

## **Marcia Langton – Tribute to John Newfong**

My dear friend and colleague, John Newfong, was a master writer and brilliant journalist who inspired me from 1975 until his untimely death. I first worked with him at the Aboriginal Medical Service in Redfern. He came to the medical service after the Tent Embassy events in which he played a crucial role as the key Aboriginal liaison with the Australian media, disseminating the perspectives and demands of those protests.

He could communicate with people from all walks of life and was able to walk into Parliament House and command an audience. I heard about his successes in those adventures from many people later, and there are others who could give first-hand accounts of his remarkable contribution.

In the mid 1970s, he wrote the newsletter for the Aboriginal Medical Service and spoke at many community gatherings to raise support for community-controlled Aboriginal health services. At night, he would come back into the office and volunteer with Naomi Mayers, me and Bobbi Sykes to write and publish the first Aboriginal newspaper. It was called *Koori Bina* and galvanised the emerging Aboriginal movement around the critical issues.

Working with John was a young writer's dream: he was extraordinarily well-read, a brilliant analyst and writer, and his supreme and ever-ready wit made the long hours pass quickly.

He told us about his earlier career adventures, working at first in the ABC studios in Brisbane, and then at *The Australian* and *The Bulletin*. He had a network of journalist friends and remained intensely interested in Australian and global news and issues of the day.

When he later went to work as the communications director at the Aboriginal Development Commission, he also took on the role of Editor of *Identity* Magazine. He also made that publication a clarion call to Indigenous people across Australia. It was widely read and had an enormous influence under his leadership.

I was honoured to be commissioned by John to write for it from time to time. He hailed from the Stradbroke Island people, who now call themselves the Noonucal tribe or the Quandamooka people, through his mother's line. I knew his family and parents, and he grew up in a loving family that was engaged fully in community life.

In his youth, with his sisters, he worked on the 1967 campaign for the Referendum on the question of whether Aboriginal people should be counted in the census and whether the Parliament should have the power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He was a compatriot of the great Faith Bandler and his influence on that decade long campaign for our civil rights should be honoured in the annals of our national history.

But it is his contribution to journalism that should be honoured. John was the first Aboriginal journalist. His track record as a journalist deserves to be researched and also honoured in the history of journalism. That is why I support his nomination for the Journalists Hall of Fame. John was an outstanding journalist and an outstanding Australian.