**Entry type:** Person
**Entry ID:** AWE4904

# Coe, Isabel Edie

(1951 - 2012)

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| **Born** | 19510101, Cowra New South Wales Australia |
| **Died** | 20121110, Cowra New South Wales Australia |
| **Occupation** | Aboriginal rights activist |

## Summary

Isabel Coe, a Wiradjuri woman, was born in Cowra. A stalwart of the Aboriginal rights struggle, and a leading figure in the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, she was also the lead litigant in *Isabel Coe v the Commonwealth*, an unsuccessful but important legal challenge which sought to assert the sovereignty of the Wiradjuri nation.

## Details

Isabel Coe, a Wiradjuri woman, was born in Cowra, New South Wales, and grew up in the Erambie Mission. She moved to Sydney in the late 1960s. She was one of the Aboriginal activists involved in setting up the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in January 1972, along with her husband Billy Craigie, Michael Anderson, Tony Coorey and Bertie Williams. The four men began the Tent Embassy by planting a beach umbrella on the lawn in front of Parliament House (now Old Parliament House) on 26 January 1972 to protest the then Federal Government's refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights. The beach umbrella was soon replaced by several tents and supporters came from all parts of Australia to join the protest.

Isabel was also instrumental in keeping the Tent Embassy going in the 1990s when it was rumoured that the Federal Government wanted to remove it. It has remained a focus of Indigenous protest and at its 40th anniversary commemoration in 2012 Isabel Coe said after four decades the plight of Aboriginal people had not improved: 'In fact everything's gotten worse for Aboriginal people'.

She played a key role in setting up many of the Aboriginal organisations in Redfern in Sydney including the Redfern Aboriginal Children's Service, and other housing, medical and legal services, including the National Aboriginal Council on HIV/AIDS.

She was the lead litigant in *Isabel Coe v the Commonwealth*, an unsuccessful but important legal challenge which sought to assert the sovereignty of the Wiradjuri nation. The 1993 High Court decision rejected the claim on the grounds that it sought to challenge the sovereignty of the state. Her brother, Paul Coe, had made a similarly unsuccessful challenge in 1979.

She was a member of the Indigenous Advisory Council supporting the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families whose report Bringing Them Home was released in 1997.

Aunty Isabel, as she was known, gained international prominence as an Aboriginal activist in the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympics. 'From the Tent Embassy, we're calling for a boycott on the Olympic Games if things don't improve here in Redfern,' she said at the time.

Isabel Coe suffered from diabetes and in later years used a wheelchair but remained active in political protest until her death at the age of 61. Her funeral was held at the Erambie Mission in Cowra.

## Published resources

**Site Exhibition**
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

**Resource Section**
Isabell Coe - Lest we Forget

'Determined' Aboriginal campaigner Isabel Coe dies, Kerin, Lindy, 2012,
http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-11-12/aboriginal-campaigner-isabelle-coe-dies/4366472

Indigenous activist Isabel Coe dies at 61, 2012,
http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2012/s3630728.htm

Activists pay tribute to Aunty Isabel Coe, 2012,
http://tracker.org.au/2012/11/activists-pay-tribute-to-aunty-isabel-coe/

**Resource**
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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