Levels 9 and 10: Chronology – Student Handout 2

The Freedom Rides in the United States

In 1946 the US Supreme Court banned segregation on buses that travelled across state borders. This new ruling was tested in 1947 by members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation when an interracial group rode together on a bus through the upper Southern states.

The 1946 ruling was extended in 1960 to include bus terminals, bathrooms and any other associated facilities. This new ruling was tested in 1961 by the Freedom Riders, a group of seven African Americans and six white Americans. The group arrived in Washington DC on 1 May for nonviolence training in preparation for the Ride. They left Washington on 4 May, their destination being New Orleans, Louisiana. As CORE believed that many people in the Deep South would violently protest their use of the bus and the facilities, the Freedom Riders were hoping to push the federal government into enforcing the 1960 ruling.

On 8 May 1961 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the first of the Freedom Riders was arrested. Joseph Perkins was arrested for trying to have his shoes shined at a whites-only shoeshine stall. The first real violence occurred on 12 May when three of the Riders were attacked when trying to enter a whites-only waiting room. The next day, the Riders met with Martin Luther King Jr – one of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights movement in America – in Atlanta, Georgia. He warned them that the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was planning violence in Alabama and asked them to reconsider travelling further into the Deep South.

When they arrived in Anniston, Alabama on 14 May, over 100 Klansmen, helped by the local police, ambushed the bus and set it alight, beating the Riders when they escaped the bus. Eventually the Riders managed to continue on to Birmingham, Alabama where they were set upon by another mob and the police, who were encouraged by the Public Safety Commissioner, Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor.

On 15 May, the Freedom Riders tried to board a bus to Montgomery, Alabama but were not allowed to board. The Attorney General, Bobby Kennedy, tried to hire a bus driver for them but could not find a driver willing to do it. Kennedy eventually organised a flight for them to New Orleans. Despite repeated bomb threats, the Freedom Riders’ plane finally took off and landed in New Orleans. The following day the first Freedom Ride ended at Xavier University and New Zion Baptist Church.

To continue the protest, a new group of ten Freedom Riders travelled by bus from Nashville, Tennessee to Birmingham, Alabama on 17 May. This group was arrested in Birmingham and then dumped on the Tennessee side of the border. On 20 May, the Riders resumed their journey and with a State Police escort made their way to Montgomery, Alabama where, with no local police protection, they were beaten again by members of the KKK.

On 21 May, Martin Luther King Jr led a service that attracted more than 1000 supporters of the Freedom Riders. A riot broke out and Robert Kennedy summoned federal marshals who dispersed the white mob that had formed.

A few days later, on 24 May, more Freedom Riders were arrested – about 300 altogether – in Jackson, Mississippi. They refused to pay for bail or any fines on the grounds that their arrests were unconstitutional. The group remained in jail for 39 days.

Altogether, more than 400 volunteers from 40 states travelled throughout the southern states for seven months from May 1961. Their actions inspired other Americans – both black and white – to become involved in other civil rights campaigns.

In September 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission prohibited all transport companies from using terminal facilities in which segregation was maintained.

One of the participants in the first Freedom Ride, John Lewis, was elected to the US House of Representatives in 1986.

The Freedom Ride in Australia

In the mid-1960s, most Australians gave little thought to how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were treated by Australian society and law.

However, a group of students from the University of Sydney were inspired by the Freedom Rides of 1961 in the United States. The Student Action for Aboriginals (SAFA) set off on a Freedom Ride of their own in 1965. One of the organisers was Charlie Perkins, an Aboriginal Australian who would go on to be a strong voice in Aboriginal affairs for the rest of his life. The intention was to draw national and international attention to the appalling living conditions of Aboriginal people and the racism that was rife in New South Wales country towns. This 15-day trip through regional New South Wales was to become a pivotal moment in the Australian civil rights movement.

The Freedom Ride left Sydney on 12 February 1965 and arrived in Wellington, New South Wales the next day. This was the home of the Wiradjuri people, and at that time many members of this community lived in houses of tin with mud floors.

On 13 February the bus arrived in Gulargambone, the home of the Wayilwan people, where the travellers found that Aboriginal people were not served in the one and only cafe in town.

On Tuesday 15 February they were in Walgett and visited the Naomi River settlement and picketed the Walgett Returned Services League (RSL), which had infamously entertained the Aboriginal returned soldiers from WWII for one day and then banned them for good on the next day.

On 16 February, a very hot day, the activists arrived in Moree, where the Aboriginal members of the group were initially refused entry to the local swimming pool. After a short period of picketing by the group, the Aboriginal members (as well as other Aboriginal people) were finally allowed to enter the pool and have a swim.

The following day, the bus arrived in Tenterfield, the home of the Marbal people, where the activists heard that the segregation statute was going to be enforced after all in Moree. So, they decided to go back to Moree to take action, arriving there on Saturday 19 February. The group prevented anyone from entering the pool until the Aboriginal children were allowed in. A mob of angry townspeople heckled the group and attacked them with rotten fruit and vegetables, and fighting followed. The police gave the activists a warning and told them to leave, but then the Mayor of Moree backed down and agreed to rescind the statute – the ban was broken. The crowd was still enraged and when the students were leaving, they were attacked again and had to be protected by the police. Nevertheless, it was a success as the incident had made national news.

On 21 February, the bus reached Grafton and then Lismore the following day, where many of the houses in the Aboriginal reserve did not have running water or electricity. They arrived at Bowraville, the home of the Gumbaynggir people, on Wednesday 23 February. The students were met by a member of the local Aborigines Welfare Committee who claimed that there was no discrimination in Bowraville. However, when the group visited the reserve, they found the conditions to be appalling and were told of rampant segregation in the town.

The following day saw them arrive in the town of Kempsey, where there was little segregation, except for the swimming pool. Even so, the activists had little success forcing change in Kempsey. On the second last day of the bus trip, 25 February, the group arrived in Taree, where they talked to a few people on the Purfleet reserve. The next day was their last and they arrived back in Sydney, where they met a few journalists for a news conference at Sydney University.

The Freedom Ride by SAFA achieved its aim of bringing the nation and the world’s attention to the plight of Australian Aboriginal peoples. The New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board quickly pledged £65,000 for improved housing in Moree. Later that year, Charlie Perkins and others returned to Walgett to help the local Aboriginal community fight segregation at the Oasis Hotel. SAFA also visited other country towns throughout 1965 and the following year, but by the end of 1966 its time as a political force was at an end. In 1967, Australia held a successful referendum that gave Indigenous Australians the rights of citizens.