

Aboriginal Children: The Challenge for the end of the Millennium

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No other group of children in Australian society stands in greater judgement of the ability and willingness of this society to deal with their problems than aboriginal children.

The challenge that faces all of us in the nineties, including aboriginal community-controlled organisations like SNAICC, is whether we are going to be able to break the cycle of disadvantage, poverty and racism that keeps our children and our community at the very bottom of this society.

The 20th century history of Australia will be seen as the millennium of a great expansion of wealth in Australia. It will be regarded as a period of gigantic advances in science and productive technology. It will also – if historians record accurately – show the plight of aboriginal people as the single glaring blight on the record of this country.

Recently, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence jointly sponsored a Report entitled 'Aboriginal Child Poverty'. We consented to such an arrangement because we felt it was the best way we could obtain the maximum attention for a document that would have credibility with aboriginal people as well as the media, who appear to respect and recognise the work the Brotherhood does. This we felt would be the best way to stimulate discussion about the situation of aboriginal children.

The Report, written by Christine Choo, emphasises the aboriginal view of the poverty of aboriginal children. It also underlines this view by bringing together the empirical evidence of this poverty. Basically, the Report says that aboriginal people view material poverty as secondary, although not less important than the cultural and spiritual deprivation of their children. In this sense it articulates the view amongst aboriginal people that if a child grows up with a strong sense of aboriginality and a clear understanding of their culture and heritage, they are better equipped to cope with the oppression and disadvantage they endure through life.

Aboriginal children in Australia live in conditions which are comparable to the "third world". Many live in communities

which lack the basic amenities like clean running water, housing and food. Consequently the morbidity and mortality rates are disproportionately higher than those for non-aboriginal children. Over-crowded housing creates particular problems which affect the ability of the child to learn. Education and school attendance become an awesome task. Lack of education leads to difficulty in seeking employment. Lack of employment means low-income and material disadvantage thereby completing the vicious circle that has not been broken to date.

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There are other "newer" problems surfacing. Children on alcohol and drugs. Sexual abuse and neglect. Domestic violence and racial abuse.

In recent times the approach to these problems has been to work with each child individually. The veritable deluge of cases means that most aboriginal child care workers (child welfare as opposed to child-minding) are working against the odds, in spite of successes with many cases they do handle. The greatest limitation however is that this approach does not address what are euphemistically referred to as "structural problems".

Without attacking the wider, "structural problems", the inherent inequality present in a system that is dominated by the free enterprise economics, our work will tend to be "band aid". Despite this the gains that can be achieved within this sort of system are considerable and the advances the aboriginal community has made over the years has shown this to be the case. However, in times of economic crises and downturns, government strategies and plans in relation to "welfare programs" decline in priority. The former consensus amongst Liberal and Labor Parties in relation to aboriginal affairs does not hold any longer.

The problems – the overall disadvantage

and poverty – are still very much with us. Indeed as "Aboriginal Child Poverty" emphasises, they have in fact worsened. The kind of problems we face now are different. In spite of the number of Aboriginal Child Care Agencies in Australia, the number of aboriginal children entering institutions has not abated. The Burdekin Report into homeless children noted in some detail the number of homeless aboriginal children. Most cities in Australia have large numbers of aboriginal children on the streets too. A large section of this generation is growing up without an education, institutionalised, unemployable and alienated from their people and society. To survive the onslaught on the streets requires an education that children do not get in school classrooms. Society is not the ideal depicted in TV ads especially if you are aboriginal.

One should not distort the picture by concentrating too much on the negatives. More than ever before, Aboriginal children are succeeding in reaching higher levels of education. They also excel in the fields they participate in, which are varied and numerous. Aboriginal children these days also have many role models in the public eye that they can identify with and emulate.

Nevertheless the majority of aboriginal children including the ones who "succeed" have to struggle to attain the goals, however modest, they set themselves.

The odds are against you still if you are an aboriginal child in Australia today. One of the biggest continuing obstacles is the racism that is alive and well in this country. This is beneath the denial of aboriginality that is insidious. The distinctions made between the "full-bloods" and the "part-aboriginals" prevails. One is not aboriginal if you do not conform to someone else's idea of aboriginality. Aboriginal children have to prove themselves in all their encounters with non-aboriginal people. This and the negative stereotypes in the media put enormous pressure on children to deny their aboriginality.

