

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Faith Bandler
1920-2015
Civil Rights Activist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 2 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Faith Bandler

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SYNOPSIS

Faith Bandler is a descendant of South Sea Islanders. At the age of 13, her father was kidnapped from the island of Ambrym, in what is known as Vanuatu, and brought to Australia to work as an unpaid labourer in the Queensland cane fields.

During the 1950s, Faith became involved in the peace movement, and in 1956 she was instrumental in setting up the Australian Aboriginal Fellowship.

Faith was also a founding member of the Federal Council for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, becoming the director of its referendum campaign in 1967, NSW State Secretary from 1962 to 1970 and General Secretary from 1970 to 1973.

In 1974, Faith decided to direct her energies to the plight of her own people, the 16,000 descendants of South Sea Islanders. She founded the National Commission for Australian South Sea Islanders and, in 1975, made her first emotional journey to her father's birthplace on Ambrym.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Australian Biography: Faith Bandler will have interest and relevance for students from middle to senior secondary levels studying Modern History, Citizenship, Economics, Legal Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, Women's Studies, English, Geography, Aboriginal Studies and Personal Development.

INEQUALITY

Throughout the program, Faith Bandler discusses a number of examples of social and political inequality. These include ones she has confronted personally, such as slavery, gender inequality and Indigenous disadvantage.

Slavery

Faith Bandler's father worked on the Queensland cane fields after being kidnapped from his homeland. He was one of over 60,000 South Sea Islanders brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904. Many of the 'kanakas', as they were called, were brought across illegally, through a process known as 'blackbirding'. Practised by Australian and European traders, this process involved removing Islanders either by force or under the pretence of trade. Once kidnapped, the Islanders were shipped to Queensland to work on the sugar plantations.

The high cost of wages for Australian workers made it difficult for the Queensland sugar industry to compete with overseas producers. The cheap labour provided by the Islanders kept production costs down and enabled the sugar industry to boom.

While many of the Islanders were paid, their wages were extremely low and barely covered their basic needs. Some were only paid in food and clothing rations. As the Islanders were 'indentured' or bound by contract, they were not free to leave the cane fields.

The trade in Islander labour came to an end in the early 1900s with the introduction of laws by Queensland's Parliament.

Discussion questions

- According to Bandler, what were conditions like for Islanders on the cane fields? How were they treated?
- List some characteristics of slavery. Why is it suggested that the Islanders on the cane fields were slaves?

- How did the sugar industry benefit from the Islanders? What does this suggest about the relationship between labour and the success of industry?

- Aside from unequal wages, what other issues of inequality arise from the experiences of Islanders in Queensland?

Gender Equality

Amongst her many achievements, Faith Bandler was also a founding member of the Women's Electoral Lobby. Since the 1970s, this group has campaigned to address inequality experienced by women and was at the forefront of the Australian women's liberation movement.

A major concern of the Women's Electoral Lobby was, and remains, gender equality in the workforce. In 1972, they ran a large campaign calling for equal wages and equal employment opportunity for women. On 15 December 1972, women were awarded the male rate of pay, no matter what work they were performing.

Working towards gender equality was also personally important for Faith, who worked in the Women's Land Army during World War 2. These women worked in a number of industries to counteract the loss of male workers who had left to fight the war.

Discussion questions

- How does Bandler describe her experience in the Women's Land Army?
- Why should these workers receive acknowledgement?
- What difficulties do you think those in the Women's Land Army faced when the men returned to their jobs?
- How has gender inequality been addressed since the 1950s? Cite some examples.
- Do women continue to experience unequal treatment in the workforce? Explain your answer.

Indigenous Issues

Faith Bandler is most well known for actively promoting the rights and interests of Indigenous Australians. Her involvement in these issues as an activist first started when she co-founded the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship. This group led the campaign to abolish the NSW state government-controlled Aborigines Welfare Board.

The Aborigines Welfare Board was established in 1883, originally as the Aborigines Protection Board. Through the powers granted to this Board, Indigenous children were separated from their families and sent to missions, schools, farm stations and reservations. These removed children are some of those now commonly referred to as the 'Stolen Generations'.

With the exception of Tasmania, each state and territory had similar boards. While their powers to remove Indigenous children differed, the effects were very much the same. The NSW Board was eventually abolished in 1969 after several campaigns.

The removal of their children was just one of many discriminatory practices that impacted on Indigenous people. Other inequalities included unequal pay, no recognition of land rights, racial prejudice and unequal citizenship rights. Under the Australian Constitution, the federal government had no power to make laws relating to Indigenous people. This was left to the state and territory governments, each with their different laws, policies and prejudices.

From 1957, Bandler was instrumental in the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders' campaign for a national referendum to change the Constitution. There were two main changes requested. First, that Indigenous people be included in future national censuses. Secondly, that the federal government be granted powers to legislate for Indigenous people. The vast majority of voters accepted these changes in 1967.

While the government took some time to act on its new powers, the referendum was a significant step towards addressing some of the inequalities and discrimination Indigenous people experienced.

Discussion questions

- Give some examples of unequal treatment of Indigenous people mentioned by Faith Bandler.
- How are the experiences of Bandler's people, South Sea Islanders in Australia, similar to those of Indigenous Australians?
- Why did she argue that the State laws relating to Indigenous people needed to be abolished?
- Since the referendum, how has the federal government used these powers to address Indigenous social inequality?
- How has the reconciliation process and Indigenous governance or self-determination contributed to social justice for Indigenous people in Australia?

