

The Stolen Generations

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From the late nineteenth-century to the late 1960s—even the dates are somewhat uncertain so little do we know—Australian governments, as a practice and as a policy, removed part-Aboriginal children from their mothers, parents, families and communities, often by force. Some of these children were taken at birth, some at two years of age, some in their childhood years. The babies and children were sent either to special purpose institutions, or in later years especially, to foster homes. In some cases mothers or families knew where their children had been taken and were able to maintain some continuing connection with them. In other cases they had no idea of the whereabouts of the babies or children who had been taken from them. In some cases within the institutions and the foster homes the children were treated well, although even here, it would appear, frequently with condescension. In other cases physical mistreatment, sexual exploitation and more extreme forms of humiliation were common.

In the period before, roughly speaking, 1940, the period this essay focuses on, the part-Aboriginal children were taken from their mothers and families under separate legislation which gave unlimited guardianship to the Aboriginal protectors in their state of origin, frequently without even giving to the parents the right of appeal to a court of law. Increasingly after 1940 these part-Aboriginal children were taken from their mothers and families

under the general child welfare legislation which was, however, in their cases interpreted in such a way that the practices of child removal seem to have continued much as before. Only very gradually did the custom of separating part-Aboriginal babies or children from their mothers merge with general non-Aboriginal practices concerning child abuse and neglect. This time came, probably, as late as the 1970s. No-one knows exactly how many babies and children were, between the late nineteenth-century and the late 1960s, removed. The degree of uncertainty is captured in the figures of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report, *Bringing them home*. It suggests that somewhere between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children were separated from their mothers during these years. A figure of one in ten is startling enough. But the difference between one in ten and one in three is very great indeed. All that one can say for certain is that in the seventy or so years in question, tens of thousands of babies and children were removed. Yet there is an even more extraordinary fact than this. Until the last year or so, most non-Aboriginal Australians either did not know or were at best dimly aware that for some seventy years Australian governments had been involved in a more or less routine practice of part-Aboriginal child removal. This was something almost every Aborigine understood.

II

How did the twentieth-century policy and practice of Aboriginal child removal begin? It seems, on present understanding, the response of Australian governments to a problem that stirred parliaments, public opinion and Aboriginal administrators alike in the first half of our century—the problem of the so-called ‘half-caste’. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century educated opinion in Australia seems, generally, to have been of the view that the full-blood tribal Aborigine represented a dying race, doomed in the fullness of time to extinction. It would be quite wrong, of course, to think that this belief about impending Aboriginal extinction was not, in general, held with regret, as a kind of settled scientific fact. Lesser cultures, it was believed, could not survive contact with higher civilisations. Eventually in the 1920s and 1930s, some Australians came to think that extinction of full blood Aborigines might not be inevitable.

In the first decades of the twentieth-century a new development, a kind of by-product of human relations on the fringes of European settlement, became apparent. This was the emergence of mixed descent children, that is to say of those children born to Aboriginal mothers after sexual encounters—sometimes fleeting, sometimes exploitative, occasionally more permanent or even matrimonial—with European and sometimes Chinese or Pacific Islander males. Almost invariably the Australian settlers in the first half of the twentieth-century thought of these mixed descent children, and of the descendants of these children—whom they labelled, almost zoologically, as half-castes or crossbreeds, as quadroons and octoroons—as a growing, fearful social problem. Late nineteenth-early twentieth-century thought in Australia, as elsewhere in the European cultural sphere, had been deeply corrupted by a racially based Darwinian social science.

Australians, like others, generally thought that the races of mankind could be fitted neatly into a civilisational hierarchy overlain by some idea of moral worth and of fitness to survive. North Europeans were on the highest rung of this civilisational ladder; Aborigines on the lowest rung. They also, in general, looked upon the progeny of sexual unions between Europeans and Aborigines with undisguised distaste and alarm. For such unions the ugly term, miscegenation, was deployed. In regard to full-blood Aborigines, there existed a certain ambivalence. They were regarded with sentimental, albeit almost invariably condescending, sympathy sometimes as ‘noble savages’ or as members of a ‘childrace’.

Concerning the half-castes there was, in general, little but cultural contempt and social alarm. The Perth *Sunday Times* in 1927 put it thus: ‘Central Australia’s half-caste problem ... must be tackled boldly and immediately. The greatest danger, experts agree, is that three races will develop in Australia—white, black and the pathetic sinister third race which is neither.’ Concerning the ‘problem’ of the half-caste in the first forty years of this century panicky statistical calculations were frequently made, purporting to show that while the full-blood Aborigine was, according to one point of view, slowly dying out and, according to another, maintaining its numbers as a ‘slow breeder’, the numbers of half-castes, negligible at century’s beginning, were increasing at an alarming rate. These statistical predictions purported to show that, unless something was done, in

fifty or one hundred years Australia would be threatened by a population of several hundred thousand Aborigine-European hybrids.

