

The Stolen Generations

In 1997, the National Inquiry was held into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families. Its aim was to investigate the effects of previous government policies that resulted in the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families.

This inquiry found in its report, *Bringing them home*, that ‘we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970.’ The people who were taken away from their families are often referred to as the Stolen Generations.

Legislation

The *NSW Aborigines Protection Act 1909*, gave the Aboriginal Protection Board the power to ‘assume full control and **custody** of the child of any Aborigine’ if a court found the child was being ‘neglected’ or ‘uncontrollable’. In 1915 this law was amended, so that the Board had total power to remove children from their families without having to prove in a court that the child was neglected.



Think about the meaning of the words, ‘neglect’ and ‘uncontrollable’. It’s quite possible that your understanding of these words is different from the definition used by the authorities in the early years of the twentieth century.

White society generally looked at **poverty** as a form of neglect. Since most Aboriginal families were living on government reserves, often receiving government rations and unable to get a job because of discrimination, they were poor. Often the Board would remove the children from a family because it was believed that poverty indicated neglect.

Blood lines

In 1914, the Board instructed that all children of ‘mixed blood’ aged 14 years and over were to leave the reserves. The girls went either into domestic service or to the Cootamundra Training Home for Girls. All boys were to find employment or be sent to a similar institution for boys.

Note how the order was for ‘mixed blood’ children. Terms such as ‘mixed blood’, ‘full blood’, and ‘half-caste’ are no longer used, as they are considered offensive. Today we prefer ‘full descent’ and ‘mixed descent’ and use the term ‘Indigenous’ to include all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.



Why do you think the order was directed at children of ‘mixed blood’ only, and not ‘full blood’?

The reason that the order was only directed at children of ‘mixed blood’ was because the Board felt that they could absorb the lighter skinned Indigenous children into the white population. The number of children of mixed descent was rapidly increasing. A major reason for this trend was the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white managers and other workers on the reserves.

Most government policies focused on children of mixed descent or those with lighter skin. The removal of these children from their families was supposed to make them appear ‘white’ by having them adopted by, or working for, a white family.



Read the following source. It is an extract from a newspaper report from May 1937. A word used in the extract with which you may be unfamiliar is ‘Protector’. In the early twentieth century, it meant the Government official in charge of Aboriginal affairs.

Mr Neville [the Chief Protector of WA] holds the view that within one hundred years the pure black will be extinct. But the half-caste problem was increasing every year. Therefore their idea was to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population. Sixty years ago, he said, there were over 60,000 full-blooded natives in Western Australia. Today there are only 20,000. In time there would be none. Perhaps it would take one hundred years, perhaps longer, but the race was dying.

Source: Brisbane’s *Telegraph*, May 1937 in *Bringing them home*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997, p 30.

The name, 'Mr Neville', may sound familiar. He was a central character in the movie, *Rabbit Proof Fence*. This story was based on the real experiences of a group of Indigenous girls who were taken from their parents in the 1930s. It is a film worth seeing if you get the chance.



Activity 11

Answer the following questions based on the 1937 newspaper report.

- 1 What does Mr Neville think will happen to full-blooded Aboriginal peoples?

- 2 How does he propose to treat full-blooded Aboriginal peoples compared to those of mixed descent?



Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

In 1928, the Federal Government asked J. W. Bleakley, the Queensland Protector of Aborigines, to report on Aboriginal policies. He was asked to concentrate on the future of 'half-castes' in the Northern Territory. Although Bleakley found that 'half-castes' preferred to remain with Aboriginal communities, he recommended a 'complete separation of half-castes from the Aborigines with a view to their absorption by the white race'.

Recall your earlier work on Aboriginal peoples and migrants. Bleakley's recommendations were essentially following the policy of assimilation that you have learnt about.

Following the Native Welfare Conference in 1937, and an inquiry into the operation of the Aboriginal Protection Board, the NSW Government changed the *Aborigines Protection Act*. This 1940 amendment changed the name of the Aboriginal Protection Board to the Aboriginal Welfare Board.

The 1940 legislation also changed the Board's powers to remove children. The Welfare Board once again had to prove to the Children's Court that a child was 'neglected' or 'uncontrollable' before removing the child from its family. The courts only became involved if the parents would not give permission for their children to be removed.



Activity 12

Colour in the circle that best answers the questions based on what you have learnt about legislation for Aboriginal peoples in the first half of the twentieth century.

