

Neville Bonner

Indigenous leader and Senator (1922–99)

Neville Bonner was born on Ukerebagh Island on the Tweed River, New South Wales, in 1922. Like many Indigenous children of his age he had little formal schooling, leaving after he had attained the third grade at the age of fifteen. He worked as a rural labourer on properties across Queensland until 1946, when he commenced employment at the Palm Island Aboriginal settlement. He rose to the position of assistant settlement overseer on Palm Island.

In 1960 Bonner moved to Ipswich where he became associated with the One People Australia League (OPAL), a moderate Aboriginal rights organisation. He served as one of the league's directors for several years and was the Queensland president in 1970. Following the 1967 referendum, which amended the constitution to give the Commonwealth government the power to make laws in relation to Aboriginals, Bonner joined the Liberal Party. In 1971 he became the first Aboriginal person to sit in the Commonwealth parliament when he was chosen to fill a vacancy in the Senate caused by the resignation of a Liberal senator for Queensland. He was subsequently returned at elections held in 1972, 1974, 1975 and 1980.

Neville Bonner became a well-known parliamentary figure during his years as a senator. He was never a serious contender for a place in the ministry of the McMahon (1971–72) or Fraser (1975–83) governments. However he was a respected commentator on Indigenous issues and served on numerous Senate and Parliamentary Committees. He also served as the parliamentary representative on the Council of the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies).

Dropped from one of the winnable positions on the Liberal Party ticket for the 1983 Senate election, Bonner resigned from the Party and contested the election as an independent. He narrowly missed retaining his seat. Neville Bonner continued to be a strong advocate for Indigenous rights until his death in 1999.

Records relating to Neville Bonner held by the National Archives

The National Archives collection includes records about Neville Bonner's years in the Senate. Records about the Commonwealth government's dealings with the OPAL organisation through the years in which Bonner was associated with it are also held.

Searches using the keyword terms such as 'neville bonner' or 'opal' on our [RecordSearch](#) database will identify relevant records. Examples of the records held are shown below.

Photographs

The Archives also holds many photographs of Neville Bonner taken during his years as a senator by the former Australian News and Information Bureau (later the Australian Overseas Information Service). These can be identified on the Archives [PhotoSearch](#) database using the keyword search term 'bonner'. A selection of photographs – including those listed below – has been digitised and can be viewed on PhotoSearch.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that records in the Archives collections include the names and images of Indigenous Australians, some of whom are now deceased.

Selected records about Neville Bonner

Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
OPAL – an association for the assimilation of Aborigines	1962–67	A452, 1962/2795
OPAL – an organisation for advancement of Aborigines	1962	A463, 1962/4002
One People of Australia League – an association for the assimilation of all Aborigines	1965–66	A452, NT1967/5754
Threats against Senator Neville Bonner and Aboriginal establishments in Queensland 1971 A1209, 1971/6037	1971	A1209, 1971/6037
Senator the Honourable Dame Annabelle Rankin's resignation from the Senate – NT Bonner to fill vacancy	1971	A11467, 31
Senator Bonner – re purchase of Aboriginal art by the Department of Environment, Aborigines and the Arts	1972	A3753, 1972/918

Sydney

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
Monday Conference [Episode 83] - Aborigines and Government: Senator Neville Bonner Faces Members and Supporters of the Redfern Aboriginal Community	1973	C100, 1125839

Adelaide

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>South Australian miscellaneous literature records: L00082 – The Bulletin The real black economy – and who loses – interview with Neville Bonner and Galawrruy Yunupingu</u>	1990	D4112, 82

Selected photographs of Neville Bonner

Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Senator Neville T Bonner in Canberra, on steps of Parliament House</u>	1971	A6180, 23/7/71/45
<u>Senator Neville T Bonner in Canberra</u>	1971	A6180, 23/7/71/43
<u>Senator Neville Bonner with his portrait, the artist and Senator Fred Chaney</u>	1979	A6180, 24/10/79/1
<u>Senator Neville Bonner assists two Queensland electors at the Brisbane office 1979</u>	1979	A6180, 18/12/79/6
<u>Senator Neville Bonner at his desk</u>	1970	A6180, 18/12/79/7
<u>Portrait of Senator Bonner</u>	1980	A8746, KN9/5/80/22
<u>Senator Neville Bonner, member of the Australia Day Committee</u>	1981	A6180, 26/11/81/59

Further information about Neville Bonner

A collection of the personal records of Neville Bonner is held by the National Library of Australia, Canberra.