

Beyond apologies

The Stolen Generations and the Churches

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The complicity of state and church in the removal and placement of Aboriginal children in Australia has been well documented. Since the investigation by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, a number of churches have apologised for their participation in these practices. Alongside the apologies, churches have engaged in activities of reconciliation. This paper documents a research project, commissioned by the Minajalku Aboriginal Corporation, to explore the role of churches and church agencies in Victoria.

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The forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families represents one of the bleakest periods of white settlement in Australia. In the interests of assimilation, children were literally stolen from their families and communities, and this policy has been variously described as an 'evil policy' (Rintoul, cited in Garrett 1996, p. 3), as 'an Australian holocaust, an Australian version of ethnic cleansing' (Katona, cited in McLean 1996, p. 4) and as 'genocide' (HREOC 1997, p. 275). Conversely, it has been described by those less sympathetic to the issue as part of a 'black armband' view of history and a policy which, although misguided, was not ill-intended. Despite divergent viewpoints, the stolen generations have forced the Australian community to confront the fact that both family and cultural links were denied to many indigenous citizens (Hocking & Hocking 1998). The effects are highlighted by Rintoul:

There was no more evil policy this century than the taking away of Aboriginal children from their families, and the wounds that left in Aboriginal society—both the wounds for individual people and the collective scarring for the Aboriginal people—that's something which has flowed through into all of the social problems we see now (Rintoul, cited in Garrett 1996, p. 3).

There is little dispute that government policies and church practices went hand in hand in the implementation of the 'stealing'. John Harris (1994) has presented details of the two hundred years of Aboriginal encounter with

Christianity. This encounter took many forms throughout Australia, and was frequently institutionalised in the form of Christian missions. In examining the involvement of the churches in the post-colonial history of Australia, Harris (1994, p. 577) suggests that of all the institutions which had an impact on the lives of Aboriginal children, those which exerted the greatest influence were children's homes. He points out that in the various Australian states, police, protection board officers and others had wide and arbitrary powers to remove children from their Aboriginal parents. Often they were sent to distant institutions and, if taken when young, had no knowledge of their ancestry and frequently lost contact with family. The practices were exposed in *Bringing Them Home*, the 1997 report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. The report asserts that the 'churches share some responsibility for forcible removals because of their involvement in providing accommodation, education, training and work placements for the children' (HREOC 1997, p. 405).

Commonly referred to as the 'stolen generations' report, the HREOC inquiry gained much of its information from testimonies of those who had been affected by removal policies, and the role of churches and church agencies was clearly identified. The report noted that governments and missionaries targeted children for removal from their families. Although different policy

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phases have been apparent during the long period in which these policies and practices were in place, 'civilise and Christianise', as part of an assimilationist discourse, was a pervading theme.

In focusing on the aspect of Christian encounter concerned with the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities, this paper draws on and summarises the findings of an exploratory research project conducted in Melbourne in 1997. This project was, to some degree, spurred on by the release of the HREOC report, and contributed to the acknowledgment by three Melbourne churches of their roles in the removal and placement of indigenous children.

CHURCH APOLOGIES

A number of churches have been at the forefront of making public apologies for the part they played in the 'stolen generations'. These apologies have stood in stark contrast to the lack of apology coming from the Federal Government and from those in the community who believe that an apology for past wrongs is somehow counter-productive.

The Uniting Church in Australia publicly acknowledged that its role in the separation of indigenous children from their families caused trauma and ongoing harm to individuals, families and the indigenous community as a whole. The Catholic Church, in its submission to the HREOC Inquiry, acknowledged the role of its welfare agencies in the removal of indigenous children and promised to provide indigenous Australians with access to their records and with other help in finding their families. The Social Responsibilities Commission of the Anglican Church made an unreserved apology to the Inquiry for the involvement of Anglicans in the process of separation. In the Commission's statement, acknowledgment was given that a great wrong was committed which still impacts on indigenous lives (Commonwealth of Australia 1997, p. 25).

Catholic religious orders throughout Australia have offered a 'heartfelt and unreserved apology' to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Catholic

Leader 1997, p. 5). In Victoria the Uniting Church Synod, in September 1996, resolved to acknowledge and apologise to Aboriginal communities throughout Australia and the Torres Strait Islands for its 'complicity with government policies and programs which separated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents...' (Uniting Church in Australia 1996, p. 1). Many of the churches have been at the forefront of Sorry Day and reconciliation activities throughout Australia.

