

# TANGATA O LE MOANA

NEW ZEALAND  
AND THE PEOPLE  
OF THE PACIFIC

Edited by Sean Mallon, Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai and Damon Salesa



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Opposite: Melanesian missionary scholars and cricket players from Norfolk Island with the Bishop of Melanesia, Cecil Wilson, at the home of the Bishop of Christchurch, 1895.

# ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE

## OVERSTAYERS, DAWN RAIDS AND THE POLYNESIAN PANTHERS

**MELANI ANAE**

At 6am on Tuesday, 17 February 1976, police and immigration officials swooped on the home of Mrs Telesia Topping, of Onehunga. Mrs Topping, a Tongan who is married to a New Zealander and had lived here for ten years, was almost in tears as she told her story to the *Auckland Star*:

A young policeman, about 22 years old, came into my room . . . I asked him what he was doing in my bedroom. He did not answer. I was really frightened. He went to the bathroom, inspected it, came back and pulled the covers off my bed . . . He pulled open the wardrobe, fiddled with the clothing, checked everything. The same policeman went into the adjoining room where my two nephews, aged 19 and 20 years, were asleep. The policeman shone the light into their eyes, saying 'get up and get out'. . . My nephews were very frightened. The police then started dragging them out to their van.<sup>1</sup>

'The revolution we openly rap about is one of total change. The revolution is one to liberate us from racism, oppression and capitalism. We see many of our problems of oppression and racism are tools of this

society's outlook based on capitalism; hence for total change one must change society altogether.'<sup>2</sup>

The racial tension and unrest that marked New Zealand's social and political climate during the early 1970s, in which police and immigration authorities victimised Pacific Islanders whom they suspected of abusing the terms of their visas, evolved after record levels of immigration from the Islands (largely to fuel postwar demand for unskilled labour) coincided with the collapse of the global commodity boom and the onset of recession in the New Zealand economy. The circumstances provided fertile ground for the public expression of racism and general resentment towards groups perceived to be taking employment from locals, threatening cultural homogeneity, boosting crime rates and adding strain to public resources such as housing, welfare and education.<sup>3</sup> The same distorted perspective that saw Pacific Island immigrants as contributors to the economic downturn also identified the typical Pacific Islander as an 'overstayer' (an individual who remained in New Zealand past the limit of his or her visa). During the early years of the decade, this stereotype was reinforced in the media and exploited cynically by politicians.



The logo of the Polynesian Panthers, 1970s.

Rhetoric escalated into direct action in the form of random checks and dawn raids, conducted mainly in Auckland, when police taskforces targeted individuals who looked like Pacific Islanders or potential overstayers, regardless of their status as citizens. The police swooped on households in the early hours of the morning, often employing aggressive or intimidatory tactics. It was in response to this hostility that the Polynesian Panthers sprang into action, working at both grass roots and governmental level to expose and eradicate injustice, inequality and racism. This essay explores the circumstances that led to both the police tactics and the emergence of the Panthers.

The law controlling entry to New Zealand in the 1970s was the Immigration Act 1964; this was an update of the 1920 Act, which conferred on the immigration minister the absolute power to refuse or permit entry to any person not a New Zealand citizen (section 14 [1]), extend the period permits applied (section 14 [4]) and pardon or exempt people from application of the Act (section 32).<sup>4</sup> The criteria under which the ministry could grant or reject immigration applications derived from a policy that for many decades had favoured those races deemed most able to assimilate - in effect, to 'fit in' with New Zealand society. Top of the list were northern Europeans (especially Britons), white Americans and Australians; southern Europeans, Pacific Islanders, Indians and Chinese came lower down,<sup>5</sup> although residents of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau were, as New Zealand citizens, free to enter the country. From 1964, a quota of visitors from Western Sāmoa received short-term work permits, typically of three months' duration,<sup>6</sup> and from 1967, a quota of Fijians received work permits valid up to six months. A 1968 amendment to the Immigration Act allowed the deportation of those overstaying their work permits: section 33a empowered police to ask people to produce not only a valid passport, but also a permit to enter and remain temporarily in New Zealand, as well as documentary or other evidence of identity. In short, it outlined procedure for the random checks and those who did not comply on the spot could be arrested and kept in a holding cell without a warrant and in some cases deported back to Sāmoa or Tonga.<sup>7</sup>

Much Pacific Island migration was of a temporary and shifting nature, with many Islanders

Previous: A Polynesian Panthers protest in Auckland in the 1970s. The youth-led Panthers were formed against the backdrop of racial tension and police harassment in Auckland during the 1970s. Photograph by John Miller (detail).

entering New Zealand as visitors, seeking work on arrival and then returning home with money. (An important function of visiting labourers was to provide financial support for their families back home and Pacific Island economies came to depend heavily on such remittances.) Instead of returning, however, many overstayed their working visas and there were others who worked illegally on non-working visas. Historically, New Zealand's high demand for labour, coupled with the convenience of this under-the-table labour pool, meant that the immigration quotas had been only loosely enforced: overstaying (by plenty of Europeans as well as Pacific Islanders) was tolerated by successive governments and encouraged by employers for as long as excess labour demand continued.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, a post-colonial sense of responsibility underlay the government's willingness to support its neighbours in the Pacific.<sup>9</sup>

When Norman Kirk's Labour government came to power in 1972, it would seek to replace the assimilationist policy with one of cultural pluralism and during 1973 and 1974 Kirk effected this change through the process of a policy review that actively encouraged government departments to help Pacific Islanders settle. At the beginning of the decade, however, old-school policy and practice prevailed, placing Pacific Island immigrants at such a disadvantage that they sought to both rally themselves and form alliances with like-minded support organisations and protest groups. Communities of Islanders living in enclaves such as Auckland's Ponsonby had disproportionate poverty and unemployment rates, received substandard education and health care and were being exploited by unscrupulous landlords. The issue that irked them above all else was police oppression under the rhetoric of 'random checks' and the 'idle and disorderly' charge, which provided the police with a convenient avenue for dealing with situations where no particular crime could be proved to have been committed.<sup>10</sup> Sick of continuous police harassment and of being stereotyped as troublemakers, a generation of young people became receptive to the idea of retaliation. On 16 June 1971, three years before the first officially recognised series of dawn raids, Will ('Ilohahia), 'The Captain' (Fred Schmidt), Nooroa Taevae, Eddie Williams, Ta Iuli and

others - a mixture of gang members and youth from a wide range of Polynesian cultures - founded the Polynesian Panther Movement in Keppel Street, Ponsonby. A former member of the inner-city Niggs gang, 'Ilohahia would head the Polynesian Panthers as chairman - after a short stint by Schmidt - and help to write a significant, but largely ignored, chapter of Pacific Island history, politics and race relations in New Zealand.

