



IKC101 Indigenous Cultures, Histories and Contemporary Realities

Module 2: Indigenous Histories

Topic 3: Stolen Generations

Module 2 investigates the Indigenous histories since the time of invasion, when Indigenous land was colonised by Europeans. Week 6 covers the issue of the Stolen Generations, considering the origin and policies that allowed removal of Indigenous children from their families and the impact of these policies on Indigenous families.

This topic is study towards achieving the following **outcomes**:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the diversity of Indigenous Australian cultures both past and present
- be able to critically examine post-colonisation policies and practices and their impact on Indigenous communities and families

This topic is divided into the following **sections**:

- Who are the Stolen Generations?
- The history of removing Indigenous children in Australia
- 'Black armband history' and the 'history wars'
- The continuing impact of removal
- The apology to the Stolen Generations

Checklist

- ☐ Read *Module 2 Topic 3*
- ☐ Complete the *Required Reading/Viewing x 6*
- ☐ Complete the *Learning Activity* and post on the forum



Who are the Stolen Generations?

Key idea

The term 'Stolen Generations' is commonly used to define the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were forcibly removed from their families and kinship networks as children as a result of past government policies and missionary practice.

This week's topic deals with some particularly tragic, traumatic and difficult to confront histories. As indicated in last week's reading, from at least the early twentieth century so-called 'half-caste' Aboriginal children were routinely removed from their families. In the earlier phases of this policy, they were sent to missions or government institutions that usually trained the girls for domestic service and boys for low status labouring jobs (Walden, 1995). Many were assigned to work for very low wages and often they never saw even this money – the Aborigines Protection Boards kept the money in 'trust'. Within other missions, children were divided from their families and placed in separate dormitories. Later, some children were sent to be raised in white foster families.

Early child removals were often informal. Later, the Aborigines Protection Acts and various other pieces of legislation provided the legal framework for these practices. The explicit aim of removal was to "to control the reproduction of Indigenous people with a view to 'merging' or 'absorbing' them into the non-Indigenous population" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, p.25 of PDF file). It was envisaged that 'half-caste' Aboriginal women would marry white men. The 'Aboriginal problem', as it was termed at the time, would thus be 'bred out' of existence. Aboriginal people would become white (McGregor, 2002).

One of the key architects of the policy of 'biological absorption' was [A. O. Neville](#), the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915 to 1940. This is how Neville depicted his policy:



Figure 1: In his 1947 book about Australian race relations, AO Neville provided visual support for his biological absorptionist theories. From Neville, *Australia's Coloured Minority*, facing p72.

'Biological absorption' was the extreme end of the spectrum of policies of assimilation.

Bringing them Home, the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, tabled in 1997, brought widespread attention to the harm that was caused by these removal policies. The Inquiry had been conducted over two years, and had taken evidence orally or in writing from 535 Indigenous people throughout Australia concerning their experiences of the removal policies. Witnesses shared highly personal experiences and the Inquiry's report contains hundreds of extracts from their testimony.

The *Bringing them Home* Report outlined the extent of child removal as follows:

Nationally we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970. In certain regions and in certain periods the figure was undoubtedly much greater than one in ten. In that time not one Indigenous family has escaped the effects of forcible removal (confirmed by representatives of the Queensland and WA Governments in evidence to the Inquiry). Most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one or more children (HREOC, 1997, Chapter 2).



The history of child removal in Australia

Key idea


Removing children from Indigenous communities has been a feature of Australian history since the early colonial period.

Children began to be removed from Indigenous communities during the earliest days of non-Indigenous settlement in Australia. Children removed from their families were said to have been 'rescued' from their culture, as this extract from the first Sydney newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette*, explained in relation to one of the first children taken, the young boy known as James Bath. Young James, it said, was:

rescued from barbarism by the events of his parents' death, both being shot while they were engaged in plundering and laying waste the then infant settlement of Toongabbie. When the pillagers were driven off the infant was found, and compassionately adopted as a foundling by George Bath, a prisoner (Sydney Gazette, 2 December 1804).

