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They had plenty to say, the women, I know that. But some of the men I thought ... might have been a bit lax in their attitudes. And the women - they spoke out pretty good.

May McBride,
Publicity Officer for QCAATSI in 1961.¹

When May McBride spoke these words in January, 1995, she looked back over more than three decades of her sometimes private and sometimes very public involvement in the fight for Aboriginal rights in Brisbane. In the formative years of the Brisbane movement, McBride was a member of Queensland’s prime Aboriginal ‘advancement’ organisation, QCAATSI,² in which she held the position of Publicity Officer. Despite her loyalty to the men who worked beside her,³ May McBride was unequivocal in her belief that women were predominant as leaders in Brisbane in the decade leading up to the 1967 referendum. She was just one of a number of Brisbane women who stepped from the cultural confines of a racist and sexist society to form the front-line of one of the most effective campaigns for Black justice waged in the reform decade.

This paper proposes that the involvement of women - and particularly Murri women - between 1958 and 1962 was integral to the establishment of a viable Aboriginal rights movement in Queensland into the 1960s and beyond. Brisbane women took the reins of what was a stumbling, uncoordinated movement, and turned it in the direction they desired. As a result, it developed from an ill-matched gaggle of factions divided by antithetical ideologies to a cohesive body which, while politically divergent, was bound by loyalty to the one cause.⁴

In a sequential development, an increasing number of Brisbane women tasted the power of politics, and were attracted by

¹ McBride, Interview, Brisbane 1995, p. 6.
² QCAATSI, the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, was the Queensland branch of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, FCAATSI.
⁴ This cohesion peaked during the campaign for the 1967 referendum, when OPAL and the Advancement Organisations, communists and right-wing activists threw their weight behind the case for a ‘yes’ vote for the proposal to remove from the Constitution a section which discriminated against Aboriginal Australians.

it. Kath Walker’s\textsuperscript{5} recollection of the influence exerted on her by the politicisation of Black rights in Brisbane is graphic:

After the [1961 FCAATSJ] conference occurred in Queensland, when [the late Senator] Max Poulter was saying, ‘Let’s change this Act, let’s wipe this Act out - it’s more racist and more damaging than Hitler’ ... all of a sudden it wasn’t paternalistic! It wasn’t tea parties! It was real nitty-gritty politics. And so I got in. I’ve never left it.\textsuperscript{6}

The energy of a sudden release from the confines of a restrictive gender role touched Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women alike. It was the reaction of a significant number of Brisbane women of this era, who found the courage and the opportunity to break free of the shackles of social expectations. An even greater stimulant for Black resistance was provided by compounded anger and resentment at White control, which had built up over decades. As former Senator Neville Bonner said:

The coming of the European ... had a devastating effect on we, the indigenous people. In Queensland, becoming urbanised was not an easy thing ... A number of things affected [Murris in suburbia] adversely: prejudice ... lack of education ... lack of any formal status ... lower paid menial jobs (if any). And what was happening to the adults was also happening to their children ... their grandchildren ... and even great-grandchildren.\textsuperscript{7}

As the pent-up emotions born of this oppression combined with the inherent strengths of Aboriginality, a reaction was generated which energised the Aboriginal rights movement in Brisbane, and Murri women took control of their lives. The ‘game’ they played had profound implications for Aboriginal rights. It is argued here that this determined the scale and direction of the national movement in the second half of the twentieth century.

In analysing the reasons for this phenomenon, the vacuum in male leadership in the early Brisbane movement will be considered in the context of what will be termed ‘the war effort syndrome’, which saw the conscription of women to jobs previously held by men. Also addressed are the barriers erected against female participation in the Brisbane movement; the reasons for the female ascendancy; the power of Aboriginality and its influence on the movement; and the results of the gender

\textsuperscript{5} In the 1980s, Walker adopted the Noonuccal tribal name of Oodgeroo; in this article, I shall use the name by which she was known in the era under consideration.

\textsuperscript{6} Kath Walker, Interview, Stradbroke Island 1990, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{7} Neville Bonner, Interview, Ipswich 1995, p. 2.
reversal in the leadership of the Aboriginal rights campaign. In short it will be argued that the contribution of women to the Brisbane Aboriginal rights movement between 1958 and 1967 was pivotal to the success of that campaign.

