

From miscegenation to assimilation: rationalities of child removal in Australian colonial administration¹

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an ARC Small Grant titled “The Bringing them Home ‘Stolen Generations’ Report: a sociological analysis of the evidence”. It examines the governmental rationalities which informed policies and practices concerning the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families. The project’s close reading and analysis of the submissions and the associated secondary literature indicates, first, that the conservative eugenicist thought which characterised practices of child removal during the period 1910-1930s cannot be so neatly distanced from the more recent liberal environmentalist arguments which informed child removal policies during the 1940s-1970s. That is, a simplistic separation and polarisation of eugenicist ideas and practices (‘breed out the colour’) from liberal environmentalist ideas (characterised by the arguments found in current responses to the *Bringing them Home* Report that ‘assimilation and child removal was informed by good intentions’) is impossible. Miscegenation and assimilation are rationales of governance informed by wider discourses of welfare, citizenship and civilisation, discourses which remain salient in key strands of contemporary public and official debate surrounding “The *Bringing them Home* ‘Stolen Generations’ Report”, including the Federal Government’s submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, *Inquiry into the Stolen Generations*.

Introduction

In March 2000 the Commonwealth Government tabled its submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, *Inquiry into the Stolen Generations*.¹ In that submission, the Commonwealth argued that: ‘Much of the design and implementation of policies and practices of child separation was explicitly directed at improving the lot of Aboriginal children and particularly ‘half-caste’ children’.² Indeed, the Commonwealth was so keen to imprint the ‘benign intent’ of policies and practices of part-Aboriginal child removal that it invoked variations on the phrase a dozen times in its submission.

Although it is well-known that arguments revolving around ‘benign intentions’, ‘welfare’, and ‘the best interests of the child’ are characteristic of the less

¹ The research on which this paper is based has been supported by a Small Australian Research Council Grant, No. A2278.

² Commonwealth Government, *Submission to the Legal and Constitutional References Committee ‘Inquiry into the Stolen Generations’*, March 2000: 5

sympathetic responses to the *Bringing them Home* report,³ they are far from being the stuff of conservative responses alone. Across a broad range of public comment there is a general consensus that notwithstanding the destructive impact of child removal on Indigenous families and children, today's survivors can indeed be understood as the victims of 'well-intentioned', even if destructive, 'welfare' policies. In its most recent form this argument has appeared in the findings of O'Loughlin J in the case of *Cubillo & Gunner v Commonwealth*.⁴ Justice O'Loughlin's judgment, generally sympathetic to the concerns about the impacts of child removal, makes it clear that it was concern about the 'individual child's welfare' which framed these post-war policies and practices of 'assimilation'. This welfarist discourse has been central to conceptions of 'assimilation' and governmental reasoning about the status and future of Indigenous populations within the life of the Australian nation. It has positioned itself to clearly distinguish the removal of Indigenous children from their families which took place during this liberal post-war period of 'assimilation' from the pre-war, pre-'assimilation' decades - decades which are constructed as having been characterized by conservative eugenicist thought and policies aimed at Indigenous miscegenation.

In this paper we will be aiming to unsettle this understanding by reference to the public submissions presented to the HREOC Inquiry, alongside other evidence on the public record. Examination of this material, provided for the most part by individuals and organizations involved in child removal during both pre-war and post-war decades reveals an *intertwining* of *both* strands of reasoning about child 'welfare' and related questions of governance throughout the entire period. Instead of seeing 'assimilation through welfare' as a conceptual orientation which marks a significant socio-political shift in the post-War years, it is better understood as a discursive strategy *continuously* pursued by the States and the Commonwealth with the changes that did take place consisting variations on the same underlying theme. It is important to problematise an overly-simplistic distinction between a pre-war period in which Indigenous child removal was an outcome of the aberrations of scientific racism and eugenicist thought, and a post-war period in which child removal was motivated by a concern for the 'welfare' of individual children, underscored by 'benign' intentions. Eugenicist ideas and liberal concerns about the 'welfare' of

³ Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Sterling Press, 1997): <www.austlii.edu.au/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/index.html>.

⁴ *Cubillo v Commonwealth* [2000] FCA 1084 (*Cubillo*).