... what we were trying to achieve in those days was just to make life better for people ... 'cause people were constantly being hassled by police ... you had the dawn raids ... you had bad tenants [landlords] ... throwing people out on the streets for no reason.

—Billy Bates<sup>11</sup>

... guys about our age ... were getting picked up, held in custody overnight, appearing at the magistrates' court the next day and getting sent away to borstals and that ... [with] no representative there to say, 'Hey what's happened to this person, what did they actually do?' And a lot of people were finding out that these people were actually being sent away for minor offences.

—Vaughan Sanft<sup>12</sup>

To many young Polynesians like myself, the only way forward for us as a migrant people was 'self help'. We would have to stand up for ourselves and our people, and not wait for others to do it for us ... The Panthers provided the platform for us to do just that.

—Wayne Toleafoa<sup>13</sup>

The Panthers were remarkable in many ways. The core leadership comprised a group of Sāmoans, Tongans, Niueans, Cook Islanders, Māori and one New Zealand-born Indian, aged between seventeen and nineteen years old. Although the organisation was youth-led, associates of the Panthers included traditional community leaders such as church ministers and community workers - among them the Reverend Leuatea Sio, Betty Wark and Agnes Tuisamoa - who

## 224 ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE



The Black Panthers headquarters in Harlem, New York, 1970. The Polynesian Panthers were inspired by the activism and imagery of the Black Panthers in the United States of America. Photograph by Michael Ochs.

supported and worked with them, for example, as members of the Police Investigation Group (PIG) patrols (see page 235). Party portfolios - ministers of information, culture and defence - were allocated by 'Ilohahia.

The Panthers' cosmopolitan nature was unusual given that at the time, as Cluny Macpherson has explained in his essay (pages 179-99), the notion of an identifiable pan-Polynesian community in New Zealand was effectively a myth. There was also no mainstream awareness of the Pacific region and its peoples or acknowledgement of the challenges and discrimination they faced in New Zealand; there was more awareness of the apartheid regime in South Africa. This was very much the old New Zealand of the 1960s, which in the 1970s would begin to crumble under resurgent activism in the form of Māori sovereignty, the hippy revolution, the rise of feminism, gay liberation, protest groups and the anti-apartheid movement.

At the Ponsonby meeting, 'Ilohahia and Schmidt convinced members to strike out on their own path modelled on the ethos of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. This US group, founded in California in 1966 by Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale, called for 'a complete end to all forms of oppression of blacks and offered revolution as an option'.<sup>14</sup> The language was of black pride, the images defiant and confrontational; and its revolutionary rhetoric was inevitably imported into New Zealand, where it took on its own distinctive character.<sup>15</sup> The Polynesian Panthers also adopted the American iconography and for anyone who lived through the 1970s, the images still resonate: the clenched fists in leather gloves, the lines of civilian-soldiers in empowering uniforms of black polo-neck sweaters, impenetrable shades and black berets. At the start of the new decade, revolution was in the air. In bookshops, *Seize the Time* (1970), Bobby Seale's history of the US Black Panther Party, was a bestseller and Che Guevara was poster art. The Vietnam War was in full swing, Jimi Hendrix and Marvin Gaye were on the radio and as Norman Tuiasau, a minister of information for the Polynesian Panthers, observed, young New Zealand-born Polynesians were reading left-wing writers and radicals such as Noam Chomsky, Samir Amin, Andre Frank, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Karl Marx.<sup>16</sup> The Polynesian Panthers'

# TESTIMONY OF AN OVERSTAYER – VEIMAU LEPA

Veimau Lepa came to New Zealand from Tonga in 1974 and overstayed his visa term. He describes his experiences of dawn raids.

The first thing that made me think hard about overstaying in this country was so that I could earn money in order to look after my wife and children who were still in Tonga. I thought that I would not be able to get the kind of money in Tonga to pay for my children's education nor look after them.

The minister at the time ordered that overstayers be pursued and removed from New Zealand. People were randomly picked up and it got to a time when Māori complained because there were many times when they were mistaken for Pacific Islanders and picked up by police around the shopping centres. This led to some upheaval and the minister ... ordered that these practices be stopped. Instead police should only search homes when receiving complaints ... Later, this practice was stopped; however, many people were found and picked up by this method ... and people of this country were burdened because we came and overstayed here.

When we were living in Ellerslie, two immigration people turned up and asked after overstayers. I told them that there were no overstayers living at the house, but they insisted that we were all overstayers. We argued and then a Rarotongan woman named Betty [Kaufusi], who was there, came and joined in. While this was happening I opened the door and ran. And when I ran out, I thought back with fear to the time when the house I lived [in], in Epsom, was raided and dogs were let out after us. In the midst of running I knew that our flat was close to the motorway and I made the decision to head that way because the police would not let the dogs loose onto the motorway since traffic was so busy. Once I crossed the motorway to the other side, I caught a bus and went to Otahuhu. And that's



Veimau Lepa preaching at an end of year service at Otahuhu Methodist Church, 1980.

how I escaped. The dogs eventually arrived and six people from my flat were caught.

In July '83, when I got my [residency] papers, I had lived illegally in New Zealand for over eight years, nearly nine. I was ecstatic knowing that I could live here legally. I no longer had to constantly look over my shoulder, be on the run, or hide. I knew that ... the dogs would no longer search for me because I was now allowed to live here legally.

The truth is, when I came to New Zealand from Tonga my children were very young ... they were all still in primary school. When I returned to bring them back to New Zealand, they were all in college ... [T]he moment that I saw my children and I walked towards them, we were the same size and the same height. It seemed as though they were my siblings, they jumped and hugged me, crying and giving thanks that they were able to see me again. I felt the same way ... eight years, nearly nine, it was not something small, but a huge thing to live in hardship and struggle - all so that my children could have a better quality of life.<sup>1</sup>

## DAWN RAIDS THE UGLY REALITY



Sione and Setaita are a middle-aged Tongan couple who live with their two sons Tesimoni (20) and Masiu (6) in Grey Lynn, Auckland. They came to New Zealand little more than six months ago, and speak very little English. Both parents work in factories. When the Overseas Register was opened they all signed. They understood that this would help them stay a little longer, perhaps permanently, and also that they would not need to worry about the police.