It is commonly believed that the White Australia Policy was more or less exclusively concerned with restrictive immigration policies. However the White Australia Policy also played its part in poisoning the well in regard to the mixed descent population. What good was a restrictive immigration policy, it was argued, if growth of half-castes were, in the next fifty or hundred years, to present Australia with an indigenous colour problem of its own?

To perceive of a group of human beings as a 'problem' is, of course, to hanker after a 'solution'. In the first half of the twentieth-century many solutions were posed in regard to the problem of the half-caste. One kind of solution focused on geographic or legal separation, attempts to prevent as far as possible, and by one means or another, physical contact between blacks and whites and in particular between young European males and young Aboriginal women.

The most important solution of the policymakers and legislators to the problem of the 'half-caste' was, however, child removal. In all states and territories, in one way or another, legislation was passed in the early years of the twentieth-century which gave Aboriginal protectors guardianship rights over Aborigines up to the age of sixteen or twenty-one. In all states and territories, policemen or other agents of the state, began to locate and transfer babies and children of mixed descent, from their mothers or families or communities into institutions. In these Australian states and territories, half-caste institutions, government or missionary, were established in the early decades of the twentieth-century for the reception of these separated half-caste children. If these children were separated permanently from family; if they were taught to despise their Aboriginal inheritance; if they were even brought up without the knowledge of that inheritance; if they were sent to work as domestic servants or station hands in the hope that they would eventually merge into European society and marry out; if they were sent to foster homes where knowledge of their Aboriginality was denied—all this was done, in my view, not as a social welfare measure, but as an attempt to break the cultural connection between the children of mixed descent and their Aboriginal families and cultures, to drag the children out of the world of the native

settlements and camps and prepare them for a place in the lower strata of European society. Because the policymakers and agents of state viewed these children and the worlds from which they had come through racist spectacles—seeing nothing but racial degeneration and social squalor—they genuinely believed in taking the children from their family and culture, they were acting in the long-term best interest of the children, whatever temporary grief or pain they caused. Because they thought of half-castes as a social problem which had to be solved, and through their alarmist statistical analyses as a threatening demographic trend, of the kind which had confronted the United States with a stubborn colour problem, they also wished, in part through the child removal policy, to help keep White Australia pure.

III

I come now to an even more troubling dimension of the inter-war child separation policy. The 1920s and 1930s were years when the science of eugenics—the science that taught that one of the responsibilities of the contemporary state was to improve a nation's racial stock by breeding programs—was, throughout the western world, extremely influential. Eugenics had a negative and a positive face. The negative part of the program suggested that people with mental illness or genetically-transmitted disease or even sub-normal intelligence, might be sterilised. Such a policy was implemented most radically in Nazi Germany, of course, but it was also implemented widely in, for example, progressive Scandinavian countries and in thirty states of the USA. The positive part of the program focused on breeding programs that would refine the nation's racial-biological stock. One minor sub-category of positive eugenics was what one study of the eugenics movement in Latin America calls 'constructive miscegenation', that is to say, government-initiated inter-racial breeding programs. In the late 1920s and early 1930s in Australia what appears to have been small circles of anthropologists, medical scientists and publicists began to advocate—as their solution to the problem of the half-caste—a policy of what was called at the time 'the breeding out of colour' and what has subsequently come to be called 'the policy of biological assimilation or absorption'.

The policy they advocated combined anthropological speculation and Mendelian biology. The anthropological

speculation was the claim that the Australian Aborigines belonged to the Caucasian or Aryan race, that is to say that they were related through the blood to the peoples of contemporary Europe and Britain. One proponent of this view, the anthropologist, Herbert Basedow, put it thus: 'The Australian Aboriginal stands somewhere near the bottom rung of the great evolutionary ladder we have ascended—he the bud, we the glorified flower of human culture.' The biological base of the policy was the claim that, given the remote racial affinity between the Aborigine and the European, a program of controlled breeding out of half-castes, quadroons and octoroons had every prospect, in a matter of three or four or five generations, and without the danger of what was called 'atavism' or biological 'throwback', of turning part-Aborigines into whites. An author, 'Physicus', put the biological case in the *West Australian* of July 22, 1933:

A century ago the Abbé Mendel discovered that hybrids follow a distinct law of their own in regard to breeding ... Human hybrids follow the same rule ... It is strange, in these days when eugenics and a craving after the methodical application of scientific discoveries and deductions are so much talked about, that no publicist has arisen to sound the tocsin for a movement to guide the half-caste and the person of mixed blood along the road he (and she) should take for happiness, not only of themselves but of their descendants ... The application of Mendelianism is the only solution, and that urges the mating of the half-caste with the quadroon and the octoroon, so that the confirmed infiltration of white blood will finally stamp out the black colour which, when all is said and done, is what we really object to.

