

NEVILLE BONNER: A LEGACY FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Neville Bonner left an inspirational legacy for young Australians, says **Sean Jacobs**

The life of the late Senator Neville Bonner (1922–99), Australia's first federal Aboriginal parliamentarian, imparts powerful lessons of participation and individual self-agency that are of great value to young Australians. In many ways, Bonner's public life anticipated the challenges faced by current today's leading Indigenous figures like Warren Mundine and Noel Pearson, whose centre-right political and philosophical alignments have drawn consternation and even outrage in some circles.¹

Born into unglamorous circumstances in northern NSW in 1922, Bonner's early life was marked by countless setbacks. From dairy hand to stockman, Bonner spent his early life in NSW and Queensland working 'all different types of labouring jobs known to man.'² In 1945, he moved to Queensland's Palm Island, where he gained a number of positions of responsibility through his professional approach to compromise and bargaining over confrontation. Bonner formalised his political credentials in the mid-1960s through the Brisbane-based One People of Australia League. In 1971, he won a senate vacancy to become a Liberal senator for Queensland.

It was a journey made difficult by his complexion, only a year of formal schooling, and a political philosophy that practised self-agency and integration over dependence and separatism. Bonner's was a life with broad lessons that can inspire not only young black Australians but also any Australian grappling with notions of heritage and identity.

A slim legacy

Given his historical achievements, however, Bonner is a curiously under-celebrated figure, especially among younger Australians. As milestones

in Aboriginal affairs, grand gestures such as Prime Minister Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern speech and Kevin Rudd's 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations seemingly capture and engage a much wider swathe of younger Australians. Even today's politically aware younger generations, when recalling landmark Indigenous Australians, will far more likely refer to Eddie Mabo, helped along by the 1997 film *The Castle*, where Mabo's name is followed by good-humoured succession of 'It's the vibe, it's the Constitution.'

There is, however, a deeper explanation for Bonner's relatively slim legacy. His political philosophy and personal style disfavoured Aboriginal separatism and acts of public belligerence that accompanied the Aboriginal rights movement then. As a firm believer in the assimilation of Aboriginals into mainstream Australia, he distrusted the message of non-integration preached by the radical elements of his era. Bonner, therefore, was a man of great character but with an unexciting conservative message, not the flamboyant type to capture headlines or make it into history pages.

Activism as a poor fit

Yet the late 1960s and 1970s—formative decades in Bonner's political ascendance—elevated protest over compromise. On streets and campuses across the Western world, public protests and confrontations were the



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dominant medium for advancing causes such as sexual liberation and anti-Western sentiments. Roger Scruton recalls a minor insurgency of targeting the ‘bourgeois’ he had seen as a student on the streets of Paris in 1968.³ For the ‘radicals’ of his generation, ‘Great victories had been scored: policemen injured, cars set alight, slogans chanted, graffiti daubed.’

The radical element of Australia’s Aboriginal rights movement actively imported this type of behaviour. In 1970, in fact, Bonner warned against the Black Power movement in the United States and cautioned that applying such militancy in Australia ‘would pit coloured against white, white against coloured, Australian against Australian.’⁴ The goal of colourless equality, it seemed, had begun with honourable intentions, yet changed course when seized by a movement promoting Aboriginal self-determination, autonomy and a life for Aboriginals well apart from the perceived corrupting oppression of mainstream Australia.

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Assimilation and its discontents

Activism through street protest did not fit well with Bonner—he preferred promoting Aboriginal integration and advancement by working through Australia’s established institutions. His ascendance to the federal Parliament in 1971—the pinnacle of Australia’s Westminster democracy—reinforced his fierce belief in fully participating in Australia’s democracy. ‘We do not want an Aboriginal parliament,’ he would tell the Senate. ‘We want to be part and parcel of the Australian community. We want to see more Aborigines in this chamber.’⁵

In 1971, after entering Parliament, protestors at the newly erected Tent Embassy across the then Parliament House broadcast their resentment of Bonner and his approach. An audio extract from

a 2012 ABC *Hindsight* program, ‘Compromise and Confrontation: Senator Neville Bonner,’ features Bonner receiving a steady stream of racial taunts from protestors during an outdoor interview. Never short of eloquence, Bonner calmly responded to the astonished reporter: ‘If they’d have been more original, then perhaps I’d have something to worry about.’⁶

In Queensland, the frenzy against Bonner went beyond the usual ‘Uncle Tom’ rhetoric and escalated to death threats, becoming serious enough to warrant a police investigation. A 1971 Commonwealth police report summarises:

Senator Bonner supports the authorities in their dealings with the aboriginal question and it is no doubt for this reason that the radical element is against him. Senator Bonner is himself an aboriginal.⁷

Coming of age

Bonner had armoured himself from an early age with values of individualism and self-agency, giving him the strength to deal with such vitriolic hostility. As a skinny youngster in Lismore, Bonner and his brother, Henry, would often walk the 5 km into town, where they would call out to houses offering to do odd jobs.⁸ This was how Bonner learned to take advantage of opportunistic employment as he travelled throughout northern NSW and central Queensland.