On Sunday 31 October 1976 at 6 o'clock in the morning the police knocked on the door while they were all still asleep. Tesimoni went to the door, and was asked for his passport. He told them that it was in the bedroom, and went to get it. The three police officers showed no warrant but walked straight in behind him; Tesimoni showed them his passport and a letter from the Labour Department confirming that he was a registered overstayer. The police then picked up his parents' passports, saw that their permits had expired too and went to wake them up.

Sione woke to find the three policemen in the bedroom and told them to get out of the house but his wife held him back, not wanting to make trouble. The police told them to get dressed and one even stayed with them while they did so. The other two checked every room, asking everyone there for their passports, and arrested two of them.

One woman in the house who spoke English told the police that Sione and Setaita had signed the register, but they told her to keep quiet or she would be arrested too. Then they took Sione, Setaita and the other two away, leaving six year old Masiu crying, distressed and bewildered at what was happening to his mother and father. They were packed into the police car and taken to Auckland Central Police Station, where they were searched, photographed and their fingerprints taken. Setaita asked if she could stay with her husband, but they were put in separate cells. Both were very upset and asked if they could contact their young son but they were not allowed to use the telephone. On Sunday night the police did go back to their home and found the boy still crying, but they gave no message to his parents.

While Sione and Setaita were in the police cells their friends tried to get help. They finally contacted a lawyer at about 10 pm on Sunday night. He telephoned immigration and was told that the police had the overstayers register. So he rang the police who said that they had no list and anyway there was no need to check because the officer must have checked before arresting them. He persisted however and asked them to

*Dawn raids - the ugly reality.* An Information sheet detailing a police raid on a Tongan couple and their two sons living in Grey Lynn, Auckland, October 1976.

rules were simple and strict: no possession of narcotics or being under the influence of alcohol during movement time; no possession of weapons or other harmful devices; no using the name of the movement in public for self-glory; equality of the sexes.<sup>17</sup>

Under the rallying cry of 'power to the people', the Panthers set out to portray the realities of being brown in Auckland in the 1970s. They sought to change the mindsets of both white and Polynesian communities by exposing and challenging racist policies and activities and by lobbying for much-needed resources for the people.<sup>18</sup> They worked with the mayor (Sir Dove-Myer Robinson) and the Auckland City Council and with Māori and community groups such as Māori activist group Ngā Tamatoa, HART (Halt All Racist Tours), the Ponsonby People's Union and ACORD (Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination). They also worked with nascent Māori nationalist movements, such as MOOHR (Maori Organisation on Human Rights) and Te Roopu o te Matakite (which spearheaded the Māori land march of 1975), arguing that the dominant European culture was trying to divide Māori and other Polynesians.

With CARE (Citizens Association for Racial Equality), the Panthers established homework centres and they linked with the Ponsonby Peoples' Union to set up a food cooperative. They raised money for causes with which they sympathised, were prominent in anti-Vietnam protests and organised transport to shuttle families and visitors to Paremoremo Prison, where they also had a chapter. Former inmates were also given advice, assistance and often accommodation with Panthers on their release. They spoke at schools and set up homework centres, community meetings, concerts for the elderly and street parties. In Ponsonby, they galvanised a truly multicultural community spirit. The local paper *City @ Westend News*, for example, was translated into Sāmoan, Cook Islands Māori and Niuean as a way of meeting the needs of its growing Polynesian communities. The Panthers also published their own newspaper, *Panther Rapp*, from 1975, and prepared their own press statements for broadcast media and for the publications of other protest groups.<sup>19</sup> With the help of lawyer (and future prime minister) David Lange, they printed 1500 copies of 'Your Rights', a legal aid booklet.<sup>20</sup>



The Panthers expanded and their influence grew in the early 1970s. Chapters of the Polynesian Panther Party were set up in South Auckland, Dunedin and Christchurch. The establishment of a chapter in Sydney caused world headlines when 'Ilohia was arrested in Canberra in July 1972 for trying to set up an Aboriginal embassy. The Panthers' minister of culture, Ama Rauhihi, became the organisation's first full-time community worker in 1973. In July of that year, Norman Tuiasau represented the Panthers at the 10th International Youth Festival in Berlin and in November the Tenants Aid Brigade (TAB) was created to help Polynesian tenants deal with illegal eviction from their homes. Formal recognition came to the Panthers when they were made the recipients of several youth awards, including the Governor General's Youth Award (\$250) on 19 September 1972 and presented with a \$1000 grant in 1973 from the National Council of Churches.

In the face of such advances, however, immigration and crime had become major political issues and, aggravated by the onset of a recession, would intensify in the run-up to the 1975 general election. In response to economic pressures and to public fears about Polynesian violence on Auckland's inner-city streets, the Labour government felt obliged to reassess its immigration policy. One of Kirk's moves in 1973 was to commission an Auckland police taskforce. He also sanctioned the continuation of random checks; these had been taking place intermittently and unofficially since 1972, but would enter a more disturbing phase in 1974.

On the night of 13 March 1974, police and immigration officials carried out a series of raids on Tongan households in Onehunga and by 3am thirteen Tongans had been arrested on charges of being illegal immigrants and/or failing to produce a passport. On 18 March, a further twenty-one Tongans were arrested after raids on another six houses.<sup>21</sup> Church services were also interrupted, as one participant recalled:

I can think of one instance, at a church service at 64 Crummer Road, all of a sudden, the doors were knocked in and the place was swarming with police, officials, and dogs. They asked for passports. There were 18 that didn't have them including the priest. They were taken to Mt Eden. There was great



CENTRAL HEADQUARTERS  
315 PONSONBY ROAD,  
AUCKLAND 2.  
PHONE 764-830.

- **AWHINA A TE TURE**
- **FESOANI FA'A LE TULAFONO**
- **TAUTURU NO TE PAE TURU**
- **LAGAOMATAI HE FAKATUFONO**
- **TOKONI FAKALAO**

The cover of the Polynesian Panther's legal aid booklet, 'Your Rights', c. 1973-74.



A poster advertising talks by Australian Black Panthers, Denis Walker and Sue Chilly, c. 1972.



