

## **AUTONOMOUS ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA: BESIEGED BY SCANDAL AND CORRUPTION, HOW CAN THEY MOVE FORWARD?**

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### **Abstract**

Discourses of Australian Aboriginal culture have all too often relied on the “noble savage” trope, in Australia as in Europe. There were practical outcomes of such views, most notably the creation of over a hundred self-governed indigenous communities in the 1980s, most of them in the Northern territories. The architect of the plan was Nuggett Coombs, a top Canberra administrator and advisor to Whitlam and Hawke. His idea was to allow Aborigines a “pre-contact” lifestyle and to shield them from all evil “white” influences. Neither worked. On the contrary, it has now emerged that the leftist, liberal consensus on how to “empower” Aboriginal culture has resulted in the exact opposite, in degradation, alcoholism, and sexual violence. This is not only due to passivity in indigenous communities but also to a decade-long denial of their dysfunctionality by the white courts, academics, and lawmakers.

### **KEVIN RUDD’S APOLOGY AND A SHORT INTRODUCTION**

In November of 2007, the head of the Australian Labor party Kevin Rudd won the Australian general elections, ending 11 years of conservative government. On 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008 he gave a speech to the Australian Parliament and to millions of Australians glued to their TV sets in which he uttered the long-awaited “Sorry” to the indigenous population. Rudd apologized for two centuries of discrimination, but the focus of his apology was pitched to the so-called “Stolen Generations”. The occasion was reported all over the globe, allowing Rudd to bask in the glory of the moment. His popularity rose by 20% over the next two weeks (*Weekend Australian*, 23 February 2009, p.13). John Howard, the PM of the previous 11 years had refused to offer such an apology.

PM Rudd’s speech was welcomed by all except the most churlish members of the Aboriginal community. It was welcomed not leastly because it offered a respite from months of relentless media attacks on Aboriginal leaders. What was there to criticize within the wide field of Aboriginal culture, a culture that in Australia is heavily subsidized and protected, and which in European discourses has been praised to the point of glamorizing? The short answer is: Rampant and *systemic* sexual violence in self-governed Aboriginal communities. By systemic one means as part of the operations of a system.

It was revealed that in remote communities, a *routine* of sexual abuses of girls and boys by Aboriginal power-men had evolved which went on undetected and unchecked for almost 30 years. To quote just one of many reports: the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) reported “horrific levels of sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities, including the rape of a baby.” Details of the report were:

At an Aboriginal camp in central Australia, a four-year-old girl drowned while being raped by a teenager who had been sniffing petrol. In other cases two very young children - including a seven-month old baby - were sexually assaulted by adult men while their mothers were elsewhere drinking alcohol. Both children needed surgery for their injuries. Dr Nanette Rogers, who is a Crown prosecutor in the Northern Territory, said that Aboriginal settlements were suffering from tragedy fatigue, where monstrous crimes appeared unremarkable. “All child sexual assault in central Australia is happening at much higher rates than are currently being reported to police,” she said. “Horrible offences committed on really small children, it is beyond most people’s comprehension and range of human experience.” (CRIN 2006).

The Robertson report of 2000 had already stated that in NSW, Aboriginal children are twice as likely to be sexually abused as in mainstream society. It also found that 88% of child sexual abuse cases are not reported. And this was New South Wales, not the North, where the real centres of sexual violence are. Nicholas Rothwell, a journalist with *The Australian* and an expert of many years on Aboriginal issues, wrote that “from Cape York to the Pilbara (...) child abuse is a familiar rite of passage and girls are routinely violated before their 13<sup>th</sup> birthday” (qut. Nowra, 45).

How could Aboriginal culture deteriorate so badly? Here is what happened and why.

## NUGGET COOMBS AND ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

In 1976 the highly respected Labor politician Nugget Coombs came up with a plan how to save Aboriginal culture. His plan provided for self-governing communities which were to be sealed off from the rest of Australia. No white person would be allowed to enter these communities without first obtaining a permit. In these communities, Aborigines would find the conditions to maintain their traditional life-styles, to have their own laws and to pursue their own educational needs. The government would assist these communities financially. Aboriginal culture would thrive in a political, social and legal matrix whose conception was emphatically autonomous and authentic. Coombs and his ideas had the full support of left-liberal academics as well as most of the Labour party rank and file. By the time it was implemented under PM Bob Hawke in the early 1980s, it had bi-partisan support.

