

## Nation and Assimilation: Continuity and Discontinuity in Aboriginal Affairs in the 1950s

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‘Assimilation means that eventually, as they make progress, all the aboriginal people are to live as we do.’<sup>1</sup> In this succinct formulation, Paul Hasluck, Commonwealth Minister for Territories and leading architect of assimilation policies, registered both assimilation’s continuities with earlier policies and its points of novelty. As the model whom Aboriginal people were to emulate, ‘we’—white Australians—would clearly remain the source of legitimacy in political and social relationships. Yet by upholding a vision of social ‘progress’ and by opening the door to ‘our’ way of life to all Aborigines, assimilation entailed a significant shift in the relationship between the settler nation and the Indigenous peoples. For the preceding hundred years and more, the dominant view was that Aborigines were innately incapable of ‘progress’; that their racial constitution debarred them from ever living ‘as we do’; that, indeed, they had little time to live at all, their inherent antipathy to modernity dooming them to extinction.<sup>2</sup> Assimilation necessarily entailed a repudiation of the doomed race prognosis, a rejection, or at least dilution, of the long-held assumption of innate Aboriginal primitivity, and some faith in their capacity to become ‘civilised’ and thereby citizens of a modern national state. To that extent, assimilation was an optimistic doctrine. At the same time, it was profoundly pessimistic about the prospects of Aborigines maintaining existence on any terms other than by living ‘as we do’. As a 1958 Commonwealth report explained, assimilation meant ‘that to survive and prosper the numerically small aboriginal group, within a vastly larger white Australian group, must learn to live and work and think as the majority do’.<sup>3</sup>

According to Stuart Macintyre, ‘Assimilation has been the aim of government policy toward Aborigines for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’.<sup>4</sup> There is some substance to this claim; insofar as Aborigines had been subject to assimilatory pressures since first colonisation, and governments had, at various times and by various means, deliberately sought to assimilate certain categories of Aboriginal people into the wider society. But this should not be allowed to obscure the differences between post-war assimilation policies and the policies that preceded them. In this regard, the word ‘all’ in Hasluck’s formulation, quoted above, is pertinent. Assimilationist measures implemented in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had singled out one category—‘mixed-bloods’—for assimilation, leaving ‘full-bloods’ to their presumed doom. Also pertinent is the mode of assimilation entailed in Hasluck’s formulation: socio-cultural ‘progress’ and the adoption of a new way of life. Earlier schemes for the assimilation of ‘mixed-bloods’ had been biologically based, entailing the regulation of their reproduction until their colour had been ‘bred out’. Other historians have alluded to this shift in the post-war years, from an assimilation predicated on ‘blood’ and breeding to one founded upon culture and ‘way of life’.<sup>5</sup> I suggest here that the change from a biological to a socio-cultural model entailed more than merely a change in the mode of assimilation; it entailed also a shift in the ways in which the Australian nation was imagined.

This chapter pivots on two opposing—or perhaps complementary—points: The first, which I discuss under the heading ‘Citizenship’, is that post-war assimilation policies represented a fundamental innovation in Aboriginal administration. The second, which I discuss under the heading ‘Governance’, is that post-war assimilation manifested substantial continuities with

earlier policies and procedures. I also want to make the point that 'assimilation' was not just a policy or an ensemble of government practices; beyond those, it was also a discourse of nationhood. Like all socio-political discourses, assimilation was riven with discords, contestations and ambivalences. Its central aspiration was cohesive nationhood; but on what that meant, how it could be attained, and what it entailed for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, there was no lack of dispute. In the third section of this chapter, under the heading 'Nationhood', I draw attention to these discords and disputes, and suggest that the revised model of national incorporation that came to prominence at the end of the 1950s under the name 'integration' was in many ways continuous with earlier, explicitly assimilationist, critiques of government policy.

### **Citizenship**

Citizenship, as a policy aspiration for all Aboriginal people, regardless of descent, goes back no further than the Commonwealth's 1939 'New Deal for Aborigines' in the Northern Territory. Citizenship in the 'New Deal', as in later assimilationist discourse, was conceived in socio-culturally normative terms, its attainment entailing 'the gradual conversion of the natives from their nomadic habits to a settled life' and to the standards of 'a civilised community'.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the 'New Deal' was, as Charles Rowley observed, 'epoch-making' since it envisaged 'a common citizenship, without postulating genetic changes' and expressed 'a long-term objective for policy that was other than some kind of social engineering for the disappearance of the race into the white majority, taking the emphasis off miscegenation'.<sup>7</sup> Implementation of the New Deal was impeded by the outbreak of war, but henceforward it was this model of assimilation—citizenship via acculturation—that would prevail in Aboriginal policy and administration.