In 1975, a National Party commercial depicted unemployment, the dangers of immigration and the horrors of over population in New Zealand cities. It also featured a Polynesian-looking character attacking a Pākehā.

shame in seeing the people taken away and it was seen in the court the next day.<sup>22</sup>

That sense of shame, and also of fear or uncertainty, was expressed in media reports following the raids on Tongan households. The 23 March issue of the weekly Auckland newspaper *8 O'clock* noted that 'a pall of fear lies over Auckland's Tongan community'. A Tongan spokesperson pointed to the great humiliation suffered by Polynesians during the raids, saying, 'It is as if these people have committed some ghastly crime - a murder, or rape. Does any person deserve to be hauled away in the middle of the night because he has overstayed a permit?'<sup>23</sup> Another said, 'Those who were picked up this week ... weren't even given the chance to dress properly before they were put in police vans. Many appeared in court without shoes. Others had to be loaned clothing over singlets.'<sup>24</sup>

Very few newspapers were sympathetic or pointed to the hypocrisy of the government's stance. One of the exceptions was *Zealandia*, a prominent Catholic newspaper, whose 31 March edition reported: 'Dawn raids against Pacific Islanders who have overstayed their entry permits were last week condemned as "shameful" by the Bishop [Patelesio Finau] of Tonga. The most recent raids occurred early last week. However, at the end of the week Immigration Minister Mr. Colman called for a halt.'<sup>25</sup> Finau, according to *Zealandia*, stated that 'there are something like 8000 Tongans at present in New Zealand', some of whom were 'on the run' and that permanent Tongan residents in this country would not be happy about the raids. The report went on:

The Bishop said his complaint about the three month visitor permit scheme was New Zealand's hypocrisy ... the labour force is needed ... But they don't earn very much and this tends to make people overstay ... The Bishop said that his people were being kept down by an 'oppressive structure'.<sup>26</sup>

Polynesian leaders and concerned groups, among them CARE, the Panthers, the Race Relations Council, Ngā Tamatoa,<sup>27</sup> and the Auckland Council for Civil Liberties, held a swift round of meetings, debates and protests at

# NEW ZEALAND CITIZENSHIP FOR SĀMOANS

In 1982, in a momentous legal decision, Sāmoan woman Falema'i Lesa won the right to become a New Zealand citizen. Between 1920 and 1962, Sāmoans could legally live in New Zealand, which administered Western Sāmoa. But after Western Sāmoa's independence in 1962, the status of Sāmoans in New Zealand was unclear. Falema'i Lesa took her case for citizenship to New Zealand's then highest legal authority, the Privy Council in London. It ruled that Western Sāmoans born between 1924 and 1948 and their descendants - 100,000 of them - were New Zealand citizens. The New Zealand Government evaded the ruling by changing the relevant statutes and negotiating a compromise with the Western Sāmoan Government. This gave citizenship only to Western Sāmoans who were already living in New Zealand or who went on to qualify for permanent residence. Many Western Sāmoans felt that this agreement was a racist betrayal of their rights and not in the spirit of the 1962 Treaty of Friendship between New Zealand and Sāmoa.

In 2003, a petition was signed by over 100,000 Sāmoans in a bid to persuade the New Zealand Government to repeal the Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act 1982 and return the law to its state as declared by the Privy Council of 1982.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, Arthur Anae, a former National Party MP and leader of the Mau Sitiseni movement, a Sāmoan rights group, filed a petition to the United Nations Human Rights Committee to consider the matter.



Falema'i Lesa, having just won her case for New Zealand citizenship with the Privy Council, with Margaret Beare at the office of Lesa's lawyer, Mr Rosenberg of Newtown, Wellington, 20 July 1982. Photograph by Peter Avery.



Stamps commemorating the Treaty of Friendship, which reflected the new relationship between New Zealand and independent Sāmoa from 1962.

the targeting of the Tongan community; these provoked a hurried response from the Minister of Immigration, Fraser Colman, who announced on 21 March that the dawn raids were to cease immediately in order to develop a 'concerted plan'. On 1 April, Prime Minister Kirk intervened and suspended with immediate effect the issue of entry permits for Polynesians until the government could set up a tighter system for controlling applications. He introduced a stay of proceedings until 31 May, presenting a two-month amnesty period in which illegal Tongan immigrants in New Zealand could step forward, register themselves with the Department of Labour and be granted a two-month extension on their visa as well as immunity from immediate prosecution. In the meantime, the government would develop an official policy on future entry, which would be 'fair, just and non-discriminatory'. The suspension would affect some 6000 Tongans with applications already in the system.<sup>28</sup>

It soon became apparent that the enforced mass deportation after 31 May of any Tongan overstayers who did not make use of the amnesty period would leave certain Auckland industries so bereft of a workforce that they would have to halt production and so Kirk introduced a staged system with time extensions for key workers.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of the April-May amnesty, 1500 Tongan overstayers returned home and a further 2000 registered to obtain extensions.<sup>30</sup> The newspapers made a spectacle of the government's embarrassment over the issue. 'Ponsonby Lost is Paradise Lost for Tongan Workers' ran the *New Zealand Herald's* headlines on 18 May. Referring to the 'plight of several thousand Tongans now under orders to leave New Zealand', the paper added, '[i]t is estimated that about 3000 Tongans - most of them illegally in New Zealand - work for Auckland industrial firms. The Ministry of Immigration has granted such people an amnesty until June 1 - or August 1 for "key personnel" - to return to Tonga (or be arrested)'. The report pointed to anxiety among Auckland industrialists, quoting one as saying, 'Let's face it successive governments have known all about illegal Tongan immigrants being a pretty vital factor in many New Zealand industries.'<sup>31</sup>

On 15 June 1974, newspapers reported six separate incidents involving violence reportedly committed by Māori or 'non-Māori Polynesians', provoking hysterical

newspaper editorials and outbursts from National MPs representing conservative white suburbs in Auckland. In response, Kirk approved the formation of another police taskforce to patrol the inner-city with the brief, like its 1973 predecessor, of 'cleaning up the streets'. Eighty per cent of all arrests made by the new taskforce were of Māori and other Polynesians, prompting Ngā Tamatoa to point out that the taskforce had selectively targeted Polynesians. Statistics bear witness to the bias: of a quarter of a million visitors who came to New Zealand in 1973, a combined 80 per cent were either from the United Kingdom (7 per cent), the United States (22.9 per cent) or Australia (50 per cent).<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the majority of overstayers were British or American. Despite these figures, in 1974, under the Labour government, 107 Tongans, twenty-four Samoans and two Americans were deported. Meanwhile, arrests of Polynesian overstayers continued. By May 1975, the Department of Labour reported that Tongans were appearing in numerous immigration-related court cases and in August raids were again reported in the press; these raids had all the characteristics of the previous searches but now included the use of dogs, which created fear among the targeted households.<sup>33</sup>