Self-sufficiency and persistence characterised not only Bonner’s pursuit of economic opportunity but also his responses to racial hostility. One of his first tangles with prejudice was brief but heartbreaking. While still in Lismore, an opportunity arose for the Bonner brothers to attend the primary school there. Amid the excitement, their mother, Julia, who died when Bonner was 12, had fashioned school shirts out of stiff calico flour bags. By lunch-time, however, the entire school had fled, alarmed at the presence of two Aboriginal boys.⁹ Bonner did not receive a formal education until years later, and even that was a brief one.

Bonner’s early experiences of persistent verbal taunts could have set the foundation for a life of resentment and hostility. However,

in a well-refined balance of individualism and his Aboriginal heritage, Bonner told his biographer, Angela Burger:

I am happy now that I am a black man, an Aborigine. I am fiercely proud of the fact that I am a descendant of the original owners of this continent. When I was a little lad, however, those trite rhymes hurt me and of course we knew we were different.¹⁰

Bonner's choice of the Liberal Party as the formal vehicle for his philosophy came from the self-agency he had refined in his early years. At the 13th annual Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, he was tormented publicly as a 'black Judas' for supporting the Liberal-National Coalition. In a revealing oratory of his raw political motivation, Bonner said:

I came up the hard way. What I have achieved, I have achieved because I was able to stand on my own black feet. I say to heck with you. I'm going to do what I can to promote the image of my race. A man's political and religious beliefs are his own concern. If my beliefs don't accord with yours, that's just too bad.¹¹

Bonner a senator

Saddled by these events, and the persistent need to balance personal beliefs with divisive questions of Aboriginality, it is unsurprising that Bonner was never seriously considered for a federal ministerial position, particularly the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. According to Fred Chaney, Bonner's friend and senator for Western Australia from 1974 to 1990, a ministry 'would have put him in an impossible position' and undermined the unique Aboriginal advocacy role he performed.¹²

Additionally, with little formal education, Bonner initially coped poorly with the inevitable flow of paperwork attached to a senate position. Capabilities, however, can be developed and Bonner quickly improved his administrative functions to perform his senatorial responsibilities.

Indeed, over his 12-year senatorial career, he served on many senate and parliamentary committees.

Bonner also made up for his limited administrative skills through his rhetorical gift. A character in Patricia Shaw's short story, 'The Senate Vacancy' (*Quadrant*, November 2009), says: 'He's a damn good speaker. He could crucify you ... and grab a hunk of sympathy votes at the same time.'¹³ Even in his many heated debates, particularly with his counterparts in the Queensland government, it is difficult to locate examples of Bonner's eloquence unravelling. This is noteworthy, especially in a period when sharp language, even in formal political circles, could be scathing. Bonner perhaps reserved the most direct language for Queensland Minister Russ Hinze during a charged radio debate on Queensland land legislation: 'The day I shut up for you, Hinze, it'll be a red letter day for Australia.'¹⁴ For Bonner, a coarse life did not bow to coarse language.

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The battle with Hinze, however, and the rest of the Bjelke-Petersen government, would again expose the balance Bonner maintained between his individualism and commitment to Aboriginal affairs. Towards the end of the 1970s, further commitments to the Liberal Party and Queensland would pull Bonner in many directions. In a 1992 interview, a decade after leaving office, Bonner revealed a list of commitments he had made to himself before entering Parliament ranking in order God, the nation, Queensland, and the Liberal Party. All commitments, he noted, were intertwined with advancing the interests of Aboriginal Australians.¹⁵

Maintaining this hierarchy, however, was impossible in practical terms. His battle with the Bjelke-Petersen government over Aboriginal land reserves unravelled his broad support among his Queensland counterparts. Without his party's support, Bonner was relegated from first to third on the Liberal senate ticket during the 1983 double dissolution.

A black Liberal?

Despite his departure from the Liberal ticket in the 1983 federal election (Bonner ran as an independent), and his subsequent electoral defeat, Bonner's choice of the Liberal Party is surprising to both a general and younger audience, who now tend to see black politicians as purely associated with the centre-left of politics. This assumption is most pronounced in the United States where, since the 1960s, the Democratic Party has become almost synonymous with African-Americans.

