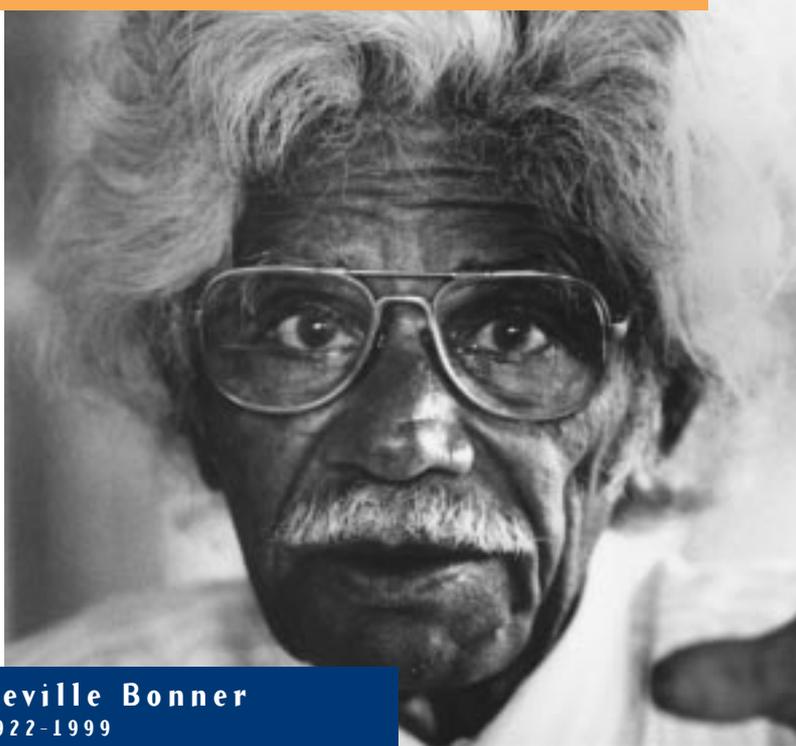


# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

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



**Neville Bonner**  
1922-1999  
Former Senator

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography Series 1** 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: Neville Bonner**

**Director/Producer** Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Ron Saunders

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1992

Study guide prepared by Darren Smith © NFSA

Also in Series 1: Nancy Bird Walton, H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs,  
Dame Joan Hammond, Jack Hazlitt, Donald Horne, Sir Marcus Oliphant

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## SYNOPSIS

Neville Bonner grew up on the banks of the Richmond River and started his working life as a ringbarker, canecutter and stockman. He spent 16 years on the repressive Palm Island Aboriginal Reserve where he learned many of the skills that would help him later as a politician.

Bonner became the first Aboriginal person in Federal Parliament, representing Queensland as a Liberal Party Senator from 1971 to 1983. He crossed the floor 23 times to vote against his own party and in 1982 the Liberal Party demoted him from first to third place on the Queensland Senate ticket. Bonner resigned from the party in fury, stood as an independent, but was not re-elected. He later became a Board member of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Neville Bonner was the author of several books including **Black Power in Australia**; **Equal World, Equal Share** and **For the Love of Children**.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Studies of Society and Environment, Civics and Citizenship, Indigenous Studies, Legal Studies, History and English.

## INDIGENOUS SOCIAL JUSTICE

### Background

Neville Bonner spent 16 years living on Palm Island, off the Queensland coast. Palm Island was established as a mission for Indigenous people in 1918 to replace the Hull River Mission, which had been destroyed by a cyclone. Over the next two decades, 1630 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from all over Australia were sent there.

Missions such as Palm Island existed across Australia and were an important part of government policy towards Indigenous people at the time. Broadly speaking, in the early 20th century governments sought to address the place of Indigenous people in Australia through a policy of assimilation. It was believed that segregation and hostility could be solved by merging Indigenous people, particularly those of mixed descent, into non-Indigenous society. Assimilation was formally adopted as national policy in 1937 at the first commonwealth-state conference on 'native welfare'. The policy was reaffirmed at the third such conference in 1951. The conference gave the following definition of the policy: 'assimilation means that, in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like other white Australians do' (quoted in **Bringing Them Home - Community Guide**, 1997).

Employment and education were central to these attempts to 'merge' Indigenous people, particularly children, into non-Indigenous society. During the 1920s, state and territory governments opened schools and training institutions. Indigenous children were also sent to missions run by church groups. Young women were often recruited to work as domestics for non-Indigenous households.

By the early 1960s, it was clear that Indigenous people were not being assimilated – discrimination by non-Indigenous people continued and many Indigenous people refused to surrender their culture and lifestyle. The assimilation policy had failed.

In 1995, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was asked by the federal government to conduct a national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The resultant report, **Bringing Them Home**, details the impacts assimilation had on Indigenous children, families and communities.

While some non-Indigenous people involved in the assimilation process acted with good intentions, the policy did reflect a core belief that non-Indigenous culture was the norm or more desirable.

The legacy of assimilation, and problematic relationships between government enforcement and Indigenous people, remains. For example, in November 2004, Indigenous residents at Palm Island staged riots in response to the death in custody of an Indigenous resident.

