

# Australia Day: a day for healing and gratitude

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**MnM Commentary No 25**

The Order of Australia Association invited me to their Australia Day Multi-Faith Celebration at Elder Hall, University of Adelaide on 26 January 2013. I was humbled and delightfully accepted the invitation. His Excellency Rear Admiral Kevin Scarce, Governor of South Australia, and Mrs Liz Scarce, Mr Hieu Van Le, Chairman of South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission, and leaders of the ethnic and religious communities amongst others attended the event. The heart-rending event was laced with speeches, music, religious symbols and scriptures. His Excellency Governor Kevin Scarce gave a speech on the theme of the event, 'Australians Together: Giving and Forgiving'. Indigenous Kurna Elder, Uncle Lewis O'Brien, offered a coolamon of eucalyptus leaves as an expression of friendship between the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains and the people of South Australia. Indigenous Australians have used eucalyptus leaves to heal physical wounds. In his speech Mr Hieu Van Lee stated, 'In this hall we have representatives of the first people of Australia, whose history and love for this land stretch back at least 40,000 years'. Mr Lee also mentioned that over the last two centuries people from almost every part of the world have migrated to Australia.

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The Australia Day event reminded the audience that there can be differences among people but the ability to live together is the strength of Australian society. The event also reminded the audience that hurting other people can be human nature but forgiving is a conscious step towards reconciliation. Yet the Australia Day event was also a time for me to reflect on how the original owners of the land felt when British settlers arrived in 1788,<sup>2</sup> and later how they felt when Aboriginal children were forcibly taken away from their parents and moved to reserves under the ‘civilising task’ of the Australian federal and state governments and church missions.

In 2003 I met an Aboriginal Elder Uncle at an Aboriginal Philosophy Farm in New South Wales. I told Elder Uncle that I came to this place to learn about Aboriginal people and culture. I asked Elder Uncle if he would share his life story with me. Elder Uncle agreed to share his life story and told me he was a part of the Stolen Generation. In his interview, he introduced himself as, ‘My name is xxx, and I am one of the groups that they refer to as the “Stolen Generation People”’.<sup>3</sup> Elder Uncle told me that he was taken away from his family at the age of five and moved to a reserve. Elder Uncle said, ‘We were taken away from home and put into this xxx reserve run by the xxx church. It was 100 miles away [from my home town] and that’s where we grew up.’

Elder Uncle moved out from the reserve at the age of 20 and heard that his mother had died. She used to work for the mission and the minister and was house girl for them. Elder Uncle said, ‘So many of us that had very similar experiences. There are old people who have the same story from this area, where they were institutionalised from here, and taken to other places. It happened right throughout Australia.’ Elder Uncle said that their tribal philosophy was non-violence so they suffered, healed and moved on.

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2 Australia Day is celebrated annually on 26 January, the date that commemorates the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove, New South Wales. The day is celebrated with community events, concerts and citizenship ceremonies and at night fireworks symbolise the joy of togetherness.

3 Interviewed by the author, New South Wales, 2003. To retain anonymity, I am referring to him as Elder Uncle.

When I asked Elder Uncle if they have had any particular religion, Elder Uncle commented, ‘There was no Christianity until we were institutionalised. I took on to this particular xxx Christian denomination but that was because we were put in that particular institution.’ Elder Uncle spoke of his spirituality, ‘The Time of Creation which the anthropologists and “White people” refer to as “The Dreaming”.<sup>4</sup> That’s our beginning xxx Time of Creation – present, past and future all rolled into one’. Elder Uncle continued:

We have a kinship system. You know caring for one another was one which was set up in our xxx law and we got our totemic connection – we are all one, we are all as though you have a relation system in there – and you, and the totemic once can relate to the neighbouring one and under xxx law you have to look after all of them.

On the totemic connection and their relation to land, Elder Uncle said:

No one can own a land. You see it is that grass and mountain and fields, stone and tree they are living being in some sense. They breathe, they eat, they drink ... to live to become alive they do all those things which we do the same, but they don’t move around like we move around.

Elder Uncle shared a very personal story of his father. Once his father wanted to stop a man from pulling down some trees. Elder Uncle said, ‘My father stood in front of the bulldozer and asked in tribal language and broken English, “Why are you killing our family?” The man replied, “I am not killing down your family. I am just knocking down trees.”’ Elder Uncle became emotional when he said:

Hateful and bizarre and a slaughter of innocent lives you see. The tree couldn’t run ... Here they are being cleared for houses. In 1974 a cyclone called Tracy wiped out all those houses. That are got levelled to the ground some years later. We just thought what goes around comes around. All houses that replaced those trees were flattened.

