

How the Polynesian Panthers changed our world

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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.

The Panthers, along with many Pacific Island youth, also supported Maori causes and political events, such as the 1975 Land March and Bastion Point occupation. The Panthers became adept at political lobbying, which became apparent during the dawn raids in the 1970s, and the Springbok Tour of 1981. Tigi Ness was jailed for his actions during the tour, but was eventually released without charge. Will Ilolahia, along with Hone Harawira and others, was on trial for two years, only getting off the charge after Bishop Desmond Tutu flew in to be a character witness.

Many of the Panthers voiced concern that the government's way of control was to divide and conquer the minorities, and as a result they banded together to fight the threat to their cultures and communities. Miriama Rauhihi-Ness remembers a time when being Maori and embracing Maori culture was "literally... cut out of you at school, all of it". She cites the 1975 Land March as a turning point, where New Zealand society began to be more accepting of Maori culture, both within Maoridom and in Pakeha society. Nowadays, all Panthers encourage Maori and Pacific Islanders to remain strongly banded together as whanau, with pride in their heritage.

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.

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