
REFLECTING ON *THE STOLEN GENERATIONS*

by Peter Read

INTRODUCTION

The Stolen Generations was a pamphlet I wrote in 1981 following a request from a small New South Wales ('NSW') government agency. Fresh from reading the painful archives relating to removed children in the NSW State Archives, (now closed) and listening to dozens of interviews with Wiradjuri people when I was conducting doctoral research—and full of fury that such things could have happened in our country—I wrote it in a day. Though the agency's director was significantly unimpressed, some members of the then Wran Government were, and soon more than 10 000 copies were distributed free throughout the state.

Later that year, Oomera (Coral) Edwards and I made the first "link-up" journey to meet her own family. From this reunion grew her idea to start an organisation to help other Aboriginal people, removed like her as a child, to find and reunite with their lost families and their lost cultures. She named the new service Link Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation.

REFLECTING ON THE PAMPHLET: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF PAST LEGISLATIONS

In the first edition of *The Stolen Generations* I described child removals as 'genocide' based on the understanding contained in the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, relating to the forcible transfer of children of a group to another group.¹ While I do not use the word any more, not least because it's too emotive, the intention to put an end to the children's Aboriginal culture was unmistakable; but the process of re-culturation was much more ad hoc. As historian Anna Haebich stated:

There was not a "coordinated plan" of genocide. It was a set of bungled outcomes, resulting from persistent demands by settlers to erase the Aboriginal presence. Through seemingly benign measures based on expediency, ruthless economy, neglect and entrenched racism.²

Looking back I understand the NSW legislation better now, although it took some disentangling. In 1883, when the Aborigines Protection Board ('the Board') was established, the Government had

no specific legal powers to remove children. Even though it had built a dormitory at Warangesda on the Murrumbidgee River to hold them, it had to fill it by unofficial means, relying on enticement or bullying, even by stopping food rations to the recalcitrant. Parents who allowed their girls to go into the dormitory could stay on the reserve. Those who wanted to leave were offered free rail passes if they left the children behind. Parents who wanted to remove the whole family from the station to avoid the manager's control were warned that they thereby rendered their children liable to prosecution under the *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act 1905* (NSW).³ A declaration under this Act though was clumsy and unreliable: a magistrate might simply find that a child was neglected and dismiss the case.

Very few of the children in institutions, foster or adoptive homes were accepted as equals if they bore Aboriginal features or openly proclaimed their identity.

The members of the Board hoped and planned that their own Act of Parliament would give them the coercive powers they needed to remove children permanently. Thus in 1909 the *Aborigines Protection Act* declared the responsibility of the Government towards the relief, maintenance, custody and education of Aborigines.⁴ The key was in the definition: Aborigines were now persons having an admixture of Aboriginal blood who had applied for rations or were living on a reserve.⁵ The unforeseen problem was that people not living on a reserve or not having applied for rations were technically not Aboriginal. Station managers refused to admit such "non-Aboriginal" families who therefore remained on the fringes of towns, to the great annoyance of the rural townsfolk.

In a clumsy correction in 1912, the Board told its managers and district police that 'Aboriginal admixture' ought to be wide enough

to include 'octoroons' and 'quadroons'; but that still did not always satisfy a magistrate that a child ought to be removed. Thus in 1915, the Act was amended to empower the Board to take control of any "Aboriginal" child if it was satisfied that such a course was in the child's 'moral' or 'physical' welfare. No formal committal was necessary.⁶ But this wider definition of Aboriginality caused more difficulties in that if the parents of the removed children were to be defined as Aborigines, then station managers would be obliged to admit, ration and house them, at a time when the Board's funds were being reduced and managers told to reduce every possible cost. So the draftsman tried another tack, in yet another amendment in 1918. The amendment short-circuited the problem by excluding the Board from control over 'quadroons' and 'octoroons'—contracting its jurisdiction to 'full-bloods' and 'half-castes' only. It planned thereby to argue that it was no longer responsible for the people who, by everyone's definition, were manifestly Aboriginal. Again, the Board had caught itself in a legalistic quagmire. Children could not be defined as Aboriginal if their parents were not.⁷ Bitter confrontations with town councils in the 1920s brought this specious nonsense to ruin. When the inevitable flood of complaints arrived from mayors, police inspectors or the Minister of State, the Board had to give way and forcibly clear the Aboriginal people from the town, establish another reserve and remove the children. This definition endured until 1939, when Aboriginal children were again brought under the jurisdiction of a new state *Child Welfare Act*.⁸ Magistrate hearings again became necessary, but a new category appeared in the Act whereby children could be removed not only by being deemed 'neglected' but also 'uncontrollable'.⁹

'What I can't understand is how anyone can lock you up on the grounds of your race and culture.'

PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE

We no longer have to rely on forensic legal analysis or face-to-face interviews to outline the extent of the child removal policies. Today, there are hundreds of songs, chapters, poems, artworks, films, documentaries, collections of oral histories and autobiographies written by Stolen Generations victims themselves. Another huge change is the work of Link-Up (NSW), which has helped Indigenous people in other states and territories to establish their own bodies of research and reunion.

The history of the Stolen Generations is now part of the central narrative of Australian history and is accepted by the majority of

Australians. In 1990, Archie Roach wrote his famous song *Took the Children Away*. In 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating said in his well-known 'Redfern Speech' that: 'We took the children away from their mothers'.¹⁰ The exhibition *Between Two Worlds* toured Australia in 1993, helping to publicise the grim history of Northern Territory child removals. By 1995, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was beginning to investigate what happened to Aboriginal children and why. The mostly oral evidence shocked first the Commissioners themselves, then the rest of Australia, when *Bringing Them Home* report was released in 1997.¹¹

One of the first states to act on the *Bringing Them Home* report was NSW. In 1997, Premier Bob Carr, through Link-Up elder Auntie Nancy De Vries, apologised to the separated Koori children of NSW. Eleven years passed before the Commonwealth apologised to the victims of separation and their families on behalf of the nation. From the viewpoint of 2014, we can see that the policy of deculturation failed, but at a terrible cost. A typical verbal response to the Commission's inquiry was:

I've had my secret all my life. I tried to tell but I couldn't. I can't even talk to my own brothers. I can't even talk to my sister. ... I don't go put. I stay home. I wish I was blacker. I wish I had language. I wish I had my culture.¹²

HOW MANY REMOVED CHILDREN?

My figure in the first edition of the pamphlet of 5625 children removed in NSW, and my later national estimate of 50 000 was widely regarded as sensationally too high. Robert Manne, for example, estimated between 20 000 and 25 000, and the Commonwealth many fewer.¹³ However, there seems no reason to revise the figures down—if anything they should be higher. Most calculations of raw numbers are derived from statistics relating to identified Aboriginal children holding an official file. Yet at a court hearing, I once calculated that the number of Wiradjuri children without a file or an official record removed over a 30 year period (never enumerated in the statistics) was equal to the number of children who did have files and were therefore 'counted'. In addition, it is important to note the vast numbers of people who confronted the Senate Community Affairs References Committee in relation to their inquiry on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children.¹⁴ Five hundred thousand children, known as 'The Forgotten Australians', were held in state and church institutions, irrespective of their colour.¹⁵ Many of the records of these children, if they had records at all, are held in the "non-Aboriginal" archives of state and mission institutions, and therefore have never been counted. But even a casual glance at the institution photographs reveals obviously the Aboriginal children standing in the rows with other institutionalised children.

THE EFFECTS

The *Bringing Them Home* report showed the devastating effects of removal. For example, a 16-year-old girl was transferred from the Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls Home to 13 different institutions and homes in the space of 11 months, before being admitted to Callan Park Mental Hospital by order of court in 1928. The young woman's committal to Cootamundra was dated 18 May 1917, when she was just five years old.¹⁶

Generally, it is now clear that very few of the children in institutions, foster or adoptive homes were accepted as equals if they bore Aboriginal features or openly proclaimed their identity. Though the Commonwealth's Apology emotionally released many people to confront and grieve what they had lost, there are some who remain ambiguous, refuse to discuss their experiences or maintain that their removal was the right course of action. What still mystifies many, though, is why their removal was necessary at all. Robert Kitchener, removed from a family camp near Berowra in Sydney, said in 2011: 'Dullness of existence in my mind and in my body. What I can't understand is how anyone can lock you up on the grounds of your race and culture.'¹⁷

The day before the national Apology, on 13 February 2008, I sent this open letter to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd:

SAYING SORRY

Congratulations, Prime Minister, on planning your apology to the removed children and their families. You may not realise how incredibly important it will be for the Stolen Generations to hear the words: 'We thought it was right for the country, now we realise it was wrong, and we are sorry for the hurt we caused you, your extended family, and to Aboriginal society.'

I know you're surrounded on all sides by advisors, but let me put in two-bob's worth from someone who has been closely involved in the story for more than 25 years.

Note, please, the plural. There are seven or eight generations stolen, beginning with Governor Macquarie enticing a dozen children into his Aboriginal school at Parramatta. Let's not be sidetracked by presentism. Keep it plural.

Were the removal policies really all that ill-intentioned? After decades of research there isn't doubt any more about the purpose of the state and federal policies. Let's face it, Prime Minister, the policies were quite malevolent. They were designed to put an end to Aboriginality in southern Australia forever. We can be confident of that malevolence because the early twentieth century policy makers didn't bother to mince their words. Here's a NSW official in 1909: '...the only solution

of this great problem [is] the removal of children and their complete isolation from the influence of the camps... In the course of the next few years there will be no need for the camps and stations; the old people will have passed away, and their progeny will be absorbed in the industrial classes of the country.'

