

## Aboriginal petitions

### Background to Aboriginal petitions

Records held by the National Archives of Australia help to tell the story of Aboriginal activism from as early as the 1930s. Petitions are an important part of this story.

Aboriginal people have been involved in the preparation and signing of petitions for many years and have presented those petitions to various prime ministers, members of parliament and royalty. Other people also wrote petitions concerning Aboriginal affairs. Petitions were often concerned with citizenship rights and the conditions and treatment of Aboriginal people but also addressed specific matters and situations.

The National Archives holds records containing information about a number of these petitions and, in some rare cases, the petitions themselves. Three of the main petitions for which information is held are:

- Petition by the Aboriginal Advancement League, 1937
- Yirrkala bark petitions, 1963
- Petition by the Larrakia people and others, 1972

### Petition by the Aboriginal Advancement League, 1937

In the mid-1930s William Cooper, the Secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League, gathered 1814 signatures for a petition to King George V seeking representation in parliament, citizenship and land rights for Aboriginal people. Of the signatories, approximately half were from Queensland (all but 12 from Palm Island), 550 from Western Australia, about 350 from South Australia, less than 100 each from New South Wales and Victoria, and nine from the Northern Territory (Goulburn Island Mission).

The petition was forwarded to Prime Minister Joseph Lyons in 1937 for passing to the King. Cabinet decided in February 1938 that no good purpose would be gained by submitting the petition to the King (see NAA: A431, 1949/1591, folios 94–98). Although the government declined to forward the petition, it remains an important chapter in the history of Aboriginal activism.

While the location of the original signed petition is not known, transcripts of the text at the head of the petition are on a number of files held by the National Archives together with references to the petition:

## Transcripts of the Petition by the Aboriginal Advancement League

| Title or description of record   | Date range | Series, item number |
|--|------------|---------------------|
| <u>Representation of Aborigines in Commonwealth Parliament</u>   | 1933-1949  | A431, 1949/1591     |
| <u>Aboriginals – Policy</u>  | 1937–1943  | A461, A300/1 Part 3 |
| <u>Australian Aborigines' League, Petition to His Majesty the King – Representation in Commonwealth Parliament</u> | 1937–1938  | A432, 1937/1191     |
| <u>Citizenship Rights for Aborigines – Northern Territory</u>  | 1939–1953  | A431, 1950/597      |

### Yirrkala bark petitions, 1963

Yolngu people from Yirrkala in eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory sent a series of petitions on bark to the federal government in 1963.

The petitions followed an announcement by Prime Minister Robert Menzies in February 1963 that the federal government would grant leases for bauxite mining in Arnhem Land and the subsequent removal of 300 square kilometres from the Arnhem Land reserve for that purpose. These petitions, presented in August 1963, called for an inquiry into the release of land for bauxite mining and sought recognition of the importance of the land to Yolgnu people. The petitions reflect the determination of the Yolgnu people of Arnhem Land to protect their land.

The Yirrkala bark petitions are among Australia's landmark constitutional documents because they bridge Commonwealth law as it then stood, and the Indigenous laws of the land. They were the first to use traditional forms and combine bark painting with text typed on paper. The painted designs proclaim Yolngu law, depicting the traditional relations to land and the typed text is in English and Gumatj languages.

The petitions have been listed on UNESCO's Australian Memory of the World register. Formally presented for display in Old Parliament House in 1977, they were moved to the new Parliament House in 1988.

### Records relating to the Yirrkala bark petitions

| Title or description of record  | Date range | Series, item number |
|---|------------|---------------------|
| <u>[House of Representatives] Inquiry into Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963 – Terms of reference, correspondence</u>      | 1920–1964  | A12813, 1           |
| <u>[House of Representatives] Inquiry into Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963 – Unnumbered submissions and exhibits</u>     | 1920–1964  | A12813, 2           |
| <u>[House of Representatives] Inquiry into Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963 – Background papers</u>                       | 1920–1964  | A12813, 3           |
| <u>[House of Representatives] Inquiry into Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963 – Proof transcripts – Darwin, Yirrkala x2</u> | 1920–1964  | A12813, 4           |

|  |           |                    |
|--|-----------|--------------------|
| <u>[House of Representatives] Inquiry into Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963 – Proof transcript – Yirrkala</u>                              | 1920–1964 | A12813, 5          |
| <u>[House of Representatives] Inquiry into Grievances of Yirrkala Aborigines, Arnhem Land Reserve, 1963 – Minutes of proceedings</u>                                   | 1920–1964 | A12813, 6          |
| <u>Demonstration in support of the Yirrkala petition on land rights to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam – Canberra [Tent embassy], 1974</u>                                | 1974      | A8739, A10/7/74/3A |
| <u>Demonstration in support of the Yirrkala petition on land rights to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam – Canberra [Tent embassy], 1974</u>                                | 1974      | A8739, A10/7/74/4A |
| <u>Australian Capital Territory – Galarwuy Yunupingu at the presentation of the Yirrkala petition on Land Rights to Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mr Ian Viner, 1977</u> | 1977      | A8739, A11/3/77/3  |
| <u>Australian Capital Territory – Galarwuy Yunupingu at the presentation of the Yirrkala petition on Land Rights to Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mr Ian Viner, 1977</u> | 1977      | A8739, A11/3/77/4  |
| <u>Art – 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petition on display in Parliament House – individual panels (given to Parliament House)</u>  | 1987      | A6180, 13/8/87/10  |

## Petition by the Larrakia people and others, 1972

In 1972 the Larrakia people organised a petition to Queen Elizabeth II. The petition asked the Queen to help Aboriginal people achieve land rights, treaty and political representation. The National Archives holds the original petition together with a 3.3-metre copy.

Headed Gwalwa Daraniki, which means 'our land' in the language of the Larrakia people (the traditional owners of the Darwin area), the petition was signed by more than 1000 Aboriginal people from all states of mainland Australia – some with their names, others with thumb prints. The Larrakia people attempted to hand the petition to Princess Margaret during her visit to Darwin in October 1972. They were unsuccessful and the petition was torn in a scuffle with police. The organisers repaired the petition and posted it to the Queen. From Buckingham Palace it was forwarded to the Governor-General.

### Records relating to the petition

| Title or description of record  | Date range | Series number               |
|---|------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Petition to Her Majesty The Queen - October 1972 [Paper work relating to petition from the Larakia/Larrakia people regarding land rights]</u>              | 1972       | A2354, 1973/86              |
| <u>[Petition to HM the Queen from the Larrakia/Larrakia people regarding land rights for presentation during HRH The Princess Margaret's visit to Darwin]</u> | 1976       | A2354, 1973/86 Attachment 1 |

## Further information

- Yirrkala bark petitions 1963 (Cth), [foundingdocs.gov.au](http://foundingdocs.gov.au)
- 'Gwalwa Daraniki: land rights struggle on record', *Your Memento*, issue 3, June 2011