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How the Polynesian Panthers changed our world

May 31, 2010

Zoe Reid

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"We were only young. We had no examples, but we knew we had a right to be here."

To clarify, in keeping with the views of the Polynesian Panthers themselves, Maori are included under the term 'Pacific Islanders'. Unless stated otherwise, all references to Pacific Islanders in this text includes Maori. In the words of Tigi Ness, "We are living on the biggest Pacific Island."

While many of you may not have heard of the Polynesian Panthers, hopefully you will have heard of the Black Panthers, a now (arguably) disbanded African American revolutionary left-wing organisation that worked for the self-defence of black people. Over time, the Black Panthers' initial stand against police brutality in black neighbourhoods became a call for staunch black nationalism for all African Americans. The strength of the movement spawned generations of strong African Americans, to whom the Panthers provided basic human rights—such as their free breakfasts and education for children programmes—and, importantly, personal strength and pride in their heritage.

The Polynesian Panthers group was founded on 16 June 1971, borne from a large mix of Pacific Islanders, including Samoans, Tongans, Niueans and Maori. Tigi Ness, a New Zealand-born Niuean, describes the founders as "former gang members and students", mere "teenagers in response to the racism we were experiencing in Auckland". The majority of the founders were *high school* students, not university students or adults; most were from working class families and inspired by Black Panther founder Huey Newton's concept of black unity.

The Panthers were mostly first generation New Zealanders. Their parents reaped some of the benefits of New Zealand's economic boom in the 1960s, when they were encouraged to migrate to New Zealand to provide cheap labour. The government turned a blind eye to expired working visas and illegal migrant workers until the production boom dwindled in the mid-1970s. Although wages were higher, living conditions were often poor and Pacific Islanders were often subject to racism and police harassment. The fortunes of many Pacific Islanders, who had uprooted their families and lives to work for wages less than the average New Zealander, took a turn for the worse as the economy started on a downward spiral. The government aggressively targeted overstayers—that is, people who illegally remained in the country past their work visa, or failed to get one in the first place—and these first generation New Zealanders were at risk of being sent back to a country, and society, they never knew. The problems many Pacific Islanders already faced in New Zealand were only compounded by this episode in New Zealand history.

On top of fears for their families, many Pacific Islanders lived in dangerous neighbourhoods, with many young people feeling their only options for survival were to join a gang or simply hide at home. The Panthers formed to provide the young with another option. They were searching for something positive—the life their families moved to New Zealand to create, as opposed to the oppressive policies and poverty keeping their cultures and communities downtrodden.

The reasons for joining the Panthers were relatively diverse. Some, like Will Ilolahia, were looking for a better way. Will remembers being a member of the gang 'Nigs' (because they were often called 'niggers'), but he was trying to find something more meaningful in life. He began reading American books about the Black Panthers and soon "woke up". Some chose the Panthers initially for its more aesthetic appeal—as Tigi Ness did—with "black leather, berets, Island shoes, raising their fist". Once initially formed, the Panthers knocked on doors of people they felt had the same ideals.

The Polynesian Panthers challenged discriminatory practices in areas such as unequal pay, unsatisfactory working and housing conditions, education, police harassment, legal rights and prison visits for families. The extent to which the Pacific Island communities felt these injustices is shocking. Before the Panthers, it was often the norm for Pacific Islander houses to have only cold water. In addition to minimal pay, they were expected to work through all breaks, including unpaid lunch breaks, to keep their jobs.

Police harassment of Pacific Islanders was common from 1974 to the late 1980s. Some were picked up by police and those who weren't holding papers showing their legal status in New Zealand were arrested. The extent of police harassment was such that Pacific Islanders made up 86 per cent of all prosecutions for overstaying. Police began 'dawn raids', knocking down Pacific Islanders' doors in the early hours of the morning, demanding passports from all occupants. In response, the Polynesian Panthers began "dawn raids" of politicians' houses by banging on the door with floodlights, demanding to see passports, and running away as politicians came to the door. It only took a few weeks before the Polynesian Panthers effectively stopped all dawn raids on Pacific Islander communities.

Much of the Polynesian Panthers' work was in empowering the Polynesian community to raise their quality of life. The Panthers organised strikes in factories with substandard working conditions, and the Tenants Aid Brigade (TAB) boycotted and protested outside sub-standard housing. To combat failing grades at school, the Panthers organised homework centres—locations simply with tables, chairs and a quiet space so students could do their homework. Many Pacific Islander families simply did not know their rights or entitlements, and the Panthers ensured that knowledge was passed on and utilised.