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4 See also, James Cowan, *Aborigine Dreaming*, Thorsons, London, 1992.

Coming from an immigrant background and knowing very little about Aboriginal Australians, I was deeply touched by this story. During my PhD study I read a few Aboriginal history books and came to know that many Aboriginals were eliminated.<sup>5</sup> Popular measures taken against the Indigenous population involved exclusion, segregation, dispossession, extermination, genocide and denial of economic and political rights.<sup>6</sup> A rapid decline in the Aborigines' numbers due to contact with unaccustomed diseases together with deliberate mass killings, banishment to segregated reserves and ultra-exploitation in the pastoral workforce was explained by arguments that the remnants of the lower orders of evolution could not withstand contact with a 'superior race'. Regarding the rigorous restrictions imposed on Aborigines, historian Andrew Markus noted that the 'protectionist' legislation adopted by most states and the Commonwealth between 1897 and 1910, in succession to the laissez-faire policies of most colonies (Victoria being the main exception), empowered officials to limit the movement of Aborigines to specific towns. In Western Australia, for example, Aborigines could not enter Perth without a permit. In the Northern Territory the Chief Protector could compel Aborigines, either singly or in groups, to move from a town, the vicinities of a town or a municipal district, to reside in a specific location such as a government reserve. In Queensland, the responsible minister could order an 'uncontrollable' Aborigine to be imprisoned indefinitely without appeal. It was an offence for an Aborigine to enter or leave a reserve without permission.<sup>7</sup>

The forceful removal of Aboriginal children from their parents has been one of the darkest phases of Australian race relations history. At the Aboriginal Philosophy Farm in 2003, apart from Elder Uncle, I met other members of the Stolen Generation. They also spoke of their feeling of loss and emptiness due to being separated from their parents. I was deeply touched by their personal stories. On 11 May 1995 the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was 'established to

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5 James Jupp, 'The Making of the Anglo-Australians' in J. Jupp (ed) *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1988.

6 See Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to European Invasion*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic, 1982; Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?: A Personal Search for the Truth About our History*, Viking, Ringwood, Vic, 1999.

7 Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations: 1788-1993*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994.

examine the effects of separation, identify what should be done in response, find justification for any compensation and look at the laws of that time affecting child separation'.<sup>8</sup> On 13 February 2008 the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, moved a motion of apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples with specific reference to the Stolen Generations.<sup>9</sup> A voice of defiance was however heard from the former Prime Minister John Howard who defended his decision not to say sorry to Aboriginal Australians during his eleven years' rule and criticised the Rudd government's apology to the stolen generations. Mr Howard said:

I do not believe as a matter of principle that one generation can accept responsibility for the acts of an earlier generation ... In some cases, children were wrongly removed, in other cases they were removed for good reason, in other cases they were given up and in other cases, the judgement on the removal is obscure or difficult to make.<sup>10</sup>

In 2011 Aboriginal people comprised 2.6 per cent of the total population of Australia.<sup>11</sup> They have high unemployment and health issues that need to be addressed.<sup>12</sup>

The Australia Day 2013 theme 'Giving and Forgiving' is of course a good gesture. However, reflecting on the injustices Indigenous Australians have endured and continue to endure, forgiveness can be a very big ask. So when at Elder Hall, University of Adelaide, Indigenous Kaurna Elder Uncle Lewis O'Brien welcomed us with a coolamon of eucalyptus leaves, and

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8 'Stolen Generations Timeline', *Creative Spirits*, <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/stolen-generations-timeline>, accessed 29 January 2013.

9 Anne Davies, 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples', *Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs*, 13 February 2008, <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/recognition-respect/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>, accessed 28 January 2013.

10 Ibid.

11 'What details do we know about the Indigenous population?', *Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet*, <http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/health-facts/health-faqs/aboriginal-population>, accessed 28 January 2013.

12 Paul Kauffman, 'Diversity and Indigenous Policy Outcomes: Comparisons Between Four Nations', *International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations*, Vol 3, 2003, pp 150–180, <http://tracker.org.au/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2011/10/Diversity-and-Indigenous-Policy-Outcomes.pdf>, accessed 29 January 2013.

other Australians acknowledged Aboriginals as the original owners of the land, I paid my deep respect and gratitude to Indigenous Australians.