The idea was already flawed in the 1970s, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it has become totally untenable. Cell phones, videos and DVDs, the internet (with its easy access to pornography and violence) and other technical ‘achievements’ of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century have rendered the local basis in these communities obsolete. Traditional culture no longer thrives and it is questionable whether it ever did; it is certainly less healthy

now than before the referendum of 1967. Literacy amongst present day Aboriginal youth is lower than in their parent generation. And above all: these communities, sealed off as they were from the media, became dysfunctional in ways that make William Golding's dystopic vision in *Lord of the Flies* appear like a harmless fairy tale. Sexual abuse of very young girls has become systemic and substance abuse has ravaged most communities. "Viewing pornography is commonplace" (Nowra 37); the collective moral fibre has degenerated to a point where the most irresponsible activity draws no response. These matters now represent the most powerful public discourse in Australia, particularly since an unprecedented government action two years ago, the so-called "Intervention".

On June 21, 2007, PM John Howard and his Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, declared Australia could no longer ignore the shame of sexual abuse against children in indigenous communities. They ordered an unprecedented intervention by medical teams, the military and federal law into the Northern Territory's Aboriginal communities. Prior to this move, there had been a wave of governmental, TV and newspaper reports all clamouring for action. The most damning was the "The Little Children Are Sacred" Report.<sup>1</sup> Amongst its major findings was the statement that "Underlying the Inquiry's findings was the common view that sexual abuse of Aboriginal children is happening largely because of the breakdown of Aboriginal culture and society." The first point made in the Inquiry's summing up was that "Child sexual abuse is serious, widespread and often unreported."

Despite unease in some Labor hearts, and despite loud protest from the Labor Premier in Darwin, Kevin Rudd (the then leader of the opposition) professed support for the intervention. However, how to straighten out the mess that a misguided liberal policy has caused, and how to strike the proper balance between local and global culture, is yet an unresolved issue.

## GOING BACK TO THE ROOTS: 1967 AND A DEMAND FOR FURTHER ACTION

Australian Aborigines were given full civic rights through a referendum in 1967 and a subsequent Act of Parliament in 1968. But that new legislation did not all at once erase all inequalities. Something had to be done that would go beyond a simple legal act. The leading intellectuals, sociologists, historians and artists were all busy drawing up plans for a better Aboriginal future.

The most influential of these was a high-ranking Australian government administrator and advisor, H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs. In 1968 he became the Director of the newly created 'Council for Aboriginal Affairs.' In 1970 he was promoted to the post of chief advisor to Gough Whitlam, the head of the Labor Party, who won the general elections of 1972 – and Coombs had a small share in this victory as he formulated Labor's "Abo-

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<sup>1</sup> Web reference: <http://www.inquiryasaac.nt.gov.au>. A Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse was established by the Northern Territories government on 8 August 2006. Its final report was released June 15, 2007. The purpose of the Inquiry was to find better ways to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse.

iginal Policy” paper (Wikipedia). Coombs thought of himself as a dedicated friend of Australia’s Aboriginality and he became the chief agent of a new policy.

As H.C. Coombs himself argued in an interview:

(...) what we have to do is to accept the fact that Aborigines are different. They do have a different way of seeing the world and understanding it, they have a different vision of what the place should be like. They are autonomous their - by their nature yes a fundamental thing in Aboriginal society that what Judge Blackburn described it as a society which is run by laws not by men - or women. And I think that’s important, they - nobody, no Aboriginal has the right to tell any other Aboriginal what he must do, or should do. Autonomy’s - autonomy is fundamental to their ways of thinking now, I think we have, we might have prepared to spend money on them, we’re prepared to offer them this and that and educate them and so on, but what we won’t do is allow them to be different. (Source: [www.australianbiography.gov.au/coombs/interview](http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/coombs/interview))  
Conducted in 1992.

Of course Aborigines are “different”, but Coombs was not aware what consequences his idea of an autonomous life-style in remote areas of the continent would have. The essence of his policy was to allow Aborigines a return to their culture as it had been practiced before 1788. Coombs and the politicians he advised believed Aboriginal Australians would be better served if they were insulated from the negative impact of ‘whitefeller’ culture. To that end, they were invited to stay in remote areas & to revive their original hunter-gatherer lifestyle. They were also advised to abandon domesticated animals, farmed crops and a monetary system.

