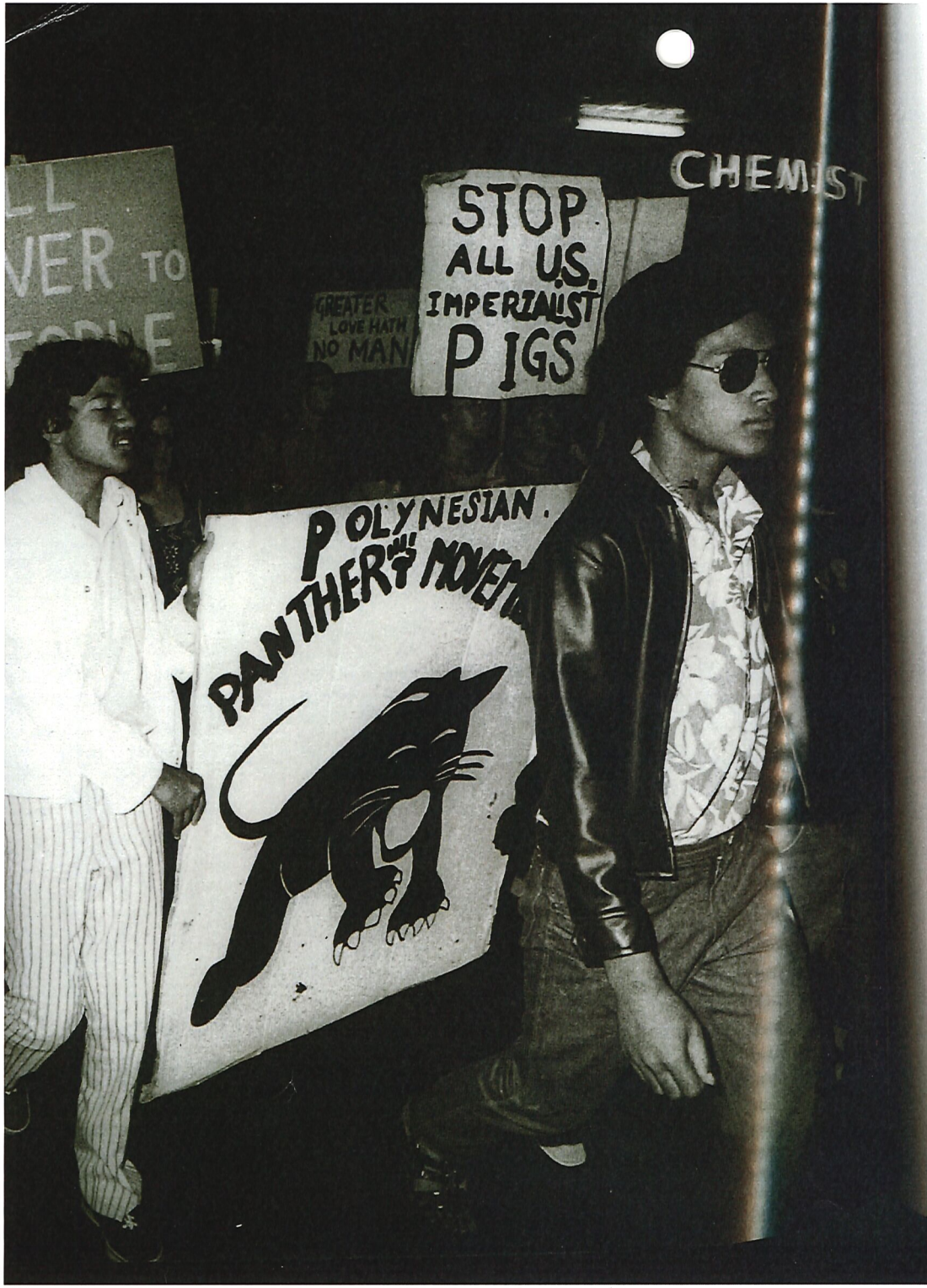

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ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE

OVERSTAYERS, DAWN RAIDS AND THE POLYNESIAN PANTHERS

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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.[1]

'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.'[2]

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.[3] 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.

e logo of the Polynesian Panthers, 1970s.

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

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).[4] 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,[5] 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,[6] 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.[7]

Much Pacific Island migration was of a temporary and shifting nature, with many Islanders 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.[8] Additionally, a post-colonial sense of responsibility underlay the government's willingness to support its neighbours in the Pacific.[9]

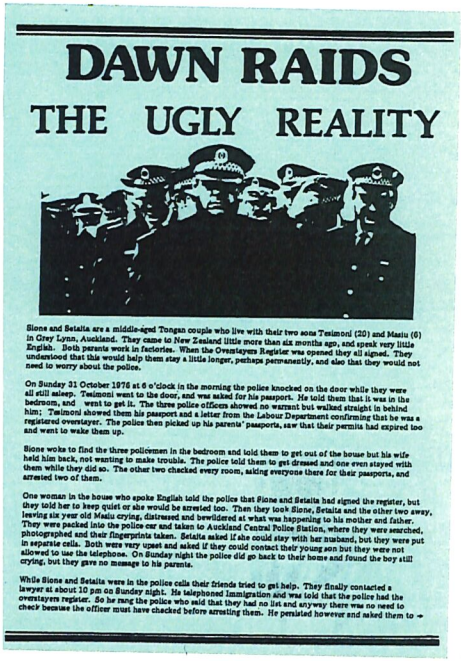
When Norman Kirk's Labour government came to power in 1972, it would seek to replace the assimilationist policy with one of cultural pluralism and during 1973 and 1974 Kirk effected this change through the process of a policy review that actively encouraged government departments to help Pacific Islanders 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.[10] 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 ('Ilolahia), '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, 'Ilolahia 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[11]

> ...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[12]

> 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[13]

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



DAWN RAIDS

THE UGLY REALITY

Sione and Setaita are a middle-aged Tongan couple who live with their two sons Tsimoni (20) and Manu (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 Overstayers 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. Tsimoni 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; Tsimoni 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 Manu 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.[17]

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.[18] 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.[19] With the help of lawyer (and future prime minister) David Lange, they printed 1500 copies of 'Your Rights', a legal aid booklet.[20]

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 'Ilolahia 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.[21] 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

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.