

The Return of Jedda

A lot of Australian voters may feel very envious of the real choice of candidates facing people in the Northern Territory in the upcoming federal election.

One of the greatest Australians of my lifetime – and let me say at the start, one of my dearest friends – Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, is standing up for her people as a Senate candidate for the FIRST NATIONS PARTY.

At the age of 76, the star of Australia's first colour feature film, *Jedda*, and a life-long voice for the rights of all Indigenous people on their lands, this magnificent *Arrente/Amatjere* woman warrior will completely transform the array of issues discussed by the Northern Territory candidates.

“We really don't have a voice today,” Kunoth-Monks told me after launching her candidacy out among the people at the Tennant Creek Show.

“We should remember the words of that beautiful song sung by the man this country has lost.”

“The way all Australians can be part of a new beginning in our relationship is to recognize our rights through a Treaty. A Treaty is the key to that new beginning.”

It was more than six decades ago that fourteen-year old Rosalie was cast by director, Charles Chauvel, to play the title role in *Jedda* but still to this day people in the bush camps will often playfully call to her with that name.

Her ten years as an Anglican nun in Melbourne and her time establishing the first Aboriginal Hostel in Victoria have given her a vast experience in social work and an easy rapport with people in all walks of life.

The crowds that came up to talk with her, standing under the FIRST NATIONS banner in Tennant Creek, were both surprised and cheered that one of the best known and most respected Aboriginal leaders in Australia today, a veteran of more than half a century of the Struggle, was offering them a choice and such a big and bold vision.

Whether she is delivering a speech at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, chairing a meeting of her people at Arapunya on the old Utopia cattle Station or making other politicians seem silly on the ABC's *Q&A* television program, it is her dignity and wisdom that lifts Rosalie Kunoth-Monks above the throng.

The founder of the FIRST NATIONS PARTY, Maurie Japarta Ryan, the grandson of Vincent Lingiari, is beaming with pride. Now Chairman of the Central Land Council, Ryan wanted high profile candidates to convince Australians that this new political force can express a clear and united Indigenous point of view on the way ahead.

Joining Kunoth-Monks on the FIRST NATIONS PARTY ticket as a candidate for the House of Representatives will be *Western Arrente* man, Ken Lechleitner.

This means there is a genuine contest of character and ideas, vision and experience, something most of us would say is missing where we live.

Territory voters will look over the Senate candidates and see Warren H. Williams, musician and community activist, running for the GREENS; Nova Perris whom former Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared was her “Captain’s pick” as the A.L.P. candidate and the man Tony Abbott wants as his Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Nigel Scullion.

In a vigorous democracy we all deserve a voice and so I have loved watching that other old friend, Warren H. Williams step off the music stage to tackle the exploitation of Aboriginal lands and the sad lack of respect for what the majority of people see as the best way ahead.

The courage of Rosalie Kunoth-Monks to put aside any thought of retiring to the shade in her senior years is a shining example to all of us to realise that the road to equality is very long and we need to work harder.

Rosalie was born at Arapunya in 1937. Both her parents were of the *Amatjere* people and the name Kunoth came from her German grandfather. In 1970 she married Bill Monks and their daughter Ngarla soon followed in her parent’s footsteps contributing to community service at the grassroots.

Rosalie has served as President of Barkly Shire, Chancellor of the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education and been a tireless campaigner for better housing, medical care and education for all Indigenous Australians.

I will never forget watching her more than twenty years ago lead an extraordinary march of Aboriginal women through the streets of Alice Springs to protest to the Government about the lack of services for women and children. She was always among the strongest voices to condemn racism and speak out against violence in any form.

After the Northern Territory Intervention in 2007 Kunoth-Monks was fiercely opposed to the imposition of federal leases and the many discriminatory measures targeting only Aboriginal people in these 73 remote communities.

With the Reverend Djiniyini Gondarra, the Yolgnu leader from Elcho Island, she travelled to Geneva and testified before the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Over the past six years as the Intervention has dragged on I have travelled with Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and her family, speaking at scores of forums in town halls, cinemas and universities. Without notes she speaks from the head and the heart, and the central issue is always to ask Australians to see the humanity of Aboriginal people.

One night at a Redfern rally, I was on stage with Rosalie. The atmosphere in the hall was intense, as we all listened to every word spoken by her impressive young granddaughter, Amelia, who suddenly told the audience that the oppression and

humiliation of the Intervention was so great that she was among the young people who had thought about ending their life.

Rosalie squeezed my hand tightly and I could see the tears in her eyes, and in the eyes of so many others stunned by this truthful revelation of how much pain these six years have caused so many people.

The return of *Jedda* will mean a great deal to people in the bush.