The eugenics program of constructive miscegenation, of breeding out the colour of the half-castes, might have represented a mere footnote in the history of Australian ideas were it not for the fact that in the late 1920s and early 1930s two of the three most important administrators of Aboriginal affairs, the Protectors in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, Dr Cecil Cook and A. O. Neville, were enthusiastic converts to this cause, and that both

devoted a part of their energies to the creation of a blueprint for the implementation of a policy for the breeding out of mixed descent population under their control. Both Cook and Neville were progressivist bureaucrats whose plans in this regard were not so much embraced as unresisted by the ministers with whom they served. The evidence concerning their conversion to the policy of breeding out is not controversial.

Dr Cook seems to have been a thoroughgoing eugenicist. He was of the view that if, as seemed to be the case, forced sterilisations or legalised abortions would never be countenanced in Australia, the most positive policy was to encourage actively the marriage of part-Aboriginal women and white males. During the 1930s, somewhat modestly, he brokered sixty or so arranged marriages between inmates of the Darwin half-caste home and European men. On one occasion Cook expressed his point of view thus: 'Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white.'

A.O. Neville's views on the question of breeding out colour were the same as Cook's. However his administrative blueprint was more ambitious. In 1936 he managed to convince his minister and the West Australian parliament to pass legislation which allowed him to attempt to implement his breeding out policy. This legislation made uncontrolled sexual relations between Europeans and Aborigines a punishable offence. It required Aborigines to seek the permission of the Native Commissioner to marry. It more or less forbade marriages between half-castes and full bloods. It prohibited the association of quadroons with those deemed to be 'native' under the act. Most importantly of all it gave the commissioner guardianship rights over all Aborigines up to the age of twenty-one, allowing him to remove all children, whether legitimate or not, from their families.

IV

In April 1937, the key administrators of Aboriginal affairs gathered in Canberra. It was the first such meeting in Australia's history. It was at this meeting that the link between half-caste policies and child removal was most clearly revealed. Neville was the

intellectually dominant figure in the Canberra discussions. He began his formal address with the following words: 'The problem of the native race, including the half-castes, should be dealt with on a long-range plan. We should ask ourselves what will be the position, say, fifty years hence.'

His state, he informed the gathering, had developed precisely such a plan. It was for the total 'absorption' of the detribalised Aboriginal population into the white. Neville believed the prospects for absorption were bright. His optimism was founded on the view that the Aborigines sprang from 'Caucasian' rather than 'Negroid' stock and that there was not, in the process of racial outbreeding of Aborigines, any tendency towards 'atavism'.

What, then, did Neville propose to do? He spoke first of the 'half-castes'. If they were to be effectively absorbed it was imperative, he believed, to get hold of the babies or infants before the age of six. By puberty it was too late. Under Western Australian law, he pointed out, he had the power to seize by force, and to institutionalise, any native under the age of twenty-one. It mattered not at all that the child was with its parents or that these parents were legally married. The question of neglect was not even raised.

Neville readily admitted the difficulty of his scheme was that 'it is well known that coloured races all over the world detest institutionalism' and that they have 'a tremendous affection for their children'. What of it? He had handled this difficulty by establishing 'native settlements divided into two parts'. The infants were sent to compounds, the mothers and fathers to nearby camps. For a few months the parents of the seized children were shown the conditions in the compounds. Most, he claimed, eventually lost interest. Some, however, continued to try 'to entice' their children back to the camps. 'That difficulty,' he told the conference, 'is now being overcome.'

Once inside his institutions, the native infants were to be given basic education and to be kept in good health. At adolescence they were to be sent out to work. At the conference some scepticism rose at this point. Would the native girls not fall pregnant to white males? Neville was unconcerned. 'If a girl comes back pregnant our rule is to keep her for two years. The child is taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. It really does not matter if she has half a dozen children.' What did matter was to prevent half-

castes marrying full bloods. Such marriages were now, he pointed out, more or less prohibited in his state. The encouragement of racial outbreeding was at the core of Neville's radical plan for the solution of the Aboriginal 'problem'. Child removal was an essential means.