Yes, I know that your speechwriters are saying: 'But there were children who had to be removed'. Sure there were—but these kids should have been allowed to be raised by their own race and within their own cultures. They almost never were allowed to. And yes, of course there were deeply caring white adopting parents who created an enduring bond of love with their children. I know several and respect and admire them. But that's not the point. Almost none of those children should have been removed in the first place.

Mr Rudd, don't let anyone talk you down about numbers, making out that a removal rate of one in three is a wild exaggeration. For the decades of the 1920s and the 1950s especially, there's no exaggeration. I see no reason to reduce my original calculation of about 50 000 Aboriginal children removed in all the states and territories since settlement. It's hard today to grasp how relentless some of those 'welfare' officers could be in the pursuit even of one particular family, and equally, how many children bypassed the government net and were simply handed over by churches or hospitals or managers of holiday camps. These were children who left in good faith and never came home.

But no compensation? Mr Prime Minister, come on! Seems like the Labor Party simply doesn't get it either. I've known many hundreds of Stolen Generation adults and worked with quite a few, and there is not one that does not deserve a monetary apology, as well as one in words. So much abuse, so much pain, so much torment, death for some, misery for almost everyone. And it was all so unnecessary. It didn't have to happen. Don't listen just to me, Sir, it's there in thousands of hours of recorded testimonies. No, it won't be easy to sort out who is more deserving. But that's what a tribunal could do, work out the guidelines in advance, and respect them.

I'm glad you are heeding the argument of the migrants who say: 'Why are you apologising on my behalf? I hadn't even arrived in the country when all this was happening! In fact the same principle applies to very many others—they didn't do anything personally. No one knows better than you the importance of getting Australia behind you on this one. It's best to say sorry not for what 'we' have done, but for what the Australian Government has done. Many Australians of every variety will be satisfied with that, and applaud it.

Everything's OK now from Wednesday? Not without compensation, no. And even if you paid compensation, your government would have

done something for only one part of the long suffering Aboriginal people. To the terrible threesome—stolen children, frontier killings and land theft—sooner or later our nation is going to have to confront the fourth, the enormity of the managed reserve system which degraded, abused and humiliated Aboriginal people for 90 years after 1870. That's a story as big and as hurtful as the Stolen Generations themselves.

Don't worry about that on Wednesday, though, you'll have my best wishes. I'll be there in the crowd cheering you on. It will be one of the biggest events in my life.

Yours most sincerely
Peter Read

Following the Apology, the plight of the Stolen Generations was by no means over, nor is it now.

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- 1 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, opened for signature 9 December, 1948, 78 UNTS 277 (entered into force 12 January 1951) art II(e).
- 2 Anna Haebich, 'Clearing the Wheat Belt': Erasing the Indigenous Presence in the Southwest of Western Australia' in A. Dirk Moses (ed) *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History* (Berghahn Books, 2004) 286.
- 3 *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act 1905* (NSW) s 5, definitions of 'Neglected child'.
- 4 *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW) ss 3, 8(1), (2).
- 5 *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW) ss 3, 8(1), (2), 10.
- 6 *Aboriginal Protection Act 1909* (NSW) s 13A, as amended by *Aborigines Protection Amending Act 1915* (NSW) ss 2(1)(a), 4.
- 7 *Aboriginal Protection Act 1909* (NSW) as amended by *Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1918* s 2(i)(a).
- 8 *Child Welfare Act 1939* (NSW) s 4.
- 9 *Child Welfare Act 1939* (NSW) s 72(j),(o).
- 10 Prime Minister Paul Keating, 'The Redfern Address' (Redfern Park, 10 December 1992).
- 11 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, (1997).
- 12 *Ibid* 372.
- 13 Robert Manne, 'In Denial, the Stolen Generations and the Right', (2001) *Quarterly Essay 1*; Bain Attwood, 'The Stolen Generations and Genocide: Robert Manne's *In denial: the Stolen Generation and the Right*' (2002) 25 *Aboriginal History*, 164.

- 14 Senate Committee Affairs Reference Committee, Parliament of Australia, *Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*' (2004).
- 15 *Ibid* 29.
- 16 *Above n 11*.
- 17 *What amazes me is how anyone can lock you up on the ground of your culture: Robert Kitchener*, A History of Aboriginal Sydney <<http://www.historyofaboriginalsydney.edu.au/central/what-amazes-me-how-anyone-can-lock-you-grounds-your-culture-rob-kitchener>>.

Palm Blossoms

Fern Martins

Elegance velvet 310gsm cotton rag

