

“Land in the State of New South Wales was traditionally owned and occupied by Aborigines. Land is a spiritual, social, cultural and economic important to Aborigines. It is fitting to acknowledge the importance which land has for Aborigines and the need of Aborigines for land. It is accepted that because of past Government policies the amount of land available for Aborigines has been progressively reduced without compensation.”

Freedom Ride

50th Anniversary



New South Wales
Aboriginal Land Council
www.alc.org.au

In February 1965, a number of University of Sydney students, including Charles Perkins, embarked on a bus tour of regional New South Wales, aiming to oppose racial discrimination and expose the mistreatment of Aboriginal people.

Inspired by protests against racial segregation in the United States, the students formed the Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) and planned a fact-finding mission to confront the practice of segregation and discrimination in rural and regional NSW.

In small country towns, Aboriginal people were excluded from swimming pools, clubs, cafes, cinemas and were often refused service at shops and bars.

Segregation existed at schools and Aboriginal people's job prospects were often limited to seasonal employment.

Aboriginal people were also forbidden to live in towns and were forced on to reserves and supervised missions on the edge of major population centres, where living conditions were cramped with substandard sanitation and little or no access to basic amenities like water, gas and electricity.

Charles Perkins

The 29 University of Sydney students who embarked on the Freedom Ride were led by Arrernte man Charles Perkins. Fellow student, Gumbaynggirr man Gary Williams joined the bus at Bowraville on its journey to Kempsey.

Other notable members included Jim Spigelman, who later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW and Ann Curthoys, whose diary entries of the Freedom Ride formed the basis of her memoir of the events.

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1965 Freedom Ride itinerary

In February 1965, the Freedom Ride bus visited Wellington, Gulargambone, Walgett, Moree, Boggabilla, Bowraville and Kempsey.

The demonstrations in Walgett and Moree created tension. National media coverage of the racism and hostility directed at Aboriginal people and the students shocked Australians and provided a reality check on the extreme inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Walgett

Demonstrations in Walgett were held outside the RSL which had refused membership for Aboriginal veterans, who were only allowed to enter on Anzac Day while a Walgett local used his truck to ram Freedom Ride bus off the highway as the students left the town.

Moree

In Moree, the students focused on the artesian baths and swimming pools that were reserved for ‘whites’ only. While the local authorities’ response to the demonstrations encouraged the Freedom Riders to leave Moree satisfied that the situation had changed for the better, the students later learned that Aboriginal children were again being refused admission to the pool.

The Freedom Ride made a return to Moree where they faced hostility and violence outside the Moree baths as they continued their protest for change.

Bowraville

The students described the discrimination in the town as “absolutely shocking” – by far the worst they had encountered. The Picture Theatre was segregated by a partition. Aboriginal people had to buy their tickets separately and could only enter the theatre after the picture had started. Segregation was also practiced at pubs and cafes, and years earlier, in schools.

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Legacy of the Freedom Ride

Many of the towns visited by the students already had an active Aboriginal protest committee.

The national media coverage generated by the Freedom Ride empowered Aboriginal people to resist discrimination with renewed confidence.

After the Freedom Ride bus left, communities showed incredible bravery and courage, in the face of hostile local reaction, to confront racism and discrimination.

The public debate that followed the Freedom Ride created pressure for change.

The Freedom Ride has often been credited for the 1967 Referendum that removed discriminatory references to Aboriginal people from the Constitution and allowed the Federal Government to pass legislation for the benefit of Aboriginal people.

The Freedom Ride was one of several precursors to the notion of Land Rights for Aboriginal people and by extension – the passing of the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983.