Indigenous children should not be understood simply as polar opposites, but part of a single and particular discursive formation – that of the settler-colonial nation-state’s rationality of ‘assimilation’.⁵

From Scientific Racism to ‘Assimilation’ – the Dominant Narrative

Historical studies of white perceptions of Aboriginal people in Australia during the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries reveal a mixture of ideas grounded in firmly held beliefs about racial purity and the absolute superiority of the ‘British race’.⁶ When these beliefs were brought to bear on the question of unions between Indigenous people and whites, the historical record shows that they manifest a contradictory combination of the idea that the mixing of supposedly distinct races would produce inferior offspring, with the idea that the infusion of ‘British blood’ would produce off-spring superior to the original Indigenous stock. In the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century, these ideas remained, for the most part, academic: the question of inter-racial mixing does not appear on the historical record to have attracted the attention of colonial *administrators*. By the time of the first decades of the 20th century however, the question of how to manage or govern what was referred to as the ‘half-caste’ or mixed-race population was beginning to concern Commonwealth and State officials.

In any analysis of official discourse on the question of the governance of Indigenous populations at this time, one document is particularly useful in presenting evidence of official attempts to prevent inter-racial mixing. That report, titled a *Preliminary Report into Half Castes and Aboriginals of the Northern Territory*,⁷ authored by the eminent Melbourne University biologist and one-time Chief Protector of Aboriginals in the Northern Territory, W Baldwin Spencer, set out in 1913 specific proposals to manage the ‘half-caste’ populations in and around the towns, mining tenements and other sites of contact between Indigenous and aliens in the Territory. In Darwin, for example, Spencer’s efforts involved the full-scale removal of Larrakeyah people to a new compound, the Kahlin Compound, and the construction there of a ‘half-caste’ home. Specific areas of the town were sectioned off from Indigenous people and

⁵ For a related argument about the *interconnectedness* of eugenicist ideas and liberal assimilationist thought, see Steven Garton ‘Sound minds and healthy bodies: re-considering eugenics in Australia 1914-1940’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 26 (103): 163-181.

⁶ Anna Haebich ‘*Submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal Children*’, May 1996: 3

⁷ WB Spencer *Preliminary Report into the Aboriginals and Half-Castes of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne: Govt. Printer, 1913.

strict limits placed on the non-Indigenous employment of Indigenous labour. In Alice Springs, similar administrative prohibitions on inter-racial contact were established and a 'half-caste' home, the Bungalow, was opened in 1914. On mining tenements at Pine Creek and elsewhere, 'protectors' and police were authorized to remove 'half-caste' children to those institutions.

Spencer's attempts to prevent miscegenation, the establishment of the Bungalow in Alice Springs and the Kahlin Compound in Darwin are seen (correctly) as the first clear example of the Commonwealth adopting a policy based on racial categories and aimed at separating part-Aboriginal children from their families. It is widely held, however, that the separation and institutionalisation of part-Aboriginal children during this period was not a widespread practice; in other words, that only relatively small numbers of children were removed from their families. By the early 1930s, however, the 'half-caste' population was seen by authorities to be rising dramatically. It is this increase in the size of the part-Aboriginal population, or rather administrative attempts to manage it, which is generally seen to be directly linked to the racist zenith in native administration in the eugenicist schemes of the administrators CE Cook and AO Neville.⁸

Dr CE (Cecil) Cook in particular was a staunch advocate of the institutionalization of 'half-caste' children. During his years as Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory 1927-1939, it has been calculated that Cook oversaw a seventy percent increase in removals of Indigenous children to Homes.⁹ He is also well known for the 'drastic steps he took to stop the increase in the 'coloured' population by encouraging lighter skinned women to marry white men and in this way 'breed out the colour'.¹⁰ Although Cook's writings on the subject of miscegenation may still not be well known among the Australian public, historians at least have seen his eugenicist ambitions as capturing a more extreme expression of scientific racism in this way they have passed from official discourse into the historical record. One such example of Cook's eugenicist reasoning was published in 1933 and now appears in a number of secondary sources:

⁸ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997; Anna Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1988.