The Panthers provided much needed assistance to Polynesians caught up in legal wrangles. Pamphlets were distributed advising individuals of their rights, such as being able to ask police whether they were being arrested, and what for. Legal aid was often provided to individuals needing court representation. One of the most successful initiatives was organising buses to prisons, so families could visit, and further support was provided to prisoners who had no family on the outside. While this was a free service, prisoners gifted the Panthers substantial amounts of the money earned in prison to show their gratitude.

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Lessons for today

The Polynesian Panthers are adamant that everything they fought for over the past 30 years is just as relevant now. Pacific Islanders are still significantly over represented in school dropout and prison admission rates. As the reoffending rate is so high, the Panthers feel the only point of the current prison system seems to be to provide jobs for guards. Now that there is talk of privatising prisons, their concern is greatly increased.

Will Ilolahia points to “complacency” as “the real battle”. We perceive there to be less racism from individuals, yet we are failing to address institutional racism—racism within the government and other institutions. Another related concern is that we are simultaneously more and less connected, talking to many people online and over text message daily, yet we no longer say hello to people we walk past on the street.

The Polynesian Panthers are still empowering generations of Polynesians. Records company Dawn Raid, Che Fu and Scribe all cite the Panthers as an empowering influence. The Panthers’ take home advice to wannabe movers and shakers at Victoria? Stay at uni, get your degree, and get into a position to make change—their experience, knowledge and passion are here to help, as strong as 30 years ago.



COMMENTS (25)

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- says:
[June 19, 2010 at 1:19 am](#)

The Polynesian Panther Movement began in the early 70s in response to oppression Pacific Islanders faced from a society with a strongly mono-cultural perspective. Katie Small looks at what has changed – and what has stayed the same – since the Panthers started their struggle.
- says:
[June 19, 2010 at 6:09 pm](#)

The spammer obviously plagiarised that comment from the summary of an article on *Scoop*:
<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/H10806/S00109.htm>

Now they're not even *trying* to write their own stuff.
- says:
[June 21, 2010 at 1:32 pm](#)

Mikey, you attract the single most bizarre fans ever. :D
- says:
[July 21, 2010 at 1:51 pm](#)

being in new zealand is hard but thanks to the panthers back in the 70's for maing the way for us.
- says:
[July 22, 2010 at 11:30 am](#)

Hi i had to do a speech and this article realy helped being a islander myself I think that its great to have role models like the Panthers :)
- says:
[August 28, 2010 at 4:04 pm](#)

“Stay at uni, get your degree, and get into a position to make change”

I don't profess to be an expert on the Polynesian Panthers, but that's certainly a far cry from what the Black Panther Party originally advocated. It seems a lot of people are more willing to remember the stuff that matches liberal identity politics, than the revolutionary (and Marxist-influenced) politics which set them apart.
- says:
[August 29, 2010 at 10:58 am](#)

TBH Ian this is over 30 years on and the Poynesian Panthers, not black panthers. Both are about making change by any means necessary but age has mellowed them somewhat.

I very much doubt that the Black Panthers would object to someone going down that route although they would decry the need to.

The politics attached to the Black Panthers was substantially higher up in the organisation and often made little impact on how they made themselves heard at a grassroots level. There certainly was little expectation that all members followed the communist undertones and on top of that if you read their ten point plan <http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm> the points they made change on are the...er..more practical immediate ones, as opposed to just attempting to overthrow the white Government immediately!

I think a lot of people do forget how willing both groups were to break the law, in various ways, and from that angle I think there are a lot of rose=tinted memories.

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Please watch but better still spread the word as we want every single Kiwi watching.

Malo aupito for your above comments.

10. [says:](#)
[August 29, 2010 at 6:45 pm](#)

im gonna watch on freeview :-)

11. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 12:18 am](#)

"the points they made change on are the...er...more practical immediate ones, as opposed to just attempting to overthrow the white Government immediately!"

So, when they talk in point 3 about ending capitalist robbery, and in point 10 rephrase Soviet slogans, they're actually asking for reforms? There's an undeniable relationship between reform and revolution, but that doesn't mean we ignore their revolutionary politics.

