

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#Gibbs>



Pearl Gibbs 1901-83

Some major achievements

- Co-organised the Aboriginal Day of Mourning, 1938
- Co-founded a cooperative association of Aborigines and other Australians: the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship, 1956
- Pressured New South Wales governments to improve the miserable conditions of Aboriginal people living on reserves, and of young Aboriginal women working as domestic servants, 1920s-1950s

Memorials or monuments

- Poem about her by Kevin Gilbert

Pearl Gibbs, an organiser and public speaker in the Aboriginal protest campaigns of the 1930s. This photo was taken in 1954. Lipman/The Fairfax Photo Library.

Background and experience

When Pearl Brown's mother took her to the state school at Cowra, New South Wales, they were told, 'Sorry, no blacks allowed'. After that, Pearl went to a Catholic school in Yass.

When she was 16, Pearl went to Sydney to work as a cook. There she met other Aboriginal girls who had been taken away from their families and sent to do household work for white families. Many of these Aboriginal girls were treated badly. Pearl later spoke up for them to the *Aborigines Protection Board*.

She was married in the 1920s and became Mrs Gibbs. When she separated from her husband she had to bring up her three children by herself.

In the 1930s, she organised strikes by Aboriginal women pea-pickers, who were expected to work in very bad conditions, and they achieved some improvements. She also organised a *boycott* of a cinema to protest against *segregation* of Aboriginal people.

- *Aborigines Protection Boards* (or Aborigines Welfare Boards) controlled where Aborigines lived and worked, who they married, where and how their children were brought up, their bank accounts and even what they ate.
- A *boycott* is a refusal to deal with a person or business as a way of protest.
- In a *segregated* cinema, Aboriginal people had to sit in a particular area.

Political life and times

Gibbs saw that Aboriginal people were discriminated against in Australia and in the 1930s she began a campaign against this discrimination. The campaign lasted for the rest of her life. Her aim was to achieve equality for Aboriginal people.

At that time, State governments were responsible for everything to do with Aboriginal people, through Aborigines Protection Boards or Aborigines Welfare Boards. There were often no Aboriginal people on the Boards. Gibbs wanted Aboriginal people to be involved whenever decisions were made which affected their lives.

She was a founder of the Aborigines Progressive Association, which aimed to improve conditions on Aboriginal reserves and remove laws which discriminated against Aboriginal people.

Gibbs also worked with Bill Ferguson, another Aboriginal activist, to organise the Aboriginal Day of Mourning on Australia Day, 1938. This was a demonstration by Aboriginal people to protest against the European invasion of 150 years earlier.

In the 1950s there was still a lot of racial discrimination in Australia. Some cafes, hotels and shops refused to serve Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were not allowed to swim in some swimming pools and some school buses did not pick up Aboriginal children. Young Aboriginal women were treated badly by the white community, especially if their babies had white fathers. Gibbs continued to work against this racial discrimination.

Beliefs and aims

See extracts of Gibbs' words in *Commonwealth of Australia 1998, Discovering Democracy Lower Secondary Units*, Curriculum Corporation, pp 132-3.

Challenges and responses

Gibbs was very concerned about the living conditions of Aboriginal people who lived on reserves.

In 1954 she became a member of the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board but she was not allowed to visit Aboriginal reserves unless she was with other Board members. Because of this she could not speak freely to the Aboriginal people who lived there and she could not find out what was really going on.

By 1957 Gibbs found that important decisions were being made by the Board when she was not there. So she looked for other ways to achieve her aims.

As vice-president of the Aboriginal Australian Fellowship she organised a rally of about 500 Aboriginal people at the Sydney Town Hall. The rally launched a national petition for changes to the Australian Constitution. The petition demanded that Aboriginal people be given the same political rights as other Australians. This campaign led to the referendum of 1967 which changed the two parts of the Constitution that discriminated against Aboriginal people.