



‘Stolen Generation’: The Ongoing Struggle of Australian Aborigines

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Abstract

The forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, commonly known as the ‘Stolen Generation,’ represents one of the darkest chapters in Australia’s history. This systematic and government-sanctioned policy resulted in the traumatic separation of very young children from their families, who were then placed in girls’ and boys’ homes, foster families, or missions. The profound and enduring impact of this practice on Indigenous communities continues to reverberate through generations, contributing to issues such as intergenerational trauma, cultural disconnection, and socio-economic disparities.

This research paper aims to highlight the historical context, implementation, and long term consequences of the Stolen Generation, shedding light on the ongoing struggle of Australian Aborigines for truth, justice, and reconciliation through various reports and the writings of the aboriginals.

Paper

Among the most harrowing episodes in Australia’s history was the enforced separation of Aboriginal children from their families. Very small children were stolen from their families to be placed in girls and boys’ homes, foster families, or missions. At the age of 18, they were ‘released’ into white society, often scarred for life by their experience.

Today, these Aboriginal people are collectively known as the ‘Stolen Generation’ because several generations were affected. Many of these people are still searching for their fathers, mothers, and siblings. Jennifer, one of the members of the Stolen Generation feel agonized when she says: “I feel our childhood has been taken away from us and it has left a big hole in our lives.” (*Bringing Them Home Report*, 4.)

The innocent Aboriginal people were free in the very beginning of the white settlement but later, were deceived by the whites. The settlers developed a relationship and addressed the natives as 'brothers' initially. This relationship was severed when the white people adopted the policy of stealing the children from the Aboriginal parents. Jack

Davis in his poem "Aboriginal Australia" rightly describes the deception of the relationship between the Indigenous and the whites and stealing the children as they have stolen the land:

You once smiled a friendly smile,
Said we were kin to one another,
Thus with guile for a short while
Became to me a brother.
Then you swamped my way of gladness,
Took my children from my side...

(*Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia*, 13.)

In this article, the experiences of those people are discussed who became the victims of the 'Stolen Generation.' These incidents and experiences construct the history of the Aborigines between 1937 and 1970 and an attempt has been made to unearth the history of these people. The main question arises that why were the Aboriginal children stolen? This is the most burning questions in the minds of the members of the 'Stolen Generations.' In removing their children, white people stole Aboriginal people's future. Language, tradition, knowledge, dances, and spirituality could only survive if passed from one generation to the other, through their children. In breaking this tradition, the whites wished to end Aboriginal culture within a short time and get rid of the Aboriginal problem.

In the early 20th century, white Australians thought that these Aboriginal people would die out. In three generations, they believed, the Aboriginal genes would have been 'bred out' when Aboriginal people had their children with the whites. It was assumed that the adult Aborigines would resist efforts to be driven out of towns and would simply be back but children once removed or taken away, could be controlled much easier. Richard Dyer, in his influential study of cinematic representations of whiteness, offers the following definition that "whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen... True whiteness resides in the non-corporeal... It is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible." (*Whitening Race*, 164.)

Dyer rightly points out that 'white' are much more than simply the colour of the skin. It is also a political and cultural term that signifies status, power and in the minds of some

character. To gain this power, the Europeans tried to convert these natives into the white culture though their colour could not be changed. Therefore, children were put into an institution or mission dormitory, fostered, or adopted. Many children were fostered or adopted after spending time in a children's home.

The 'Stolen Generation' is a term used to describe those children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descendants, who were removed from their families by the Australian and State government agencies and Church-Missions, under the acts of their respective parliaments. The removals occurred in the period between approximately 1869 and 1969, although in some places, children were taken in the 1970's also.

The occupants in their home had the tradition of removing the children for different purposes. In the beginning, the children were sent to the residential educational institutions so that they could be educated in a proper way but this step was not considered appropriate. Some of them commented on the apparent heartlessness of the English in sending their children away. But in the nineteenth century, the practice was introduced of removing children forcibly. From the 1830's onwards there were increasing anxieties about child crime, and it was thought such children would be better off away from the bad influence of their parents." (*Whitening Race*, 173.) It was assumed that the control of the state would be more benevolent than the control of criminal, low class, or self-interested individuals like parents. As historian Clandia Nelson puts it: "Children in mines, in factories, in theatres, on farms, even in their own homes gradually came under the eye of what its opponents dubbed grand-motherly government". (*Whitening Race*, 173.) So, it was possible to explain the policy of forcibly removing children by saying that, over a period of 100 years or more, the British Government increasingly intervened in the lives of children, particularly the lives of poor children, both at home and abroad. It is certainly possible to emphasize the progressive aspects of such policies, as in, for example, the foundation of a body like the society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, but there is a certain internal discrepancy within the claims made for the rescue of mixed-race children. "If the creation of an underclass of permanent servants and labourers may be called benevolent, it might be ceded that policies of child removal were well intentioned." (*Whitening Race*, 173)

