THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

Aboriginal Generations Stolen children

Abuse culture language Bruce
bringing families years
away parents

Many taken first
Home
back end

girls family
members
institutions

speech

compensation
people

13/3/2008 girl
Trevor

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We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhoods. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunties, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30, 40 years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we were separated from them. We can go home to ourselves as Aboriginals, but this does not erase the attacks inflicted on our hearts, minds, bodies and souls, by caretakers who thought their mission was to eliminate us as Aboriginals.

- Link Up (NSW)
Removal of children

Indigenous children have been forcibly removed from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia.
Definition

- The term ‘Stolen Generations’ is used for Aboriginal people taken from their families between the 1890s and 1970s, many to never see their parents, siblings or relatives again.
- The period covers many decades therefore the word ‘generations’ is used.
- Most families have been affected in one or more generations by the removal of one or more children.
Setting the scene

• In 17\textsuperscript{th} Century England infants under the age of 5 accounted for half of the deaths.
• Children from poor families were sold into work from as young as four years old, many died from sickness, abuse and accidents.
• Any child over the age of 7 could be tried as an adult and put to death.
Setting the scene

• In the early 1800s, destitution was associated with disorderliness and was one cause of criminal behaviour.

• Children were ‘rescued’ and trained to become ‘useful citizens’.
  – Placed in orphanages, reformatories and industrial schools
  – Children over the age of 10 could be apprenticed to work until the age of 21.
Setting the scene

• By the end of the 19th Century in Britain it was accepted that orphan schools and reformatories were harmful to children.
• The shift was towards ‘boarding out’, foster care and adoption were considered more beneficial for the children.
Removal of the children

• Removing the children from their environment was embedded in a system of punitive legislation, networks of institutions and rigid state control.

• The entrenched assumption was that the care, education and training of Aboriginal children was synonymous with taking them from their families and ‘civilising’ them in institutions or with ‘white’ families.

• Children from institutions were trained as menial labourers and domestic servants.

Anna Haebich
Removal of the children

• Dissent
  – Rev. John Gribble publicly accused employers in the Carnarvon District of Northern WA in the mid 1880s of kidnapping Aboriginal children and treating them like slaves.
    ➢ Driven out of town
    ➢ Physically assaulted
    ➢ Vilified by the Perth Press
    ➢ Rejected by his own church
    ➢ Removed from the colony
Removal of the children

• Government policy and legislation was influenced by Darwin and ‘The Origin of the Species’. (1859) – Social Darwinism

• The White Australia policy introduced after Federation was made up of the
  – Immigration Restriction Act
  – The Kanaka Bill
  – 1902 Franchise Bill
Removal of the children

- Early decades of the 20th Century these practices solidified into rigid systems of removal and institutionalisation of children from mixed race families.
- Policy and practice were enmeshed in a morass of principles of rescue, reform and eugenic intent.
- Publicly believed that over 2 or 3 generations the ‘Aboriginal problem’ would disappear, as the older generation died out and the young people were absorbed into the wider community.
Why were the children taken?

• Remove the ‘Aboriginal problem’
  – Believed that Aboriginal genes would be bred out after three generations
  – Believed that Aboriginal parents were neglecting their children
  – To civilise and Christianise the children
  – Break the cultural cycle.
Removal of the children

• In the 1950s more enlightened polices were introduced, they advocated equal citizenship through social assimilation.
  – Removal of children still occurred
  – Assimilation would occur through education, adoption and fostering of Aboriginal children by ‘white’ families.
Removal of the children

• Who was involved?
  – Policy makes and legislators, planners and decision makers in government departments, police officers responsible for removing children and staff caring for children in institutions.
  – They saw the way the children were treated and the pain of separation.
  – Emotional letters were frequently received from parents.
Removal of the children

• Aboriginal mother to the Protector of Aborigines in Brisbane, 1902:

  – *I am writing to you about my little boy he has been taken away from me ... I would like to know if you would let him come back for he is only 3 year and ten months old and is too young to be taken from me if you would let me have him till he is 8 years old I am quite able to look after him respectable and send him to school when he is old enough.*

  QSA A58750,6/11/1902
Removal of the children

Margaret Tucker describes how the white manager and his wife responded to her removal from Moonahculla reserve school.

– **Mr Hill was in a situation he had never experienced before. He did not take into account that Aboriginal hearts could break with despair and helplessness, the same as any other hearts. Mrs Hill, the tears running down her cheek, made a valiant attempt to prolong our stay ... She stood her ground, against her husband, the police and the driver of the car.**

_Tucker 1977:91-2_
Removal of the children

• Following a trip by plane to remove children from Wave Hill Station in 1949, Northern Territory patrol officer, Ted Evans, wrote to his superiors complaining of the ‘distressing scenes the like of which I wish never to experience again.’

