



Wave Hill: A ceremonial return

Sir William Deane

This paper is an extract from “Some Signposts from Daguragu”, the Inaugural Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture by Sir William Deane, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, delivered 22 August 1996. Northern Territory University, August 1996, pages 15, 16 and 17.

Produced with kind permission of the Australian Government Publishing Services, Canberra ACT. Copyright The Commonwealth of Australia, 1996.

PLEASE NOTE: This paper is not an official publication of the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) and, as such, ideas or sentiments contained in it may not reflect QSA views or policy. The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author’s own.

The Wave Hill strike commenced exactly thirty years ago (1966). The objective facts of the strike have been recounted in the past. They will, I expect, be subjected to detailed re-examination and re-telling in future lectures in this series. For now, there are some aspects of them to which I wish to draw specific attention.

On the face of things, the immediate cause of the strike was the rejection by the Vestey’s manager at Wave Hill of a request by Vincent Lingiari for a wage of twenty-five dollars per week for Aboriginal stockmen, that being much less than the thirty-four dollars to forty-six dollars per week then paid to the non-Aboriginal stockmen. When the request was rejected, Vincent Lingiari’s response was immediate: “I’m walking off today”. He went to the Aboriginal camp on Wave Hill where he addressed his people. “The people told [him]: ‘You right, old man.’ “. He then led the Gurindji from the Wave Hill camp to the Victoria River bed near the small Wave Hill welfare settlement. That was the walk-off. Years later, Mick Rangiari recalled and translated Lingiari’s words of grim determination:

No one’s gonna go back — no women, no men are gonna go back to the station to do their work.

In truth, however, the refusal of Lingiari’s demand for a wage of twenty-five dollars per week for Aboriginal stockmen was no more than the catalyst for the strike. It was made clear at the time, and subsequent events confirmed, that the underlying causes went much deeper. Indeed, Vincent Lingiari himself subsequently made clear that the money claim for twenty-five dollars per week was of little meaning to him. His first complaint to the manager of Wave Hill station in the conversation leading to the walk-off had not been about wages but about the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by European workers on Wave Hill. Essentially, however, the cause, the subject and the purpose of the strike, from the beginning and throughout until its end, lay in the emerging assertion of a claim by the Gurindji people for the return of their ancestral lands.



In December 1972, the Whitlam Government came to power in Canberra on a platform which included a promise to legislate for Aboriginal Land Rights. The new Government appointed Justice Edward Woodward as a Royal Commissioner to advise it in relation to the grant of such rights. Contemporaneously with the Woodward Royal Commission, there was a period of genuine negotiation between the Government, Vestey's and the Gurindji in relation to the Gurindji claims and an offer by Lord Vestey to relinquish part of the Wave Hill lease. Finally, there was consensus that the original Wave Hill lease should be surrendered by Vestey's and that two new leases would be issued, one to Vestey's and the other to the Murrumulla Gurindji Company, that is to say, to the Gurindji people. The Gurindji lease would comprise an area of more than three thousand square kilometres and would include the most important parts of the ancestral lands.

On 16 August, 1975, the then Prime Minister, Mr Gough Whitlam, who is known to the Gurindji as *Jungarni*, meaning "that big man", accompanied by a number of other prominent national figures, came to Daguragu. There he addressed the gathered Gurindji people. I repeat part of what he said:

On this great day, I, Prime Minister of Australia, speak to you on behalf of the Australian people — all those who honour and love this land we live in.

For them I want to say to you ...

I want to acknowledge that we Australians have still much to do to redress the injustice and oppression that has for so long been the lot of Black Australians ...

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.

As he concluded his remarks, the Prime Minister poured a handful of Daguragu soil into Vincent Lingiari's outstretched hand. Vincent Lingiari, having received both the Crown lease of his ancestral lands and a symbolic handover of the land itself, simply replied:

We are all mates now.

He then turned and addressed his people in their own tongue. He noted that the important White men had come to Daguragu and were returning the Gurindji land.

He exhorted the Gurindji thenceforth to live with the Whites as friends and equal. He concluded:

They took our country away from us, now they have brought it back ceremonially.

The Wave Hill strike had run its course. Much still remained undone. The title delivered to the Gurindji was leasehold only. Freehold title would not be obtained until more than ten years on, after the enactment, during the term of office of the Fraser Government, of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1979 and a report and supplementary report by Aboriginal Land Commissioners under that Act. Cattle, equipment and other assistance which had been promised remained to be supplied. The deforming fallacy of *terra nullius* continued to be accepted as the basis of our nations' land law. Yet there was, at Daguragu on 16 August, 1975, an event of limited but true reconciliation.