The extent of the removal of children, and the reason behind their removal are contested. The Australian authorities wanted to spread their white culture among the Indigenous

people, therefore, they targeted the children as they have tender heart and mind who can easily be moulded in any direction. Their aim was to wipe off the Aboriginal civilization with the ‘assimilationist’ policy. They justified the removal of the children from their families by declaring the Aboriginal parents unfit to bring up their children as they did not have any permanent home and had no skills to educate their children in the ‘colonizer’s terms’. But the Aborigines always rejected this point of view as they believed that they were civilized enough to bring up their children as they had been doing so for centuries. The Aborigines had their own culture and ways of life which may be different from the whites.

Thus, they protested the removal of their children. In their view, it was a heinous crime and inhumane to take away a child from a mother who is a life giver and cradle of love. This policy denied the joy of mother-hood which is a heavenly experience. This predicament of the dispossessed reoccurs in the works of many Aboriginal writers. The pain of being taken away is expressed mainly by the women writers as they are more sensitive and have learnt reading and writing. Certainly, males also suffered being separated from their parents but did not express as they were strong-hearted who could suppress their pain and remained illiterate. For instance, Pam Errinaron Williams questions the whites in one of her poems “Torn Apart”: “Is this what you have done to us/Took us away/ From the warmth of mother’s arms” (*Voices From the Heart*, 5.)

When the stolen children reached the age of 15 or 16, they were sent into white farms and households. Girls had to work as domestic servants while boys worked with cattle or crops. These children were exploited as they had to work from as early as 6 am to 10 pm, seven days a week and as many as 20% were abused – physically and sexually. The abuse many children of the Stolen Generations suffered is passed on in one way or another to their own children thus their personal trauma becomes a transgenerational trauma.

Aboriginal Protection Board’s ward registers, 1916 to 1923 showed that among the girls in these institutions or white people’s houses, one in eleven girls became pregnant while apprenticed, one in twelve died, and one in seven ran away. Jack Davis’ play *No Sugar* also describes the situation of the girls. In his play, he presents that the Aborigines, particularly the Aboriginal girls are trained as domestic servants to serve the whites. Even their chastity is violated which shows the segregation of the natives. The hypocrisy of the whites is very evident from the speech of Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines: “Of eighty girls from the Moore River Native Settlement who went out into domestic service last year, thirty returned – to the settlement in pregnant condition.” (*No Sugar*, 2)

It is a belief, even today of some of the non-Indigenous people that Aboriginal children were taken away from their families because they could not look after them, which is one of the myths about the Stolen Generations. These stolen children were in fact, mistreated and abused. The conditions of Missions, Government institutions and children's homes were often very poor. Resources were insufficient to improve them, or keep children properly clothed, fed and sheltered:

There was no food, nothing. We were all huddled up in a room like a little puppy dog on the floor. Sometimes at night we'd cry with hunger. We had to scrounge in the town dump, eating old bread, smashing tomato sauce bottle, licking them. Half of the time the food we got was from the rubbish dump. (*Bringing them Home Report*, 14.)

The education provided in Indigenous children's institution was essentially a preparation for mental labour. However, the promise of a good education was often the inducement for parents to relinquish their children to the authorities:

I don't know who decided to educate the Aboriginal people but the standard was low in those mission areas I started school at the age of eight at grade one, no pre-school. I attended school for six years, the sixth year we attended grade 4, then after that we left school, probably 14 years old.

I wanted to be a nurse, only to be told that I was nothing an immoral black lubra, and I was only fit to work on cattle and sheep properties. (*Bringing them Home Report*, 15.)

The children placed in work by the authorities were not entitled or trusted to receive their wages. These were supposed to be held in trust, but many never received the money that was rightfully theirs:

We never, ever got our wages. It was banked for us. And when we were 21 we were supposed to get this money. We never got any of that money ever. And that's what I wonder: where could that money has gone? Or why didn't we get it? (*Bringing them Home Report*, 16.)

Many children were experienced of being physically assaulted and brutally punished in placements. These children were most at risk of this treatment in foster or adoptive families. Almost a quarter was fostered or adopted reported being assaulted there. One in six children who were institutional reported physical assault and punishments. WA Chief Protector, A.O. Neville found it necessary to ban 'degrading and injurious punishments and the practice of holding inmates up to ridicule, such as dressing them in old sacks or shaving girls' heads.' A NSW superintendent was told 'that on no account must he tie a boy up to a fence or tree, that such instruments as lengths of hosepipe or a stock whip must not be used, that no dietary punishments shall be inflicted': "Dormitory life was like living in hell. It was not a life. The

only things that sort of come out of it was how to work, how to be clean, you know and hygiene. That sort of thing. But we got a lot of bashings.” (*Bringing them Home Report*, 17)

Few records of the stolen children were kept, some destroyed or just lost. Some of the administrations tried to tout their ‘successful assimilation’ of the Aboriginal people by deliberately understating Indigenous numbers, thus distorting data. In 1994, the Australian Bureau of Statistics presented a survey which revealed that one in every ten Indigenous people aged over 25 had been removed from their families in childhood, a figure which seems to be confirmed by research since the *Bringing Them Home Report*.