Rowley's allusions to miscegenation refer to the mode of assimilation (biological assimilation, hereafter designated 'absorption' to minimise confusion) pursued in the 1930s and earlier. Implemented most zealously and systematically by Western Australia's Commissioner of Native Affairs, A O Neville, and the Northern Territory's Chief Protector of Aborigines, Dr Cecil Cook, absorption received Commonwealth-wide administrative endorsement at the 1937 Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities.<sup>8</sup> Its colloquial designation, 'breeding out the colour', accurately represents absorption's primary objective, which was to be achieved through vast, state-supervised, trans-generational programs of managed miscegenation.<sup>9</sup> 'Colour', here, was a potent signifier, for breeding the colour out of persons of mixed descent was equally a program of breeding them into the national community. The colour—or rather, perhaps, absence of colour—of the Australian nation was white, not merely metaphorically, but literally, physically white.<sup>10</sup> In the absorptionist vision, persons of mixed descent could become members of the national community only by becoming white, shedding all attributes, biological and well as cultural, that would stamp their origins as distinctive, their descent discordant. As such, absorption was grounded in a potently ethnic conception of Australian nationhood, whereby the outward signifier of shared descent—colour—was given primacy as a criterion of national membership.<sup>11</sup>

Post-war assimilation, by contrast, emphasised the civic dimensions of national belonging. Aboriginal people would become members of the nation not through conformity to a common complexion, but through their adherence to shared norms and codes of conduct, and their enjoyment of equal rights and responsibilities with other Australians. It was a shift of emphasis rather than a total transformation, for no nationalism is purely civic or purely ethnic; all contain both civic and ethnic elements, though in varying degrees and proportions.<sup>12</sup> The shift to a more civically-orientated nationhood was flagged in the post-war conferences of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, held in 1948, 1951, 1952 and intermittently

thereafter, at which the delegates expressed none of the fuss about a 'rising tide of colour' or the need for reproductive regulation that characterised the 1937 conference. Instead, the focus was squarely on citizenship, conceived as a status for which Aboriginal people would qualify through 'their advancement in civilization'.<sup>13</sup> Exemplifying a civic conception of nationhood, Hasluck explained his policy in 1952:

*Assimilation...means that the aborigines and persons of mixed blood are expected eventually to attain to the same manner of living and to the same privileges of citizenship as white Australians and to live, if they choose to do so, as members of a single Australian community, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.*<sup>14</sup>

It was the commonalities—or sameness—of Aborigines and other Australians, in manner of living, customs, loyalties and so forth, along with the concomitant 'privileges of citizenship', that would bind them into the Australian nation.

Civically-orientated nationalisms are seldom, if ever, culturally neutral. Conformity to a shared public culture is as intrinsic to civic models of nationhood as shared rights and responsibilities; and this public culture is typically, to a greater or lesser extent, the culture of the nation's dominant ethnic group.<sup>15</sup> As Anthony Smith has pointed out, the cultural demands of civically-orientated nationalisms can be far from benign toward minority groups:

*For civic nationalisms often demand, as the price for receiving citizenship and its benefits, the surrender of ethnic community and individuality, the privatization of ethnic religion and the marginalization of the ethnic culture and heritage of minorities within the borders of the national state.*<sup>16</sup>

These were the cultural demands levied upon Aboriginal people as the price of their citizenship. While their colour had no longer to be 'bred out', their cultural heritage had to contract to mere folkloric remnants, and their social life-ways give way to the 'Australian way of life'.

Although conformity to the 'Australian way of life' was a dominant motif of 1950s assimilation (for immigrants as well as for Aborigines), it was a notoriously nebulous notion.<sup>17</sup> For present purposes, however, the pertinent quality of the 'way of life' was its enshrinement of the middle-class virtues of self-reliance, self-regulation and family-centred sociality. To instil these into Aboriginal people, a vast array of educational and training institutions was established. In the Northern Territory, government settlements were set up, where Aborigines were taught, among other things, the benefits of stable employment and competence in the use of cash thus earned, appropriate norms of nuclear-family domesticity and befitting standards of personal hygiene.<sup>18</sup> Following recommendations made at the 1948 Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, an Aboriginal education system was developed in the Northern Territory, with school enrolments trebling over the course of the 1950s, from 763 at the beginning of the decade to 2175 at its end.<sup>19</sup> Schools have long served the nationalist end of moulding youthful citizens-to-be into the desired national shape.<sup>20</sup> This was certainly the case for Aboriginal education in the 1950s, schools being regarded as primary sites for the inculcation of the knowledge, norms and behaviours requisite 'for living in full citizenship as part of the Australian community'.<sup>21</sup> It would be mistaken to imagine that those espousing these assimilatory aims were totally dismissive of Indigenous heritage. For example, the 1950 syllabus for Aboriginal schools, which provided the foundations of Aboriginal education for more than a decade, enjoined teachers to maintain a 'constant and open recognition of the worth of native culture', to encourage 'the aboriginal child...to feel a pride in his own culture', and to impress 'the fact