Children were useful to non-Indigenous colonists in a number of ways. Some colonists wanted to see whether Indigenous people could be 'civilised' and in the process the gained children who also worked for them as domestic servants. Explorers valued the knowledge of country that even very small Indigenous children possessed (Reynolds, 1990, p. 165).

Over time these practices of removal came to be implemented more formally in government policy. As we learnt in last week's study, in the late 19th century Social Darwinism and thinking about 'race'



in biological terms came to dominate non-Indigenous thinking about Indigenous people. Those people who were of 'mixed-race' were then the subject of particular concern by non-Indigenous people and were seen to have both potential and to be a cause of danger:

While the mixing of supposedly distant races was widely believed to produce inferior offspring, the infusion of 'British blood' was also believed to produce children who were superior to their Aboriginal ancestors. At the same time adults of mixed descent were associated with disharmony, danger and immorality, and were considered to be in need of strict controls (Haebich & Delroy, 1999, p.18).

Under Protection Acts in various colonies and later Australian states, Protectors were given powers to remove children from their families (among the many powers they held over Aboriginal people's lives). After Federation (when the colonies joined together to form the new Australian nation), the states retained control over Aboriginal affairs. This meant each state had different laws and policies. However, in the 1930s, the idea of 'absorption' became central to actions of Protectors to remove children in many states. Queensland was a notable exception. [J. W. Bleakley](#), Chief Protector and Director of Native Affairs from 1913 to 1942, exercised a major influence over Queensland policy and the practices of officials as well practices on the missions. He believed firmly in the segregation of Indigenous people from non-Indigenous people:

*It is only by complete separation of the two races that we can save him ('the Aborigine') from hopeless contamination and eventual extinction, as well as safeguard the purity of our own blood (Chief Protector Report 1919, cited in *Bringing them Home*)*

At this time 'eugenics', the (pseudo) science of racial improvement through good human 'breeding', usually focused on race, was popular around the world. A. O. Neville, was a strong advocate of these racial approaches: "[h]e claimed the 'natural outcome' was for the 'blacks to go white' through progressive intermarriage". Under Neville's influence the Western Australian government included "eugenic measures to 'breed out the colour' in the 1936 Native Administration Act" (Haebich & Delroy, 1999, p.39. See also McGregor, 2002). These focussed on controls over who Aboriginal people could marry, as well as the removal of 'half-caste' children.

Neville's influence can be seen in practices in many other states, particularly the Northern Territory and NSW, with children with light skin being removed from their families and communities. In his home state of Western Australia one institution where children were taken, known as 'Sister Kate's', was officially called the 'Quarter Caste Children's Home' reflecting its racial purpose. Children who were described as 'nearly white' were taken to this home (cited in Haebich & Delroy, 1999, p.40). Children were allowed little contact with the outside world until they were sent to work in non-Indigenous homes, and, because they were not defined as being Indigenous, were forbidden contact with their families and communities because those people contact was not allowed with Aboriginal people who came under the 1936 Act (Haebich & Delroy, 1999).

In 1937 the first Conference of Commonwealth and State authorities on 'Aboriginal Welfare' was held in Canberra. Although the States had previously been influenced by each others' practices, and Chief Protectors sometimes consulted with each other, this was the first time that Aboriginal affairs had been discussed at the national level. Despite some objections from Bleakley, the conference was heavily influenced by A. O. Neville, and passed a general agreement that 'the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1937, p. 21).

After WWII, ideas about biological absorption were discredited. Social and economic assimilation became the dominant official policy. However, removal of Aboriginal children on supposedly 'welfare' grounds remained common practice.



Required Reading

The *Bringing them Home* report is a very large document however it is a very important one in Australia's Indigenous history. The Inquiry and this publication brought to light the removal of Indigenous children over generations and commented specifically on what this did to Indigenous people, social structures and families. Below are links to the National Overview section of the report, and links to two of the individual testimonies included in the report.

