Charles Perkins: 'no longer around to provoke, irritate, and inspire us all'

I met Charlie Perkins on the Freedom Ride. We were both students at the University of Sydney in the mid-1960s; I was 19 and white, he was 29 and Aboriginal. With other students we had in common the desire to draw attention to racial discrimination in New South Wales, specifically in the country towns visited by the Freedom Ride – Wellington, Gulargambone, Walgett, Moree, Boggabilla, Lismore, Bowraville and Kempsey. Charlie and 28 white students travelled for two weeks in February 1965 on a bus tour subsequently dubbed the 'Freedom Ride', protesting against discrimination in various ways, such as holding up placards outside pools and RSL clubs. The high levels of hostility to us in some of the towns we visited – especially Walgett, Moree, and Bowraville – drew national and international media attention to our protests.

The Freedom Ride was the product of the ideas, actions, and commitments of many people, especially the students on the bus itself, and also their supporters in Sydney and in the towns visited. Its success in making connections with Aboriginal activists in those towns, and in drawing public attention to the high levels of racial discrimination and hostility still prevalent in New South Wales at that time, was, however, very largely due to Charlie's own outspoken presence. Without him, the Freedom Ride would have been seen as, and would have been, a bunch of white students without much direct knowledge or understanding of the issues. With him, we could meet Aboriginal people in the towns, extend our own understanding, and above all capture the interest of the media. All of us, I think, recognised Charlie's pivotal role, and despite some disagreements amongst us over tactics from time to time, we remained a remarkably cohesive group.

That political action in February 1965 affected many people's lives – Charlie's, ours, and those of many others, including young Aboriginal people in the 'Freedom Ride' towns. The students, black and white, went on with our lives in various ways, many going on to develop our interest in Aboriginal rights and issues as teachers, lawyers, academics, journalists, writers, administrators, and public servants. Most important of all, however, was the role of the Freedom Ride in making Charlie into a national leader of Aboriginal people for the following 35 years. From that time, he was rarely out of the public eye. After a period as manager of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney, he began his long career as a public servant when he became a research officer at the new federal Office of Aboriginal Affairs in 1969. He helped create the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee in 1972, and became chair of the newly created Aboriginal Development Commission in 1980 and Secretary to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1984. Although a public servant, he was never quiet and discreet, publicly criticising superior departmental officers and ministers when he thought criticism

was warranted. Even after he ceased his career as a public servant in 1989, he continued to speak publicly on Aboriginal issues, becoming chair of the Arrernte Council of Central Australia (1991-94) and deputy chair of ATSIC.

Charles Perkins had a full and active life fighting for Aboriginal rights, and with his passing we have lost one of the most courageous and forthright Aboriginal activists this country has so far seen. I am glad to have known him, and very sad that he is no longer around to provoke, irritate, and inspire us all.

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