Cited in Haebich 2000: 469
Removal of the children

• Employers and townspeople responded to requests by Aboriginal parents seeking their intervention to save their children from removal.
  
  – *It is an act of impossibility to prove ill treatment in this or any similar case ...* *(she) has raised this child as her ancestors reared children for untold centuries.* Shire clerk of Cardwell on behalf of an Aboriginal woman whose 12 year old son was removed on the grounds of neglect. *(1903)*
  
  – The editor of the Renmark Pioneer said it was ‘*an outrage*’ and ‘*a grave miscarriage of the intentions of provisions made for the protection of the aborigines of this State*, after two young boys were removed from their mother. *(1910)*
Removal of the children

• Women’s organisations were criticising Aboriginal child removals in national and international forums, drawing on international standards of rights for women and children. (1927)

• Mary Montgomery Bennett in 1934 publicly attacked the Aborigines Department for its ‘official smashing up of native family and community life.’

• Bessie Rischbieth called for an immediate investigation into the system of removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children.
Removal of the children

• In the mid 1970s Aboriginal people began a national political campaign for the return of control of Aboriginal children to Aboriginal families.

• National network – Aboriginal Child Care Agencies.

• Autobiographies, songs, poems, art work, videos were being produced by Aboriginal people.
1869    Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines is established. The Governor can order the removal of any child to a reformatory or industrial school. The Protection Board can remove children from station families to be housed in dormitories.

Later similar legislation is passed in other colonies:
1888    New South Wales
1897    Queensland
1905    Western Australia
1911    South Australia

The Northern Territory Aboriginals Ordinance makes the Chief Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and 'half-caste' person under 18.

Boards are progressively empowered to remove children from their families.
Timeline for South Australia

- 1844 An Ordinance for the Protection, Maintenance and Upbringing of Orphans and other Destitute Children and Aborigines Act
- 1881 Destitute Persons Act
- 1895 State Children’s Act
- 1899 Children’s Protection Act
- 1911 Aborigines Act
- 1923 Aborigines (Training of Children) Act
- 1925 Adoption of Children Act
- 1926 Maintenance Act
Timeline for South Australia

• 1934 Aborigines Act
• 1936 Children’s Protection Act
• 1939 Aborigines Act, Amendment Act
• 1962 Aboriginal Affairs Act
• 1965 Maintenance Act, Amendment Act
• 1965 – 1966 Juvenile Courts Act
• 1972 Community Welfare Act
• 1979 Children’s Protection and Young Offenders Act
Timeline for South Australia

• 1981 Community Welfare Act, Amendment Act
• 1982 Community Welfare Act, Amendment Act
• 1988 Adoption Act
• 1993 Youth Court Act
• 1993 Young Offenders Act
• 1993 Children’s Protection Act
Which children were taken?

• Mainly children of mixed descent
• Believed they could be assimilated more easily into ‘white’ society
• Many children not told they were Aboriginal
• Babies not obviously Aboriginal were fostered out without telling their new parents their heritage.
• Many children were removed at birth, a pillow or blanket was held up so that the birth mother never saw her child.
Children’s experiences

‘Assimilation’ was rigorously pursued by most authorities and by non-Indigenous foster and adoptive families.

- Children and their families were discouraged or prevented from contacting each other.
- Children were told they were unwanted, rejected or their parents were dead.
- Taught to reject Aborigines and Aboriginality.
- Conditions were very harsh (not properly clothed, fed or sheltered)

Bringing them home report
Children’s experiences

- Education was often very basic
- Many never received their wages
- Excessive physical punishments were common
- The children were at risk of sexual abuse
- Authorities failed to care for and protect the children
- Some children found happiness.

Bring them home inquiry
The effects

The effects have been multiple, continuing and profoundly disabling.

- The trauma of separation and attempts at ‘assimilation’ have damaged their self esteem and well-being, impaired their parenting and relationships.

- Their children have suffered.

- There is a cycle of damage that people find difficult to escape unaided.