For him the problem could be summarised thus: 'Are we going to have a population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?'

To Neville the fate of the full-bloods was a non-problem. Their breeding rates were far lower than that of the half-castes. 'The problem,' he told the conference, 'is one which will eventually solve itself. There are a great many full-blooded Aborigines in Western Australia living their own natural lives. They are not, for the most part, getting enough food, and they are, in fact, being decimated by their own tribal practices. In my opinion, no matter what we do, they will die out.' At the Canberra conference the question of whether or not a handful of tribal natives might survive was left open.

The key resolution of the conference called 'the destiny of the race' was unanimously endorsed. It called for the total absorption into the white community of all non-full-blood natives. Removing part-Aboriginal children from their mothers and families was, of course, a vital part of the scheme for the realisation of this ambition.

If there exists a more terrible moment than this in the history of the twentieth-century Australian state than the Canberra conference of April 1937, I for one do not know where it is to be discovered.

V

Let me turn to some questions about the policy and practice I have been analysing. The first question—although not the answer—is simple. How can the cruelty of the child separations be explained?

Here I believe a number of important considerations are involved. The first is the habit of mind of the key policymakers, the protectors. In our century the marriage between bureaucratic rationality and the scientific point of view has been at the heart of many political tragedies. In interwar Australia—in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia—Aboriginal policy was determined by energetic, reform-minded, progressivist bureaucrats with an interest

in eugenics, racial demographics, anthropology and social Darwinism. The human style of Dr Cook was described by a critic thus:

Dr Cook has always been courteous and polite to me, but he is one of those scientifically inhuman automata, to whom you are not a living personality, but merely Class ... Genera ... Record ... File ... and so on ... He is, I think, far too removed from genuine human feeling, too much of the scientist, and too little of the real man to be a good Chief Protector.

For his part, Neville was an amateur but enthusiastic anthropologist and a particularly authoritarian bureaucrat who exercised detailed control over the lives of the Aborigines under his care; who thought of himself, according to Paul Hasluck, as 'the virtual sole proprietor of Aborigines in Western Australia'; and who, in 1934, informed a Royal Commission that Aborigines of mixed descent had 'to be protected against themselves whether they like it or not.' The style of scientific, bureaucratic rationality served to shield the key policymakers from the extreme acts of cruelty their policy prescriptions inflicted on thousands of human beings.

Not everyone involved in the policy of child removal could be thus shielded from reality. There is in policy such as this always a chain of command where decisions taken in administrative offices and voted on the floors of parliaments are implemented on the ground by police officers, welfare workers and school teachers. For at least some of the executors of the policy on the ground the cruelty was obvious. In 1997 a remarkable letter appeared in the *Age*, written by Lang Dean.

My father was a Victorian policeman from 1922 until 1946. He spent a long spell of duty at Echuca and he was there when the Deniliquin and Balranald railway spurs were constructed.

The rail workers came to Echuca to spend their earnings and let off steam. My father made 343 arrests on average in those years. He was a good and conscientious policeman. During 1937-38, when I was seven or eight years old, he would sometimes come off duty and, as was his custom, sit on a stool outside our

kitchen and take his helmet off. On occasions he would be crying and sobbing like a child, I would be upset to see such a strong man cry and I asked him why. He said he would not tell me as I was too young to understand but he would tell me when I grew up. What he did say then was: 'Son, don't ever be a policeman, it's a dirty job.'

After he left the force, when I was about sixteen years old, he and I were camping on a fishing trip and we were sitting around the campfire. I had often thought about how Dad cried years ago so I asked him would he tell me the reason. He told me that when he went on duty those mornings his sergeant would order him to accompany two welfare officers to Cumragunga, a mission station, to give them bodily protection when they entered nice clean simple homes of half-caste people and bodily removed nine, ten, eleven and twelve-year-old children from loving mothers and fathers into commandeered taxis. They were then taken to the Echuca railway station and sent to the far reaches of NSW and Queensland. They were farmed out to service to wealthy businessmen and graziers. No doubt a few were treated well but the rest would be thrown on the human scrapheap when finished with.

So that was the reason my father cried on those days.

One of the elements that strikes me as interesting, although not at all surprising, about this letter, is what it reveals about the willingness of good-hearted individuals to carry out, in the course of their duties, terrible actions which they know to be utterly wrong. Partly it is because of their dependence on a job. Partly because of the habit of deference towards an authority which is assumed to know best or to have deeper reasons which simple folk cannot fathom.

