



Five Fast Facts – The Aboriginal Tent Embassy

1) The Tent Embassy started out with four protesters and a beach umbrella

On Australia Day in 1972, a number of Indigenous activists erected a beach umbrella on the lawns of Old Parliament House. Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Koorie set up the protest and placed a sign that said 'Embassy' to represent a displaced nation. The activists were protesting against the McMahon Liberal Government's statement in which land rights were rejected in favour of 50-year leases to Aboriginal communities (a similar protest in Perth, WA was staged at the same time).

The protesters issued a petition in February, which detailed a five point plan addressing Aboriginal ownership of existing reserves and settlements, preservation of all sacred sites, \$6 million in compensation and full rights of statehood for the Northern Territory. A policeman on duty at the time reportedly asked the activists how long the protest would last. When told the Embassy would stay until Aboriginal Australians had land rights, the police officer replied "that could be forever".

2) The Aboriginal Tent Embassy has been a focal point for protests and marches on Parliament

Since 1992, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy has been a focal point for protests and marches on Parliament. Activists Arthur and Rose Kirby were even married there in 1997. In recent years protests have taken on a more ceremonial style, such as the lighting of the sacred fire in 1998. Every year on 26 January, the Tent Embassy holds a free public event called *Coroborree for Sovereignty*, and issues a public invitation to the community to attend the event.

The black, yellow and red land rights flag was first flown at the Tent Embassy in 1972, uniting Aboriginal people from around the country. Many have described the Embassy as the birthplace of the final form of the Aboriginal Land Rights flag designed by Harold Thomas. Thomas reportedly responded to the request to have the black above the red, not the red over the black. As the late Billy Craigie stated, "otherwise they've already buried us, Brother!". Given its position in the nation's capital, the Embassy has also become a place where non-Indigenous Australians and international visitors first meet and talk with Aboriginal people to learn firsthand about their history.

3) The Aboriginal Tent Embassy was given heritage value in 1995

The tents erected on the lawns of Old Parliament House were removed twice by the Liberal Government in 1972 (by use of police force, territory and planning guidelines and direct negotiations). From 1975, the Embassy was intermittently closed and re-erected in line with the political climate at the time. However, in 1992 it became a permanent fixture, representing the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal sovereignty and land rights. In 1995 the

Embassy was listed on the Australian Heritage Commission's National Estate. It is the only place recognised nationally for the political struggle of Aboriginal people.

The Embassy's mix of grassroots politics has seen it become a powerful symbol of resistance and cultural revival with many Aboriginal activists (such as Shirley Smith and Gary Foley) attributing their political consciousness and education to the Embassy.

There have also been other Embassies established in most Australian capital cities. During the 1988 Bicentenary an embassy was erected at Mrs Macquarie's Chair on Sydney Harbour. A second site was established in Sydney during the 2000 Olympics and another site established later at Sandon point near Wollongong.

4) The sacred Fire for Peace and Justice in the centre of the site has been tended since 1998

The Sacred Fire for Peace and Justice was first made by Arabunna Elder Kevin Buzzacott and lit by Wiradjuri man Paul Coe in 1998.

The Fire provides spiritual healing and inspiration. The guardians of the Sacred Fire (those who live at the Embassy) continue to fuel the fire and ensure a continual supply of wood remains on the grounds. The fire is also used for smoking ceremonies, which are an important healing process and integral to the spiritual component of the Embassy.

5) The Tent Embassy will commemorate and celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2012

January 26, 2012 marks the 40th anniversary of the Tent Embassy. The anniversary is a significant milestone both for Aboriginal people and for our nation's history.

Despite some labelling the Tent Embassy as an eyesore, its existence over the past 40 years has seen it become an icon of Aboriginal political rights and struggles and has become a national icon for all Australians. Thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and many non-Indigenous supporters, from around Australia will make the pilgrimage to mark the occasion.

Isabell Coe, whose late husband Billy Craigie was one of the four men who founded the Embassy in 1972, said the embassy represents the continuing struggle for land rights and determination to end discrimination.

The Embassy is also on Canberra's tourist map, and visitors are invited to place gum leaves on the ceremonial fire as a symbol of protection during their travels around Australia.

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<http://aboriginaltentembassy40th.com/about/>

www.aboriginaltentembassy.net