The Vacuum in Male Leadership

The ascendancy of women to leadership in the Brisbane Aboriginal rights movement implied that there were few men with the desire, opportunity or the capacity to take on the role. Neville Bonner stated that:

Men were there, but the women were the sloggers. They were the workers. And I think that a lot of that came because ... they'd raised families ... and perhaps that gave them greater force in those issues, *rather than the men*. 8

His recognition of woman's greater force implies that the leadership status of women was greater than that of their male counterparts. Bonner's statement is an explicit acknowledgment of the leadership role of women in the movement.

Kath Walker's 1990 evaluation of the comparative status of males and females in the early movement reinforces this argument. Walker was forthright in her contention that 'it was the women who spearheaded the movement' and unequivocal that they did so 'to such an extent that the men got behind us'. She supported her argument by citing a situation which arose during a FCAATSI deputation to the federal government in the 1960s:

When Joe [McGinness] got us all together there, he said, 'Kathy, now in view of this very important business, this deputation, we men have decided that it would be better for you ... to lead us'. Because we [women] were the best talkers of the lot, you see, it was quite common-sense. So I said, 'Joe, what's going to happen after we come up?' He said, 'Oh, you get behind us again, mate, you get behind us!' So Faith [Bandler] and I led the talking inside, and they [the male delegates] just filed in. And when we came out, they said, 'Right! Get behind us now, women - that's where you belong!' 9

In the longer term, Walker did not 'get behind' the FCAATSI male membership; she led them.

A proper evaluation of the reasons for this situation must address the question of whether the absence of men permitted the involvement of women, or whether

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8 Ibid., pp. 24-25, emphasis added.
Brisbane males conceded the leadership to women in the wake of a gender takeover.

While some men such as Lambert McBride and Manfred Cross made substantial contributions,\(^{10}\) it is apparent that a large percentage of Brisbane men were as absent from the battle of Black rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s as they were from the 'home front' during World War II.

In the case of Murris, there was a socio-cultural reason for the male hesitancy to assume active status in the movement. While Murri women who accepted traditional women's responsibilities were deeply affected by White racist attacks on their spouses or children, the experience gained in their usual work environment enabled them to respond to the call for participation in Aboriginal rights organisations. Murri activist Sylvia Cairns described how routine social intercourse developed a female expertise in accessing and manipulating the White system:

> the women - even when they came out of the settlements - had to take the children to the doctor, and speak to people who spoke softly and kindly. And then go to the school and talk to the teachers about how their children were doing - and the teachers were kind, and spoke nicely - and the shopkeeper. And the wives picked up these sayings, and put it all together. So you get a twenty-two year old woman going to the shop and wherever else, mixing with people, learning to talk to people, learning how to greet people. Bandying words back and forth, learning to argue with the tradespeople, argue with neighbours.\(^{11}\)

But Murri men were required to spend the majority of their waking hours obeying the unwritten (but rigid) rules which prescribed Black behaviour within White cultural contexts. As Sylvia Cairns described the work environment of Brisbane Murris: 'the men never argued at work - they were told what to do'.\(^{12}\)

If Murris broke the rule of Black subservience to Whites, retribution could be swift. Sometimes the penalty was overt. Murris of both genders faced a threat of incarceration if they rebelled against the White system, but Bonner believes that men were at greater risk. Responding to May McBride's contention that males were 'a bit lax' in their reluctance to speak out for Black rights, Bonner mounted a strong defence for the cautious attitude of Murri men. He claimed:

> they’d been through the mill, they’d been kicked around, they’d been rough-

\(^{10}\) Joe McGinness was stationed in Cairns.

\(^{11}\) Sylvia Cairns, Interview, Townsville 1995, p. 43.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 43.
handled by police and they’d been in the situation where they could be picked up and taken from where they lived and put on an Aboriginal community. So they had to be a little more cautious, perhaps, than the women.13

Nevertheless, Murri women were not immune to fear of police invasion in their lives. Rita Huggins experienced this when she decided to march on the streets of Brisbane in public protest at policies of White control. Initially, Huggins, who typified the women who entered the public arena while retaining a traditional Murri ‘homemaker’ role, had qualms about her involvement, based on a deep fear of police violence or incarceration. Like a significant number of Brisbane women of the era, she overcame this fear. As she recalled in interview:

I said to old Granny Janey [Arnold] ... ‘Granny Janey, are you marching?’, and she said, 'Take my hand!'; and we just went, round the block. I said, 'I'm just going down to the corner and back again. [But] we did the whole rounds of Queen Street!'14

Huggins went on to become a leader in the Brisbane campaign for social justice: one of the many Murri women who utilised White-dominated organisations to set their own Black rights agendas. Thus while a gender division in Murri life experiences may have militated against males learning the skills to take on White society, Brisbane women acquired these skills.