that there IS a place for aboriginals in Australian life', suggesting Harold Blair, Doug Nicholls and Albert Namatjira as appropriate role models. Even so, the primary objective was to prepare the Aboriginal child 'for entry into the white man's world', by inculcating a 'new intellectual, emotional and moral attitude' toward life.<sup>22</sup>

If Aboriginal people were to enter 'the white man's world', that world had to be receptive to them. In many instances, it patently was not. Consequently, assimilationists argued the need to combat 'colour prejudice', which was identified as one of the major obstacles to the realisation of assimilation. In contrast to the absorptionist aspiration of eradicating 'colour' itself, assimilation targeted 'colour prejudice'. The second meeting of the Native Welfare Council in September 1952:

*recognised that some of the obstacles in the way of coloured Australians enjoying full citizenship are not legal but social barriers and that they will only enjoy the privilege of citizenship if they can live and work as accepted members of the community. To this extent the problem of assimilation is one of breaking down the colour barrier which has been erected by the white community...consequently an information campaign to combat colour prejudice should be sustained.*<sup>23</sup>

This 'information campaign' remained somewhat desultory until late in the decade, when the Commonwealth began publication and wide dissemination of a series of promotional booklets on assimilation, in which white Australians were enjoined to accept Aboriginal people as members of their communities.<sup>24</sup> The persistent refrain of these booklets was that 'Aborigines can be assimilated', suggesting that many of their presumed readers had yet to be convinced of the possibility.

While the state entreated its citizens to be colour-blind in their dealings with Aborigines, the state itself was imperfectly so. The old categories based on 'blood' or descent continued to be invoked in the era of assimilation, and persons of half or lesser 'caste' continued to be considered more ready for citizenship than 'full-bloods'. For example, when new legislation to facilitate the assimilation of Northern Territory Aborigines was devised, in the form of the 1953 *Welfare Ordinance*, 'half-castes' were excluded from its ambit. Effectively, Northern Territory 'mixed-bloods' were granted citizenship in 1953, at the same time as 'full-bloods' were confined to the legal status of 'wards of the state'.<sup>25</sup> In this instance, the release of 'mixed-bloods' from discriminatory legislation was not simply a dictate from above; it was driven also by lobbying from the local Halfcastes Progressive Association and the North Australian Workers Union.<sup>26</sup> And the distinction made here, between 'full-blood' and 'mixed-blood' was not commensurate with earlier strategies of 'breeding out the colour'. The 'coloured' people of the Northern Territory were made citizens in 1953 regardless of their dark complexions, and there was no suggestion that their reproductive futures should be regulated toward their eventual whiteness.

Yet biological understandings of assimilation persisted into the post-war era. No longer was 'breeding out the colour' avowed policy in any Australian jurisdiction, but the inevitability and/or desirability of genetically subsuming the Aboriginal minority into the white majority continued to be invoked. According to C D Rowley in 1962, assimilation 'as popularly understood in the Australian context' did involve 'the gradual loss of biological differences (especially skin colour) through miscegenation'.<sup>27</sup> Rowley was at pains to distinguish a supposedly popular view of assimilation from its administrative best-practice. Yet even Hasluck, whom he considered (ambivalently) representative of such best-practice, could sometimes slip into formulations dangerously close to upholding biological absorption as an ultimate consequence of assimilation.<sup>28</sup> The thrust of Hasluck's advocacy, however, was not that colour should be 'bred out', but that colour should cease to signify in any socially or politically meaningful way,

becoming no more than a superficial and inconsequential attribute of particular individuals. 'Colour consciousness' was unbecoming in the modern Australian citizen, a principle Hasluck asserted as applicable equally to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens.<sup>29</sup>

