Genocide in Australia

Report details crimes against Aborigines

*By Brett Stone 7 September 1999*

The genocidal practices perpetrated against Australian Aborigines were the outcome of policies adopted and implemented by all Australian governments from British settlement in 1788 until the present. A people who had virtually no contact with the outside world, were suddenly confronted with a hostile and alien force. Aborigines were forced out of their traditional homes, hunted like wild animals, poisoned or shot, and confined to the harshest and most desolate climes. The effect of British settlement upon these people led to near extinction within 120 years.

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Even though no official figures exist, estimates of the Aboriginal population in 1788 range between 250,000 and 750,000. By 1911 the number was 31,000. Aborigines have only been included in the National Census since 1971. In 1996 the National Census recorded that 352,970 or 1.97 of the population were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

Despite the substantial increase in the population of Aborigines since 1911, the conditions of life in which they find themselves remain impoverished and highly oppressive. Tatz states that according to every social indicator available Aborigines are found at the top or bottom. Diseases, such as coronary disease, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory infections, are far more prevalent than 30 years earlier. Life expectancy is 50-55 years for males, approximately 55 years for females. The likelihood of an Aborigine being unemployed is far greater—22.7 percent as opposed to 8.1 percent. Fewer Aborigines own their homes. For Aborigines fortunate enough to have employment, their income is 25 percent less on average. Large proportions of Aborigines languish in prisons (14 percent of the prison population in 1997) and police watch-houses. This excludes those confined, through economic necessity, to black settlements, like Cherbourg or Yarrabah in Queensland.

The oppressed condition of Aborigines is marked in other ways—a prevalence of personal violence, lack of care for children, increased death from non-natural causes, as well as high levels of alcohol and drug abuse. It should come as no surprise that one manifestation of oppression—alcohol and drug abuse—is commonly offered as the explanation for all manifestations of oppression.

“Killing members of the group”

The report states: “In 1803, Tasmania was settled. In 1806 serious killing began. In retaliation for the spearing of livestock, Aboriginal children were abducted for use in forced labour, women were raped and tortured and given poisoned flour, and the men were shot. They were systematically disposed of in ones, twos and threes, or in dozens, rather than in one systematic massacre. In 1824, settlers were authorised to shoot Aborigines. In 1828, the Governor declared martial law. Soldiers or settlers arrested, or shot, any blacks found in settled districts. Vigilante groups avenged Aboriginal retaliation by wholesale slaughter of men, women and children. Between 1829 and 1834, an appointed conciliator, George Robinson, collected the surviving remnants: 123 people whom were then settled on Flinders Island. By 1835, between 3,000 and 4,000 Aborigines were dead.” And further: “They were killed, with intent, not solely because of their spearing of cattle or their 'nuisance' value, but rather *because they were Aborigines.”*

Between 1824 and 1908 approximately 10,000 Aborigines were murdered in the Colony of Queensland. “Considered ‘wild animals', ‘vermin', ‘scarcely human', ‘hideous to humanity', ‘loathsome' and a ‘nuisance', they were fair game for white ‘sportsmen'.”

”Protection”: Segregation

Like the fences erected to keep dingoes (wild native dogs) off pastureland, similar fences were erected around missions and settlements for Aborigines. The segregation had two aspects, legal and geographic. The law was meant to keep whites out and blacks in. Geographic isolation was to ensure that nobody could get in or out.

”Protection”: Assimilation

In 1937, 1951 and 1961 official conferences adopted policies aimed at the assimilation of Aboriginal people into the mainstream of society. Tatz points out that these policies were directed towards ensuring the disappearance of the Aboriginal people. Terms such as "breeding them white" indicated a biological solution.

Throwing light on the “stolen generations”

This aim continued throughout the period of the “stolen generations” when Aboriginal children were taken from their families. In a 1983 monograph, historian Peter Read cited annual reports of the New South Wales Board: “This policy of dissociating the children from [native] camp life must eventually solve the Aboriginal problem”. By placing children in “first-class private homes”, the superior standard of life would “pave the way for the absorption of these people into the general population”.

Tatz writes: “In sharp contrast were the memories of the salvaged ones: there was little that was wonderful in the experience; there was much to remember about physical brutality and sexual abuse; and for the majority the homes were scarcely homes, especially in the light of the then healthy practices of kinship, family reciprocity and child rearing in extended families.

In May 1995 the federal Labor government headed by Paul Keating established the “National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families”. Tatz points to the ambiguities of this inquiry. The use of the term “separation” presupposed a degree of agreement by the families with the removal of their children. Further, “separation” suggests that the removals were of a temporary character with a door remaining open for reunification. This could not be farther from the truth.

In 1997 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission published the results of the inquiry. It concluded that between 1910 and 1970 between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities.

Genocide and Reconciliation

One is left in no doubt that what transpired, even within the parameters of the UN Convention, constituted a terrible crime against the Aboriginal people.

The term “reconciliation” implies that the interests of Aborigines can be squared with the present social order; that in some way, the crimes of the past, as well as those of the present, can be overcome if only the political will exists. What is lacking, claim its advocates, is a formal apology from the Australian government, led by Prime Minister John Howard.

The attempt to wipe out the Australian Aborigines was not the result of some racist mindset on the part of unenlightened individuals in positions of authority. It was spawned out of the requirements of establishing private ownership in property, initially in land. Genocide emerged out of the need of the emerging Australian squattocracy to “clear the land”. And the appalling conditions faced by the majority of Aborigines today similarly derive from the requirements of the “market”.

“Reconciliation” accepts the private profit system, which remains utterly incompatible with the rights of Australia's indigenous population to justice, equality and basic human dignity. Indeed, one of the primary purposes of the “reconciliation” campaign is to help cement relations between mining companies, agricultural combines and Aboriginal entrepreneurs to facilitate planned large-scale mining projects and farming of Aboriginal land. Billions of dollars are at stake, with a small share destined for a select few Aboriginal leaders, while the living conditions of most Aboriginal people deteriorate further.

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“And some Aboriginals today sell souvenirs and art and crafts to tourists etc. – globalization continued”.

(Added by Ms. Evensen)

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