Despite divergent viewpoints, the stolen generations have forced the Australian community to confront the fact that both family and cultural links were denied to many indigenous citizens.

The policies and practices documented by HREOC are not unique to Australia. The separation of indigenous children from their families and communities was common practice in other countries, including Canada and the United States, resulting in apologies from churches in those countries. For example, the Presbyterian Church of Canada acknowledged that it had cooperated in the policy of the Government of Canada to assimilate aboriginal peoples to the dominant culture, and stated its regrets for those scarred by the effects of these practices. Similarly, the United Church of Canada acknowledged its part and stated its intentions to be part of healing initiatives.

THE MINAJALKU PROJECT

The project discussed in this paper was auspiced by the Minajalku Aboriginal Corporation, an Aboriginal ecumenical centre, as a response to the National Inquiry. The research aimed to assist in clarifying the role of the churches and church agencies in removal and

placement practices in Victoria. As a small pilot research project, undertaken in 1997, the objectives of the project were:

- to contribute to identifying the gaps in the recounting of the history of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria, particularly the role of the churches;
- to recommend any further research into church agency involvement;
- to assist in identifying strategies for the provision of services to deal with the impact of such removal, particularly access to records.

The three participating churches in the project were the Uniting Church, the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church, and the project was funded by the churches and the church agencies. Under the direction of a Project Steering Committee, the researchers, Linda Briskman and Karen Moubourne, examined a selection of archival material held by seven church agencies. The report was entitled *Home – Still Waiting* in recognition that many of those removed were still not reunited with their families.

In the course of the research it was established that each of the agencies had different programs, different time-spans for their files, different means of recording information and varying degrees of information. The general means of searching the files was to use well-known Victorian Aboriginal family names, utilising the list compiled by the Australian Archives Victorian Branch (1993) in the publication *My Heart is Breaking*, combined with knowledge of the Victorian Aboriginal community by the researchers. Samples of records in each of the agencies were scrutinised.

There were many ways in which children came to be in the care of the various church agencies, and some of these were identified from the records. Non-statutory placements included voluntary placements where parents who were unable to care for their children placed them in an institution. In these cases the placements generally required the payment of maintenance from parents and, if this did not occur, the children could be made Wards of State. Boarding out and fostering were common practices, with children placed with what were perceived to be suitable

non-Aboriginal families for extended periods. Holiday hosting was a practice in some agencies where children were sent to families during school holidays, with a number of these arrangements continuing into long-term placements, including adoption. Some agencies also provided farm placements for boys, in order to train them for work in the agricultural industry, and it is likely that some Aboriginal children would have been among those sent to rural areas for this purpose.

Statutory placements included legal adoptions and State guardianship. Legislative provisions changed over time, and the research revealed a variety of provisions by which children were adopted or made Wards of State.

Early files generally gave little or no recognition of Aboriginal identity, but it is believed that quite a number examined were Aboriginal children. Some of the content that led to this conclusion included a combination of name and geographic location; the use of value-based dispositions, including the 'neglect' category for the removal and placement of children; psychological reports which made negative references to intelligence; and lifestyle factors, including 'no permanent place of abode'.

Recurring examples of reasons for removal were: 'insufficient food', 'unfit guardianship', 'abandonment', 'insufficient care and attention', 'physical mental or emotional development in jeopardy' and 'no settled place of abode'. Some of these categories were indicative of the application of white value judgements which were culturally irrelevant to Aboriginal people. For example, there was some evidence that when overcrowding was referred to, this meant that the families lived in an extended family household. It is likely that children labelled as 'abandoned' were being cared for by relatives or community members.

There was an apparent lack of follow-up of extended families. There were examples of children being placed in care with no reference on files to consultation or discussion with other family members. In some agencies, ministers of religion and priests were significant in recommending that children be placed in church agencies

and in recommending boarding out, fostering and adoptive parents.

Files up to the 1950s usually contained minimal information. Some included details of medical records, religion, schooling and holiday host information. Other files had no personal information at all. In a number of agencies, social workers and psychologists were employed from the late 1960s and early 1970s resulting in more recorded information, including psycho-social assessments. Information in these reports often revealed little understanding or knowledge of Aboriginal society and judged children by white standards.