As the country prepared for a general election, the issue of immigration figured among the top ten problems concerning the electorate. Robert Muldoon, leader of the National Party since July 1974, now promised to cut immigration to protect the 'quality of life and living standards of all New Zealanders by strictly controlling immigration from all sources',<sup>34</sup> to reduce population growth through immigration 'from 30,000 annually to around 5,000' and to tackle law and order by getting 'tough'.<sup>35</sup> Through his brilliantly intuitive use of mass media, Muldoon rammed home his accusations that the recent record levels of immigration were not only to blame for the recession (due, he claimed, to Labour's failed immigration policy), but were also causing a shortage of housing and undermining the New Zealand way of life, which his National Party was committed to preserving. Muldoon's scapegoating campaign regularly strayed into blunt crudity. An animated commercial featuring a Polynesian character that snarled like a tiger and attacked a Pākehā character drew censure from a



A Dawn Raid Entertainment T-shirt, Auckland, 2000. Contemporary artists have reclaimed aspects of history, turning them into statements of identity and ethnic solidarity.

## 232 ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Race Relations Council spokeswoman, who remarked that 'the featuring of a Polynesian-type figure only in a violent situation, in the light of the adverse, negative publicity relating to Polynesians and violence, has the net effect of stereotyping Polynesians as violent people'.<sup>36</sup> A 1976 *New Zealand Monthly Review* would later report on how National had manipulated voters: 'During the recent election campaign, the National Party went to great pains to make immigration a major issue. In the process it was guilty of the most grave distortions and thoroughly dishonest appeals to latent racism in the New Zealand population.'<sup>37</sup>

Bill Rowling had assumed leadership of Labour following Kirk's death from heart problems in late August 1974, but he was no match for Muldoon, who sailed into power in November on a remarkable 8.6 per cent increase in votes (against a 10.4 per cent decrease for Labour). The National Party had persuaded formerly neutral New Zealanders that 'matters were very serious and that the cost to the country of Polynesians had to be examined'.<sup>38</sup> And when 1976 dawned with no end in sight to the recession, the new government clung to its get-tough policy. As raids continued, Allan McCready, National's Minister of Defence and Police, compared the checking of passports to a fishing licence, allegedly saying, 'There are things you have to accept sometimes. It's like Taupo fishing. You have to produce a licence even though you have been fishing there 20 years. People who look like overstayers will have to put up with a little inconvenience.'<sup>39</sup> McCready made explicit the racial selectivity of the random checks when he said, 'If you have a herd of Jerseys and two Friesians, the Friesians stand out.'<sup>40</sup> Revived, too, was the idea that Pacific Islanders could not be assimilated. In January 1976, the *Auckland Star* quoted Justice Graham Speight saying that 'one must have the gravest anxiety as to the placement of these unsophisticated people in an environment which they are totally unfitted to cope with' and that 'New Zealand's migrant problem was everyone's problem'.<sup>41</sup> These views were in fact supported by some Pacific leaders, who called for even more rigorous education programmes both in the Islands and in New Zealand to aid adaptation to the New Zealand way of life.

The significant difference between the 1976 wave of raids and its predecessor of 1974 was that,

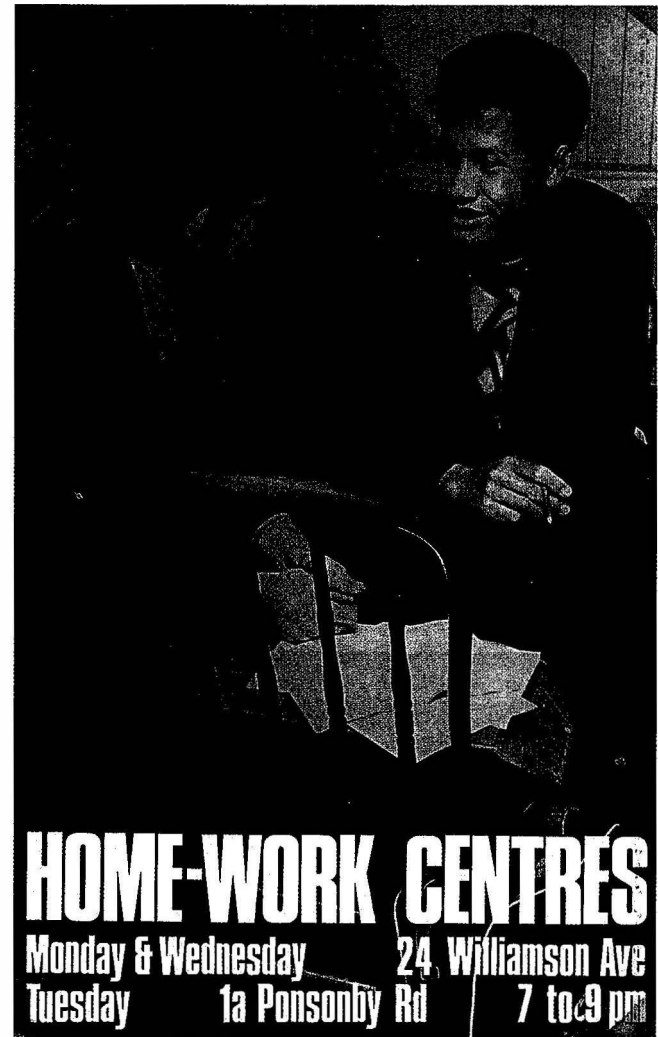
while widespread condemnation had led to the cessation of the earlier raids, in 1976 there appeared to be widespread approval of the police tactics now employed. For example, letters and articles in mainstream newspapers supported the immigration policies, as did the law and order platforms espoused by the various governments in power during the vigorous immigration campaigns of 1974-76. The *Southland Times* justified its point of view by citing the issue of rising unemployment, stating, 'Those who are all too ready to leap to the defence of illegal immigrants should recognise that every illegal immigrant in work at present may be keeping a New Zealander ... out of work ... [and] the time has come to realise that immigration on too generous a scale is not in the best interests of this country.'<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the *Nelson Evening Mail* stated, 'An immigration rate of around 5,000 a year, set as a target by the National Party ... acknowledges the country's economic hardship.'<sup>43</sup> The increase in support for National's proposals coincided with an increase in dissatisfaction with the Labour government's handling of immigration matters. *The Press* reported that Labour's 'attempts to stem the tide of immigrants have had not much effect'.<sup>44</sup>