⁹ Tony Austin *Never Trust a Government Man: Aboriginal Policy in the Northern Territory 1911-1939* Darwin: Northern Territory University Press: 195

¹⁰ Anna Haebich *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000: 195

Many such white men would be prepared to marry half-caste females and make decent homes. Provided the girl has been reared to a moderately high standard there can be no objection to such mating...Experience shows that the half-caste girl can, if properly brought up, easily be elevated to a standard where the fact of her marriage to a white will not contribute to his deterioration.¹¹

AO (Auber) Neville was Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915-1940. Like Cook, Neville has been widely acknowledged in the history of race relations in Australia as a central figure in the eugenicist moment of that history. For those who have been following the current public debate about the stolen generations, it is perhaps statements made by AO Neville in 1937 at the *Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities* which most effectively capture the full horror of an administration intent on implementing eugenicist policies and practices based on the forcible removal of children from their families and miscegenation. Neville's exhortation to the delegates at that Conference is now an essential part of any analysis of those pre-war policies and practices:

Are we to have 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...I see no objection to the ultimate absorption into our own race of the whole of the Australian native race.¹²

The eugenicist administrations of C.E. Cook in the Northern Territory and A.O. Neville in Western Australia were both brought to a close in 1939 –1940. Neville's retirement and Cook's removal have been widely held to mark a turning point in the governance of Indigenous people and in particular policies and practices concerning the removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

There are two versions of this narrative of disjuncture, one treating the issuing of the 'New Deal' for Aborigines in 1939 as the turning point, the other identifying the unveiling of 'assimilation' in 1951 as the date for the change. Each date is seen as significant because each marks the appointment of a new minister responsible for Commonwealth policy concerning Aboriginal people. In 1939, the new minister was JW (Blackjack) McEwan who had been appointed Minister of the Interior. McEwan claimed he had a new policy direction for the administration of the Territory's Indigenous populations in the *New Deal for Aborigines 1939*, heavily influenced by the

¹¹ Cited in Tony Austin 'Cecil Cook, Scientific Thought and "Half-Castes" in the Northern Territory 1927-1939' *Aboriginal History*, 14 (1) p. 113. Also cited in Haebich *ibid.*, p. 195

¹² Commonwealth of Australia, *Aboriginal Welfare: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities* Canberra: Government Printer, 1937: 11.

University of Sydney anthropologist, AP Elkin. In 1951, the new Minister for Territories was Paul Hasluck, who claimed that under his direction ‘*assimilation*’ was the new policy under which the Commonwealth would govern its Indigenous subjects. In each case a new rationale was to inform the administration of Aboriginal people. It was presented as a rationale which rejected race as an administrative category and which instead was based on a socially (as opposed to scientifically) confident vision of the ‘assimilation’ of Aboriginal people into the white community. This vision, it was said, would enable Aboriginal people to achieve equality with whites and to eventually attain the status of citizens within that white community. Policy concerning the removal of part-Aboriginal children from their families was thus framed by Hasluck (in turn followed by all administrators in Aboriginal affairs) as moving away from the racialised thinking of an earlier era, to be based instead on a rational, sociologically informed concern for the individual child’s ‘welfare’. It is this move from ‘scientific racism’ to ‘welfare’ which many current observers argue constituted the removal policy as unassailably arising from benign intentions focusing on ‘best interests of the child’.

‘Welfare’ Revisited

This narrative of disjuncture, of a polarization between the scientific racism and eugenicist thought which informed pre-war policies and practices of Indigenous child removal and post-war ‘assimilationist’ arguments about ‘welfare’, equality, citizenship and so forth is, we suggest, somewhat overdrawn. A closer study of the evidence shows that any such narrative of disjuncture and polarization of political reasoning and administrative practices is in fact difficult to sustain. In our discussion we will show how both the existing historical evidence and the material put before the Inquiry reveals a much more *continuous* complex intertwining of both strands of political reasoning and administrative practice concerning the governance of Indigenous children. This continuous intertwining of these two modes of reasoning is, however, more than just the linking of opposing ideas. Both modes of reasoning can be better understood as part of a single discursive strategy – the essentially assimilationist political rationality of liberal democracy.

To begin with, what are meant to be the leading examples of non-welfarist, eugenicist thinking turn out on closer inspection to be something considerably different. In Spencer’s administrative vision in his *Preliminary Report*, it is possible to

see that the two modes of reasoning form part of an overarching assimilationist vision with its own understanding of Aboriginal welfare. For Spencer, the two goals of racial purity and social advancement came together in his goal of Indigenous ‘uplift’ – a goal which he thought could only be achieved through basic schooling for children and light industrial and agricultural training for adults. It was this which would eventually enable Indigenous people to achieve a social status and level of welfare he thought, equivalent to that of the white working classes.

