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Panthers
The Polynesian
Dawn Raids and
Overstayers,
All Power to the People
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 1967: this was an update of the 1950 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 periods permits applied (section 14 (4)) and pardon or exempt people from application of the Act (section 32). The criteria under which the minister could grant or reject immigration applications were 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 European, especially British, white Americans and Australians; southern Europeans; Pacific Islanders, Indians and Chinese came lower down, although residents of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau were, as New Zealand citizens, free to enter the country. From 1966, a quota of visitors from Western Samoa received short-term work permits, typically of three months' duration, and from 1969, 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 39 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 a procedure for the random checks and searches who did not comply on the spot could be arrested and kept in a holding cell without warning and in some cases deported back to Samoa or Tonga.

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. Additionally, a post-colonial sense of responsibility underlay the government's willingness to support its neighbours in the Pacific.

When Norman Kirk's Labour government came to power in 1975, it sought to replace the assimilationist policy with one of cultural pluralism and, during 1975 and 1976, 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 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 Auckland, who had disproportionate poverty and unemployment rates, received substandard education and health care and were being exploited by unscrupulous landlords. The issue that arose 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. A lack of continuous police harassment and of being arrested as troublemakers, a generation of young people became receptive to the idea of retaliation. On 16 June 1971, a year before the first officially recognised series of dawn raids, Will ('Hoolahiah', 'The Captain') Pedersen, Nona Tavea, Eddie Williams, Tari and others - a mixture of gang members and youth from a wide range of Polynesian cultures - founded the Polynesian Panther Movement in Keppler Street. Promising a former member of the inter-city Nga Puna Wai, Will ('Hoolahiah') 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...we were constantly being handled by police...we had the dawn raids...we had bad tenants [landlords]...throwing people out on the streets for no reason.

— Bill Bates

...guys about our age...were getting picked up, held in custody overnight, appearing at the magistrate's court the next day and getting sent away to borstals and the...[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 Sarge

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 Panther provided the platform for us to do just that.

The Panther was remarkable many ways. The core leadership comprised a group of Samoans, Tokelau, Niueans, Cook Islanders, Maoriland and one New Zealand-born Indian, aged between sixteen 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 Lesa Sio, Betty Waria and Agnes Tiaoniso - who