It would be unfair, however, as well as inaccurate to attribute the ascendancy of women to leadership solely to a belief that men had left vacancies to be filled. The predominance of women at all levels of the movement is a tribute to their ability and their drive, rather than to their availability. Their achievements bear witness to their ability; while their drive is patently obvious when one considers the gender-exclusive barriers which they overcame to enter the political world previously controlled by men.

The Invisible Women: Barriers to Female Participation

From 1961 onwards, female leaders of high calibre came to the fore in the Brisbane Aboriginal rights movement, with a significant number of Brisbane women being active both locally and nationally. Yet the level and type of contribution made by women is not reflected in publications of the day.15 This could suggest that the

13 Bonner, Interview, p. 25.
14 Rita Huggins, Interview, Brisbane 1991, pp. 4-5.
15 This is apparent from a search of records of Queensland Parliamentary Debates and reports in Brisbane’s newspapers, the Courier-Mail and the Telegraph, in the period. The deficit was left uncorrected by later historians.
extent and calibre of female participation was too minimal to warrant public acknowledgment at the time. The media’s role in reporting the leadership of women is unclear: the low level of coverage could reflect ignorance or a belief in the public’s disinterest, and is surprising given the media’s preference for novelty. Certainly women’s achievements remained effectively invisible in the media.

Thus it is apparent that other factors must have placed women in the shadow of men. Predominant amongst those identified by participants and observers at the time were the psychological barriers erected against women by a male-dominated society. In Brisbane, these barriers defied divisions of race to unite on the common ground of sexism. For despite the alleged satisfaction of many women with the domestic role, the societal measurement of a woman’s worth against the criterion of domestic performance caused a leeching of confidence which crossed the boundaries of race. When combined with the Black inferiority taunt, the self-perception of Murri women suffered. Nevertheless, a clear-cut division cannot be made on the basis of gender and race. Aboriginal men living in Brisbane, caught in the cross-shafts of dispossession of traditional tribal roles and a denial of job opportunities which could partially compensate for this loss, also suffered a diminution of self esteem.

The over-riding factor which rendered women ‘invisible’ was the widely held male perception of the female as solely an auxiliary figure. The reality of the emerging Brisbane movement was that women had been deeply involved in its organisational framework since its inception, despite their domestic ties. So their ‘invisibility’ was not corporeal, but strategic. It was the symptom of a self-induced male ‘blind spot’ regarding female participation in the movement; and centred on a male definition of leadership which downgraded the significance, and ignored the existence of the contribution of women.

One manifestation of this discrimination was the perception of many Brisbane men that any woman who was active in the movement was playing a purely auxiliary role. This could be due to the practical abilities of women in administration and implementing ideas. Aboriginal activists such as Pat O’Shane\(^\text{16}\) and May McBride attest to this; they thought that because women were strong ‘hands on’ administrators, that this was their exclusive role. It was a case of the ‘invisible Aborigine’\(^\text{17}\) revisited. But in this instance, the glass wall was not of race, but of gender.

The pervasive male view of the contribution of women developed despite a

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\(^{17}\) The racist phenomenon observed in Brisbane in 1957 by Muriel Langford and recounted in interview (1991).
proportionately low ratio of male participation in the movement. At the same time, a disproportionately high number of men such as Bryant, McGinness and McBride assumed positions at an executive level. This was a manifestation of the sexist equation of 'male' with 'leader' which reflected the reality of the wider Australian society in the 1950s and 1960s. Men held the highly visible, executive positions of power. For this reason, Kath Walker was unique as a national leader.

The effects of this gender distortion were reinforced by related strategies which were also used as a racist slur. One such was the concept of tokenism, which doubly disadvantaged Murri women in the power stakes. One of the most highly utilised descriptions of people in the movement was that of 'pawns'. Typically, it was used in a pejorative manner to score political points. The appellation 'pawns' was used as a weapon in the hands of the combatants in the ideological conflict which flourished between Black rights supporters with left and right wing sympathies in Brisbane between 1958 and 1962. In this context, the term encompassed men and women, Aborigines and Europeans, as politics took precedence over gender and race.