Similar assumptions drove Bonner towards the Liberals; the Labour Party, he felt, should have been less presumptive and fought for his vote. In canvassing political party manifestos, Bonner was apparently persuaded by the Liberal philosophy

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and Robert Menzies' statement of Liberal beliefs.¹⁶ One suspects that, due to his sheer grit and self-made success, Bonner gravitated towards Menzies' timeless dictum that 'it is the individual whose efforts produce progress.'

Bonner's emphasis on individual identity over 'the group' also resonates with African-American Republicans. Condoleezza Rice, for example, notes that her choice of the Republican Party was primarily based on a distrust of identity politics and the anguish of being constantly boxed in or categorised because of her skin colour. 'I hated identity politics,' she wrote in her 2010 family memoir, *Extraordinary Ordinary People*, 'and the self-satisfied people who assumed that they were free of prejudice when, in fact, they could not see beyond colour to the individual.'¹⁷ Bonner, similarly, was cognisant and proud of his Aboriginality, but he was never bound by assumptions that his heritage should determine his political orientation.

Significance

Young people today can draw a number of lessons from Bonner. His life is littered with countless challenges requiring resilience, courage, grit, determination, and repudiations of pity or difference. 'I have graduated [from] the university of hard knocks,' he said in his Maiden Speech, 'My teacher was experience.' Persistence is a worthy lesson for young people in an age of instant gratification.

At its broadest, however, Bonner's legacy to young Australians is the lesson of participation. At a time when running for Parliament catapulted him into a lonely fraternity as the lone Indigenous face, and even earned him an army of enemies, Bonner's life emphasises the concept of being 'in the arena' rather than a passive bystander. This should be an inspiration for the self-imposed handicaps some young Australians place on themselves. In some youth minority circles, for example, it is still common to hear that finishing high school or pursuing certain professions is 'not for us'—a view based entirely upon complexion rather than any real examination of individual capability or passion.

The individualism Bonner espoused, but balanced with his Aboriginal identity, is another powerful lesson. While culture is important, it should not be a prison that binds and constrains. This approach—using culture as a tool for advancement—has slowly won advocates, particularly among Australian Indigenous leaders. In a 2012 speech to the Northern Territory Parliament, Minister for Aboriginal Advancement Alison Anderson echoed Bonner's philosophy from decades earlier:

We Indigenous people need to be more like other Australians. I do not mean we should abandon our beliefs or our language, but like dozens of other cultures in Australia, we must learn to combine our own identities with participation in the broader society that will not weaken us.¹⁸

Conclusion

Over the last 40 years, Bonner's legacy and philosophy of integration and assimilation have clearly endured. The Tent Embassy, far from its high turbulence of the 1970s, now lazily torments crowds of tourists and school students. Nearly 70% of people of Aboriginal descent now live in urban areas and stand testament to Bonner's philosophy of self-determination. On the other hand, encouraging Aboriginals to live entirely separate lives from mainstream Australians—an initiative Bonner detested—has had devastating and tragic consequences for Aboriginals in remote areas. One hopes the late senator's life, his persistence, participation and identity, will motivate young Australians, regardless of background or race.

Endnotes

- 1 'Warren Mundine abused on Twitter because he voted Liberal,' news.com.au (10 September 2013).
- 2 Interview with Robin Hughes, *Australian Biography*, www.australianbiography.gov.au (13 January 1992).
- 3 Roger Scruton, 'Why I Became A Conservative,' *The New Criterion* (5 February 2003).
- 4 Angela Burger, *Neville Bonner: A Biography* (South Melbourne: McMillan, 1979), 63.
- 5 Tim Rowse, 'Out of Hand: The Battles of Neville Bonner,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 21:54/55 (1997), 96–107.
- 6 ABC Hindsight, 'Compromise and Confrontation: Senator Neville Bonner' (29 April 2012)
- 7 'Threats Against Neville Bonner and Aboriginal Establishments in Queensland,' National Archives of Australia, circa 1971.
- 8 Angela Burger, *Neville Bonner*, as above, 3.
- 9 As above, 6.
- 10 As above, 8.
- 11 As above, 64.
- 12 ABC, *Hindsight*, 'Compromise and Confrontation,' as above.
- 13 Patricia Shaw, 'The Senate Vacancy,' *Quadrant* (November 2009).
- 14 ABC, *Hindsight*, 'Compromise and Confrontation,' as above.
- 15 Tim Rowse, 'Out of Hand,' as above.
- 16 Ian Macdonald, 'Tribute to the late Senator Neville Bonner' (21 November 2011).
- 17 Condoleezza Rice, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family* (New York: Random House, 2010), 134–135.
- 18 Alison Anderson, 'Reconciling Culture and Modernity,' *Policy* 28:4 (Summer 2012–13), 5.