

RISE UP

THE STORY OF THE DAWN RAIDS AND THE POLYNESIAN PANTHERS

by Pauline Vaeluaga Smith



In the United States in the 1960s, the civil rights movement continued to grow. Those leading the demand for equality included Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. Fast forward ten years to another country, Aotearoa, and social injustice was happening on the front steps of people's homes. Police and immigration officials were targeting Pacific people, accusing them of being in New Zealand illegally. Many experienced humiliating and often terrifying encounters known as dawn raids. Enter the Polynesian Panthers – along with other activist groups – and Aotearoa had its own civil rights movement.

BOOM AND BUST

The story of the dawn raids begins in the 1950s. At the time, New Zealand's economy was doing so well, there weren't enough people to do all the work, especially in factories. So the New Zealand government looked to the Pacific, introducing a system that made it easy for Pacific people to live here. Many came on temporary permits or visas, but when the labour shortage continued, the government allowed workers to stay longer.

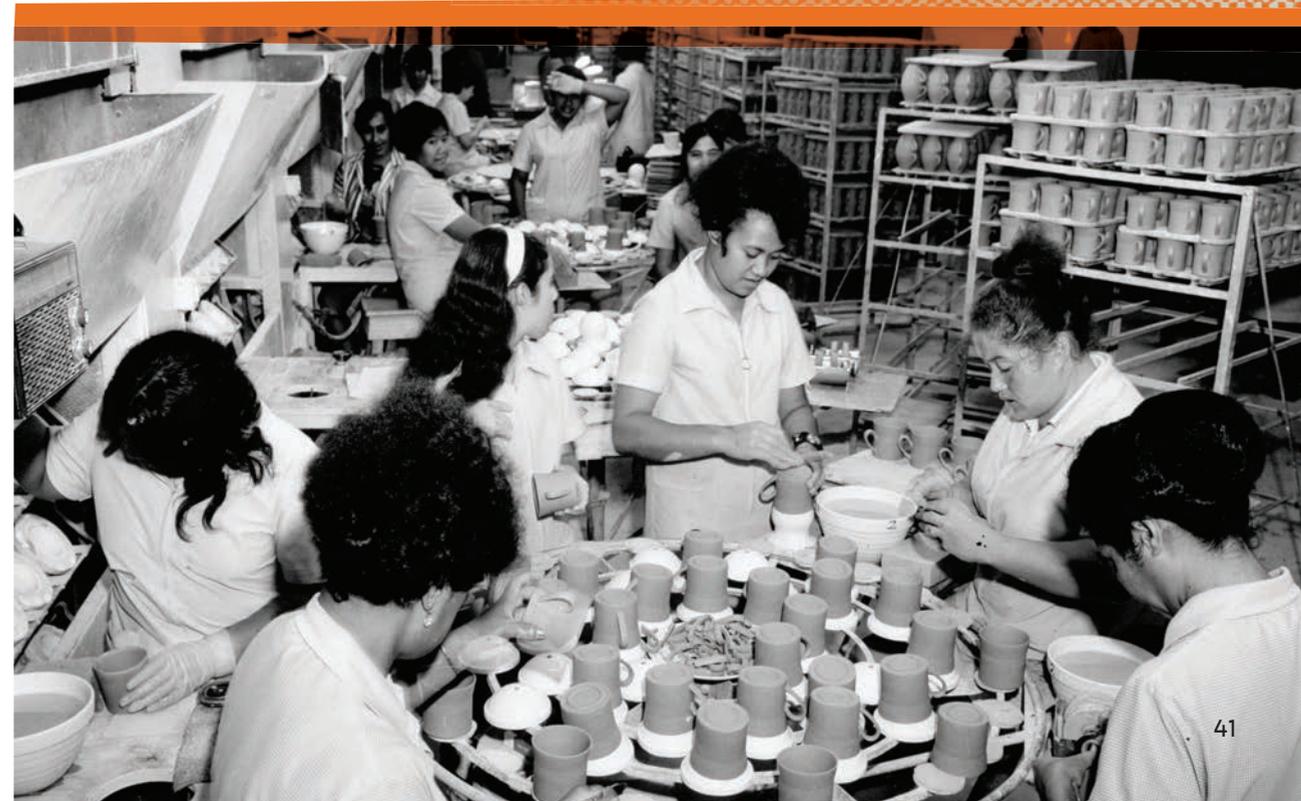
Things suddenly changed in 1973, when hard times hit around the world. In New Zealand, unemployment became a problem – in stark contrast to the decades before – and Pacific people became scapegoats. They were blamed for the lack of jobs, and some people started using the term “overstayer”.

RAID

The first dawn raids happened in March 1974 under a Labour government led by Norman Kirk. Each raid followed the same pattern: very early in the morning, police and immigration officials would force their way into Pacific people's homes demanding paperwork. They wanted permits, visas, passports – anything that proved a person's right to be here.

In the first week of the raids, around eighty Pacific people were arrested. This caused a public outcry. Although some of those arrested did have expired visas, for many New Zealanders, the targeting of ethnic groups was unacceptable. They believed that the dawn raids were destroying race relations in New Zealand as well as Pacific people's sense of belonging.

Most of those arrested were taken from their homes with only the clothes on their backs. They were held in police cells until they could prove their right to be here. Those who couldn't either stayed on in the cells or reported to the police each day until they were deported. Some never got to say goodbye to family; others were escorted onto planes while distraught family members watched. It was a sad time that divided communities in all kinds of ways, with some people dobbing in others for being overstayers.