In assimilationist discourses, few words were as freely bandied about as 'citizenship'. But exactly what 'citizenship' meant was never coherently and comprehensively elucidated. Nor could it be, since in the Australian political tradition 'citizenship' has never been closely defined, or its rights, responsibilities and requirements systematically set out.<sup>30</sup> Authorities in the 1950s knew that Aboriginal people already possessed the formal legal status of 'Australian citizens', by virtue of the 1948 *Nationality and Citizenship Act*; and they were equally aware of the point that has recently been elaborated by John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, that this formal legal status was irrelevant to their rights and entitlements, which were determined by specific items of Commonwealth and state legislation.<sup>31</sup> Assimilationists realised that if Aborigines were to be incorporated into the nation, they had to become legally equal to other citizens; but legal/civic equality was to be deferred until Aborigines proved themselves capable of exercising their rights 'responsibly', that is, in accordance with national norms. In this conception of citizenship, legal equality was secondary to, and consequent upon, cultural attainment.

### **Governance**

Ultimately, assimilation aspired to novel forms of Aboriginal governance. As they became citizens, living 'as we do', Aborigines would be governed as 'we' were: consensually, through their fidelity to the norms and values of the national community. The questions remained: how they should be governed in the meantime? what forms of governance would best promote their acculturation into citizenship? On these, as on other assimilationist questions, there was no single answer. In practice, however, one of the most striking features of Aboriginal governance in the era of assimilation was its continuity with earlier, often authoritarian, forms of governance. In some instances, authoritarian practices became more entrenched and more intrusive, as Aboriginal lives came to be more meticulously regulated for the purpose of transforming them into responsible citizens. Among the intrusive and disruptive practices of assimilation that were continued from earlier policy eras, child theft is commonly highlighted today.<sup>32</sup> But in myriad other respects, Aboriginal people continued to be controlled and regulated in ways that had become customary, even though the ultimate objective had shifted to their incorporation into the nation. As the anthropologist William Stanner observed in 1964, looking back on two decades of the policy, assimilation was motivated by 'benevolent' intentions, but was offered on terms that were 'still fundamentally dictatorial'.<sup>33</sup> This was not simply a matter of bureaucratic inertia or administrative conservatism, though the significance of these should not be overlooked.<sup>34</sup> Beyond those, a vast array of assumptions about Aboriginal people remained in place.

The continuities (and to some extent, discontinuities) of Aboriginal governance are well exemplified in the 1953 *Welfare Ordinance*, devised by Paul Hasluck as the legislative foundations of assimilation. This followed his announcement that in the interests of securing 'citizenship for native people, the Commonwealth Government has decided to amend the whole of the Northern Territory legislation on the subject'.<sup>35</sup> Legislative amendments consisted largely of giving the Director of Welfare new citizen-making responsibilities, 'to promote [the Aborigines'] social, economic and political advancement for the purpose of assisting them and their descendants to take their place as members of the community of the Commonwealth'.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, stress was laid on education, vocational training, health, hygiene, nutrition and housing, to bring Aborigines to a social, cultural and physical status commensurate with that of white people. Yet the more striking feature of the *Welfare Ordinance* is its similarity to the *Aboriginals Ordinance* it replaced. Indeed, in the drafting stage it was admitted that 'Generally the provisions of the draft

Ordinance follow those of the “Aboriginals Ordinance 1918-1947”. Despite this, Hasluck certified the draft ‘to be generally on the right lines’.<sup>37</sup>

Another remarkable feature of the *Welfare Ordinance* (and in this it was unlike the *Aboriginals Ordinance*) is that it nowhere referred to ‘Aborigines’, ‘natives’ or any other racial or ethnic identifier, even though it was patently an instrument of Aboriginal governance. The non-reference to ‘Aborigines’ was at the Minister’s insistence, against the advice of his officers in the Northern Territory.<sup>38</sup> According to Hasluck, the word ‘Aborigine’ must be avoided in legislation because the state must not extend legal recognition to any racial or ethnic group; to do so would discriminate between people on the improper grounds of racial or ethnic origins rather than on the (to him) quite proper grounds of ‘conduct and mode of living’.<sup>39</sup> Instead of ‘Aborigines,’ the ordinance identified its subjects as ‘wards’. This, Hasluck averred, was preferable, both because wardship was a revocable legal status rather than an ascriptive ethnic label, and because it accurately described these people’s ‘need of guardianship and tutelage’.<sup>40</sup>