- 1 Which of the following best describes J. W. Bleakeley's model for assimilation as it applied to Aboriginal peoples?
 - a The government had supervision and care over all Aboriginal peoples and any matters relating to them.
 - b Aboriginal peoples could choose to live in a similar way to other Australians while keeping their own culture and traditions.
 - c Aboriginal peoples were expected to fit into white society by 'living like white Australians' and adopting white traditions and culture.

- 2 The 1940 Amendment is similar to what previous legislation? (Hint: you may want to refer back to page 31)
 - a *The Aborigines Protection Act 1909*
 - b *The Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1915*
 - c *The Aborigines Protection (Amendment) Act 1938*



Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

The amendment also made it an offence for Aboriginal parents to try and contact their children when they were placed in institutions or with foster families. This made the experience even more traumatic for both the children and their families.



Would you like to be removed from your family and forbidden from ever contacting them again? And for no reason but the colour of your skin?

The Homes

When Aboriginal children were removed from their families they were placed in institutions or sometimes with foster families. The institutions, or Homes as they were called, were to teach Indigenous children to read, write, speak English and practise Christianity. The children also learnt skills to help them get jobs, not that these jobs were well paid!

The following map shows the location of some of the better-known reserves, missions and institutions in NSW.



Source: *Bringing them home*, Sydney, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997, p 45.

Cootamundra Girls Home

Cootamundra Training Home for Girls opened in 1911 and operated until 1969. Cootamundra was one of several institutions throughout Australia where Aboriginal children were taken after they were removed from their families. Look at the map to find the location of Cootamundra.



Read the following extract. It is from an autobiography of a woman removed to the Cootamundra Girls Home in 1917.

The Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls was, I believe, a hospital before it became the Home. It had a long, wide, big room in the centre, with rows of beds each side and a row of beds end to end up the middle of the room...

There was another long room called the dormitory with about half a dozen beds, and another with more beds... There were about thirty girls, but different ones came and went all the time...

There was a school in the grounds, and we three attended the first day, but I was kept from school the next day because I was too big. The officials called me the overgrown fourteen-year-old. I protested and said my mother ought to know. However, that was the last time I went to school. I think I was thirteen years and four months...

When the Protection Board visited the Home, which they did every now and then, some would speak to the girls and ask how they were getting on. One or two would speak up and say we didn't get enough to eat. At that, the men would say it couldn't be true, because the food bill for the home was enormous...

Source: Tucker M, *If everyone cared*, Grosvenor, Melbourne, 1984, pp. 97–99.



Activity 13

Answer these questions based on the Cootamundra Girls Home extract.

- 1 Is the extract primary or secondary evidence?

- 2 Where does this source come from?

- 3 What is the main purpose of the source?

- 4 Imagine you are preparing for an oral history interview with Ms Tucker. List three questions that you would like to ask her.



Check your responses by going to the suggested answers section.

The adults

The policy of separating children of mixed descent from their families was also applied to adults of mixed descent. Adults of mixed descent were told they were no longer allowed to live on the reserves and missions with their families.

The adults who had to move away from the missions also didn't fit into white society. Discrimination made it difficult for these people to belong. They found themselves stuck between two worlds. They were told that because they had 'white blood' they had to leave their home, where they had received food and shelter, and go and find a job and a new place to live. The discrimination they faced because they had some 'black blood' made this extremely difficult. Many couldn't find jobs and those who did, usually had to accept terrible pay and conditions.

Many of these people became 'fringe-dwellers' who lived on the outskirts of white settlements and on the edges of reserves.



Read the following extract. It is from a debate in the Federal Parliament on the establishment of the Aboriginal Welfare Board to replace the Aboriginal Protection Board. It illustrates the plight of the ‘fringe-dwelling’ Aboriginal peoples in 1940.

About 50% of the Aborigines are camped on stations and reserves which are controlled by the Government. The remainder are living independently of the board ... They are quite independent and free to live according to their own wishes. In many cases, they are living in close proximity to towns, in much the same way as the unemployed lived during the worst years of the depression, and in that regard they are a great annoyance to the community.

Source: Parliamentary debates on the 1940 Act in *Bringing them home*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1997, p.6.



Do you think the Aboriginal peoples were ‘free to live according to their own wishes’?

The Aboriginal peoples were not ‘free to live according to their own wishes’ because they weren’t allowed to live with their families and they were unable to make enough money to afford better housing.



Go to the exercises section and complete Exercises 2.10 to 2.11 as directed by your teacher.