Commonwealth of Australia. (1997). *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Online. Part 2: Tracing the History. Chapter 2: [National Overview](#).

Individual stories:

Peggy: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-peggy-story>

John: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-john-story>

PLUS read at least ONE of the following:

Walden, I. (1995). 'That was slavery days': Aboriginal domestic servants in New South Wales in the twentieth century. *Labour History*, no. 69, 196-209. Available [here](#).

OR

McGregor, R. (2002). "Breed Out the Colour" or the Importance of Being White. *Australian Historical Studies*, 33(120), 286-302. Available [here](#).

The *Bringing them Home* report found that the removal policies were an act of genocide as defined by the United Nations. This finding has been the subject of intense debate (Ellinghaus, 2009).




'Black armband history' and the 'history wars'

Key idea

Some people remain 'in denial' about aspects of the history of Australian Indigenous people's experiences, even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, some commentators (primarily non-specialists, journalists and politicians) still deny the history of the Stolen Generations. One such commentator is Keith Windschuttle, who is also well known for claiming that massacres on the colonial frontier were nothing but a 'myth'. Former Prime Minister John Howard suggested that writing on these subjects was 'black armband history'.



Some have claimed that the removal of children was never official government policy, although this is clearly documented in the Protection Legislation which we examined last week and in the policies proclaimed by various Protection Boards and Chief Protectors of Aborigines. Others have claimed that Aboriginal children were only removed 'for their own good', that their lives were improved by their removal. The attempts to deny these histories led to what has been termed the 'history wars'.

Further readings on the 'history wars' are contained in the Reference list at the end of this Topic.

Further Reading/Resources

Further Reading:

If you have time, read more of the *Bringing them Home* report, particularly Chapter 10, Children's Experiences'.

Commonwealth of Australia. (1997). *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Available here:

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>

More of the individual testimonies are available here:

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/stories-report>

The National Library of Australia's Bringing Them Home Oral History Project includes nearly 200 interviews with members of the Stolen Generations. You can listen to many of these interviews here:

<http://www.nla.gov.au/digicoll/bringing-them-home-online.html>

Specific information about the Stolen Generations in New South Wales is available in the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs submission to the Bringing them Home inquiry.

- New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs (1998). *Securing the Truth*. Sydney: DAA. Available at http://www.aboriginalaffairs.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/securing_the_truth.pdf

The film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), directed by Philip Noyce, is based on the story of three young Aboriginal girls (sisters, 14-year-old Molly Craig and 8-year-old Daisy Kadibil, and their 10-year-old cousin Gracie Fields) who were removed from their families in the 1930s in Western Australia and taken to the Moore River Native Settlement, a government-run reserve just north of Perth. A. O. Neville is also depicted in the film (played by Kenneth Branagh). You can watch the film here:

<http://edutv.informit.com.au.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/watch-screen.php?videoID=677613>



The continuing impact of removal

Key idea

The impact of child removal on Indigenous people who were removed, the descendants of those children, and the communities from which they were taken, is profound and ongoing.

Reflection

"Every morning our people would crush charcoal and mix that with animal fat and smother that all over us, so that when the police came they could only see black children in the distance. We were told always to be on the alert and, if white people came, to run into the bush or run and stand behind the trees as stiff as a poker, or else hide behind logs or run into culverts and hide. Often the white people - we didn't know who they were - would come into our camps. And if the Aboriginal group was taken unawares, they would stuff us into flour bags and pretend we weren't there. We were told not to sneeze. We knew if we sneezed and they knew that we were in there bundled up, we'd be taken off and away from the area.

There was a disruption of our cycle of life because we were continually scared to be ourselves. During the raids on the camps it was not unusual for people to be shot - shot in the arm or the leg. You can understand the terror that we lived in, the fright - not knowing when someone will come unawares and do whatever they were doing - either disrupting our family life, camp life, or shooting at us.