The *Welfare Ordinance* did not reduce Aborigines to the legal status of wards; they were already effectively that. Nor did Hasluck envisage Aborigines remaining wards in perpetuity; it was a stage intended to facilitate their advancement into citizenship. Assimilation, more generally, he conceived as a process of advancement through ‘stages of progress’, legal discriminations being lifted as the Aborigine advanced from one stage to the next.<sup>41</sup> ‘Any discrimination between the white and the coloured person,’ Hasluck declared, ‘is to be regarded as a temporary measure based, not upon colour, but existing needs for guardianship and tutelage and is to be removed as soon as the need for it disappears.’<sup>42</sup> Until then, the draconian controls implied by the term ‘ward’ would continue. Determining when such discriminations should be lifted—when, that is, Aborigines no longer stood in need of ‘guardianship and tutelage’—Hasluck acknowledged to be one of the more intractable problems of assimilation.<sup>43</sup> He was adamant, nonetheless, that the state’s duties of ‘guardianship and tutelage’ necessitated rigorous restrictions on its Aboriginal citizens-to-be.

Wardship represented continuity not merely in mode of governance but also in assumptions about the character of Aboriginal people. As the Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, A P Elkin, pointed out in a lengthy critique of the ordinance, wardship was a status generally associated with children, so the ordinance perpetuated the ‘old convenient fallacy’ that Aborigines constituted a ‘child-race’, incapable of realising their own best interests.<sup>44</sup> In similar vein, the Methodist missionary, A F Ellemor, denounced the ordinance for ‘classing [the Aborigines] as wards and grouping them with delinquents, lunatics and criminals’.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Hasluck was disarmingly frank in explicitly making the analogies deplored by Elkin and Ellemor. Under the ordinance, he noted, the system would be ‘analogous to the kind of action customary [sic] taken under the laws in respect of neglected children, the feeble-minded, or other persons who need special care’.<sup>46</sup> Incompetence had long been an assumed characteristic of Aborigines, and the language of wardship sustained that assumption. Where Hasluck departed from earlier, race-bound, conceptions of Aboriginal incompetence was in rendering their incompetence remediable. It could be remedied only under the firm paternal guidance of the state.

Hasluck’s *Welfare Ordinance*—indeed, his entire conception of assimilation—was founded upon his assumption of the rapid and inevitable collapse of Aboriginal culture and social structures on contact with Western civilisation. ‘What happens is that the aboriginal society collapses and the stranded individual either lives and dies an outcast or enters the Australian society.’<sup>47</sup> Although Hasluck did not always represent the consequences of inter-cultural contact as starkly as this, the imagery of socio-cultural collapse is highly salient in his writings. Assimilation, he resolutely maintained, did not cause the collapse; rather, it was a necessary consequence of the inevitable ‘breaking down of tribal life’.<sup>48</sup> His arguments on this score might be considered mere evasion or special pleading, but they were in accord with pervasive

assumptions of the frailty and feebleness of Aboriginal culture (indeed, of everything Aboriginal) that had been current for over a century. Against the doomed race idea, which held that the collapse of this frail socio-cultural order necessarily portended the demise of its bearers, Hasluck maintained that Aboriginal individuals were adaptable, capable (under guidance and tutelage) of assuming the civilisation of white Australia. But while Aboriginal people, as individuals, were adaptable, Aboriginal cultures and social structures were not. Efforts to sustain an Aboriginal socio-cultural heritage (other than as a folkloric residue) Hasluck represented as not merely futile but worse: impediments to the realisation of citizenship.<sup>49</sup>

Hasluck's rival as intellectual leader of the assimilationist cause, A P Elkin, propounded quite a different vision of assimilation. The *Welfare Ordinance*, according to Elkin, not only demeaned Aboriginal people by classifying them as 'wards'; it was based on a fundamentally flawed concept of assimilation: 'the type of assimilation envisaged by the Bill is the complete change in the Aborigines in all but skin colour. But this is impossible.' What was necessary, he averred, was to recognise the 'importance of being Aboriginal' since Aborigines constituted 'a Distinct Group':

*The Aborigines are racially different from us, and recognizably so. In spite of the economic, religious, social and political assimilation at which we aim, they will be a distinct group, or series of groups, for generations to come. Indeed, they will develop pride in their own cultural background and distinctness while at the same time, being loyal and useful citizens.*<sup>50</sup>

Assimilation, in Elkin's view, was ideally a process of 'cultural blending', in which Aborigines gradually worked out their own 'Aboriginal version of the European view of life and religion'.<sup>51</sup> From this perspective, the endurance of Indigenous traditions was not an impediment to Aboriginal 'advancement,' but a positive contributor to the process. The success of such creative cultural engagements, he stipulated, depended on the maintenance of Indigenous group solidarity and substantial cultural continuity. Thus, he considered it to hold greater promise in the north and centre of the continent, whereas in closer-settled southern Australia he regarded Indigenous social structures and cultures as too deeply eroded to provide secure foundations for change. But where the foundations were reasonably secure, 'advancement' should proceed by preserving and renovating, rather than demolishing or renouncing, the Indigenous heritage.<sup>52</sup>

