowerment experienced by First Peoples across the country. Calling for land rights and political representation, the petitioners declare that without a treaty they are 'refugees in the country of our ancestors'. The petition was not acted upon. However, alongside the Yirrkala Bark Petitions, *Milirrpum v Nabalco* and the Gurindji Strike,¹ the Larrakia Petition was a foundational step in the campaign for Aboriginal rights in Australia. The determination of the Larrakia people helped push the Commonwealth government to enact a land rights law in the Northern Territory in 1976.

¹ Hobbs, H. (2021). The Gurindji Strike – ANtar Factsheet.

History of Petitioning

There is a long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples petitioning the government and the Crown. As early as 1846, for example, Aboriginal people petitioned Queen Victoria about maltreatment on Flinders Island in Bass Strait. Part of the petition read:

'Your petitioners humbly state to your Majesty that Mr Robinson made for us and with Colonel Arthur an agreement which we have not lost from our minds since and we have made our part of it good.²

In the 1930s, Yorta Yorta man William Cooper gathered 1,814 signatures for a petition to King George V, seeking representation in parliament. The government did not forward the petition to the King and took no action. This did not stop Aboriginal people seeking every opportunity to protect and promote their rights. In 1963, the Yolngu of Yirrkala sent a series of bark petitions to the Australian Parliament calling for land rights. When the government failed to act, the Yolngu took them to Court, asserting that they had a native title right to their traditional country.'

Background to the Petition

In 1971, the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory ruled against the Yolngu claim for communal native title to their traditional lands. Justice Blackburn held that native title 'does not, and never has formed, part of the law of any part of Australia'.³ The Yolngu were 'deeply shocked'.⁴ So too, were many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

² Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights. A Documentary History* (Allen & Unwin, 1999), 38.

³ *Milirrpum v Nabalco* (1971) 17 FLR 141, 245.

⁴ [The People of Yirrkala, 'Yolngu Statement in the Gupapunyngu Language'](#) (online, 6 May 1971).

Larrakia people from around Kulaluk in Darwin decided to take action. Forming the ‘Gwalwa Daraniki’, which means ‘Our Land’ in the Larrakia language, the group began to ‘shape themselves into a spearhead of the national and international resurgence of black pride’.⁵ In March 1972, Gwalwa Daraniki sent a petition to Prime Minister William McMahon calling for a ‘Commission to go around to every tribe and work out a treaty to suit each tribe’. The petition concluded, ‘These are the demands of the Gwalwa Daraniki and we shall not stop until the treaties are signed’.⁶ McMahon dismissed the petition, replying ‘that it was not appropriate to negotiate with British subjects as though they were foreign powers’.⁷ Gwalwa Daraniki decided to go above the Prime Minister by petitioning directly to the Queen.

Delivering the Petition to the Queen

In 1972, a second petition was prepared. Signed by over 1,000 Aboriginal people from across the country, the petition is a testament to both the determination of Gwalwa Daraniki and the demands of First Peoples. The plan was to present the petition to Prince Margaret, who would be visiting Darwin in October 1972:

Princess Margaret will be visiting Darwin on October 15. She wants to meet the Aboriginal people. To make sure she learns the TRUTH...the Gwalwa Daraniki is planning to present a petition to Government House. We hope that hundreds of black Territorians will sign the petition (thumb-prints with names for those that don't write). On the night of her visit, we ask all tribes to join us and camp all night outside Government House. Bring your swags, didgeridoos, and guitars.⁸

Hoping to emulate the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, Gwalwa Daraniki wanted to establish an alternative ‘Aboriginal Government House’ on the lawns outside the Administrator’s residence.

⁵ Bill Day, *Bunji: A Story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) 5.

⁶ Judith Wright, *We Call for a Treaty* (Fontana, 1985).

⁷ Bill Day, ‘Speaker’s Corner’ (Address at the National Archive of Australia, Canberra, 29 May 2011) 3.

⁸ Bill Day, *Bunji: A Story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) 37.

