

Do we enjoy full citizenship?

The University of Queensland: Diversity Week 2007 Panel Discussion:

Ms Frances Peters-Little

Good evening, and thanks to Jackie Huggins and Michael Williams for asking me to be a part of UQ's Diversity Week. I am absolutely delighted to be here. I have been asked to share a few words about the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum and my film VOTE YES FOR ABORIGINES.

There were perhaps several things I have tried to address in this film, but perhaps more relevant to this week's events, during Diversity Week. I might just point out that one of my main aims was to bring attention to the question of citizenship and how in recent months we have been watching our federal government debate topics on Australian values and what it means to be an Australia citizen.

As you will see in the film, which screens on SBS TV next Sunday night at 8.30pm on the 27th May, which in fact is the date of the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, that the film opens with our Prime Minister Howard telling Australians what it means to be an Australian.

From my part however, I felt that in addition to some of what I think have been absolutely shamefully narrow views of what it means to be an Australia; which incidentally seems to exclude anyone who is not a Christian, who never fought at Gallipoli or indeed knew what Donald Bradman's cricket score; I was particularly appalled (but not surprised) that no-one has bothered to include the views of Australia's indigenous people into their debates. Anyway, having said that, I now want to focus back on what the film is about.

VOTE YES for Aborigines is a documentary about the 1967 Referendum and the fight for citizenship rights for Aborigines. It marks the 40th anniversary of the occasion, celebrating its historical significance and contemporary relevance.

It argues that while many people believe that the 1967 Referendum gave Aborigines the right to vote, in fact the Referendum had in fact only removed two sections of the constitution that discriminated against Aborigines resulting in the highest YES vote in Australia's history. Where over 90% of voters agreed that Aborigines be counted in the census and that the Commonwealth Government take charge of Aboriginal affairs, effectively acknowledging Aboriginal people as citizens within their own country.

The film tells the story of the relentless struggle of Aborigines fight for citizenship rights for more than a century, but it was the coming together of the many Aboriginal associations and leagues in 1958 to form a national body that finally gave impetus to the struggle. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders or FCAATSI attracted both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal membership and support from across all sections of Australian society.

That for ten years they campaigned to convince the public and politicians of the need for Constitutional change. They capitalised on the global condemnation of Australia's treatment of its indigenous people and the media's growing interest in Aboriginal issues. The "Freedom Rides" of 1965 and the Gurindji strike at Wave Hill in 1966 highlighted Aboriginal living and working conditions and helped advance the crusade to set things right for indigenous Australians.

VOTE YES for Aborigines is a documentary that revisits those involved with the 1967 referendum and the social attitudes and influences that led to the event, featuring former Prime Ministers, politicians, historians and campaigners.

But more than just marking a time in history, VOTE YES for Aborigines interrogates the success of the Referendum and addresses current debates about what is meant by Australian citizenship and values and how they relate, if at all to Aboriginal history, identity, and culture.

In any case I do hope that you will watch the film and perhaps gain from it some historical knowledge of the events that led up to the 1967 Referendum and the relentless struggle for Aboriginal people to gain equal citizenship rights and a sense of the importance of reconciliation and cultural diversity, even if our leaders have seem to forgotten it for the time being.

Thank you.