Whitlam had great faith in Nugget Coombs, but the idea of autonomous Aboriginal communities was only realized during Bob Hawke’s tenure. Leave them alone, was the motto, and they will themselves shape their future. The plan was in a large measure born out of shame over what had been done to Aboriginal people over the past 180 years. Coupled with that shame was an unrealistic view of the worth and potential of Aboriginal society, as Louis Nowra has observed: “At the (..) time there was a growing romanticisation amongst the general population, especially from those on the liberal and left-wing side of politics and among New Agers in particular” (2007, 31). Nowra also finds the “idealisation” of Aboriginal life “epitomized” in Nugget Coombs (ibid., 32). Similarly ‘romantic’ views also prevail in Europe, as the huge success of Marlo Morgan’s novel *Mutant Message Down Under* (1991<sup>2</sup>) demonstrates.

The great flaw in Coombs’ plan was that it did not provide for any sustainable economic base for these communities. Labor has traditionally held the notion in disdain that culture must have an economic basis and had unrealistic hopes that the empowerment of ‘the local’ would somehow deliver the future. And ‘the local’ was, in this case,

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<sup>2</sup> *Mutant Message Down Under* was on the US best-seller list for 25 weeks. The New-Age author claimed she had been on a four-month ‘Walkabout’ with a hitherto unknown W.A. tribe. That her yarn was all fabricated had to be admitted after representatives of the Nyoongar people staged a sit-in in front of the Los Angeles based publisher. The German translation titled *Traumfänger* sold roughly 100.000 copies and a sequel is still in the shops. In 1995 there were plans for a film adaptation, but these came to a halt when once again, W.A. Aborigines (under the leadership of Robert Eggington) flew to Hollywood to protest. In a press statement, Eggington said Morgan had “taken away the right for Aboriginal people to tell their own story as she saturates the American market with a complete fabrication.” Websource: [http://www.mountainman.com.au/news96\\_5.html](http://www.mountainman.com.au/news96_5.html) (27 Feb 2009)

an indigenous culture that was still largely unknown to Australians. There were no plans for training facilities, for higher education, for literacy programmes – because these were, and are, parts of *white* culture. In white Australia, of course every child has by law to go to school between the ages of 6 and 16. This law was considered non-binding for Aboriginal communities. “Let them decide whether school is necessary” was an often heard view, and there was also the naïve notion that a good command of English was not necessary if young people had a good command of their own Aboriginal language. Both languages, so the politically correct view was, were equally important. *Nonsense*. What job opportunities does a mono-lingual Aboriginal boy or girl have in mainstream Australian society?

How muddled Nugget Coombs was on the issue of education is shown in another passage of the interview cited above in which he is asked about education:

(...) starting with the education of how they are changing the way in which children, from the very beginning, are introduced to the world and to the ... and learn how to be Aborigines or to ... and those are - those things are very important and I, yeah so that as I say this is one area where, not because of our - I think our policies are almost universally wrong in relation to Aborigines. (*Ibid.*)

Coombs argued that self-governed indigenous communities would have to be given some seed money before becoming self-sufficient, but he did not have any idea when that point would be reached. The handouts became habitual, and indigenous communities dependent on them. “Sit-down money” was the term created for government support because the recipients were not required to do anything in return. That would have been considered ‘racist’. So no responsibilities were attached.<sup>3</sup> And the people in those communities were content to live a life in idleness, and the speedy consequence was alcohol abuse.

## ALCOHOL ABUSE

Since the communities were autonomous, no laws to ban alcohol could be passed. (A ban on selling alcohol to the indigenous population existed until 1968: it was repealed after the 1967 referendum.) The politically correct advisors to the government (academics, mostly) did not see ‘grog’ (to use the Australian vernacular) as a problem. They lived in denial. I myself have heard the opinion: “Alcoholism isn’t any worse amongst Aborigines; it is just that they drink in public and the whites drink at home, so theirs is visible and ours is not.” Well intentioned, but totally wrong. A whitewash of the real dimensions of alcohol abuse.