Bringing them home report
The effects

• Loss of the primary carer in infancy
  – Between one half and two thirds of children were removed before the age of five years.
    • Insecurity and lack of self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness
    • Depression and suicide
    • Delinquency and violence sometimes leading to imprisonment
    • Alcohol and drug abuse
    • Lack of trust and intimacy
The effects

• Forcibly removed people are not better off
  – Poor health
  – Not better educated
  – Not more likely to be employed
  – Not receiving significantly higher incomes than people raised in their communities
  – Twice as likely to have been arrested more than once
The effects

• Indigenous parenting skills have been undermined
  – “As a child I had no mother’s arms to hold me. No father to lead me into the world. We had few ideas about relationships. No one showed us how to be lovers or parents”
  – Many relationships of members of the Stolen Generations fail.
  – Their children are taken into care.
The effects

• The next generations are at risk
  – Many ‘stolen generations’ children have ‘problem children’ of their own.
  – Children at risk of being removed on the grounds of neglect or abuse or because they become offenders.
  – Fear that their children will be taken from them makes the parents scared to tap into mainstream services or discipline their children.
The effects

• Loss of heritage
  – Loss of cultures, languages, heritage, lands as well as families and communities.
  – Nowhere to belong, no sense of identity.
    “When we left Port Augusta, when they took us away, we could only talk Aboriginal. We only knew one language and when we went down there, well we had to communicate somehow. Anyway, when I come back I couldn’t even speak my own language. And that really buggered my identity up.”
  – Prevent or impair the ability to make a native title claim
  – Short family tree.
The effects

On those left behind

• Affected the health and morale of many Indigenous communities
• Lost their purpose
• Drinking binges
• Hospitalisation following accidents or assaults
• Behaviour which led to incarceration or premature death
• Fear of having children removed led to exile from communities and hiding of Aboriginal identity.
Bringing them home report

- **1997 26 May**: Publication of the Report Into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, more commonly known as the **Bringing Them Home Report**.

- The inquiry made 54 recommendations, e.g. reparations and an apology to Indigenous peoples.
Making reparation

• Recording testimonies
• Acknowledgement and apology (Australian parliaments, police forces and churches)
• Commemoration (National Sorry Day)
• Public education (everybody should be told the history and the continuing effects)
Making reparation

• Going home to country (funds to enable people to go home to their country)
• Learning the language and culture again
• Identification (help to find families and to certify a person as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander)
Making Reparation

- Compensation for removal (a lump sum amount)
- Compensation for harm caused by forcible removal on the grounds of
  - Racial discrimination
  - Arbitrary deprivation of liberty
  - Pain and suffering
  - Abuse
  - Disruption of family life
  - Loss of cultural rights and fulfilment
  - Loss of native title rights
  - Labour exploitation
  - Economic loss
  - Loss of opportunities
- National Compensation fund.
State Governments Of Australia
Formally Apologise

- **27 May 1997**: Western Australia (Richard Court, Premier; Geoff Gallop, Leader of the Opposition)
- **28 May 1997**: South Australia (Dean Brown, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs)
- **3 June 1997**: Queensland (K.R. Lingard, Minister for Families, Youth and Community Care)
- **17 June 1997**: Australian Capital Territory (Kate Carnell, Chief Minister)
- **18 June 1997**: New South Wales (Bob Carr, Premier)
- **13 August 1997**: Tasmania (Tony Rundle, Premier)
- **17 September 1997**: Victoria (Jeff Kennett, Premier)
- **24 October 2001**: Northern Territory (Claire Martin, Premier)
Federal Parliament Statement Of Deep And Sincere Regret

2008  13 February: The Australian Parliament apologises to the Stolen Generations. Both the government and the opposition support the apology and say 'sorry' to Aboriginal people who were taken away from their families from 1900 to the 1970s. The apology has no legal effect on the ability of Aboriginal people claiming compensation.
Sorry Song by Kerry Fletcher is published by ABC Music Publishing.
On 13 February 2009, the Australian government promised to establish the **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation**.

The foundation is designed to deal with the “trauma experienced by all Aboriginal people as the after-effect of colonisation”, but with a particular focus on the Stolen Generations.

It funds healing work, educates communities and social workers and evaluates healing programs to find out what works.

Many members of the Stolen Generations attend annual reunions where they meet fellow Aboriginal people to share their stories and experiences they endured as children in the institutions where they were raised. The Link-Up service often supplies funding for these reunions. For many this is the start of their journey of healing.
Movies to watch

• A very good 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.
• The award-winning documentary *Why me? - Stories from the Stolen Generations* by Rick Cavaggion.
Useful Websites

NATIONAL SORRY DAY COMMITTEE

STOLEN GENERATION ALLIANCE

AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

CREATIVE SPIRITS

BRINGING THEM HOME

LINK UP
Archie Roach

"The Stolen Generation - Rosie's Freedom”,
David Hudson
Reconciliation

• Building stronger relationships between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is everyone’s responsibility.

• We need more people talking about the issues and coming up with innovative ways to create positive change.

• We cannot do it alone and there are many ways for you to get involved in the reconciliation journey. From hosting or attending a National Reconciliation Week event; to having a conversation about our work; to donating your time, skills or resources; every action helps us to take another step toward reconciled Australia.

https://www.reconciliation.org.au