However, the concept was most damaging to the status of women and particularly Aboriginal women when used as part of a racio-sexist strategy to deride the contribution of so-called 'token' Blacks or women. The prevalence of this strategy is demonstrated in Kathie Cochrane's defence of Kath Walker's appointment as secretary of QCAATSI:

Some people belonging to the Council thought that Kath would be a token secretary and that I would do the real work, but this was far from the case. I couldn't even type!\textsuperscript{18}

Her reference to tokenism indicates that Brisbane Whites were using the concept to devalue the social contribution of Blacks in the era. A constant reference to White ownership of Blacks was an extension of this strategy. This reference, often in the form of 'our Blacks', is consistently recorded in publications of the day, and is particularly evident in Department of Native Affairs (DNA) and media reports, as well as in Queensland Parliamentary Debates. Brisbane women broke through these racist and sexist barriers by exploiting every opportunity which presented itself, including that offered by QCAATSI and the other dominant Black rights organisation in Brisbane, OPAL, to gain experience in European administrative processes. Kath Walker's recollections of her appointment as Secretary of QCAATSI in 1961 highlight the dilemma faced by high-performance participants suddenly propelled into the alien 'office' environment.

\textsuperscript{18} Kathie Cochrane, \textit{Oodgeroo}, St. Lucia 1994, p. 32.
Despite her widely-recognised skills of public speaking and debate, Walker faced a common barrier created by a lack of experience in basic administrative skills. Non-Aborigines without office training could face similar obstacles. Such a circumstance was not common at a time when it was usual for female students at secondary level to receive instruction in typing, after which they gained office experience 'on the job'. The dilemma for many Murris was that denial of a reasonable level of education blended with many employers’ discriminatory attitude, ensured that they did not get the job in the first place. Those Murri women who did work outside the home were frequently employed in domestic duties in White residences. As Walker explained:

See, they [Whites in QCAATSI] had the knowledge, they had that type of knowledge that we didn’t have; and so when we could see what they were dealing out, then came the, 'Well, I’ve got to get in here and learn more'. And they were marvellous because ... when they elected me in the Queensland Council as the Secretary, I said, 'I don’t know a thing about secretarial work'. Kathie [Cochrane] said, 'Don’t worry, I’ll teach you' - and she did. She’d just say, 'Go home, write your minutes. This is how you write a minute - if you get stuck with any letters, let me know'. So I’d pick up the phone and say, 'Look, I’ve written this letter, what do you think about it?' 'Wonderful, go with it, you don’t need a teacher - you’re doing fine, you know'.

Cochrane’s response indicated the key role played by QCAATSI and OPAL in providing Brisbane women with the tools to demolish institutional barriers.

The diversity of experience offered by the two organisations resulted in a choice for women seeking a training base which met their own particular needs. Murri historian Jackie Huggins has documented the advantages to Murri women of their connection with OPAL. She cites the belief of Murri activist Sylvia Cairns, a founding member of that organisation, that by 'putting Aborigines in the spotlight ... they began to speak up for themselves about the way they were treated', resulting in the increasing competence of Blacks in Queensland society.

On the other hand, Kath Walker’s comparison of the modes of operation of the two organisations presents an alternative view of OPAL, which also conveys her bitterness at the offensive and discriminatory paternalism of the era:

[OPAL] was the most paternalistic thing that ever came into Aboriginal

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affairs. They had White people doing all the work for the Aboriginal people; the Aboriginal people were just sitting there like a lot of monkeys and taking all the credit. Whereas in the Civil Rights movement, they said to the Aboriginals, 'You've got to learn. You've got to get into key positions'.

Huggins' and Walker's dual perspectives are authentic representations of widely held Brisbane opinions in the early 1960s. Both indicate the racist denial of training and lifestyle opportunities which formed an almost impenetrable barrier to participation in the Brisbane Aboriginal rights movement. But the women of Brisbane penetrated that barrier, achieving first involvement and then control.