Having firmly secured in people's minds the perceived links between Polynesian immigration and law and order problems, unemployment and housing shortages and having increased police numbers accordingly, the National government had effectively paved the way for renewed dawn raids. Officially, this new wave began in October 1976 and lasted only a few weeks; unofficially, raids had continued since 1974. In February 1976, AW Smith, as superintendent of the Auckland Immigration Department, had made it clear that 'checks' - raids by any other name - had intensified since Christmas 1975. When asked by an *Auckland Star* reporter to describe a dawn raid, Smith stated that police went through a certain procedure when they came to a house: 'We usually knock on the door and say, "We're from the Immigration Department and Police, may we come in please?"'<sup>45</sup> This conflicts markedly with the graphic account at the start of this essay. A young Tongan policeman who witnessed one of these raids in his role as a policeman was appalled by the aggressive tactics and cultural insensitivity of the police. He stated:

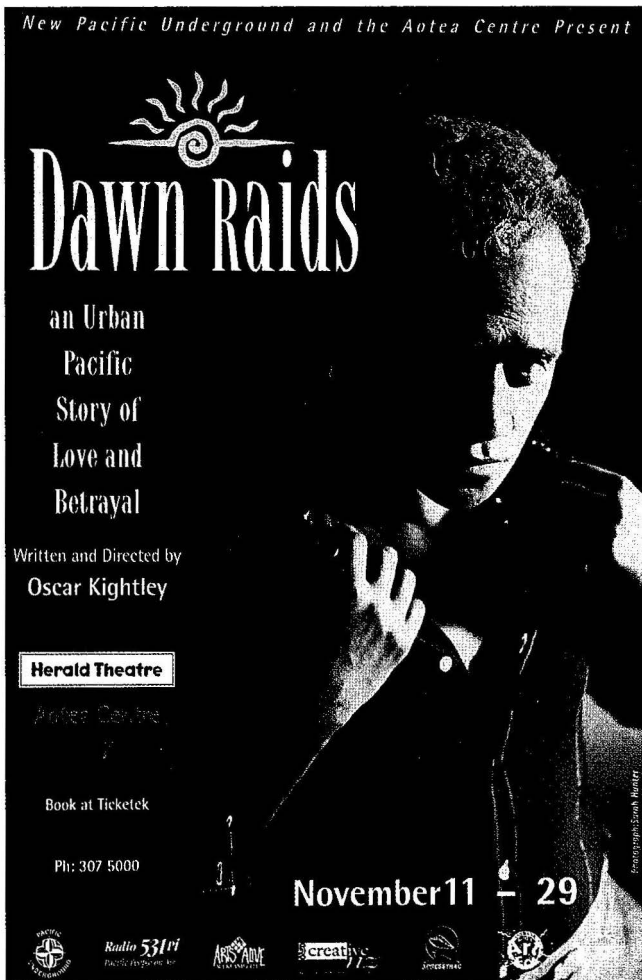
The [Tongan] people will be shocked [at] the taboo in the culture ... if you're a housewife only your husband should see you in the nude, you have two policemen walking in and without saying anything they pull your blankets away from you and if you're naked they say 'Get up, put something on' and they stand there looking at you while you shyly jump around trying to have something to cover yourself ... and if you take your time they grab you and throw you into the lounge ... the language is the coarsest most obscene language you can use like 'F— get up! You black bitch, put something on ... whore!' To them it's an operation ... to the people there it's a cultural shock, because they have never been treated like that before ... women, even men, would have tears in their eyes ... I felt like a Jew in the German Army.<sup>46</sup>

On 10 April 1976, Minister of Immigration Frank Gill announced a three-month amnesty that allowed overstayers to register with the Department of Labour in return for immunity from prosecution. A total of 46,477, all but 77 of whom were Pacific Islanders, took up the offer. On 12 April, Gill said that there were some 10,000 to 12,000 overstayers in New Zealand, two-thirds of whom were Pacific Islanders; five days later, he updated this to more than 12,000 overstayers. In contrast to Gill's figures, however, the *New Zealand Herald* reported that there were only 3000 Pacific Island overstayers.<sup>47</sup> In July, Cabinet instructed the police force to step up enforcement of the Immigration Act by locating offenders. Raids were ordered by Commissioner of Police Ken Burnside in Christchurch, but it was Auckland's police chief AK Berriman who set up special squads in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland (Criminal Investigation Branch included) to carry out the raids, informing senior officers that they had 'complete discretion as to the time of arrest' and that the government was 'only concerned with results'.<sup>48</sup>

On Thursday 21 October, the raids began. Applying a broad interpretation to Berriman's brief, the police squads conducted random checks for overstayers at any public or private place and at any time of the day or night. Drinkers in pubs, passengers at taxi ranks,



A poster advertising homework centres in Auckland, 1970s. The Polynesian Panthers lobbied for much-needed resources for the community.



A poster for *Dawn Raids* a play by Oscar Kightley about a Samoan family's experiences of this turbulent time in New Zealand's history, 1997.

pedestrians on Auckland streets, workers in factories, New Zealand-born Polynesians, university students, Māori: all were counted among the more than 850 who were picked up and questioned and the many others who were raided in their homes.<sup>49</sup> Joris de Bres, at the time of writing New Zealand's Race Relations Conciliator but then an active member of CARE, recalled the events:

The figures I recall were more than one thousand people were stopped and less than twenty were found. Māori were stopped. The ministers said that if you don't look like a New Zealander then you better carry a passport . . . Pacific Islanders made up a small number of migrants. There were six hundred thousand migrants and Pacific Islanders were [only] about three per cent of them. It was a terrible time and very discriminatory. And it was used in a campaign, very distressing.<sup>50</sup>

Public reaction to the raids was both swift and sharp and came not only from expected sources - Pacific Island and Māori leaders, church groups (particularly the Samoan Catholic Church), anti-apartheid groups and Labour MPs - but also from National backbenchers. Rebukes focused mainly on the way in which the raids appeared to have unfairly targeted Polynesians. The police tactics were compared to those of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and South Africa and the immigration policy likened to that of apartheid. Peri Ngata, chairman of the Auckland branch of the New Zealand Police Association (NZPA), said that 'the methods used to track down overstayers were "quite abhorrent" to the 1100 members of the Police Association', who had become 'the meat in the sandwich'.<sup>51</sup> Both Muldoon and Berriman publicly denied that the checks and raids had been random. 'No one,' said the prime minister, 'will be stopped on the streets on suspicion of being an overstayer.'<sup>52</sup> Despite continuing denials, the mounting evidence would eventually discredit Muldoon. Investigative journalist Pat Booth, then working at the *Auckland Star*, recalled: 'We began highlighting that . . . [random checking] was happening. I remember at one press



conference [Robert Muldoon] said Show me some evidence. We had six affidavits sent. He had to accept that the [government] denials would not hold. In fact we knew that meetings had happened to plan them.<sup>53</sup>