First of all, since traditional Aboriginal culture did not know alcohol it is much more addictive to them than to us. Secondly, when there is nothing to do, when there is pure boredom, addictive drinking is more likely to occur than in a fulfilled working life. The CRIN Report mentioned above points at a concrete link between violence and alcohol:

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<sup>3</sup> In Queensland, unemployment pay to indigenous parents is now tied to the requirement of regular school attendance of their children.

Central Australia has the highest murder rate in Australia, at ten times the national average. Alcohol and drug abuse have caused many impoverished native settlements to self-destruct.

An even more serious addiction is petrol sniffing, which has become so frequent the government was forced to introduce a type of gasoline in Central Australia that is 'non-sniffable'. Sniffing petrol damages the brain and addicts die after relatively short periods of addiction. The syndrome was given serious treatment in a feature film with the title *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001).

We now know that alcoholism is rampant amongst Aborigines, and deadly. Let me refer you to a newspaper report about a community located in Northern Queensland, on the West coast of the Cape York peninsula. It is already a community with a limited supply of alcohol – limited to weekends. The beer supply boat arrives at 9 in the morning and takes it to the local pub as well as to some shops. By 11 the first shouts and fights are heard. By the afternoon, comatose figures line the streets. The whole male community is drunk. But this isn't the only effect. The men beat their wives and children. As a measure of self-protection – this is how the report went on – the wives organize themselves into weekend trips into the bush to escape domestic violence. They hide until Monday morning when their husbands' drunkenness has worn off (Opinion, 2007). A similar case was reported by Mary Ellen Jordon on the Arnhem community of Maningrida, where the 'grog' would be delivered only every two weeks. Jordon concluded her report with the words: "I knew that women were bashed, raped and assaulted every time grog came into town" (qut. Nowra, 39).

## ABORIGINAL VIOLENCE: A CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

That none of this made it into the collective awareness of the nation is to a large extent due to a conspiracy of silence amongst well-wishing liberals, social workers, and academics. You don't play into the hands of the racists, was the unspoken agreement. The first voice breaking that silence was that of an anthropologist, and even he had waited for many years to "come out"<sup>4</sup>. He gave a paper at a conference titled "The Politics of Suffering" which was published in 2001, but had zero impact in the general population. In it Sutton writes of the rapid deterioration of a community which he had known and in which he had repeatedly lived since 1970 after a "wet-shop" was opened in 1985. He returned to it in 2000 for a double funeral of two people he knew. But there had been many more casualties:

[E]ight people known to me have died at their own hands, two of them women, six of them men. Five of these were young people. From the same community in the same period, 13 people known to me have been victims of homicide, 8 of them women, 5 of them men, and 12 others (9 men and 3 women) have committed homicide. Most of these, again, were young people, and most of the homicides occurred in the home settlement of both assailant and victim. Of the eight spousal murders in this list, seven involved a man killing his female partner, only one a woman killing her husband. In almost all cases, assailants and victims were also relatives whose families had been linked to one another for generations (2001, p. 125. (Sutton: Web reference, 2001.)

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<sup>4</sup> Personal correspondence.

Sutton's paper had no echo either in the media or in policy making. It was social workers of indigenous communities who blew the whistle a few years later. In 2004 two newspapers, *The Australian* and *The Age* began to report on wide-spread sexual abuse and rampant alcoholism. The academic establishment as well as Aboriginal leaders immediately closed ranks and *denied* these allegations. A typical example was the journalist, film director and producer Philip Adams, whose achievements in the field of Australian political culture are many and great. He averred that "the public outcry" about the various cases of violence were "an example of conservatives using the information to pick on Aborigines." And more denial came spouting from his pen: "[T]here is just as much domestic violence in the general community" (qut. Nowra, 33). But the reports did not stop, and in 2006 the lid flew off. More and more social workers came forward and spoke to the press about how they had been intimidated by Aboriginal elders NOT to report of the abuses or else they would lose their jobs. For many years this threat had worked, but now some social workers were so ashamed of their silence that risking their jobs, they blew the whistle. And then a veritable tsunami of reporting crashed over Australia. An article in *The Age* quoted a social worker: In this community [which was in central S.A.] you will be hard pressed to find a 13-year old girl that has not been raped by her uncle, her father, or other relatives. Other reports spoke of systemic domestic violence, violence which often enough resulted in the death of a beaten wife – and the perpetrators usually came off with very light sentences.