Group Activity

Choose two of the issues of inequality discussed, or others Faith Bandler raises in the program. Compare both, discussing the similarities and differences. Here are some questions for guidance:

- What are the sources of inequality?
- Who are the stakeholders? Who has an interest?
- Why are they involved? What is their interest?
- Are there any rights involved? If so, what are they?
- Are there any power imbalances? How do these come about?
- What values are promoted? Whose are they?

SOCIAL CHANGE

Civil Rights

Civil rights have a long history, at least as ideals towards which societies can aim.

Essentially, these are the rights needed for a proper and smooth democracy. They are designed to protect the individual from arbitrary and unjust uses of power by governments. These rights recognize that there are some things, such as freedom of speech, which demand protection in order for a democracy to work effectively.

Looked at from the other point of view, they limit and control the power of governments over their people. In democracies, civil rights exist independently and above the laws made by governments. Where there is an abuse of power or gross inequality, individuals can 'use' these rights to call for a change to the situation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, civil rights activists in places like Australia and the United States were advancing these rights in their campaigns against government laws and practices. Civil rights continue to be used in lobbying for social and political change.

Discussion questions

- What civil rights does Faith Bandler touch on? List three more examples of civil rights.
- Are civil rights effective in protecting individuals from undemocratic government power? What limitations do people face in using civil rights?
- Give examples of any recent civil rights issues and consider what civil rights are involved.

Activism

'My belief is in people. I fix my faith in people. I'm a great believer in the power of people.'

Activism refers to direct action taken by people to achieve certain social or political goals. These goals involve some change to existing circumstances or practices by government that are seen as problematic or unjust.

Activists often draw on civil rights or some other higher values in putting forward their claims. They can take very different kinds of action, such as rallying, letter writing, collective lobbying, signing petitions, advertising or organising passive resistance campaigns. The two key elements of activism, however, are that it involves some action and that it comes from 'the people'. Some suggest this is based on the view that ultimate power or authority for social change comes from the people.

Discussion questions

- What makes Faith Bandler a civil rights activist? What direct action was she involved in?
- Name three other people who dedicated their lives to activism.
- Why does Faith feel it is not so important to be acknowledged for her activism?
- What other examples of activism are there?
- Why do you think people get involved in activism?
- Should people be able to take direct action against their governments? Should there be any limitations?

Group Activity

Faith Bandler explains her involvement in helping South Sea Islanders in Australia: 'It was because I could see that they would become other than what they were...'

Social change is often about having hope in some future that is different from present circumstances.

- Think of a social issue that is important in your school or local community and you imagine could change for the better. Discuss what civil rights are involved (e.g. public space) and agree on a set of goals you have collectively.
- List at least 5 kinds of activism you may take to work towards these goals. After this, discuss what problems, limitations and consequences may arise. Which do you think is the best course of action? Why? Do you have to consider other people's rights? If so, what are they?

IDENTITY AND CHANGE

Place

The program traces Faith's history from her father's transportation to Queensland, her childhood in northern New South Wales, her move to Sydney, trip to Europe, experience at Dachau and return to her father's island. In many ways, her story is one of migration and movement. We can see how these places impacted on and changed the course of Faith's life.

Similarly, our own sense of self relies in part on our environment. The places in which we live and work develop our personal history and identity.

Discussion questions

- How do you think the places Faith spent time in affected her life and values? Were there any particularly resounding places for Faith?
- Why do you think Faith was personally overwhelmed by her welcome to Ambrym? How do you think this changed her life?
- How does environment and geography relate to people's sense of identity?
- What other things shape our identity?

Time

Our identities are also influenced by time—by what has happened, what is happening and where we are going. History is particularly important to our identity, and not just our personal history.

Personal and social histories are always connected. We live our lives in a social context, a context with its own history and one that is greater than our own. Social events, both past and present, can affect our lives to differing degrees.

For Faith, her father's personal history is part of a history of the cane fields and South Sea Island slave trade. Faith's own history is influenced both by her father's personal history and this greater social history. Without an understanding of these two histories, we would fail to understand much about Faith's own life.

Discussion questions

- What social histories touch on Faith's story? How do these help develop our understanding of her life?
- Have any social events affected your personal history? What influence did they have?
- We often think about time in separate blocks—past, present and future. Do you think this is an accurate way of representing time?

Activity

How have places and time affected your identity?

Divide a piece of paper into three columns. In the first column, write 3 places that have had some impact on your identity and how. In the second, write 3 social events (anything from politics to entertainment) that have influenced you and how. Finally, write 3 things about your parents' past that have shaped your identity in the present.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Imagine you are a civil rights activist. Write a letter to a Member of Parliament on a recent civil rights issue that you feel strongly about. Think carefully about your approach. Identify your supporting arguments/justifications, your goals and the changes you will suggest.
2. Are civil rights absolute or are they balanced against each other? Discuss with reference to the right to free speech and another civil right.
3. 'People have a social obligation to address social and political inequality.' Discuss this statement and consider the possible sources of this obligation.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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Amnesty International www.amnesty.org.au

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