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Terminology which would be considered racist by today's standards (and possibly even by the standards of the time) was common, particularly around the late 1960s and 1970s. 'Half-caste' and 'part-Aboriginal' are frequently used terms. Other comments included:

- 'Aboriginal I believe, but extremely well-adjusted to white society' (doctor's report);
- 'I am continually surprised by his nativeness' (cottage parent);
- 'A quarter-native blood and fair complexioned. A big advantage';
- 'The house was extremely clean for an Aboriginal house (home visit from regional office, Social Welfare Department);
- 'M's Aboriginal features can definitely be detected ... when she is smiling which emphasizes her wide mouth and full lips';

- 'Part-aboriginal, a slow moving, dumb, morose woman ... obese and dirty in appearance' (description of a mother).

Usually there was more than one child involved per family and per extended family. From one file in an agency, nineteen Aboriginal children who were Wards of State, from one extended family, were identified. Separation of sibling groups appeared common.

Holiday hosting and 'boarding out' were common practices and these often became permanent. The criteria used to assess holiday hosts and foster parents frequently related to material well-being and church attendance. Many children were moved from placement to placement, and examining single files provides a limited picture only. Two of the agencies received children from the Northern Territory for placement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Concerns about the current over-representation of indigenous children in the system prompted the incorporation of recommendations for changes about both access to past records, and current policies and practices. This was consistent with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) report which highlighted the fact that Aboriginal children are still being removed from their families at unacceptable rates.

A total of twenty-five recommendations were made in the Minajalku report (1997). These included the need for the development of a co-ordinated and accessible form of access to records for individuals who endeavour to locate their personal files. This is particularly needed in situations where there have been multiple placements, and where individuals have moved between State and church institutions. As noted in the HREOC report (1997, p. 326), there is no 'one stop shop' in which all the personal information held can be located and accessed. The means by which this system can be simplified would need to be developed through negotiation with all the various service providers. These include State agencies, Aboriginal organisations, church agencies and other non-government organisations. Link-up services play a key role in this process and the report

recommended that additional support be given to these under-resourced services.

The research indicated that although there is now a great deal of goodwill in church agencies, there remains potential for ongoing misunderstandings about cultural factors in the placement of Aboriginal children. Adequately resourced staff training and the development of formal protocols is likely to go some way to achieving more effective practice. Furthermore, the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, which has been a recognised principle since the 1960s, needs to be formally included in agency practices and protocols. This Principle states:

When a child is to be placed out of his or her natural family, then the order for priority for placement should be:

1. A member of the child's extended family;
2. Other members of the child's Aboriginal community who have the correct relationship with the child in accordance with Aboriginal customary law;
3. Other Aboriginal families living in close proximity.

Although this principle has been enshrined in policy and legislation in most Australian jurisdictions, a report by the New South Wales Law Reform Commission (1997) revealed that implementation falls well short of the required standards. Furthermore, there has been no compulsion for non-government organisations to implement the Principle, although many do take it into consideration in their agency practices.

Variations remain in the way agencies record information on their files in respect to Aboriginal identity. Some consistency in record keeping is warranted for both data collection and for improving access to information. Records, past and present, need to be enhanced and preserved, and some agencies are taking steps in this direction through a process of computerisation and by providing fire-proof facilities. There appear to be many people who do not know their records can be accessed, and others who do not know how to go about

obtaining this access. A suggestion which arose from the Minajalku workshop held in April 1997, was for open days to be held by church agencies for this purpose. Another recommendation suggested that any fees currently charged by agencies for access to records be waived.

The ongoing over-representation of indigenous children in the child welfare system, including in out-of-home care, is a warning for continued vigilance.

The Minajalku project has merely scratched the surface of the involvement of church agencies in the removal and placement of Aboriginal children in Victoria. The project did not single out the policies and practices of particular agencies, but endeavoured to identify themes in such policies and practices and to gauge the extent and nature of Aboriginal child placement practices. The project had some limitations: only a sample of agencies was surveyed, and it is widely known that many other church agencies were involved in caring for Aboriginal children; only a sample of files from each agency was examined; some files had minimal information; Aboriginal identity was not always evident; and the practice of changing names in some agencies made identification difficult.

DISCUSSION

The Minajalku project raised a number of broad issues which require more detailed consideration at a time when the formal reconciliation process is coming to an end. In recent years support for indigenous rights has waxed and waned and a backlash against the significance of the child stealing has been evident. This backlash is evident through the rise to prominence of political ideologies which challenge the notion of Aboriginal autonomy and a pluralistic society.