Meanwhile, Peter Sutton has worked his 2001 essay into a full-length study (MUP 2009). It provoked controversy in Australia, but also much praise, for instance from Professor Marcia Langton (who is the only indigenous person to hold a professorship in Australia, at Melbourne University). In her introduction to the book, Langton called Sutton's study "a powerful corrective to the romantic, misinformed fabulations about Aborigines as a special kind of modern 'noble savage'". But Sutton did more than buttress his report of 2001. There are three main points one can discern. The first addresses how racially liberal attitudes have actually been more harmful than beneficial to indigenous communities. Second, as the book's subtitle "The Collapse of the liberal Consensus" already reveals, he attacks as "totally unscientific mumbo-jumbo" the long-held liberal view that a formal treaty, or handing back large tracts of lands, would somehow 'empower' dysfunctional communities. Thirdly, and this is the most contentious view, he argues that a number of Aboriginal problems, from low life expectancy to sexual violence, are an after-effect "of ancient, pre-existent social and cultural factors that have continued (...) into the lives of people living today" (qut Neill, 17)

To provide a better picture, here are a few further reports, starting with one that is about Australia's best known interior city, Alice Springs. It has an Aboriginal population of appr. 6.000, which is 25% of the population. In 1966 there were 165 cases of Aboriginal women getting treatment in the hospitals for injuries resulting from beatings by their partners. In 2006 this figure rose to 800 cases, a five-fold increase. According to my computation, of the 2.000 Aboriginal women in Alice who are between 18 and 65 years, a full 40% were beaten so badly that they needed hospitalization – *in one year alone*. Alice has a murder rate that is 10 times the national average. Alice Springs has an alcohol consumption that is 70% above the national average (Nowra, p. 7).

In his *Aboriginal Health and History* (1993), Dr Ernest Hunter established that in the Aboriginal population of the Kimberleys, an indigenous woman was twice as likely to be killed by her husband than in the white community. He had known of this fact as early as in 1984.

A case occurred in an Aboriginal community in Araru (Coburg Peninsula) in which a 27-year old pregnant woman sought protection from her husband and it was denied because police were told not to interfere in the affairs of Aborigines. She reported her husband for blatant violence 29 times, and the police never arrested the man. A psychologist filed a report to the social workers of the district in which he predicted: this woman will eventually be killed. Nothing was done, and one can only marvel at the total passivity of both police and judicial systems. On April 25 2005 she was beaten to death, for refusing to bring him a glass of water. At the time of the murder, the husband was already on parole for viciously beating his wife months earlier. The man received a mild jail sentence of 6 years (qut. Nowra 40-41)

In another and well-publicised case of 2002 that I remember very well, a man in a community about 300 km from Darwin beat his wife to death for not telling him she intended to go to Darwin shopping and for staying away overnight. He beat her with a branch from a tree and there were about a dozen witnesses who did not stop the man. The woman died in a Darwin hospital from multiple injuries and internal bleeding. Her killer was sent to jail for all of 2 years. The judge asked a community elder whether the man would be received back into the community when he came out of jail, and this elder said yes, there was support fore the man. His wife had wronged him, he said. After a public outcry the sentence was increased to three years.

Another man was sentenced to 3 years after beating his wife to death while drunk. He showed absolutely no remorse. In court he reported how he had left his wife unconscious on the floor after giving her a thrashing and had gone to sleep. He was astonished in the morning to find her dead. "I thought she would wake up eventually" he explained to the police, "she usually does" (qut. Nowra, 44)

In VIC where the Abor population is a mere 1%, 12% of children in state care and protection are Aboriginal children. From 1997 to 2000, the rate of removal from abusive parents rose by 50%. There are also troubling reports that the rape of boys has risen dramatically. A survey conducted in QLD and the NT in 2006 reported that a full 10% of all Aboriginal boys had been raped before the age of 16, and a further 15% said anal rape had been attempted on them. 33% reported they had been sexually abused in other ways. Women in remote communities now refuse to allow their 12 or 13 year old boys to go out into the desert with their uncles for the customary initiation or *Tjukurrpa* rites as so many have told them afterwards that they had been pack-raped.