An even more striking instance of the dangers of deference is found in the biography of Neville. In the 1930s Neville worked closely with Kate Clutterbuck, Sister Kate, to establish an institution for light-skinned part-Aborigines in a suburb of Perth. By all accounts, Sister Kate was a fine and charitable woman. On one

occasion she wrote the following letter to Neville: 'We should of course like to have the most poorest and neglected children, not those who have mothers who love and care for them. But we must leave that to you.' The sting of this letter is in the tail. Kate Clutterbuck has imagined that there might well be children taken by the state from mothers who love and care for them. She would prefer not to have these delivered to her home. But if authority in its wisdom decides to send her such infants, she will not object. The dangers of deference could scarcely be more clearly seen. The virtues of rebelliousness with regard to authority were displayed by another charitable woman, Mary Bennett. We will have reason to speak of her soon.

Not all of those who were implicated in the practice of child removal were, of course, as humane in their instincts as the father of Lang Dean. No doubt many local protectors, policeman and welfare officers routinely carried out actions of a similar kind without a care. To explain how this was almost certainly so takes us to what Raimond Gaita has argued lies at the very heart of racism: the blindness to the reality that other people, seen through the prism of racism as lesser, simpler, more primitive can experience with the same intensity and depth as we, love and attachment, bereavement and grief.

It is impossible to read the stories of the separation of Aboriginal children without stumbling, time and again, upon non-Aboriginal Australians for whom this incapacity to grasp the depth of suffering of Aborigines lies at the heart of the harm they inflict. I have previously referred to the article by 'Physicus' in the *West Australian* in defence of the policy of biological assimilation. 'Physicus's advocacy of state-arranged marriages went thus: 'Love as we know it did not animate the breasts of the blacks of Australia.' Earlier in the century the local West Australian protector, James Isdall, explained his involvement in the forcible removal of part-Aboriginal babies from their mothers in the following way: 'I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at that time. They soon forget their offspring.' The wrong that he did was done because he thought of Aborigines as incapable of feeling with the intensity or fixity of Europeans, in short because he did not think of Aborigines as fully human.

One of the most important aspects of *Bringing them home* is precisely to place on record the permanence of the grief and the guilt many Aboriginal mothers experienced, after being separated from their children, for the rest of their lives. We learn in its pages of a woman so ashamed of having surrendered her children that she carried on her person, throughout her life, letters testifying to her good character. We learn of a family which, every sunrise and sunset, for thirty-two years, ritually mourned the loss of their daughter.

VI

Many Australians now accept that the practice of child removal was wrong. Many, however, also think it wrong to condemn earlier generations for their role in this policy. They think of this policy as misguided but well-intentioned. Is it not all too easy to judge simply and harshly with the wisdom of hindsight?

It is true that a certain kind of callow judgement, which condescends to the past from the standpoint of contemporary conventional wisdom, is the enemy of historical understanding. Nonetheless, I have never been able to understand how we think it is either possible or preferable to contemplate the past with moral faculties disengaged. Far from leading us into complacent self-satisfaction, a moral engagement with the past and an alertness to the injustices of other times ought, if anything, to remind us of the precariousness of our judgements about ourselves and of the need for searching self-questioning and self-criticism.

It seems to me important to remember also that not all Australians, in regard to child removal and biological assimilation, were morally blind. Among such Australians no-one was more impressive than Neville's most unrelenting enemy, the maternal feminist and supporter of Aboriginal women's rights, Mary Bennett. At the Royal Commission in 1934 she condemned the practice of child removal thus: 'Many of these poor children are parted from their mothers ... but first for years they suffer from the misery of hunted animals, always running away from the police ... always in fear that at any moment they may be torn away ... They are captured at all ages, as infants in arms, perhaps, and until they are grown up. They are not safe until they are dead ...' For her the solution to the problem of the half-caste child was very far indeed from the kind of solutions

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preferred by her age. “Institutionalism seems to destroy all sentiment in the character.” The only remedy is for them to be given back that which they have lost—human ties. They need fellowship, and they will get it only among the mother’s people ... They need *their* homes, *their* families, and not to be interfered with.’ To Mary Bennett, finally, the policy of breeding out the colour spoke as plainly as it does to us. Cook’s ‘real policy’, she wrote, was ‘still the extermination of the unhappy native race, and the leaving of the most unfortunate native women at the disposal of lustful white men—this policy is euphemistically described by Australian officialdom as “the absorption” of the native race and the “breeding out of colour”!!! We shall be better able to evaluate this policy when another race applies it to ourselves as “the absorption of the white race” and “the breeding out of white people”!!!’

Mary Bennett’s was an exceptional voice. It is also one worth remembering and cherishing.