OPERATION POT BLACK

In 1975, a National government, led by Robert Muldoon, came to power. Muldoon was determined to address the “immigration issue”. His election campaign even used a television ad that showed a Pacific-looking character getting angry because there was no work. Muldoon’s plan was to find and deport overstayers, which seemed fair enough – if people were breaking the rules. But Muldoon’s government didn’t act fairly. At the time, around two-thirds of New Zealand’s overstayers were British or North American – yet by far the largest number of people to be prosecuted were from the Pacific.

As well as dawn raids, Pacific people also endured “blitzes”. These were random checks, in public, when the police demanded proof of residency. Pacific people were treated like criminals in front of family, friends, workmates, and neighbours, and this caused humiliation and shame. The police named this work operation Pot Black.



A SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS

Many police officers were opposed to blitzing. They said it was harming their relationship with Pacific communities. Journalists were also keen to expose the injustice and wanted politicians and police leaders to come clean about what was happening. In parliament, the opposition leader, Bill Rowling, said: “When a Chief Superintendent of Police advises that anyone who does not look like a New Zealander or who speaks with a foreign accent should carry a passport, we have come to a very sad state of affairs indeed.”

Yet Muldoon tried to deny that raids or blitzes were happening, despite people who were there speaking out. Records show that during Labour weekend in 1976, police in Auckland stopped and demanded passports from over eight hundred people, most of them from the Pacific. Over two hundred homes were also raided. Bill Rowling was right. New Zealand had a disturbing problem.

TIME FOR CHANGE

The ongoing raids and blitzes caused many responses. One of the most important was the work of the Polynesian Panthers, an activist group formed in 1971. Most Panther members were young, between the ages of seventeen and twenty, and most had been born in New Zealand. Unlike their Pacific parents and grandparents, who were known for keeping their heads down and not complaining, the Panthers were prepared to fight injustice. Vaughan Sanft explains it this way: “People of our age weren’t that patient. It was time for change, and it needed to be done then. I think worldwide this was starting to happen, and we were just people of the times.”

The Panthers took photos if they saw people being treated unfairly by police, and they organised and took part in sit-ins and marches. They also supported various causes both here and around the world, including Māori land rights and the anti-apartheid movement. In their own communities, the Panthers set up homework centres, and they distributed pamphlets that explained people’s legal rights.

WHEN THE POLICE COME TO YOUR DOOR...

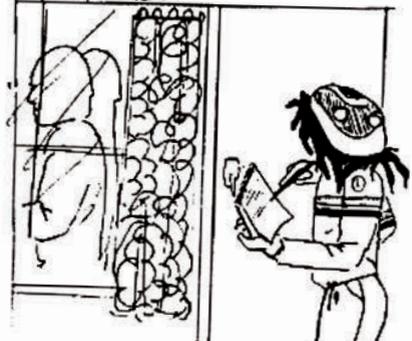
ALWAYS ASK THEM WHAT or WHO THEY WANT AND WHY



ALWAYS ASK THEM TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES AND TAKE THEIR NUMBERS...



ALWAYS REMEMBER WHAT THEY SAID; WRITE DOWN WHAT HAPPENED STRAIGHT AFTERSWARDS





“People of our age weren’t that patient. It was time for change ...”

– Vaughan Sanft

“COME OUT WITH YOUR PASSPORT NOW!”

One of the Panthers’ most memorable actions was to carry out several dawn raids of their own – at the homes of National politicians. Tigilau Ness, Panther #34, explains how it was done when he took part in a raid on Bill Birch’s house: “A group of us ... got together with some cars and some Pālagi students who had the cars ... Three o’clock in the morning we were out there with loud hailers and spotlights and shone them on his house. ‘Bill Birch. Come out with your passport now!’ When the lights went on and they all came out, we’d take off. Just to turn the tables.”

There’s no doubt that these actions had an impact. Polynesian Panther co-founder Will ‘Ilohahia remembers hearing the Minister of Immigration, Frank Gill, on the radio after his home was “raided”. “How dare these people come ... at such an ungodly hour!” Gill exclaimed. But as ‘Ilohahia says, “that was the whole point”.

INTO THE LIGHT

In 2005, Prime Minister Helen Clark was interviewed for a documentary about the dawn raids. They were shameful, she said, because they “set out to pick up anybody who didn’t look like a Pākehā or Pālagi New Zealander. They swooped on people who were Māori, they swooped on many Pasifika people who had absolutely lawful residence in New Zealand ...”

But some good things did come from this dark time. The Polynesian Panthers helped to start a revolution. Alongside other New Zealanders, they worked for the positive recognition of Pacific people in Aotearoa. Their message? Pacific people were New Zealanders with as much to contribute as anyone else. Some of the Panthers proved this by becoming teachers, academics, social workers, and police officers. They used their skills to help their people forge a new identity.

To this day, the Polynesian Panthers are active in their communities. They speak at schools and universities, passing on such messages as “knowledge is power”, “educate to liberate”, and “power to the people”. One of their strongest beliefs is “once a Panther, always a Panther”. Melani Anae has been a Panther since the group began. The experience has taught her to fight for what she believes in. Most important of all, Anae has learnt the value of education. She says it is “the tool that will lead us out of oppression and darkness and into the light”.

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Quotes in this article are from two sources: *Polynesian Panthers: Pacific Protest and Affirmative Action in Aotearoa New Zealand 1971–1981* edited by Melani Anae with Lautofa (Ta) Iuli and Leilani Tamu, Huia Publishers, 2015 (second edition) and *Tangata o le Moana: New Zealand and the People of the Pacific* edited by Sean Mallon, Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai, and Damon Salesa, Te Papa Press, 2012.

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