Elkin's conception of assimilation is exemplified in his 1953 proposals for Aboriginal policy in the Darwin area. There, he acknowledged, the existing Aboriginal groups, after nearly a century of contact with Europeans, were not identical to the pre-contact groups but had modified their social structures and created 'a wider Aboriginal solidarity'. This in no way diminished the vitality or viability of Aboriginal culture, the maintenance of which Elkin construed as advantageous:

*Above all, the ritual life is retained or revived. This strengthens the authority of the elders, for their power derives from their place in, and knowledge of, the secret life...Further, rituals, which are sacred but not secret, such as some connected with initiation and burial, serve to express, against the background of the "Eternal Dreamtime", the solidarity of the group in belief and aspiration, as well as in outward association.*

'In other words', he continued 'the elders hope and plan to cope with the modern process of economic and political assimilation, by strengthening tribal sentiment and loyalty to the secret

ceremonial life, with its moral and social implications.’ This was all to the good, for ‘their own sacred and secret sanctions’ provided the best means of maintaining ‘community solidarity and well-being’. Moreover, he claimed, ‘they are developing a pride in themselves as Aborigines, and when they become full citizens of Australia, they will do so as Australian Aborigines, who have worked out their new adaptation.’<sup>53</sup>

Hasluck assumed that the primary task of Aboriginal welfare was to facilitate the upward social mobility of deprived individuals (who happened to be Aboriginal).<sup>54</sup> Consequently, he envisaged assimilation as a process of individuals extricating themselves from the ruins of a decaying Aboriginal culture and society. Elkin, by contrast, assumed the fundamental embeddedness of individuals in their social groups, and the essential need to maintain ‘continuity with the past’ to ensure ‘preservation and progress.’<sup>55</sup> At the 1959 Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) Congress, he explained that ‘Through their own [Aboriginal] group life, continuity with the past will be retained; social security in the present be experienced and assurance for the future certain. These are essential principles for a people’s well-being.’<sup>56</sup> While Elkin insisted that ‘the Aborigines must move up in groups’,<sup>57</sup> Hasluck explicitly disavowed this collectivist approach, stating that ‘we [should] avoid any tendency to push people forward in groups’.<sup>58</sup> The disagreement between these two leading exponents of assimilation was symptomatic of wider disagreements among proponents of assimilation in the 1950s; these will be considered in the following section.

### **Nationhood**

According to the classic definition by the American sociologist Robert Park, assimilation refers ‘to the process or processes by which people of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence’.<sup>59</sup> Exactly what processes were involved, and what might constitute a ‘sufficient’ level of cultural solidarity, Park, wisely, refrained from stipulating. His crucial point was that assimilation forged nationhood out of diversity. The permissible level of enduring cultural diversity within the nation may be set high or low, varies between different nations, changes over time, and is almost always contested among the nation’s constituent groups. But whether the nation be relatively accommodating or stridently suppressive of cultural differences, assimilation is inherently asymmetrical, its demands levied primarily upon minority groups since it is they, not the national majority, who must acquire a new identity, norms and values in the interests of national solidarity. Assimilation has been a common strategy of nation-building since the dawning of the age of nationalism in the late eighteenth century. As the ideal of the nation-state came increasingly under challenge in the late twentieth century, critics frequently targeted the assimilatory means by which that ideal has been realised.<sup>60</sup> From another angle, the recent resurgence of minority ethno-nationalisms throughout the world can be understood as reactions against the assimilatory propensities of the putatively national state.<sup>61</sup>

Although assimilation is widely reviled today, this was not the case in the 1950s. Then, the assimilation of Indigenous peoples held the imprimatur of the premier international body, the United Nations. The main United Nations agency that concerned itself with Indigenous peoples at the time, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), was firmly committed to ideologies of progress, and to the setting of Indigenous peoples on the pathway of progress via their incorporation into the national life-ways of their encompassing states. According to Chris Tennant, the ILO conceived assimilation as the only viable means of raising Indigenous peoples to a standard of living commensurate with their survival in the modern world. In his comprehensive survey of the international literature of the time, Tennant suggests that this vision of Indigenous destinies began to unravel toward the end of the decade, the crucial event



being the adoption of ILO Convention 107 of 1957, 'Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries.'<sup>62</sup> If ILO Convention 107 had this pertinence internationally, it also had considerable national resonance. It was this Convention that bequeathed to Australian activists the term 'integration', which from the late 1950s became a rallying-cry for activists seeking change in Aboriginal policy.