- For what reasons did Neville Bonner and his wife end up on Palm Island?
- How does Neville describe life on Palm Island?
- What affect do you think the assimilation policy would have had on the way Indigenous people saw themselves?
- What different motivations and intentions might have been behind the assimilation policy?

### Self-determination

In the program, Neville Bonner comments that, traditionally, decisions affecting Indigenous Australians had been made by non-Indigenous people and were based on non-Indigenous perspectives and values. He argues that these decisions need to be made by, or at least with, Indigenous people. Neville is speaking of self-determination.

The right to self-determination has underpinned many social justice concerns of Indigenous Australians. Self-determination is the right of all peoples to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development in a way that meets their needs.

The principle is a fundamental human right under international law and is included in the UN Charter of 1945, as well as other important international instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 1).

Article 31 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples describes Indigenous self-determination in practical terms as follows:

- Indigenous peoples, as a specific form of exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, including culture, religion, education, information, media, health, housing, employment, social welfare, economic activities, land and resources management, environment and entry by non-members, as well as ways and means for financing these autonomous functions.
- How does self-determination differ from assimilation?
- What might be some examples of self-determination based on the definition in the Draft Declaration?
- How does the concept of self-determination apply to your own pursuit of goals?

## Activities

**Comparison chart.** Based on their understanding of assimilation and self-determination, students identify statements made by Neville Bonner that reflect each of these. Students then identify other traits or characteristics of these different policies.

**Community groups.** Students identify a group or project run by Indigenous people as an example of self-determination. They are to report on the charter for the group/project, any achievements, what it seeks to address and its source of funding (if that information is readily available).

**Research.** Students select one of the following Indigenous social justice issues: deaths in custody, native title, Aboriginal cultural heritage, child welfare, health, and Indigenous education. They then research and write a report showing the role assimilation played in these areas and how an approach based on self-determination delivered any change in practice.

## AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

### Political Parties

In the program, Neville Bonner indicates that his interest in party politics directed him into parliament.

Australia has a two-party system, comprising the Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition. In addition, there are a number of smaller parties, which include the Australian Democrats and the Greens, as well as independent members. This structure operates at state/territory and federal levels. Though local government has a slightly different decision-making process, its elected representatives can come from political parties as well.

The party system is an important feature of Australian democracy. It enhances the representative nature of parliament by ensuring diverse public interests are represented. It also seeks to give voters greater choice of candidates. Some minority parties represent community interest in particular issues (such as the environment, immigration and families) while the larger parties tend to cover a spectrum of policy concerns.

As political parties tend to emerge from people with shared values organising themselves collectively to pursue outcomes, parties come to represent or be associated with particular interests and voter types. For example, the Australian Labor Party has its roots in the trade union movement and has traditionally been identified with workers. The Nationals, which originated from various state farm associations, have a significant voting base in rural Australia.

It is important for parties to indicate their position on particular issues so that voters can make informed choices. In the lead up to elections, the various parties gradually release their policies on issues such as taxation, the environment, social security, education and health. This is sometimes referred to as their 'election platform'. However, parties continue to develop policy positions outside election periods, often in response to government proposals and decisions.

The decision-making process around what positions to take varies across the parties and involves the party membership to differing degrees.

In recent years, there have been concerns about divisions caused by party factions and party interests diverging from the values of membership.

- What assumptions did Labor politician Bill Hayden make about Neville Bonner? How did Neville feel about it?
- For what reasons might a person decide to join a particular political party?
- Discuss some of the values and positions associated with major political parties in Australia.
- Who are the current leaders of Australia's political parties?
- Other than internal divisions, can you think of any problems associated with the party system?

### Indigenous Representation in Parliament

As the first Indigenous member of federal parliament, Neville Bonner left an important legacy. Since then, there have been a number of other Indigenous people with seats in the various Australian parliaments – these include Australian Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway and Labor MP in NSW, Linda Burney.

Neville's election to parliament came some nine years after the right to enrol and vote in all federal elections was extended to all Indigenous people regardless of where they lived. Prior to this and from 1949, Indigenous Australians could vote in federal elections only if they could enrol as electors in state elections (meaning that those living in Queensland and Western Australia were excluded). This changed in 1962 with amendments to the Commonwealth Electoral Act allowing all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to vote. In 1983, their enrolment on federal electoral rolls became compulsory.

It is worth noting that the 1967 referendum did not grant the right to vote to Indigenous Australians. The referendum proposed to change two sections of the Constitution which had prevented:

- the Commonwealth government from making laws in relation to Aboriginal people; and
- Aboriginal people from being counted in the census.

The referendum was successful and it has had an important impact on the inclusion of Indigenous Australians in the polity (civil society).

Some countries with indigenous populations have formal structures for indigenous representation in the legislature – New Zealand is a notable example. Since 1868, the NZ Parliament has had designated Maori seats, starting with four and reaching seven in 2002. These seats do not preclude Maori from standing for general seats.

An important area of recent development in terms of Indigenous representation in the Australian political structure has been at the local government level. In some states and territories (notably Queensland and the Northern Territory), there exist Indigenous community government areas or councils that are connected to the local government system.