It is for this reason that the recognition of aboriginal land rights by Australian society and its institutions is so important. Such recognition will bestow status in the mind of the public. It will also go a long way towards removing the stigma of being aboriginal. For

aboriginal people it will mean that they are no longer "welfare cases" but Indigenous People with a special place in Australian society.

Naturally, remedies for the material problems are essential too. A wealthy society such as this with the standard of living and rights that non-aboriginal people enjoy should not tolerate the islands of want and oppression that exist. There must be a concerted assault against the areas of impoverishment. This means Government and non-government organisations discussing reports like "Aboriginal Child Poverty" with Aboriginal organisations like ours. We emphatically reiterate the principle that it must be aboriginal communities that decide what is in their best interests. This will also ensure less wastage and the delivery of more appropriate programs and projects.

In the field of child welfare we have long advocated a National Aboriginal Child Welfare Act along the lines of the North American Indian version of 1978. The Australian Law Reform Commission Report No. 31, 1986, "The Recognition of Aboriginal Customary Laws" went some way towards assessing this goal. It's recommendations were limited however, and we feel there is a need to actively move towards developing and implementing such an act.

Non-aboriginal Australians must also accept that there are no quick-fix solutions. Problems that take 200 years to create will

require some thought and experimentation to sort out. Government must therefore make a long-term commitment to aboriginal programs to enable them to try the solutions they wish and see what results obtain. Mistakes will occur and this must be taken into account in planning too.

The Government must also support Aboriginal community-controlled projects. These organisations are very good training grounds for aboriginal people who often find private enterprise far too alienating an environment in which to work especially after long periods of unemployment.

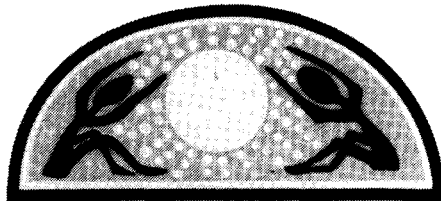
Australian society must also work towards changing attitudes. Racism denies people an opportunity to contribute their talents to the general well-being of that society. We must also eradicate the institutional racism; the sort that refuses to recognise different customs and laws and acts as a barrier to equal participation.

If these changes can be achieved we will move a long way towards creating the conditions for the deep-seated problems to

be worked out.

All of this will cost money and this is perhaps where the catch is. For inspite of the fact that money is generally regarded as the key to most things in this society, it is denied to aboriginal people. Aboriginal people still have no significant capital base within the community to develop their own independent structures. This, one must say, is the most accurate measure of dispossession. It is true that millions have been spent on aboriginal affairs and not much has apparently changed. Maybe it is too early to judge? In any case, without a commitment to further funding – which should be viewed as compensation not as welfare handouts – little will happen in the economic context we are in today.

For Aboriginal children the nineties will be crucial. The end of the decade will tell us not only whether we have been on the right path, but also whether the plans we make today will prepare them for the 21st century. Perhaps the ability and willingness of this society, to help find a genuine solution to the problems aboriginal people and their children face, will also be a measure of the effectiveness of the solutions we all need to find to the crises that face all mankind. Certainly the measure of the well-being of aboriginal children in Australia at the end of this millennium will be a barometer of the health of this society and the state of human rights for aboriginal people.



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Aboriginal Children 1990 and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Seven days after he had attempted to gouge out his own eye with a paintbrush, 29 year old Malcolm Charles Smith, died in Sydney's Prince Henry's Hospital on January 5th 1989. Apart from the unusual circumstances of Malcolm's tragic death, inadvertently caused by his own actions, everything about his brief life since 1965 had been a complete denial of his existence as a human being and an aboriginal child.

At the age of eleven, Malcolm was taken

away from his family. I will quote Royal Commissioner Hal Wooten from his Report into Malcolm Smith's death:

Immediately prior to 5 May 1965, the other date from which Malcolm's story may be commenced, he was a happy, healthy and free eleven year old, albeit grubby, living in a humpy, and truant from a school made unattractive by racial prejudice and irrelevance to his life. He was taken away from his family by police, cut off from his family, whom he did not see again until he

was 19, and sent to Kempsey, over 1500 kilometres away on the coast, beyond the boundaries of their accessible world. When he finally rediscovered them at the age of 19, it was too late for him to start a normal life. The intervening eight years, mainly in despotic institutions of various kinds, had left him illiterate and innumerate, unskilled and without experience of normal society. He had been taught a model of human life based not on mutual respect, co-operation, responsibility, initiative, self-expression and