Until the late 1950s, the major activist groups devoted to Aboriginal interests endorsed assimilation. The multi-racial, New South Wales-based Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship (A-AF) was typical, including in its 1956 Constitution explicit support for the 'policy of assimilation', which it evidently considered congruent with its other objectives of establishing 'the fullest mutual understanding between the Aboriginal and European Australians' and 'complete social and political equality' between the two groups.<sup>63</sup> Yet by 1958 the president of the A-AF, Herbert Groves, was expressing profound apprehensions about 'assimilation', and a strong preference for a policy of 'integration.'<sup>64</sup> The A-AF amended its constitution the following year. In the case of the Aboriginal Advancement League (AAL), founded in March 1957, the impact of 'integration' was more immediate and more striking. The draft constitution of the AAL, dated April 1957, included the objective: 'To assist in the effective assimilation of those people [Aborigines] into the larger community with full recognition of the contribution they are able to make to the community.'<sup>65</sup> Later that year, the AAL adopted a formal constitution in which this objective had been amended to: 'To work toward the complete integration of people of Aboriginal descent with the Australian community, with full recognition of the contribution they are able to make.'<sup>66</sup> Thereafter, the AAL vehemently opposed assimilation, in 1959 going so far as to claim that 'assimilation' implied 'racial genocide' of the Aborigines, whereas 'integration' was entirely laudable and desirable.<sup>67</sup> How, then, could this organisation have endorsed 'assimilation' in its own draft constitution only two years before? There is nothing to suggest that the leaders of the AAL had experienced an ideological epiphany in the middle months of 1957. What had changed was that another word had entered the activists' lexicon: 'integration', taken from ILO Convention 107 of 1957. The word struck a chord with many activists, because it allowed them to distance themselves from government policy while simultaneously affirming their commitment to national inclusion.

'Integration' denoted a mode of national incorporation respectful of Indigenous cultures and social solidarities, and receptive to Aboriginal autonomy and identity. It entailed a rejection of the monocultural nationhood imagined by official assimilation policy, and a recognition that civic equality within the nation was compatible with cultural diversity.<sup>68</sup> Some partisans for the new term, such as the AAL leaders quoted above, radically dissociated it from assimilation, and into the 1960s 'integration' versus 'assimilation' became a major battlefield in Indigenous politics. Yet as more astute observers of the day pointed out, the line between 'integration' and 'assimilation' was at best hazy, and perhaps illusory.<sup>69</sup> That there were dissensions between integration and state policies of assimilation is unquestionable, but in many ways these dissensions were continuous with disputes that had emerged within assimilationist discourses over the preceding decade. Reference has already been made to the dispute between Hasluck and Elkin. Other scholars have noted that Elkin's 'assimilation' was congruent with 'integration'; and Elkin himself said so.<sup>70</sup> He endorsed, sometimes guardedly, the emergence of a culturally pluralist nation, and welcomed the cultural enrichment that Aborigines could contribute to it.<sup>71</sup> Insisting that to become citizens Aborigines must become 'civilised', he also asserted that this 'does not mean that they will become just as we are... Rather, they will add another variation to our present varieties.'<sup>72</sup>

Elkin was not a lone voice crying out in the wilderness of 1950s assimilation. Others

pushed a similar line. Anthropologists such as T G H Strehlow, Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt argued for a collectivist approach to assimilation, proceeding through the retention and renovation of Indigenous cultures and social structures.<sup>73</sup> For Strehlow in particular, assimilation should be reciprocal, the Australian nation drawing moral inspiration from Aboriginal spirituality and sociality.<sup>74</sup> Missionaries were overwhelmingly in favour of assimilation; indeed, they were among its primary agents. But many, like the Methodist Wilbur Chaseling, founder of Yirrkala Mission in Arnhem Land, and the Presbyterian Charles Duguid, founder of Ernabella in the Centre, were committed to an assimilation that allowed Aboriginal people considerable choice in the pace and texture of social change and the retention of much of their cultural heritage.<sup>75</sup> At a conference of missionaries and administrative officers in Darwin in 1953, the Methodist missionary, A F Ellemor, acutely dissected Commonwealth policy. He was appreciative of the 'progressive, out-reaching' stance that had recently been adopted, and endorsed what he termed 'economic assimilation' and 'political assimilation'. But in cultural matters he preferred the term 'amalgamation', because it:

