

The Stolen Generations

For those of you unfamiliar with the expression, the 'Stolen Generations' is the term commonly used in Australia to refer to the Aboriginal children removed from their parents by State agencies and Church missions over more than a century, spanning approximately 1870 to 1970.

Originally seen as a form of child-welfare, the practice is of course seen by most people today as a gross violation of human rights and has been seen to have wrought considerable damage to Aboriginal families and culture.

According to an Government Report, entitled 'Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families', at least 100,000 children were removed from their parents over the sixty-year period spanning 1910-1970 alone, and the true figures may be substantially higher, amounting to between 10-30% of all of the aboriginal children born in that period.

Although in some cases removals were voluntary, albeit usually uninformed, the report went on knowledge that the vast majority of children were not voluntarily surrendered by their parents, and in most cases threats, deceptions and brute force were used.

The report stated that removed children were, in most cases, placed into institutional facilities operated by religious or charitable organisations, although a significant number, particularly females, were placed in foster homes.

The physical infrastructure of missions, government institutions and children's homes was often very poor and resources were insufficient to improve them or to keep the children adequately clothed, fed and sheltered.

The incidence of sexual abuse was also found to be disturbingly high in institutions and foster homes, affecting 7% of males and 17.7% of females.

The aim of the policy was two-fold:

Firstly, it was intended to integrate Aboriginals into mainstream, European Australian culture, which is why half-cast Aborigines were most targeted, seen to be already partly European and therefore easier to 'civilize' than full-blooded Aborigines.

And also, by encouraging half-cast Aborigines to intermarry with Caucasians, it was also hoped to gradually reduce the Aboriginal stock, eventually breeding it out of existence.

However, despite being intended to integrate Aboriginals into mainstream society, figures have revealed that there was no tangible improvement in the social position of "removed" Aborigines as compared to "non-removed", particularly in the areas of employment and post-secondary education, with removed Aboriginal people less likely to have completed a secondary education, three times as likely to have acquired a police record and were twice as likely to use illicit drugs.

Widespread awareness of the Stolen Generations only began to enter the public arena in the late 1980s through the efforts of Aboriginal and white activists, heightened in 1995 with the release of the book *Telling Our Story* by Rob Riley of the Aboriginal Legal Service.

An official public enquiry was finally commissioned in May 1995, lasting 17 months, presided over by Sir Ronald Wilson, the president of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, and Mick Dodson, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). In April 1997, the enquiry led to the publication of the official report which I have referred to throughout my talk today.

As a result of this report, formal apologies were tabled and passed, first in the state parliaments of Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, and the Northern Territory, with a formal apology finally passed by the Parliament of Australia on 13 February 2008.