Pacific advisory groups formed deputations and asked to see Frank Gill. Often these deputations were refused, as in the case of a deportation order on a Samoan overstayer; Gill deflected the issue, announcing that he would meet with them only over general issues and reminding them that the Inter-Church Commission on Immigration and Refugee Resettlement seminar (scheduled for 10 April 1976) would discuss resettlement problems.<sup>54</sup> Later, it was reported that Pacific Islanders attending the seminar were unhappy about Gill's stance and that 'a bitter verbal fight erupted over the weekend as the Minister of Immigration and the leaders of New Zealand's Island community came to blows over a number of issues'.<sup>55</sup>

There was also an immediate outcry from leaders in the homelands, which was echoed in Pacific health conferences and meetings of the South Pacific Forum. New Zealand Press Association correspondent Bruce Kohn stated:

New Zealand's relations with Pacific Island governments have reached a delicate state, and the international community in Wellington believes there could be a breakdown in the traditional friendly dialogue between Wellington and the capitals of the islands ... Concern [is] at the government's Immigration policy [and the] insensitivity of the New Zealand government to their problems ... and the tendency to regard Island states as New Zealand's personal fiefdom.<sup>56</sup>

Noa Nawalowalo, member of the Wellington Pacific Islands Advisory Council, stated that the government's plan to stiffen sentencing for minor criminal offences by migrants (eventually passed as the Immigration Amendment Act of 1977) was 'racist', pointing out that Polynesians faced harsher punishment than other New Zealanders for the same crimes. He strongly advocated for a new law to be introduced to ensure that Polynesian migrants could be properly represented in the courts:

'because of dire consequences that could result from conviction ... The proposed law would ... affect Pacific Islanders more than any other group.'<sup>57</sup>

Along with these vocal protestations came direct action. At 3am on a cold foggy night in June 1976, three groups of the Polynesian Panthers and some palagi supporters simultaneously 'dawn-raided' three National politicians' houses in upmarket streets in Epsom, Pakuranga and the North Shore in Auckland. A small group, including 'Ilohia, Tigilau Ness and others, went to the home of Franklin MP Bill Birch. Ness recalled:

A group of us, including the military wing, got together with some cars ... [At t]hree o'clock in the morning we were out there with loud hailers and spotlights and shone them on his house: 'Bill Birch. Come out with your passport now!' When the lights went on and they all came out, we'd take off. Just to turn the tables.<sup>58</sup>

'Ilohia also dawn-raided MP for North Shore George Gair, and Tuiasau dawn-raided Minister of Immigration Frank Gill. According to 'Ilohia, 'when Air Commander Gill was interviewed on the radio about the incident he said, "How dare these people come into us at such an ungodly hour!" - but that was the whole point'.<sup>59</sup>

The Panthers further responded to the dawn raids by forming the PIG. PIG patrols followed and observed the police taskforce, noted down details such as registration numbers and identification numbers and informed those who had been arrested of their legal rights. The Panthers' legal aid booklet stood them in good stead when it came to court representation for Polynesian defendants. The Panthers claimed, no doubt with some justification, that their own visits to the homes of Gair, Birch, Gill and fellow politicians played a part in bringing the dawn raids to an official close, but there were a number of other important factors involved. In the first instance, the illegality of the police operations had come to light under public and press scrutiny to embarrass the Muldoon government.



'All New Zealand people are Pacific Islanders' badge, c. 1980s.

Another factor was the tremendous outcry from a wide spectrum of protest groups - the Polynesian Panthers, CARE, Ngā Tamatoa - as well as church groups and Pacific leaders both in and outside New Zealand. The dawn raids also provoked condemnation from National backbenchers and the opposition party - former Labour prime minister Bill Rowling, for instance, claiming the fiasco was a cover-up by National to hide the country's economic crisis.<sup>60</sup> This highlighted the sharp division within the National Party, which included a faction that would become the fourth National government. National MPs such as Jim Bolger were deeply opposed to both the tenor of Muldoon's electioneering and the practice itself. This wedge issue - not only within and between parties, but also between New Zealand and its Pacific neighbours - eventually helped to bring the dawn raids to a halt. The raids were also terminated because they were seen to be ineffectual; the New Zealand economy continued to decline despite the deportation of illegal Polynesian immigrants.

Paradoxically, the third quarter of the decade saw net emigration increase. As economic stagnation continued through the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was only a limited relaxation of New Zealand's restrictive immigration policy. An unforeseen effect of recession and consequent restrictions on immigration intakes was that permanent and long-term arrivals fell by almost half during the period 1974-78; with high rates of emigration, particularly to Australia, New Zealand saw a net migration loss of well over 100,000 people between 1977 and 1982.<sup>61</sup>

What were the long-term consequences of the dawn raids? The stigma of overstaying certainly tested the resolve and sense of community of Polynesians in New Zealand. The images and events of the dawn raids changed Polynesian perceptions of New Zealand and New Zealanders' perceptions of Polynesians. But as insulting and humiliating as this pivotal chapter in our history has been, it is rich in examples of the collective and radical action, taken by the Polynesian Panthers and like-minded groups, that brought down such discriminatory and oppressive tactics. The dawn raids and the immigration policies in the 1970s attracted attention in the wider Pacific, especially Samoa and Tonga. New Zealand's immigration policies