**Women in Control: 'Kath, go!!!'**

Despite the obstacles described above, the wider participation of women was achieved, and to a greater extent than is apparent from publications of the era. This argument is attested to by reference to the policies introduced and changes wrought by a diversity of women; by the greater development of the Brisbane Black rights movement as a result of these changes; and by the leadership which Brisbane women clearly displayed. The women in the Brisbane movement between 1958 and 1962 met all the requirements of leadership. First, Ada Bromham exemplified the ability to define an issue and then exploit it. In 1957, when Bromham was invited to participate in the Adelaide meeting which led to the formation of FCAATSI, she recognised an opportunity to do more than just consolidate her own interest in Black rights. She identified the value of the meeting as a potential forum before which Queensland could petition for support against control policies in her home state. Her set objective was to mount an Advancement council in Brisbane as a base from which an active campaign for Black rights could be launched. When Black rights supporter and United Nations Association Australia member Alistair Campbell appeared reluctant to act on her suggestion, Bromham took the initiative. She arrived at the Adelaide meeting as a representative of QCAATSI, ready to participate in FCAATSI and fully equipped to confront the White authors of Queensland’s control policies. Her actions in initiating a viable lobby for the reform of Aboriginal policy positioned Queensland to take advantage of the new directions offered by FCAATSI when Gordon Bryant, who became a chairman of FCAATSI, sought to rejuvenate the movement in 1961.

Bromham’s leadership qualities were not unique. Other Brisbane women who formed the front line of those ranks in the 1950s and 1960s included Kath Walker, Margaret Valadian and Joyce Wilding. These women did not make history as the

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21 Walker, Interview, p. 2.
22 Faith Bandler urges Kath Walker to agree to Prime Minister Holt’s dictum that she be the sole spokesperson of an Aboriginal delegation awaiting interview with him, late in 1966.
first or the strongest person of their sex to distinguish themselves and to raise the profile of the Aboriginal cause through their endeavours. They stood out because each as a person broke new ground. Their ability to take the lead was tangible. Moreover, they demonstrated characteristics common to many women in the movement. One characteristic which had remarkable consequences was the manner in which women, once committed to a particular cause, worked actively to encourage other women to follow suit.

Collaboration

The networking which occurred in Brisbane in the lead-up to the FCAATSI conference which Federal MP Gordon Bryant had contrived to bring to Brisbane in 1961, was typical of this strategy. For instance, in April of that year Brisbane academic Kathie Cochrane approached Kath Walker in order to persuade her to attend the FCAATSI conference. Thinking that she was being solicited by 'another do-gooder organisation', Walker’s initial response was explosive. As she revealed in interview in 1990:

They sent Kathie Cochrane to me to come to that conference and I said 'Go to hell - I'm sick of you paternalistic people'. She said 'I'm not paternalistic. I'm trying to help your people'. I said, 'I am sick of people trying to help my people, it doesn’t work'.

Cochrane persevered - and succeeded. Walker succumbed, and attended the conference 'to listen'. She has since confirmed that the event was the catalyst for her active involvement in the Queensland movement, and that Cochrane’s intervention was central to that decision. Thus Cochrane was the motivator for Walker’s assumption of leadership in QCAATSI and the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League (QAAL) following the FCAATSI conference. Ironically, Cochrane cites Walker as the motivator for her (Cochrane’s) ongoing commitment. Cochrane described the relationship in interview:

It was ... Alistair [Campbell] who rather pushed me into QCAATSI ... [but] once I’d met Kathy and found the sort of remarkable person she was, I didn’t ever, ever want to be uninvolved again. Because I felt so strongly that here I had met a remarkable woman, that we both seemed to see the urgent need for reform in the same light, and I never thought then of being anything but deeply involved.

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23 Ibid., p. 6.
24 Ibid., pp. 2 and 15.
This power of women to trigger other women to action was one of their greatest strengths. Bandler was particularly inspiring to other women. She attended the FCAATSI Easter Conference held in Brisbane in 1961, in search of potential Murri leaders. An understanding of her background and the way in which she operated in the fight for Black rights is of significance to the direction of the entire Brisbane movement.

Bandler had firm links with Brisbane. She was born on the North Coast of New South Wales in the small village of Tumbulgum. Her father, a banana farmer, was a South Sea Islander; and he and Bandler's mother reared her with six brothers and sisters. He died while she was still young. As a child, Bandler had visited her maternal grandmother, who lived in the Brisbane suburb of Albion, and in 1940 she left home for Brisbane. However, following the death of her brother on the Burma railway, Bandler travelled to Sydney and joined the Australian Women's Land Army. Her family had strong political persuasions and she herself followed politics and current affairs in young adulthood. Music, politics, discussion were part of her life.