*involves the recognition of Aboriginal culture as an element of continuing worth in the new 'whole' that is being worked out; it leaves the Aboriginal people themselves to work out the modification of their culture and to adapt themselves to the European challenge; and it leaves the future open, as to where the balance will lie between predominantly Aboriginal and European elements in the final result.*

More generally, he considered that "'Citizenship" would be the best general term to adopt to describe the new policy outlook' since, in his view, 'This term is broad enough to recognise the place of differing cultures within one community.'<sup>76</sup>

Even within the Native Affairs/Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory, officers expressed views on assimilation at odds with their minister's. In 1953, E C Evans, Acting District Superintendent of the Native Affairs Branch, Alice Springs, outlined a philosophy of assimilation that was decidedly collectivist in orientation. 'For any group to survive and progress,' he argued, 'there must be some principle of cohesion holding the members together, and ties with the past giving them continuity as they move forward.' Consequently, the Aboriginal 'family and social pattern', along with their cultural heritage, should, as far as possible, be maintained; otherwise 'there can be little hope for their survival and successful assimilation'. Deviating further from government policy, Evans urged Aboriginal groups to be granted 'Ownership of their land', since a 'native people divorced from their land, in my opinion, has little hope of successful assimilation'.<sup>77</sup> Evans' views appear to have been by no means exceptional among his patrol officer colleagues.<sup>78</sup>

Such views, propounded as 'assimilation', are indistinguishable from what later was called 'integration', except perhaps in one significant respect. Proponents of the collectivist, culturalist approach to 'assimilation' had tended to assume that it was applicable only, or mainly, in northern and central Australia where Indigenous socio-cultural integrity had been maintained. The strongest demands for 'integration', by contrast, came from southern 'detrribalised' Aborigines of mixed descent. Hitherto, few white activists on the Aborigines behalf had given much credence to the possibility of substantial cultural retention or revival among these people, or to their maintenance of distinctively Aboriginal social formations. The Melbourne activist, Anna Vroland, was a rare exception.<sup>79</sup> Integration, then, was not so much a new idea as an expansion of an old one, to encompass all persons of Aboriginal descent, continent-wide, as a single vast collectivity with a common history, heritage and destiny. As such, it connected with growing sentiments of pan-Aboriginality and the mobilisation of national Aboriginal political networks.

Attempts to establish an organisation representative of Aborigines across the continent go back at least to the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association of the 1920s.<sup>80</sup> None were successful until 1958, when the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA) was founded. Initially, the pan-Aboriginal credentials of the FCAA were compromised by its leadership including non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous persons. Nonetheless, it did provide, for the first time, a formal political structure linking Aboriginal people and groups throughout Australia. From its inception, the FCAA campaigned for Federal Constitutional change, to delete Sections 51 (xxvi) and 127 and to give the Commonwealth power over Aboriginal affairs nationally, a campaign that culminated in the 1967 referendum. Although the FCAA (from 1964 FCAATSI: Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) espoused 'integration', not 'assimilation', its campaign rhetoric for the 1967 referendum upheld an ideal of unitary, cohesive Australian nationhood that is scarcely distinguishable from official assimilation policies of the day.<sup>81</sup> Yet the legacy of the FCAA also flowed in a contrary direction since, as the first successful pan-Aboriginal organisation, it fostered an ever-stronger sense of Aboriginal unity, identity and autonomy, that is, of distinctive Aboriginal nationhood.<sup>82</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The 1950s were not years of stasis or stability in Aboriginal affairs but a decade of ferment. Assimilation, the archetypal policy of the decade, entailed a shift from exclusion to inclusion of Aborigines in the national community, and thereby a shift in how the nation itself was imagined. Assimilation, as a discourse of nationhood, was internally conflicted, a site of dispute as much as of consensus. Assimilation held emancipatory aspirations for Aboriginal people, and at the same time sustained oppressive forms of governance. Responding to the latter, Aboriginal people asserted an ever-stronger sense of their own identity, autonomy and unity, cultivating connections and associations that spanned the continent and that culminated in the establishment of the first successful pan-Aboriginal organisation in 1958.

Assimilation's most novel innovation was to place citizenship as the paramount aspiration of Aboriginal policy. This marked as significant a policy shift as later innovations such as the advent of self-determination in the 1970s. Regardless of the numerous provisos and qualifications around which Aboriginal citizenship was hedged in the 1950s, by making citizenship the cardinal principle of policy, the state legitimated Aboriginal membership of the nation. In doing so, it opened a Pandora's box of dispute and contestation over what Aboriginal membership of the nation entailed and how it might best be realised. Once opened, it has never since been closed.

### **Notes**

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