Similarly in Cecil Cook’s writings, eugenicist ideas are intertwined with ideas which are sociologically informed, to come together in an essentially ‘assimilationist’ vision. Cook spoke of the ‘colour of the mind’, and his notion of ‘breeding out the colour’ was aimed more at the *perception* of people of Aboriginal descent *among Europeans*, who would not accept non-whites, than at what he regarded as any real difference between Aborigines and Europeans.¹³

This complex overlay of different modes of reasoning and the argument that together they form part of the wider discursive strategy of liberalism is further evidenced in looking at the *reconfiguration* of these ideas throughout the post war period. According to Hasluck, ‘assimilation’ meant the end of ‘race’ as category of administrative control. Indigenous people would be assessed in their capacities to join the Australian nation on the basis of their ‘welfare’ needs. As he stated before a missionary rally in 1965:

The work of native welfare in Australia in the present day is a social problem and not a racial problem. What do I mean by that distinction? A social problem is a problem concerning the way in which people can live together in the same society with benefit to themselves and to each other. A racial problem is a problem concerning the way in which two groups of people of different races may live in the same community while each maintains its separateness as a group and gives first importance to physical characteristics, traditions and habits which mark them as belonging to a separate race. Native welfare in Australia is not a racial problem.¹⁴

However, in the evidence presented by a number of missionaries to the HREOC Inquiry, it is clear that the practices of Indigenous child removal continued apace in effectively the same way that they had during the pre-war decades. That is, the practices continued to be informed by concerns about ‘race’ *as well as* ideas about the future status and ‘welfare’ of children. As a result, ‘race’ was no less a salient category

¹³ Russell McGregor *Imagined Destinies: Aborigines and the Doomed Race Theory*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, p. 195

¹⁴ Paul Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness*, p. 135.

of administrative intervention than Aboriginal citizenship and ‘welfare’, along with a promised future of ‘sameness’ with whites, were new administrative goals.

Jack Goodluck first went to the Northern Territory in 1953-54 as a student to work during the summer vacation at St Mary’s Hostel in Alice Springs. After graduating he became the child care superintendent at Orana Homes for Children and following that, became the Superintendent of the Methodist Overseas Mission at Croker Island. Jack Goodluck told the HREOC Inquiry that he first became aware of the purpose of Croker Island during the war when EWP Chinnery was Director of Native Affairs. Chinnery had, Goodluck said, ‘set up a policy and program for caring for children’ and he had visited the Director of Native Affairs to learn more about it. What Goodluck discovered shocked him, and he decided to take up the position of superintendent at Croker Island some 20 years later partly in a spirit of resistance to Chinnery’s race-based attitude of social engineering:

I went to visit EWP Chinnery ... He pulled out some policy papers...his first drafts of an organization chart for putting the various categories of children who had some European parentage and some aboriginal parentage into hostels. Croker Island was amongst them and it was several sheets stuck together with sticky tape stretching half-way across the table and showed the various institutions that had been created or were proposed at the outset. He seemed to be very pleased and very proud about this program, and I felt cold inside because I had this fear of what would be happening to the children. That’s what sent me north. I realised I would be working in a system that I didn’t believe in but I thought we shouldn’t leave it to the people who did. When I went there in 1964 it was still officially listed as a half-caste home.¹⁵

For Goodluck it was clear that ‘the whole of the operation was based on the assumption that there was deliberate cultural discontinuity and separation from the Aboriginal people’, and that ‘assimilation meant that the values of the traditional Aboriginal community would be replaced’.¹⁶

A colleague of Goodluck’s, the Rev Bernie Clarke, who at the time was Director of the MOM’s North Australia Unit and based in Darwin made it clear that not only did ‘race’ still matter at Croker Island in 1951, but also that it was central to the way in which whites generally continued to think about Indigenous children.

¹⁵ p. 155.

¹⁶ p. 163.

People in talking about the children were obsessed with their ethnicity or their ethnic background – or their race I suppose, rather than their ethnicity. People talked about ‘half-castes’ they talked about ‘quadroons’ and ‘octoroons’.¹⁷ If the ‘racial mix’ of Indigenous children continued to matter, the grounds upon which children were removed from their parents had also hardly changed. As the Rev. Clarke told the Inquiry, ‘neglect’ was the most often cited reason for removal and concern about a child’s ‘future’, but that both these categories were constructed in terms of degree of whiteness.