Despite police harassment, around 300 Aboriginal people gathered outside Government House as Princess Margaret greeted registered guests and awarded an MBE to Gunwinggu artist Yirawala. The crowd chanted, 'We want land, not medals'.⁹

The next morning, one of the men attempted to break through police lines to deliver the petition to the Princess as her motorcade sped off to the airport. Part of the petition was torn off in the struggle. Gwalwa Daraniki decided to post it to Buckingham Palace, explaining that they wanted the Queen to 'know the truth about the Aboriginal people of Australia'.¹⁰ The petition was returned to Governor-General Sir Paul Hasluck, who passed it onto the Whitlam Government. Gordon Bryant, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, wrote to Gwalwa Daraniki promising action:

You may have heard that it is the policy of the new Government to act to grant rights in land to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory ... The Government is very much aware of the past failure to give proper recognition to the rights of Aboriginal people to land ... you may be assured that we intend to give it a high priority.¹¹

Indeed, although drafted by Gwalwa Daraniki, the petition was 'intended as a national effort on behalf of all Aboriginal people'.¹²

After the Petition

The Larrakia Petition helped drive momentum for the Woodward Royal Commission.

⁹ Bill Day, *Bunji: A Story of the Gwalwa Daraniki Movement* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) 37.

¹⁰ Letter from the Aboriginal Government House to Queen Elizabeth II, 17 October 1972.

¹¹ Cited in Archie Thomas, 'The Princess and the Protestors: The 1972 Larrakia Petition and Discourses of Failure in Aboriginal Protest' in Archie Thomas, Andrew Jakubowicz and Heidi Norman (eds), *Does the Media Fail Aboriginal Political Aspirations?* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2019) 36, 48.

¹² Bill Day, 'Speaker's Corner' (Address at the National Archive of Australia, Canberra, 29 May 2011) 2.

Set up in 1973 by the Whitlam Government, the Woodward Commission recommended that the Commonwealth pass legislation to restore Aboriginal ownership of land in the Northern Territory. The Whitlam government was dismissed before it could act, but the Malcolm Fraser led Coalition government passed the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* in 1976—the first Australian law that allowed for First Nations peoples to have their land rights recognised in Australian law. However, the Act initially proved of limited value for the Larrakia, who struggled to prove to Australian courts that they had a continuing connection to their country, which is centred on Darwin.

The Larrakia issued a formal land claim in 1979. Yet, it was not until 2016, that land around the Cox Peninsula was formally handed back to the Larrakia people, bringing an end to the ‘most complex and hard-fought land claim in the history of Aboriginal land rights’.¹³

The Northern Territory government had spent around \$20 million fighting the Larrakia over the preceding years.¹⁴ However, the claim is not fully resolved. In 2020, calls for a review were made by the former CEO of the Northern Land Council to ensure that all Larrakia traditional owners can share in the benefit.¹⁵ Reflecting on these calls and the Larrakia Petition, Nigel Browne, CEO of the Larrakia Development Corporation notes, ‘In 1972 we didn’t just call for land rights for our mob. We called for land rights for all our mobs’.¹⁶

¹³ [Zach Hope and Christopher Walsh, ‘Historic NT Kenbi Land Deal Sealed after 37 Years’, *NT News* \(online, 7 April 2016\).](#)

¹⁴ [Zach Hope and Christopher Walsh, ‘Historic NT Kenbi Land Deal Sealed after 37 Years’, *NT News* \(online, 7 April 2016\).](#)

¹⁵ [Jane Bardon, ‘Calls for Review of Cox Peninsula’s Kenbi Traditional Ownership “To Heal Darwin Divisions”’, *ABC News* \(online, 23 March 2020\).](#)

¹⁶ [@Garamanak twitter post](#), 1 December 2021, 10:15pm.

© ANTAR 2022

Email: hello@antar.org.au
Phone: 02 9280 0060

PO Box 77
Strawberry Hills NSW 2012

With thanks:

This background report was authored by
Dr Harry Hobbs, Research Consultant.

**ANTAR is proud to acknowledge and pay our respects
to First Nations Peoples as the traditional owners
of the lands on which we work across the continent.**

For more information visit:

ANTAR.ORG.AU