"I very much doubt that the Black Panthers would object to someone going down that route although they would decry the need to."

Fred Hampton spoke of the dangers of liberal careerism; that one day we might have an African American president presiding over US imperialism. This was not an uncommon view in the party, which sought to overthrow the system, not change it from within. So in fact, they *did* object to that route.

12. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 7:39 am](#)

No Ian, when they spoke of ending capitalist robbery, and rephrased Soviet slogans, they did much less to actually bring about complete overthrow of the Government than, say, acting on point 2, encouraging employment of African Americans into capitalist systems.

I don't see the problem here- noones claiming that their ideology is based in anything other than communism, and I'm certainly not claiming that they wouldn't have completely and utterly changed society had they the chance.

I can tell you that if someone gave them a magical wand to change society, as with any organisation, there would be a huge amount of argument as to how far to go, or even what to do. (Some people argue that the Black Panthers no longer exist because of the more extreme elements clashing with the more mainstream ones.) I think you're reading what you want to, what you say is largely fair and accurate but their political ideology isn't the be all and end all of what the Panthers were about, and not close to what they actually accomplished.

13. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 10:32 am](#)

Well, for starters I think you're missing what Point 2 is getting at. They argue for taking the means of production out of the hands of "businessmen" (note, not just "white businessman") and putting it in the hands of the community (ie, the urban proletariat.)

Anyway I'll stop bugging you now, just thought the article more reflected the author's liberalism than BPP politics. Since it was largely about the trajectory of the Polynesian Panthers that makes some sense, but I'd still prefer a great communist organisation wasn't neutralised in that way.

14. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 10:37 am](#)

Also, just on Point 2, fighting for employment doesn't contradict communist strategy. I'd argue there were tensions between nationalist and communist currents, but not really any major liberal currents.

15. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 3:32 pm](#)

It was entirely about the Polynesian Panthers. It was an article based on the speeches and presentations from the Polynesian Panther Party. Nobody is neutralising a great Communist body. In fact, bother to ask her and you'll find that the author is a virulent Anarchist who can't stand the idiotic conception of political spectrums, as in essence they become blurred and contradictory. Jesus.

16. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 4:12 pm](#)

"Judean People's Front"

17. [says:](#)
[August 31, 2010 at 6:42 pm](#)

ian anderson misses the point og

ian anderson opens salient article

ian anderson: mm im gonna read this but first imma drink this battery acid

- [Features](#)

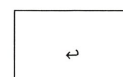
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18. _____ says:
[September 1, 2010 at 12:19 pm](#)
 OK, I'll bite. Since when is the difference between a get-into-a-position-of-influence "human rights" strategy and a revolutionary strategy a minor sectarian quibble?
19. _____ says:
[September 1, 2010 at 12:24 pm](#)
 It has huge implications for strategy. It's the difference between the NAACP and the BPP, the difference between a communist group and an NGO, it is not the difference between Trotskyist Sect A and Trotskyist Sect B as satirised in Life of Brian.
 And yes, the international context is crucial. If I'm writing about the gay liberation movement in NZ for example, I have to write about how the US gay liberation movement broke from the Homosexual Law Reform groups or I'm missing the point.
20. _____ says:
[September 1, 2010 at 12:35 pm](#)
 And, finally, I'm unsurprised to discover that back in the '70s, the Polynesian Panthers *did* advocate overthrow of the capitalist system. So yes, it is a crucial part of the story.
21. _____ says:
[September 1, 2010 at 4:58 pm](#)
 I'm 14n 4nd3r50n 4nd 1 u53 numb3r5 1n5t34d 0f 13tt3r5
22. _____ says:
[September 2, 2010 at 4:40 pm](#)
 an anderson sitting around hitting F5 wondering if the debate's going on, gotta get them posts in, gotta have my say
 woo hoo someone's replied oh wait
 it's just me
 it's just smackdown :-)
23. _____ says:
[September 3, 2010 at 12:04 am](#)
 Zoe has replied too just to say LOLZ
24. _____ says:
[September 3, 2010 at 6:53 pm](#)
 its fun to laugh :-)
25. _____ says:
[October 7, 2010 at 8:22 pm](#)
 Awesome article. A very important part of New Zealand history and Polynesian movement in NZ.

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sense of my own whakapapa was a kind of patchwork, something I could stitch together by pulling threads from family stories. The waka I chose, or borrowed from my father, was called the Wanganel

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