By the 1950s, Bandler, coming to a realisation that most Aborigines and Islanders faced a far bleaker future than she, was highly motivated to join the emerging fight to reverse this situation. As she put it:

I thought of my upbringing as ordinary until I was made painfully aware that for a black person in Australia it was really very exceptional. I'd occasionally been the target of racism but my family friends as well as skills such as literacy and languages which were part of my background insulated me from its worst extremes.26

This was the situation when she was approached by Pearl Gibbs, who became a co-founder of FCAATSI, providing a trigger for Bandler's move to join the Black rights movement. Together, the two established the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship (AAF), forerunner to the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), in Sydney. The AAF was under the patronage of Jessie Street, who was responsible for drafting the original petition calling for a referendum on Aboriginal rights. Peter Read identifies Street as an instigator of the Adelaide meeting, attended by Ada Bromham, which became the precursor to the formation of FCAATSI in 1958.27 So the history of the AAF and FCAA, which later became FCAATSI, was interlinked; and women provided the solder for those links. Prominent among those

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who gave impetus to FCAATSI were the women of Brisbane.

One of the most noteworthy examples of the networking skills of women in the Black rights movement in Brisbane was the organisation of those who did not align with OPAL, QCAATSI nor any other association; but who collaborated with all interested parties in furtherance of the overall cause.

A large number of Murri women displayed leadership qualities in the years under discussion. They were people of tremendous energy, with the finely-honed survival skills needed to operate on the Brisbane ideological battlefield of the era. Some were well known in the Brisbane community, while others worked outside the glare of publicity. While they followed diverse personal and political agendas, all were united in the overriding cause of Black justice. In 1959, Sylvia Cairns met Muriel Langford at a National Aboriginal Day Observance Committee (NADOC) meeting in Brisbane. According to Langford, Cairns was moved to tears at a film depicting the plight of Aborigines in West Australia. Cairns became a regular attendant of QCAATSI with Langford and Wilding; then, in 1961, the three joined forces to actively lobby the government for better conditions for Aborigines, under the auspices of OPAL. 28

Langford recalls Cairns' role clearly. Cairns gravitated between her outer Brisbane residence and OPAL, bridging the gap between the lifestyle of Murris settled 'in the bush' near her home, and the policies issuing from the office of the Queensland Minister responsible for 'Native Affairs', Dr Henry Noble. Cairns was skilful in implementing the Murri strategy of infiltrating the White system to extract what she needed from it. She encouraged Murris to access the courts when necessary, and accompanied them to the Housing Commission if they sought accommodation. 29 Cairns represented the broad stream of Murri women who, along with a number of European women, provided covert as well as overt leadership in the battle for Black justice in an antagonistic Brisbane environment. They also provided role models: a form of leadership which affected Murri women in particular and encouraged them to have confidence in their abilities. One such was Faith Bandler, who, stating that spending her young adulthood in a cosmopolitan environment gave her the added confidence to fill such a role nationally, rejected self-aggrandisement in favour of motivating Black women in particular to speak out.

In 1989, in her foreword to Bandler’s published history of FCAATSI, Dr. Roberta Sykes recalled her first contact with Bandler in the North Queensland city of Townsville in the 1960s:

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29 ibid., p. 7.
I recall first meeting Faith in Townsville, my home town. Margaret Reynolds, now a Senator for that region, told me, 'a lady from the south' was to speak at a luncheon at the Queen’s Hotel and invited me to go with her. It was the first time I had gone to a luncheon and I found myself the only Black in the otherwise White female audience.

I regret I don’t recall a thing Faith said as I was so overcome with her poise, dress and charming manner. She wore dainty white gloves and elegant shoes. I had never seen a Black woman so elegantly groomed.  

The impact on Sykes of this confrontation exemplifies the importance of role models in the emergence into public life of Black women in an era when their self-esteem had been methodically eroded by decades of negative stereotypes. Sykes’ life was transformed. She stated:

I now consider it a put down really to be noticed only for how one is dressed or behaves and in most instances, it is. For me, however, Faith’s presentation in Townsville was a mind boggling occasion. In a flash, all the negative stereotypes of Blacks were smashed down. I had always secretly hoped that it was possible for Blacks to rise above the level at which we were kept in Townsville; and suddenly I knew it was possible.  

Sykes was motivated.  