In W.A., sexual crimes in the Aboriginal community rose tenfold between 1981 and 2001. In Queensland it was reported that an under-age Aboriginal girl was ten times more likely to be raped than a white girl. A spin-off is that sexually transmitted diseases are horrifically frequent in under-age Aboriginal youths, as a result of having become rape victims. Syphilis amongst Aborigines in the NT is 65 times the rate of the non-indigenous population. In Alice Springs, it was 70 times as high (qut. Nowra, 49).

Speaking of Alice Springs, in late 2005 four girls aged between 7 and 15 were diagnosed with multiple infections, including syphilis. The girls named the men with whom

they had had sex. The hospital notified the social workers. 7 months later, health workers wanted to know what the child-care department had done about the case. They found that the department contacted these men only to tell them they needed medical treatment!

## THE MARCH OF CORRUPTION

The evidence on what lies at the bottom of the malaise is quite clear. Left to themselves, the self-governed communities fell under the sway of a powerful elite of corrupt elders. They decided on how to use the government funds, and they formed a mafia-like structure which killed any community spirit. Little wonder then that in several communities, the women have petitioned their state governments to remove the power from the hands of their kinsmen, and to restore white administration and white policing.

Lest I be accused of a one-sided analysis, I must add that the failure of white institutions is equally mind-boggling. So great has been the faith in the *laissez faire* approach to Aboriginal culture that a kind of dogma arose which laid down that any white interference would only make matters worse. It is a fine philosophy, but it fails to take into account what happens to the weakest members of that culture. What happened in a self-governed community in April 2006 provides ample illustration.

Aurukun lies on the eastern coast of the Cape York peninsula. A ten-year old girl was gang-raped by nine men, six of whom were under the age of 18. The girl was described as intellectually retarded. She had been removed from her alcoholic mother and was now in the care of white foster parents in Brisbane. But then a relative died and the local social workers (ironically called the "Child Safety Office") decided she had to attend the funeral in order to maintain links with the family. She was flown to Aurukun and given into the temporary care of an aunt. The same evening as she was going for a stroll she was set upon and gang raped. Her aunt told her not tell the police. So she was raped again, by the same gang. Again she did not tell the police (she had been instructed that this would land well-respected boys and men of her own family in jail) but she went to two white social workers, both women, asking about the symptoms of VD. These women did not report the case to the police either, but at least they ordered a medical check-up. The result was the girl had been infected with gonorrhoea. Even then the case was not reported: one social worker actually inquired from the hospital whether gonorrhoea could be contracted in a non-sexual way! Only after the girl returned to Brisbane was the police informed. In turn, the local police in Aurukun were alerted. They hauled all nine men in and got confessions from all of them. However, all of them were released back into the community. In December 2007 came the trial. The state attorney applied for *suspended* sentences, and the court agreed. So nobody went to jail. This sent a powerful message to the community, namely that Aboriginal men were exempt from any responsibility for their sexual crimes.

The case was picked up by *The Australian* soon afterwards and as a result, both Kevin Rudd (the newly elected PM) as well as Queensland Premier Anna Bligh recorded their horror about this lenient sentencing. Noel Pearson was interviewed on ABC's "The 7.30 Report" on December 12<sup>th</sup>; here is an excerpt from the Report:

Pearson, a long-time advocate of law and order and the scrapping of welfare, argued that “lenient sentencing” and “passive welfare” had caused a complete breakdown in social norms, not just in Aurukun, but throughout Cape York (Allan 2007)

Aurukun is described as fairly typical. It is a neglected city with no job prospects where the moral fibre and the will of its population to take charge of their fate had broken down. Outrageous actions no longer drew any response, Pearson argued. But he went further than that:

Pearson outlined an even broader agenda, insisting that courts must stop taking into account the historical dispossession and oppression of indigenous people: “In fact, part of the whole breakdown, the social and cultural breakdown, that we see in our communities is the consequence of courts taking into account the historical and social background of Aboriginal offenders.” (Ibid.)