While Neville chose to further Indigenous interests within the existing political structure, others have sought change from the outside. In 1972, a year after Neville's election, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was set up outside (the now Old) Parliament House. As an 'embassy' it is an important expression of Indigenous self-determination as something distinct and separate from (and literally outside of) the Australian political structure. In some ways, it represents a different stand-point or position from which to negotiate and discuss issues.

There are also organisations that lobby and work with government on policy. In 1990, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was established by statute, and comprised representatives elected by Indigenous people. It was the peak independent representative body for Indigenous Australians. In 2005, the federal government abolished ATSIC and replaced it with the consultative National Indigenous Council.

- How does Neville Bonner describe his feelings when he walked into parliament for the first time?
- What do you understand by the difference between being a symbol of Indigenous rights and a token representative? Where do you think Neville sits in this? How did he react to the interviewer's question and why might he have reacted so?
- Do you think Indigenous people should have particular seats in parliament?
- What advantages and limitations might be involved in working within the system to achieve change? What advantages and limitations might be involved working outside the system to achieve change?

### Activities

**Political profiles.** Students research and write a profile of an Indigenous politician or political activist: Aden Ridgeway, Lowitja O'Donogue, Michael (Mick) Dodson, William Jonas, Charles Perkins, Noel Pearson, Patrick Dodson, Faith Bandler, Eddie Koiki Mabo or someone of their choosing.

**Policy analysis.** Students choose a political issue (such as taxation, immigration, the environment etc) and, in table format, set out a comparison of the different positions various parties take on each. (Links to relevant party websites are in the reference section to this guide.)

**Role play.** Students work in groups to develop a political party for their local area. They are to develop a name, charter, process for selecting candidates and for deciding what policies to adopt. Groups could then work together on a mock parliamentary session.

**Research.** Students research and write a report on when Indigenous people received voting rights in their state or territory, and detail events leading up to that decision.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

### Neville Bonner

- ABC News Online – obituary  
[www.abc.net.au/news/features/obits/bonner/bonner\\_bio.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/news/features/obits/bonner/bonner_bio.htm)
- Neville Bonner. **Equal World, Equal Share.** World Vision of Australia, Melbourne, 1977
- Neville Bonner. **For the Love of Children.** World Vision of Australia, Melbourne, c 1982
- Angela Burger. **Neville Bonner – A Biography.** Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1979
- Online Opinion – tribute from Aden Ridgeway  
[www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=769](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=769)
- Racism No Way – fact sheet on Neville Bonner <http://www.racismnoway.com.au/teaching-resources/factsheets/18.html>
- Ann Turner (ed). **Black Power in Australia – Bobbi Sykes versus Senator Neville T Bonner.** Heinemann Educational Australia, South Yarra, 1975

### Indigenous Issues

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission – Bringing Them Home

- Online education material on the report:
  - [https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social\\_justice/bringing\\_them\\_home\\_report.pdf](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf)
- Bringing Them Home Community Guide, 1997: [www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen\\_summary](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen_summary)

Bringing Them Home Study Guide, 2002: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/bringing-them-home-stolen>

Teaching activities on **Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence**: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/rights-ed-bringing-them-home-11-follow-rabbit-proof-fence-doris-pilkington-common>

The National Indigenous Council – <http://www.atns.net.au/default.asp>

### Political Parties

- Australian Democrats – [www.democrats.org.au](http://www.democrats.org.au)
- Australian Labor Party – [www.alp.org.au](http://www.alp.org.au)
- The Greens – [www.greens.org.au](http://www.greens.org.au)
- Liberal Party of Australia – [www.liberal.org.au](http://www.liberal.org.au)
- The Nationals – [www.nationals.org.au](http://www.nationals.org.au)

### Indigenous Representation

Aboriginal Tent Embassy – [www.aboriginaltentembassy.net](http://www.aboriginaltentembassy.net)

**Australian Biography.** There are a number of other relevant programs in this Film Australia documentary series: Faith Bandler, Lois (Lowitja) O'Donogue and Charles Perkins.

Trevor Graham (director). **Mabo-Life of an Island Man.** Film Australia, Sydney, 1997

Catherine J Iorns. 'Dedicated Parliamentary Seats for Indigenous Peoples: Political Representation as an Element of Indigenous Self-Determination', **Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law**, Vol 10 No 4, December 2003: [www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw/issues/v10n4/iorns104\\_text.html](http://www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw/issues/v10n4/iorns104_text.html)

NSW Legislative Council Hansard, 20 September 1995 – discussion of Aboriginal representation in Parliament [http://23.101.218.132/prod/parlment/hanstrans.nsf/V3ByKey/LC19950920?open&refNavID=HA6\\_1](http://23.101.218.132/prod/parlment/hanstrans.nsf/V3ByKey/LC19950920?open&refNavID=HA6_1)

Johanna Sutherland and Whyne Russell. 'Reserved Seats for Indigenous Australians', [1997] **Indigenous Law Bulletin** 47: [www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/1998/5.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ILB/1998/5.html)

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