Confidential evidence 681, Western Australia: woman ultimately surrendered at 5 years to Mt Margaret Mission for schooling in the 1930s, (quoted in HREOC, 1997, Chapter 2).

- Consider the quote above; what impact do you think living in fear that children would be removed would have on Aboriginal families?

Many of the members of the Stolen Generations were not provided with any information about their family or communities, so finding out that they are Indigenous creates complex issues of identity.



Optional Reading/Resources

Koolmatrie, J. & Williams, R. (2000). Unresolved grief and the removal of indigenous Australian children. *Australian Psychologist*. Vol.35(2). pp.158-166. Available through the library catalogue [here](#).

Some of the most powerful accounts of the impact of the Stolen Generations come from Indigenous artists:

- Audiovisual clip titled 'Took the Children Away' with music by Archie Roach. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLXzKYP1uCw&feature=related>
- Audiovisual clip of 'Brown Skin Baby (They Took Me Away)' by Bob Randall <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3ytJioxKzI>



The Apology to the Stolen Generations

Key idea

The Apology to the Stolen Generations provided important official national acknowledgement of the harm caused by government policies and practices.

The question of an apology to the Stolen Generations became a political issue in Australia after the Bringing them Home inquiry and report, with the former Prime Minister John Howard adamant in his refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian nation. With a change in government in 2007, the new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a national apology on 13 February 2008.

Required Reading/Viewing

- Video and Transcript of the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Apology Speech to the Stolen Generations: <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>
- Video and Transcript of the response to the Prime Ministers Sorry Speech by Tom Calma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice and Human Rights Commissioner, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/response-government-national-apology-stolen-generations>



Learning Activity

The impacts of removal

Look at your table from last week. What can you add in the *Effects on people* column from this week's readings? Think about:

- structures of Indigenous kinship systems
- relations to country
- transmission of the Dreaming to future generations of Indigenous Australians


As well as the more personal impacts:

- loss of identity
- loss of family connection
- poor life circumstances

Please **share some of your ideas in the forum.**

References and further reading

- Birch, T. (2002). 'History is never bloodless': Getting it wrong after one hundred years of Federation. *Australian Historical Studies*, no. 118, 42-53.
- Commonwealth of Australia. (1937). *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities*. Canberra: L. F. Johnston, Commonwealth Government Printer. Available online at <http://archive.aiatsis.gov.au/referendum/20663.pdf>
- Commonwealth of Australia. (1997). *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Online. Available at http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/report/index.html
- Ellinghaus, K. (2009). Biological Absorption and Genocide: A Comparison of Indigenous Assimilation Policies in the United States and Australia. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 4(1), 60-79.
- Grimshaw, P. (2004). The Fabrication of a Benign Colonisation: Keith Windschuttle on History. *Australian Historical Studies*, no 123, 122-29.
- Haebich, A & Delroy, A. (1999). *The Stolen Generations: Separation of Aboriginal children from their families*. Perth: Western Australian Museum.
- Haskins, V. (2004). A Better Chance'? Sexual Abuse and the Apprenticeship of Aboriginal Girls Under the NSW Aborigines Protection Board. *Aboriginal History*, 28, pp.33-58.
- Manne, R. (2001). *In denial: The stolen generation and the Right*. Melbourne: Black Inc.
- Manne, R. (2003). (Ed.) *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. Melbourne: Black Inc.
- McGregor, R. (2002). "Breed Out the Colour" or the Importance of Being White. *Australian Historical Studies*, 33(120), 286-302.
- Read, P. (1982). *The Stolen Generations: The removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. Sydney: Government Printer.



Read, P. (1999). *A rape of the soul so profound: The return of the Stolen Generations*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Reynolds, H. (1990). *With the White People*. Ringwood: Penguin Books.

Walden, I. (1995). 'That was slavery days': Aboriginal domestic servants in New South Wales in the twentieth century. *Labour History*, no. 69, 196-209.

You have finished Module 2, Topic 3!