



52nd Backhouse Lecture
presented by
The Religious Society of Friends
(Quakers) in Australia

The James Backhouse Lecture, commonly known as the Backhouse Lecture, is a public lecture on contemporary issues delivered annually at the national gathering of Quakers in Australia

**Reflections on the 50th anniversary
of the 1967 Referendum
in the context of two Aboriginal life stories
with
David Carline, supported by Cheryl Buchanan**

**10 July, 7.30pm
The Golf Club at the Adelaide Shores Resort
Adelaide South Australia**

David Carline is an Indigenous Australian Quaker, a member of the Kooma people of southwestern Queensland and a member of Queensland Regional Meeting. In the 1990's David was involved in the protests against French nuclear testing at Muroroa atoll. For the last twenty years he has been actively working for the well-being of his people (Kooma) and is caring for country and its waterways along with his niece, Cheryl Buchanan, who is working with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

Cheryl Buchanan has been an author, editor, speaker, director, businessperson, political activist, teacher, lecturer and negotiator. She had also been the founding member of numerous Queensland Aboriginal organisations, including Aboriginal Legal, Medicare and Childcare Centre in Brisbane, Black Community School, Black Resource Centre, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Women's Legal and Advocacy Service. She was the first Aboriginal woman publisher and an acclaimed playwright and author.

The 2017 James Backhouse Lecture

After the powerful, mysterious throbbing of the didgeridoo by Peter Webb, and the silence, came the stories of our Friend, David Carline, and his niece, Cheryl Buchanan. As members of the Kooma (Gwamu) People of southwest Queensland, near Cunnamulla, they delivered the Backhouse Lecture of 2017.

David spoke of his birth in Brisbane: his mother was one of the stolen generation, his father, a white United States soldier in Australia during World War II. At 12 David became involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses, eventually joining them and going to Sydney. By 18 he decided to move on, first to New Zealand, where he worked in a hospital for handicapped children, then to England, Europe, and Africa, where he worked for Leonard Cheshire Disability in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. With a sharpened sense of how well off Australians were, he returned home in 1966 in time to be an advocate for the referendum of 1967. The very small 'no' vote across the country seemed to mean 'a turning point in Aboriginal life'.

Away again, working as a cook/steward on ships in the Pacific, it was not until the early 1980s that David returned home to Brisbane after the devastating loss of his partner. He began attending Quaker meetings and found the silence 'a strange, spiritual experience – like being home'. He set up a house with another Quaker to provide emergency care for people with AIDS, before government funding was available. A personal alcohol problem, and the help he received, led David to hand his life over to 'the Great Spirit'. His life changed, 'a strong leading' taking him back to his unknown tribal people. David's bonding with his family at about the age of 10 had been unsuccessful. Now he 'received the gifts of a good job and an Indigenous education'.

His involvement with the politics of the Kooma People, supported by Friends, led to gaining control and protection of their traditional land through Australian Commonwealth schemes begun in the 1990s. Establishing a company, the Kooma introduced projects to provide work for their people and the revival of their cultural life on outstations. Then, after many years of negotiation under the Native Title Act, the Kooma land claim was successful. Most of David's work in all this was voluntary, and also included schooling children and fostering a child. Re-discovering family after years of separation, and experiencing the 'lesson' of raising a child and seeing him 'come good' was 'a real joy' for David. But caring for Kooma people and country did not exclude his continuing involvement with the Pacific in joining the protest against renewed French nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll in 1995.

Cheryl was well loved as a child growing up surrounded by a great grandmother, grandmother, mother and aunts in the 1950s. She was nourished by their stories and their willingness to involve her from the age of 9,

and other children in discussions about all the issues of the day. They were fluent speakers of their language. Home was a source of strength and drive for Cheryl in becoming articulate in voicing social justice concerns. Encouraged to attend school and gain an education, Cheryl also 'wagged school to attend Trades Hall' to hear workers' left-wing views. She campaigned for the 1967 referendum.

Increasingly aware of the discriminatory Queensland legislation that controlled Aboriginal lives, Cheryl worked in Brisbane from the 1970s to the 1990s to establish medical, educational and legal services for Aborigines. High rates of Aboriginal infant deaths and of Aboriginal incarceration were a particular concern. She also saw the need for an Aboriginal advocacy women's group to respond to the widespread problem of bullying in Aboriginal organisations, which revealed internalised trauma.

With land rights Cheryl was active in Queensland and the Northern Territory from the early 1970s. She condemned the decades-long processing of land claims, arguing that native title was 'a way of holding off black fellows from land'. Indigenous peoples 'lost many elders through that process'. However, she also recognised that the long-drawn-out process of proving connection to the land to regain it also had a positive outcome. It revived peoples' interest in using their language, remembering stories and songs. The cultural revival brought strength and a pride in their identity. In gaining their land, with every clan having a voice on a land board, new possibilities seemed to be emerging in the future. Cheryl has continued to be involved wherever there is a need to represent her people.

But still Aboriginal people remain the most disadvantaged people in Australian society. Still the regular, often weekly funerals continue, from illness, violence, substance abuse and suicide, especially of youth, symbolised by the bag of recent orders of funeral services David and Cheryl had brought with them. 'Why the fear of Aboriginal people?' she asked, believing that 'we'll never move forward in this country' until there is dialogue in a truth and reconciliation commission. She called on Australians to acknowledge their 'dark history', believing that Australia is 'such a powerful country that can provide the spiritual healing needed'. In closing the Lecture Monday evening, Cheryl sang one of her people's songlines about Australia's major river system, reaching from southwest Queensland to South Australia. The Lecture ended with silence.

Friends, informed and discomfited, felt privileged to have heard the Lecture and were moved by the speakers' honest sharing of their stories, which continued in the Feedback Session Tuesday afternoon. Invited to ask questions, no matter how awkward, Friends learned more about the strength of the women in the network surrounding Cheryl as a child. Both Cheryl and David emphasised the importance of educating young Indigenous men and women at tertiary level to enable them to become decision makers. But

equally they needed to maintain the knowledge of their own culture and people. Both speakers saw the necessity of bilingual education, Indigenous history in schools, training in diversity for staff, and reserving a percentage of positions for Indigenous employees.

The fact that both sessions went over time indicated the speakers' determination to share with us their stories of meeting the needs of their people by drawing on the strengths of their own backgrounds and exploring the possibilities of change following the passing of the 1967 referendum and subsequent legislation. Equally, Friends were eager to listen, asking for more, even when some stories were so painful and terrible. But they reinforced the point that such knowledge impels us to seek healing through respect, hope and love. At the Preparatory Session for First Nations Peoples' Concerns Tuesday morning, many referred to the powerful impact the Lecture had had on them.

Both the Lecture and the Feedback Session Tuesday afternoon continued to inform and influence discussions of the Quaker Statement in the 50th year after the 1967 referendum. These sessions had inspired anew Friends in their desire to uphold First Nations' and our search for justice.

The Lecture was live-streamed, and recorded by Friends Michael Searle and Geoff Greeves, in the hope that copies will be available.

Elizabeth Kwan, Backhouse Lecture Committee
July 2017