Another quality which distinguished women who were influential in the Brisbane movement was their ability to pick up an issue initiated by a male in authoritative position, and to run with it. This phenomenon did not carry the negative connotations of role diminution apparent in the (male) sexist model. When women saw an opportunity for action to further their cause, they took it, not for reasons of gender, but for the prospect of a successful outcome. For despite stereotypes of passive or subordinate female roles, women in the movement were often more independent and aggressive in their leadership than were men. That is, males in leadership mode often operated within a sphere of authority which supported their activities. After personally initiating a strategy, they then delegated its implementation to others. In Brisbane, those others were often women.  

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30 R. B. Sykes, Foreword, in Bandler, Turning the Tide. Today, Sykes enjoys a national reputation as a lecturer at educational institutions (in Australia and abroad), and is a newspaper columnist, literature critic and author. An activist for Black justice issues, she is founder and executive officer of the Black Women’s Action in Education Foundation.

31 Loc. cit.
Taking the Ball and Running With It

Instances of women giving the kiss of life to ideas conceived by men were spread across my interviews with activists of the era. In a prime example, Gordon Bryant initiated the political rejuvenation of the Queensland movement; but Kath Walker was widely recognised as its leader. From the moment of her exposure to Bryant’s rhetoric - at the 1961 FCAATSI Conference - she took his idea of a cohesive, politically powerful Brisbane-based campaign, and made it happen.32 When Queensland Anglican Bishop Ian Shevill sought assistance to enable Tennyson Kynuna to take up a trade,33 Joyce Wilding was the only person who responded. When a strong voice was needed to espouse Black rights in Canberra, Kath Walker provided it. Again, while it was Con O’Leary who provoked Neville Bonner’s consideration of a role in the White system of government,34 Bonner cites Ipswich woman, Robyn Kunde, as the ‘prime mover in [his actually] ... becoming involved in politics’.35

The female strategy of building on a male idea to further their cause was clearly observable in the male-initiated conspiracy to quash QCAATSI and form OPAL as a vehicle to promote DNA policy, unhindered by a vocal organisation opposed to its directions. Muriel Langford and Kath Walker raised the tactic to an art form, by using the blueprint for conspiracy to deliver an outcome which directly opposed its authors’ objectives while furthering their own. Thus despite the fact that Henry Noble, anti-Communist zealot George Cook and DNA Director Con O’Leary used Langford to conspire against QCAATSI, it was Langford whose approach to the bureaucracy generated the idea that she serve as an informant; Langford who set the terms of Aboriginal leadership of OPAL; Langford whose strong will, while she co-operated with the government to the extent that she thought expedient to her cause, led bureaucrats within Noble’s department to seek to oust her from her position of power once it became apparent that she was ‘doing too much for Aborigines’ - and not vice versa.36 Therefore, though O’Leary may have thought he was using Langford, he was doing so on her terms. Her co-operation came at the price of his providing what she really wanted: support for a hostel to provide shelter for homeless Aborigines in the inner city.

Kath Walker effected a similar distortion of the conspirators’ plan when she stepped into the hiatus left by their dismemberment of QCAATSI in July 1961; as right-

32 In this case, Walker’s action coincided with Bryant’s hopes for Queensland.
33 Kynuna later became Queensland’s first Aboriginal shipwright.
34 Angela Burger, Neville Bonner: a biography, South Melbourne 1979, p.36.
35 Neville Bonner, telephone interview, 1 September 1995.
wing recruits stacked the QCAATSI meeting and then voted it out of existence.\textsuperscript{37} The strength of Walker’s leadership moulded the dwindling support-base of shell-shocked QCAATSI survivors into a force to be reckoned with. Kathie Cochrane has confirmed the low ebb which the organisation had reached in 1961, even before the July take-over. She recalled the demoralised state in which she found members in 1961 on her return from a sojourn in London the previous year:

When we came back I found that QCAATSI was in a terrible disarray, and people like Royce Perkins - who was a very sincere person - didn’t really know what was going on, although he was on the executive.\textsuperscript{38}

Following the July meeting, morale dropped further as members disenchanted with the movement gravitated to OPAL or ceased active participation. It was at this point, when the government’s strategy to achieve just such demoralisation was going according to plan, that Walker moved to change its course, and succeeded.

She did not work alone. A number of committed supporters, male and female, were part of the resurrection of QCAATSI, but Walker was the motivating spark which ignited QCAATSI and its sister organisation QAAL. Neville Bonner, who was president of OPAL from 1966, has acknowledged the impact of the politicisation of QCAATSI on the empowerment of the Aboriginal rights movement in 1961. He has also specified Walker’s role in this empowerment, referring to her as one of the ‘very strong forces in Queensland representing FCAATSI’ who achieved it.