So it was not easy to state the number of Stolen Generation. There were as many as eight homes where stolen children were kept initially. Some of the most famous institutions are as follows:

- ⑩ Bomaderry Children’s Home (United Aborigines Mission) which operated from May 24, 1938 to 1981.
- ⑩ Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls’ Home which operated from 1911 to 1969.
- ⑩ Kinchela Aboriginal Boys Home (Kinchela Training Institution) which moved to Kempsey in 1924 and closed in 1970.
- ⑩ Mittagong Boys’ Home.
- ⑩ Kempsey.
- ⑩ Parramatta Girls’ Home which operated from 1887 until 1986.
- ⑩ Kahlin Compound, Darwin.
- ⑩ The Bungalow, Alice Springs.

But as far as these records are concerned, even these homes are not able to provide the exact data of the stolen children. As it has been pointed out, the children in these homes were maltreated. They boys were made to do menial jobs and they too were sexually abused.

It has been the policy of the English people to divide and rule. The Aborigines were also divided into several parts. In Victoria the Aborigines Protection Act 1886 narrowed the definition of ‘Aborigine’ to “full-bloods, half-castes over 34, female half-castes married to Aborigines, the infants of Aborigines and half-castes who were licensed by the Board of Protection for Aborigines to reside on a station.” (*Aboriginal Australia*, 41.)

The authorities and missionaries targeted mainly children of mixed descent, also known as the ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal children. They thought that these Aboriginal children could be assimilated more easily into the white society and out of these many children during this time were never even told that they were Aborigines and this truth was discovered by them

much later in their lives. Aboriginal author Sally Morgan was one among them and she has written about her experiences in her novel *My Place*: “How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as a whole people. We would never have known ‘our place’.” (*My Place*, 7.)

In several cases children were removed from situations in which they enjoyed a comparatively high level of education to government settlements where the quality of education was sub-standard. Interrogation of the official record has further more revealed that in many cases the causes that influenced removals were not recorded on the removal order.

Although removals were authorized under legislation which was supposed to protect Aboriginals but it was not the case. Those administering the aftermath of the removals also had an interest in justifying them. Minister Katter described forced removals and the denial of wages as “arguably a necessity if the people of this state were ever going to catch up to the living standards of the rest of the Australian community.” (*Cape York Justice Study*, 23.)

So, the policy of removals played a role in showing the possibility of Aboriginals having a standard of living, approaching their non-Aboriginal counterparts. But the humanitarians and missionaries who were concerned about the treatment of Aboriginal people were always on the margins of colonial power. Those advocating on behalf of Aboriginal people were as concerned with the taking of Indigenous lands as they were with the taking of Indigenous lives. The 1897 legislative framework was successfully introduced because it combined maximum control of Aboriginal lives with minimum expenditure and the benefit of a cheap and available source of labour.

There have been several movies on stolen generations. A wonderful movie which tells the story of three young girls taken away from their family is *Rabbit Proof Fence* by Phillip Noyce. Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* also treats the stolen generations as a central theme of the movie. The documentary *Lousy Little Sixpence* was the first film to tell shocked Australians the story of five girls stolen from their families. Some short films by Aboriginal directors discuss stolen generations, e.g. *Back Seat* by Pauline Whyman or *Bloodlines* by Jacob Nash. There is another award-winning documentary *Why me? Stories from the Stolen Generations* by Rick Cavaggion.

In 2002, the Australian Film *Rabbit Proof Fence* struck a chord with many Australians as they relived the extraordinary journey of three Western Australian Aboriginal children taken from their mother during the 1930’s. Publicity for the film in the United States came under attack

from Queensland Federal M.P. Peter Slipper. Slipper believed that “a poster claiming that Aboriginal children were taken from their parents every week between 1905 and 1971 was misleading.” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4)

A study estimated that between 1897 and 1971 approximately four Aboriginal children were separated from their natural family each week. Removal of these Aborigines was a tool of control rather than a measure of compassion.

Casting Aboriginal people as ‘victims’ and concentrating on injustices of the past is disempowering and is part of a conspiracy to continue a form of ‘separatism’ in Australia which Elazar Barkan rightly points out in her works.