Later Pearson speculated that the only way out might be to remove all children above grade four to boarding schools in the major cities in order to remove them from the bad influence of their dysfunctional communities. This however immediately conjures up echoes of the “Stolen Generation” and so the proposal will almost certainly not be pursued any further.<sup>5</sup> Pearson does not advocate that these young Aboriginal people should cut all ties to their local community and culture, but he does suggest that unless they prioritize proper ‘white’ schooling and a familiarity with standard systems of knowledge they will never become active and valuable members of Australian society.

One question that these cases raise is whether Aboriginal culture has not always been misogynist; Peter Sutton’s study arrives at this conclusion. Letters from the early colonists, reports such as Arthur Phillip’s journal of the First Fleet Colony and by his officer Watkin Tench (1793) give strong indications in that direction.<sup>6</sup> And what are we to make of convicted rapist Geoff Clark, the ATSIC president between 1999 and 2004? In 2001, Geoff Clark was indicted on four independent cases of rape. He used ATSIC money to pay his attorneys, managing to delay the court cases. Despite the investigations against him, the ATSIC Board re-elected him as Chairman in 2003. Three of the women withdrew their cases on technicalities (they had been reported more than 30 years after the actual rape date.) But the fourth case resulted in Clark’s conviction. In December 2007 after battling his indictment through all court levels, he was found guilty of twice leading a pack-rape of 14-year old Carol Ann Stingel in 1971 (Uebergang, 2). Clark’s bathetic comment on his conviction was that it “represents the lowest point in the history of this country” (*Wikipedia*, entry on Geoff Clark).

In May 2009 the German journal GEO published an interview with Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and Race Discrimi-

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<sup>5</sup> In an interview with ABC’s “Lateline” presenter Tony Jones (June 3, 2007) Louis Nowra confronted the issue of removing children from Aboriginal families – *for their own safety*: “There’s also a - there’s a secret that nobody really talks about because Aboriginal children are taken from their communities at a rate much higher than at the times of assimilation in 1920s, 1930s. So in Victoria 1 per cent of children are Aboriginal but 12 per cent are taken from their homes because of the violence and because of the alcohol. Now the trouble is many more should be taken.” Web reference: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2007/s1864812.htm>

<sup>6</sup> For a proper debate on this, see Livio Dobrez’ excellent article in *Zeitschrift für Australienstudien* 21/22 (2007), pp. 36-45 (Klagenfurt).

nation Commissioner of the Kevin Rudd government (Albig, 2009). Asked about sexual abuse, he downplayed the issue: “the media presented it as if each man there was abusing children and was violent towards women”, saying that “here and there”, sex abuse cases may have had happened. He criticized the government for their “paternalistic” attitude of intervening rather than “cooperating with the communities.” The overwhelming evidence however, gathered in about 40 reports, is that violence really is embedded in each and every community. Paul Toohey (2009) reports that the NT’s “Child Abuse Task Force” (CAT) has conducted 842 child-sex investigations since June 2006. CAT has made 79 arrests, it has 124 cases under investigation and 41 matters before the court. Sex abuses only “here and there”? A recent report in *The Australian* (Anon., May 28, 2009) summarizes the case in these words: “Extent of Aboriginal child abuse ‘far worse’”. Secondly, Calma ignores that *real* violence against women and children is much more “paternalistic” than any governmental policy can be. And thirdly, he failed to admit that indigenous rulers had shown no inclination at all to “cooperate” with the government.

### THE WAY FORWARD?

Things are in flux and it is to be hoped that modern solutions can be found. One thing is certain: There is no stone-walling the issue any more. Of course it is hard for Australian Aborigines to admit of a cancerous evil in their midst; it took German and Austrian politicians 25 years or more to admit of their citizens’ involvement in the Nazi crimes. (Some deny them to this very day.) Enlightened Aborigines now say that they have to blend into mainstream society, and this must be done by a heavy emphasis on education. They go so far as to say that certain aspects of their traditional culture (for example its emphasis that no individual can own land) stand in the way of progress. They even raise the question whether there is any future for them on their ancestral lands, whether they must not move to where the jobs are. It is no use romanticising the past with its emphasis on the alleged strengths of the local: that policy was tried by the Labor Party and its chief advisor, and it was a total and unmitigated failure. For our part here “up over”, we should stop glamorizing an exotic culture as it only encourages Aborigines to stay frozen in the past.

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