# PUT-DOWNS TURNED ROUND – T-SHIRTS AS CULTURAL HISTORY CANVASES

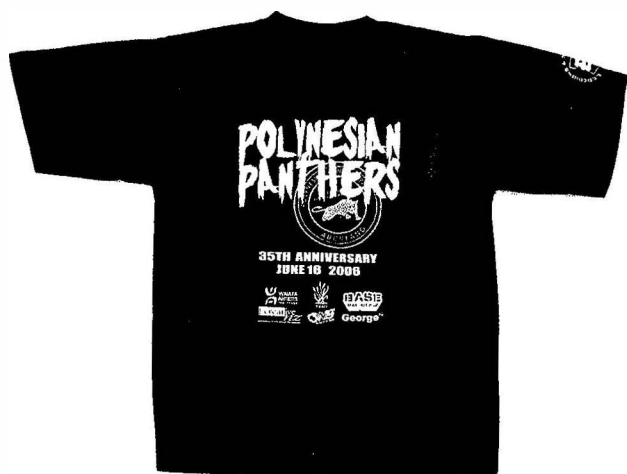


These T-shirts were made by artist Siliga David Setoga of POPOHARDWEAR. Using a mock dictionary format, he has come up with a historically accurate yet humorous definition for 'freshy'. Like 'fob', freshy is a derogatory term used to describe new arrivals to New Zealand from the Pacific Islands. The expressions come from the shipping term fob ('free on board' or 'freight on board') and its informal interpretation 'fresh off the boat', often used by traders to refer to fruit imported from the Pacific Islands. Another derogatory term used by Pacific T-shirt designers is 'bunga' - a racist expression for a person of colour, especially a Pacific Islander. By reworking these put-downs in a humorous way, Setoga and other T-shirt designers turn them into statements of pride and identity.

Some T-shirts draw on the historical importance of place to Pacific migrants. 'Bungaz N The Hood: Homage to Ponsonby' and 'Grey Lynn: The Original Fob Mecca' are slogans that acknowledge the two Auckland suburbs where most Pacific migrants settled during the 1950s and 1970s. Other T-shirts pay homage to Otara and Mangere, twenty-first-century suburbs in Manukau City with large populations of Pacific Island people.

T-shirts designed by artist Siliga David Setoga, of POPOHARDWEAR, 2004.

Setoga has also reworked commercial symbols and slogans in his designs. One example is 'Fob Power - Outstanding on the Football Field, the Factory Floor, and the Footpath Brawl' (inspired by a laundry-powder brand); others include 'Freshy, I'm got to be good for you!' (inspired by a well-known fruit juice slogan), and 'Kalo & Fried Corned-beef' (inspired by the Kentucky Fried Chicken - KFC - brand). There are many other Pacific T-shirt designers who work in a similar way, decorating a global form of clothing in a distinctive local style, that cleverly combines popular urban culture with Pacific heritage, values and humour.



A T-shirt marking the Polynesian Panthers' thirty-fifth anniversary, 16 June 2006.



Protesters against the Springbok Tour, Auckland, by John Miller, 1981. The Polynesian Panthers placed an active role in protests against the Springbok Tour.

and harsh treatment of overstayers was a fixture on the agenda of many an annual South Pacific Forum during the decade. An article in an August 1976 issue of the left-wing paper *People's Voice* described how many Western Sāmoans and Tongans came to New Zealand on short-term work permits for low-paid jobs, only to be exploited by landlords and high costs of living (for example, medical bills); it stated that immigration as an aid to industry was self-seeking and based on imperialist ambitions and then called for the working people of the Pacific to 'stand up against NZ imperialism'.<sup>62</sup> History scholar James Mitchell states that the dawn raids experience, New Zealand's immigration policies in the 1970s and the reaction from political activist groups such as the Polynesian Panthers have together provided a platform for Pacific peoples and New Zealanders to re-evaluate the boundaries of national identity and the cultural definition of the nation:

Where increasing social and economic problems coincide with rising rates of immigration, as they did in 1970s New Zealand, the almost inevitable consequence is scapegoating of 'out' groups for the problems. The perception of immigrants as a threat to national economic interests and shared national values, however, is contingent on assumptions about the boundaries of the nation which place certain groups outside the definition of 'New Zealanders'.<sup>63</sup>

The dawn raids and the controversy that grew around them were partly a product of rapid economic and social change, but they were also, as Mitchell notes, 'a symptom of a growing uncertainty about national identity and a growing tendency to confrontation within the country over the form and direction of New Zealand's multi-racial society'.<sup>64</sup>

What was the legacy of the Polynesian Panthers? In terms of popularity and profile, the group was at its peak from 1971 to 1974, with chapters in all the major centres. The Panthers worked hard to end the

oppressive police tactics leading up to and including the dawn raids and to expose and overcome the racial prejudice that was denying Pacific Islanders equal access to education, employment, health and housing. The group would also play an active part in the occupation of Bastion Point in 1977-78 and the 1981 Springbok Tour protests. The Panthers were very much creatures of their time, in keeping with the turbulence and activism that characterised the decade and in later years their influence dwindled as members left to take up other causes or family obligations, or fell out as a result of infighting.

Though their formal involvement with the Panthers has ended, many members remain committed to combating racism. They also continue to share an intense drive to help Pacific Island youth realise their full potential by both drawing on their Pacific heritage and developing their professional skills as New Zealanders. Given their personal experience, it is no accident that so many former Panthers are in occupations in which they can initiate social change from within the system. For some, a university education added intellectual breadth to their perspectives on racism, inequality, feminism and the gay movement and demonstrated how knowledge could lead to political and social empowerment. Importantly, it also provided a context within which to explore and understand the subordinate status of Pacific peoples in New Zealand society. Wayne Toleafoa (former Panther minister of information) went on to become a police officer, then a Presbyterian minister and is currently principal chaplain of the Royal New Zealand Navy. Tigilau Ness (former Panther minister of culture) is now a veteran musician who has served in a number of reggae bands and was the subject of a 2008 documentary, *From Street to Sky*, which looked at his life of artistic expression and struggle against injustice. Will 'Ilohia, founder leader of the Panthers, is now a Tongan broadcaster, the chief executive officer of the Waiata Artists Trust and a passionate community development campaigner. Norman Tuiasau (former Panther minister of information) is today a lawyer and principal analyst for the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs; he likes to regard Pacific communities as 'treasure troves with many assets and not just a population with crime or health problems'.<sup>65</sup> Others

went on to become university lecturers, social workers, chefs, musicians and youth advocates.

The Polynesian Panthers were undoubtedly a catalyst for political change in the 1970s, prompting the government not only to recognise the burgeoning Pacific Island population in New Zealand but also to exercise its burden of care. Their achievements were acknowledged by their own Pacific Island communities, by the New Zealand Government and by the Black Panthers in the United States. The Panthers' story is an integral chapter in New Zealand's modern history and must be told to the new generations of New Zealanders of Pacific Island heritage who are exploring themes of identity and nationhood. It is something of a paradox that the dawn raids were a force for positive change in that they propelled the Polynesian Panthers into action; without the impetus provided by the raids, the Panthers would not have been able to rise up, join forces with Pacific Island advisory groups and leaders and give 'all power to the people'.