A well-known anthem for many stolen children, their families and communities is writer Bobby Randall’s “Brown Skin Baby”. Randall was removed by police as a young child and taken to the notorious Bungalow in Alice Springs, before being sent to Darwin, Goulburn and Croker Islands. The lyrics capture the pain of never being reunited with his parents or siblings ever again:

The child grew up
And had to go
From a mission home
That he loved so
To find his mother
He tried in vain
Upon this earth
They never meet again. (*Blak Times*, 188.)

World famous didgeridoo master David Hudson also made an album about his true family history called *The Stolen Generation – Rosie’s Freedom*.

Barbara Nicholson’s *The Bastards* is a short history lesson in the destruction caused by the white-powers that were and continue to be, and part of her commentary gives a very visual and emotionally powerful reading of the heartache of mothers who had children literally ripped from their arms under the policy of protection. She writes:

‘You don’t take that kid’, she cried,
she yelled, she wailed
at the men in the pinstripe suits and fedora hats.

'Come back here with my babies;
don't take my babies, my babies, my babies'.
But they didn't listen,
Didn't listen to the moaning,
And they gloated
And they took them, put them in homes,
took the babies away... (*Blak Times*, 188.)

Erol West in her poem "Pleas mista do'n take me chilen, please mista do'n" expresses this experience:

"Please mista do'n take me chilen, please mista do'n"
These words echo through the channels of my heart and mind,
A black mother as rich as Croeses in love and loyalty...

I will not be parted from my chilen –
my body born them
my love make them grow
My spirit need them
And they need me... (*Indigenous Australian Voices*, 25.)

Referring to the way in which history has been recorded and language used to deny the reality of the horrendous policies of protection that led to the Stolen Generations, Boori Monty Pryor exposes the strategic manipulation of language in *Words are History*:

Stolen generations
Oops
Now these two words are hard to separate
Just like a mother and child
Oh
It's all there in black and white
Right
The children were made with consent
But were taken away for their own
good
Aah, no it's understood
There wasn't enough of them taken away
To constitute a generation... (*Blak Times*, 188.)

These few experiences quoted above show that what the whites thought turned out to be wrong. They thought that this policy will be able to do well but the consequences of this policy happen to be just the opposite. The effects of stealing the children from their families have resulted in a very adverse condition of these 'Stolen Generation.' The members of this Stolen Generation suffer from loneliness, and low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness as they do not possess any identity. Even as parents, many 'stolen generations' children have 'problem children' of their own. Their children are at risk of being removed on the grounds of neglect or abuse of because they become offenders:

I'm a rotten mother. My own husband even put my kids in the Home and I fought to get them back. And then I was in a relationship after that, and he even put my kids in the Home. I think I've tried to do the best I could but that wasn't good enough. Why? Because I didn't have a role model for a start. (*Bringing Them Home*, 20.)

As parents, many forcibly removed children carry the fear that their own children will be taken away from them. This can translate into a reluctance to tap into mainstream services, or a perceived lack of discipline for their children. The removal of 'Stolen Generations' people from their families has, in most cases, prevented them from acquiring language, culture and the ability to carry out traditional responsibilities and in many cases, has prevented them from establishing their genealogical links. They are therefore prevented or seriously prejudiced from successfully asserting rights under land rights or native title legislation.

The forcible removal has left many people with nowhere to belong, no sense of identity: "You spend your whole life wondering where you fit. You're not white enough to white and your skin isn't black enough to be black either, and it really does come down to that." (*Bringing Them Home Report*, 21.) 'Going home' or the 'journey home' is fundamental to healing the effects of separation. Going home means finding out who you are as an Aboriginal: where you come from, who your people are, where your place of belonging is, what in short your identity is. Going home is fundamental to the healing process of those who were taken away as well as those who were left behind.

Denial of identity, the heartache and pain of loss, and the physical removal from family, cultural practices and familiar community surrounds were all parts of the process of assimilating Aboriginal people into white society. A significant strategy in the process was the removal of Aboriginal children from their families from the late nineteenth century right through until the late 1960s. Under a range of Acts and Policies of Protection carried out through the states and territories of Australia, a community of removed children was created – later to be known as the 'stolen generations.' Many of these children, now as adults have used the pen as a means of healing the scars of removal, of telling their own stories of survival, of trying to describe the enormous impact such policies had and continue to have on Aboriginal lives and to provide a voice for Aboriginal Australia in the political history of their country that has denied they even existed.

Kevin Gilbert refers to the *Aboriginal Ward Act*, which specified that it was an indictable offence for a European to cohabit with an Aboriginal. Therefore, all children were forcibly removed from the mother and placed in an institution. But the whole narrative of the 'Stolen

Generation' is a nightmare, the history of which recounts that the Aborigines had no choice about their identity. They were shamed into feeling as if they were a thing, an object because they were treated like 'dirt'! It is an act of sacrilege for all Christians.

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