

Source: Discovering Democracy Lower Secondary Units – Political Life
Biographies of four Australians who were politically active outside
parliament

<http://www1.curriculum.edu.au/ddunits/units/ls4fg3acts.htm#Nicholls>



League Centre)

Sir Douglas Nicholls 1906-88

Some major achievements

- Member of the British Empire (MBE), 1957
- Co-founder of the Victorian Aborigines' League of Advancement, 1969-74
- Knighted for 'distinguished services to the advancement of Aboriginal people', 1972
- Governor of South Australia, 1976

Memorials and monuments

- Nicholls, Canberra suburb
- The Sir Douglas Nicholls Reserve, Northcote Victoria (part of the Aboriginal Advancement

Sir Douglas Nicholls at the time of his appointment as Governor of South Australia, May 1976
Australian Information Service Photograph. National Library of Australia.

Background and experience

Doug Nicholls was born in an Aboriginal settlement at Cumeroogunga, on the Murray River in New South Wales. He did not have much schooling but he was very good at sport. In 1929, he won the Warracknabeal and Nyah gifts, which were important sprint races. He also played Australian Rules football for Fitzroy and represented Victoria in 1935.

But in 1937 Nicholls gave up his sporting career to become a minister with the Church of Christ. He became a pastor in 1947 and helped to establish the Churches of Christ Aborigines' Mission in Melbourne.

After that, he worked to improve conditions for Aboriginal people. In 1976 he was made Governor of South Australia.

Political life and times

In 1957 Nicholls was a foundation member of the Victorian Aborigines' Welfare Board and he stayed on the Board until 1963. He was also involved in other groups which were fighting for equality for Aboriginal people.

For example, in 1963 he was a member of one of the first Aboriginal *deputations* to be received officially by an Australian prime minister. The prime minister was Robert Menzies and the deputation was supporting changes to the two parts of the Constitution that discriminated against Aboriginal people.

Together with Doris Blackburn, Nicholls also established and led the Aborigines' League of Advancement in Victoria. The League was set up to work to achieve a better deal for Aboriginal people.

At the time, governments wanted Aboriginal people to live like white people. This was called 'assimilation'. It meant Aboriginal people giving up their language, their religious beliefs and their land. Governments might have thought that this would help Aboriginal people but Nicholls knew that it did not and tried to stop it.

- A *deputation* is a small group of people which represents a larger group.

Beliefs and aims

I've seen what happens when our people are put off their land - pushed into the white community - before they're ready. It destroys them. They become social misfits: not wanted by the whites, unable to return to security - caught both ways. They're on the scrap-heap then. The State steps in and says, 'Well, we'll save the children'. The children go into homes - institutions. They're well fed and clothed. But they're not saved. Children need the love of father and mother; otherwise they grow up to be a drag on society, too. That's happened with a good many of our Cummera people. They weren't ready to live side by side with white society. That was forced assimilation, brought about by *maladministration* and intimidation. From Cummera I learned a lesson: we must retain group identity. It's our only strength. That's why I'll fight this assimilation move, this bid to close Lake Tyers.

Nicholls, D in Clark, Mavis Thorpe 1975, *Pastor Doug: The story of Sir Douglas Nicholls, Aboriginal Leader*, Rigby, Adelaide, pp 218-19.
Courtesy The Executor Mavis Rose Latham Estate (Mavis Thorpe Clark).

- Maladministration means bad management.

Challenges and responses

In 1963 the Victorian Government decided to close the Aboriginal settlement at Lake Tyers, east of Lakes Entrance, Victoria. The Lake Tyers settlement had 30 cottages but they were old and run-down and the Aboriginal people were living in very poor conditions. The Government decided to send the Aboriginal people who lived there to live in country towns, to assimilate with white people.

When Nicholls heard about what was going to happen he resigned from the Aborigines' Welfare Board of Victoria. He fought for the settlement to remain open, and led a protest march through Melbourne to Parliament House to present a petition.

Many other people agreed with Nicholls but the Government closed the settlement anyway, and the Aboriginal families were moved away from Lake Tyers. When they asked to be able to go back they were refused.