

HARD LABOUR, STOLEN WAGES – NATIONAL REPORT ON STOLEN WAGES

Dr Rosalind Kidd, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR)
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This Report, prepared by historian Dr Rosalind Kidd at the behest of ANTaR, provides a detailed exposition of the policies and programs underpinning the failure to adequately remunerate, if at all, Indigenous Australians for their labour efforts in each State and Territory of Australia throughout the 20th century. The Report's seven chapters individually analyse the magnitude and quantum of Indigenous stolen wages in the States and Territories in respect of the control of work and wages, the misuse of trust funds established for the benefit of Aboriginals and the control and management of Commonwealth benefits in respect of Indigenous persons.

Gary Highland, National Director of ANTaR, introduces the Report by expressly categorising Indigenous labour control by Australian governments as slavery. The opprobrious history the Report deals with is captured in Highland's summary:

Governments around Australia controlled wages, savings and benefits belonging to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for most of the 20th century. Payments withheld include child endowment, pensions and even soldiers' pay. Much of the money held in trust was never paid to its owners. Trust account funds were transferred to public revenue, or disappeared through fraud or negligence along with many of the records.

Highland also notes the 'double injustice' faced by those members of the Stolen Generations whose wages were stolen, 'twin practices' which 'took many Indigenous people into a form of cultural and economic exile'.

Given that Indigenous affairs has historically been the responsibility of State Governments (with the exception of the Northern Territory), different regimes were in place throughout Australia, meaning that the precise quantum

of monies stolen or misappropriated varied according to the State or Territory concerned. For the sake of brevity the chapter concerning Queensland is summarised as an exemplar of the research compiled in the Report as a whole.

In considering the extent to which Aboriginals in Queensland went unpaid, or were paid at discriminatory levels, the report notes that the Queensland Government 'assumed extraordinary discretionary powers' over Aboriginals with the passage of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (1897)* (Qld) ('*Protection Act*'). Cash remuneration for services rendered was not obligatory under the *Protection Act*. An Amendment Act in 1901 enabled protectors to directly control wages and Aboriginal property, a 'surveillance and control network' operating until the 1970s. A further Amendment Act in 1934 extended Government powers over all Aboriginal adults and 'half-caste children to the age of 21 years'. While the *Aboriginal Affairs Act (1965)* (Qld) 'ostensibly freed Aboriginal people from state controls' residents on reserves were held to still require 'assistance' and those deemed to need it. The Report notes that when community councils took control of communities in 1986 pursuant to the *Community Services (Aboriginal) Act (1984)* (Qld) no 'provision was made to address the massive infrastructure backlog (assessed nationally in 1991 at \$2.5 billion)'.

In relation to pastoral workers the Report notes that in spite of the Government's awareness that Aboriginal workers were essential to the economy 'it failed to adhere even to its policy of the 66 percent parity with white pastoral workers. Across a workforce of between 4500 to 5500 people in the period 1920-1968, the loss of wage entitlement is probably over \$500 million'. This was not subject to any direct supervision. The Report estimates that in the same

period the 'amount of pocket money [moneys which were supposed to be paid in lieu of direct wages to offset the systematic disparity] known to be open to endemic fraud ... is over \$600 million'.

In relation to community workers or, as the report calls them, '[i]nmates exiled on government settlements', it is estimated that a calculation of 'workforce numbers against award wage deficits in each year from 1975 to 1986 reveals an illegal profit to the government of over \$66 million (around \$186 million)'.

The Report delineates the 'continuing negligence and misuse of trust funds' including the Aboriginal Protection of Property Account, the Aboriginal Provident Fund, the Queensland Aboriginal Account and the Aboriginal Welfare Fund. It is estimated that with interest the Welfare Fund has a current balance of \$9.3 million, although Aboriginal people doubt that this represents the Fund's potential value.

In addition to considering unpaid wages and retention of moneys held in trust, the Report details the manner in which the Commonwealth Government discriminated against Aboriginals in Queensland in respect of maternity allowances, child endowments and pensions.

These findings in relation to Queensland are echoed in the chapters dealing with unpaid wages and mismanagement of trust funds in other Australian States and Territories.

By way of conclusion it is worth noting that, as it presently stands, New South Wales is the only State to respond 'to this aspect of our nation's past with any decency' through the establishment of the Aboriginal Trust fund Repayment Scheme, which fully reimburses claimants for money identified as still owing, in today's value. The Report is scornful of the Queensland Government's tokenistic offer of a maximum of \$4000 compensation per person, the acceptance of which requires a renunciation of all future rights to claim, through litigation or other means, restitution or compensation. No other State or Territory has as yet met 'their responsibility to ensure elderly and vulnerable Indigenous people finally receive the payments that were denied to them for so many years'.

The full text of this report is available at: <<http://www.antar.org.au/images/stories/PDFs/StolenWages/stolenwages.pdf>>.