Using research to develop a better system of allowing families to have access to their records is a process that few would argue with. The Indigenous Link-up services throughout Australia are swamped with requests from people who have been removed from their families and communities, and who want to find their origins. A more controversial area is around examination of records for historical 'truths'.

Records are important in revealing policies and practices of the past and present. In a book aptly entitled *Under the Cover of Kindness*, Margolin (1997) comments that before social work, poor people were mainly vulnerable to starvation and homelessness. With the advent of detailed record keeping, however, they became vulnerable to judgment ((1997, p. 43). Labels such as *neglect, drunkenness, immorality* and *abuse* were particularly used to describe Aboriginal parents (Van Krieken 1992, p. 145). The way the records were kept in the Victorian agencies provides evidence of assimilationist approaches through the lack of identifying information about Aboriginality (except for negative stereotypes), changing of names, not allowing children to learn their languages or understand their culture, and not encouraging family contact.

McGrath (1995) advocates the need to publicise information hidden in the records. She argues that to lock up this information threatens to keep the lid on an already censored past, denying access to vital knowledge relevant to understanding colonial power relations. Releasing this information also helps negate what Henry Reynolds describes as the white blindfold view of history (cited in van Tiggelen 1998). In proclaiming this viewpoint there is an obvious need, in conjunction with relevant indigenous organisations and communities, to ensure that control of this process is in the hands of indigenous people so that the colonial process is not perpetuated through the appropriation of historical documentation.

A question that arises relates to how 'accepted' the past policies and practices were. The political leadership has been reluctant to dwell on the past and to take on the 'burden of the previous generations' supposed

wrongdoings', with the defence of 'good intentions' put forward (Manne 1998, pp.12,22). Although the stolen generations, including the role of church agencies, has been a seemingly hidden part of our history, recent evidence has suggested that there were in fact many who knew what was happening and in fact challenged those 'good intentions' notions.

Historian Anna Haebich undertook extensive archival research throughout Australia, revealing opposition and protest which indicated a level of public awareness and concern not acknowledged in contemporary debate (MacDonald 1998, p. 15). Henry Reynolds (1998, p. 248) also refers to the long history of humanitarian protest which has received little recognition in Australia from either contemporaries or in retrospect. Although the Minajalku research did not reveal the protest occurring at the time, it demonstrated how all the participating agencies turned around their policies and practices as they became perceived as inappropriate. Correspondence of one agency pointed to the doubts about 'importing' Northern Territory children to a Melbourne institution. What had previously been seen as an 'opportunity' resulted in concerns which promptly eliminated the practice.

Placing children into children's homes and white foster homes was one way of trying to rid Australian society of the 'otherness' which the presence of Aboriginal people symbolised. It was a way of taking 'the Aboriginality out of the Aboriginal kids' (Dodson 1997). It can also be viewed as an extension of the concept of *terra nullius*. By ultimately ridding society of the visibility of Aboriginal people, there could be justification for the policies of exclusion, exploitation of the land and the development of a mono-cultural society.

Related to this, assimilationist policies constituted a means of providing full civil rights to indigenous people, rights which were dependent on the relinquishment of their culture and identity. The separation of indigenous children from their families and communities is a clear example of how a category of people was excluded from the full citizenship accorded to other Australians, through the imposition of

selective and discriminatory legislation, policies and practices. Yet at the same time the prevailing ideology driving such policies was to create a society of equals, with Aboriginal children growing into an adulthood in which they would be white, 'civilised' and 'Christianised'.

RECENT EVENTS

The organisations who participated in the Minajalku study have all, in some way, continued their interest in this area. To coincide with National Sorry Day on 26 May 1998, the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria issued a statement to record deep sorrow for the injustices suffered by indigenous Australians as a result of European settlement (Age 1998, p. 6). The participating agencies were signatories to the statement. The agencies have made further contributions to addressing the issues raised by the research. These include a donation to the Victorian Link-up service, re-ordering of file information to facilitate access and the development of procedures and protocols in conjunction with relevant Aboriginal organisations.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing over-representation of indigenous children in the child welfare system, including in out-of-home care, is a warning for continued vigilance. Care needs to be exercised that the policies and practices of the past are not merely cast into the annals of history, but are seen as contributing to ongoing policy and practice development and implementation. Many of the church agencies are now ensuring that this occurs. □

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