They were the ones that worked towards and forced ... the Federal government to introduce legislation to change the Constitution.\textsuperscript{39}

The extent and potentially ‘lethal’ nature of the political intelligence which underlay Walker’s leadership has also been acknowledged by Queensland publisher John Collins, who described her in 1994 as ‘larger than life-size, often brutally frank, as lively as quicksilver and teller of a thousand stories’.\textsuperscript{40}

She was particularly effective within QAAL, the organisation which was formed as an alternative power base for sympathisers of the Black cause who feared that QCAATSI was a Communist ‘front’. With Walker as political motivator, QAAL provided a platform for Brisbane Murris to put reform on the political agenda,

\textsuperscript{37} Quaker representative and original QCAATSI member, Fred Harris, recorded his recollections of the 1961 take-over in interview, Brisbane, 5 January 1991. Other members have confirmed his account.

\textsuperscript{38} Cochrane, Interview, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{39} Bonner, Interview, p. 2.

leading to the successful referendum result in 1967. She and Langford, along with Rita Huggins, Sylvia Cairns, May McBride and an army of Brisbane women who grasped the opportunities offered by the emerging Black rights movement and ran with them, were central to this outcome. Their intervention turned a potential termination of the protest movement into a rebirth.

It is ironic that central to this phenomenon were the contributions of two women whose ideologies were antithetical. Above all, like a significant number of women in the Brisbane movement, Langford and Walker were personally active, taking the initiative to carry their views - and where it appeared desirable, those of others - to fruition.

One source of the energy which empowered the gender domination of the Black rights agenda in Brisbane was the 'pressure cooker' phenomenon which resulted as women, and particularly Black women, grasped the opportunity to realise their own power. The effects on the movement of this realisation should not be underestimated. Whether it meant moving into a position at an auxiliary level or representing Australian Aborigines internationally, the release from domesticity which accompanied their involvement in the movement was an incentive not experienced by most men.

One of the most evocative descriptions of what this life-change meant to many women, has been recorded by Faith Bandler. In 1989, Bandler made this affirmation of the effect of FCAATSI on her life and the lives of other Blacks:

> Totally unprepared for its impact on our lives we lived, breathed, slept and dreamed its progress, our existence caught up by its existence. We were bowled over by the power of a social movement which had taken on a life of its own.  

This was the experience of Brisbane women. But here, the impact was even greater because of the greater oppressive measures of the Queensland government. The reaction, and sense of liberation for Murri women, was directly proportional to the depth of oppression they had endured for so many decades.

Reliance on circumstances such as the absence of willing males to explain the role of women in the Black rights movement does justice neither to the strength of the women involved nor to the calibre of their leadership. Queensland men may have made a valuable contribution to the development of the Brisbane Aboriginal rights movement. But it was the women of Brisbane who were the flag-bearers of the movement in its formative years.

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They took over where the men left off. The pinnacle of their leadership was manifest in the experience of Kath Walker when she visited Canberra in the mid-sixties as part of a FCAATSI delegation which sought an audience with Prime Minister Harold Holt. The delegation sought a firm commitment for the referendum for which they had long lobbied. The Prime Minister would speak to no-one but Walker. The story is widely recounted. As Walker told it:

the whole lot [of us] - representatives from each state - went in there and for some reason I will never know, Holt sent out word he'd see Kath Walker only. And I said, 'Faith, I'm not going in alone. That's too much to ask me to do'. She said, 'Kath, you haven't any choice'. I said, 'But it's not right that ... just one person should go in there'. She said, 'Kath, go!!!'.

Walker went. Holt presented her with a proposition: lobby the Senate and the House of Representatives and get a promise of a 'yes' vote, and the government would 'run with the referendum'. Walker conveyed the message to the waiting FCAATSI delegates, after which she heavily involved herself in the lobbying effort. They successfully achieved support for the 1967 referendum which has been widely acknowledged as a turning point for Aboriginal rights in Australia. Walker was the person who led that campaign in Queensland, and the person who 'got the numbers' to ensure the referendum went ahead. Her achievements were characteristic of the women responsible for the crucial development of the Brisbane Black rights movement between 1958 and 1962.

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42 Walker, Interview, p. 19.