Evidence presented to the Commission about the *practices* associated with child removal in Queensland also revealed a strong continuity between the pre-war and post war periods. As one Lutheran missionary, the Reverend Vitale told the Commission, the Hopevale mission and most other missions in Queensland had maintained a strict system of dormitory accommodation - which was used especially to separate children from parents and siblings from one another - from 1898 right through to the 1960s.¹⁸ There was little indication that the arrangements made for the child’s institutionalisation were any more rational as result of consideration of the individual child’s welfare, than the pre-war period. The Rev Clarke told the Commission that ‘the arrangement for the placement of really were very arbitrary’.¹⁹ The removal of part-Aboriginal children, said Clarke,

was so casual as to allow unnecessary deprivation to be experienced by all the children regardless of whether some special care was necessary because of the context of the their situation. We would also argue that other basic rights were totally ignored in the structure of care of the children, basic human rights. So much so as to suggest that all institutions failed in their fiduciary duty to some extent.²⁰

Conclusion

A number of scholars have argued that in the relationship between church and state, the removal of Indigenous children from their families had always produced tensions and differences of emphasis.²¹ The fact that the three missionaries examined here who were associated with child removals over the decades have argued that they saw

¹⁷ p. 158.

¹⁸ p. 6.

¹⁹ p. 157.

²⁰ p. 172.

²¹ Choo, Anna Haebich *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000, Ros Kidd.

little to suggest any real change in either the reasoning which informed removal or the practices associated with the separation of children is, in one sense, hardly surprising – a characteristic example of the tensions between church and state. However, as we have argued, by looking closely at the terms of official discourse associated with the policies and practices of part-Aboriginal child removal, the simple polarisation of pre-war and post-war reasoning is indeed impossible to sustain. Conservative and other commentators might today want to argue that ‘benign intentions’ and concern for the individual child’s ‘welfare’ underscored post-war thinking on Indigenous child welfare. However, both pre-war and post-war thought and practice have been characterised by a continuous intertwining of ideas about ‘welfare’, ‘race’ and the place of Indigenous people within the Australian state and settler-colony polity. These complex strands of reasoning, we have argued, are all variations on the same underlying discursive themes of assimilation characterizing liberal governance under settler-colonialism.²²

²² It is also possible to argue that more than this, ‘assimilation’ is a central and critical logic of modern state formation: Robert van Krieken ‘Assimilation and liberal government’, unpublished paper presented at *Assimilation: Then and Now*, University of Sydney, 30 November-1 December 2000.

When, in 1912, W. Baldwin Spencer was appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, the prevailing understanding of a future for Indigenous people was that they were a ‘doomed race’. ‘A hundred years of observations made by whites of declining Aboriginal health and numbers, combined with the explanatory device of evolutionary theory led white Australians to the conclusion that the race was doomed to extinction’.²³ Although this theory was closely connected to eugenicist ideas about miscegenation – A.O. Neville’s ideas for example, were based on two premises: one, that Aborigines would die out and, two, that strict controls on marriage between ‘half-castes’ was the way to ‘breed out the colour’, it nevertheless allowed scope for intervention into that process on behalf of the ‘dying race’. Responses aimed at easing the plight of the ‘doomed race’ (such as the now clichéd, ‘soothing the dying the pillow’) were rooted in the essential racism of the ‘doomed race’ theory however, at the same time, these responses were also characteristically ‘humanitarian’ in as much as they constituted attempts to ‘relieve’ Indigenous ‘distress’ and ‘suffering’. As several scholars have recently shown, W.B. Spencer’s *1913 Report* captures this intertwining of what we call these two modes of reasoning – scientific racism and liberal humanitarianism.²⁴ Consequently, in the *Preliminary Report*, it is certainly clear that Spencer wanted to prevent miscegenation, and he saw the practice of removing ‘half caste’ children from the towns and mining tenements and placing them in Homes as central to this. However, at the same time, it is also clear that Spencer’s aim was not simply to establish an administrative regime which would prevent miscegenation. It was a clear attempt to limit what Spencer saw as the worst effects of contact between Indigenous and others – the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women and children and the widespread exploitation of Aboriginal people as unpaid labour.

²³ Russell McGregor ‘The idea of racial degeneration: Baldwin Spencer and the Aborigines of the Northern Territory’ in R. McLeod and D. Denoon (eds) *Health and Healing in Tropical Australia and Papua New Guinea*, p.23

²⁴ John Mulvaney and Neville Calaby, *So Much That is New: Baldwin Spencer ...*