

HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

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The Australian Aborigines comprise the oldest living culture in the world. Aborigines have occupied the Australian continent, relatively undisturbed, for at least 50,000 years. Their way of life began to profoundly and permanently change after the English laid claim to the continent in 1770. Who are these people we call Aborigines? Where did they come from? How has colonization over the past 200 years affected them? What is the current plight of Aborigines? These are a few of the questions that I would like to address this afternoon.

A word about the term 'Aboriginal.' The word 'aboriginal' which comes from the Latin *ab origine* (meaning 'from the beginning') emerged in seventeenth-century English to mean the 'original inhabitants of a land'. The word 'aboriginal' was not at first used in Australia. Following the 1770 'discovery' of Australia by the English, the original inhabitants were called 'natives' and also 'the blacks'. Both of these terms remained in common usage until the twentieth century. The words 'aboriginal' and 'aborigine' gradually became more commonly used in the late 19th century. The term 'aboriginal' historically was used without a capital 'A', which gave it a derogatory edge. It has been capitalized conventionally since the 1960's,

revealing new respect. 'Aboriginal people' has now become the term preferred to 'Aborigines' or 'Aboriginals'.

One must have an understanding of the origin of mankind and also possess a knowledge of the history of the 'discovery' and colonization of Australia by the British in order to comprehend the present day situation of Australian Aborigines. Therefore, allow me to briefly digress.

It is largely believed that homo sapiens arose in Africa about 150,000 years ago. Homo sapiens began migrating out of East Africa about 60,000 years ago. Population geneticists, such as Spencer Wells, have studied mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosome information to accurately document the migration of homo sapiens around the globe. How might have the Aboriginals reached such a far-away continent as Australia, separated from the African and Asian continents by large areas of open sea? One must examine the climatic conditions that existed long ago for an answer to this question.

Global climate has been relatively stable during the past 10,000 years. Between 2 million and 15,000 years ago much of the world was frozen into ice sheets at the poles. There were periodic warming periods that occurred roughly every 100,000 years.

During these colder periods, the sea levels dropped by as much as 395 feet exposing vast continental shelves,

portions of continents normally submerged under relatively shallow seas.

These exposed shelves produced land bridges and small islands that served as stepping stones for human migration. This allowed for the migration of homo sapiens from Africa across the Arabian Peninsula, through India, Indochina, Malayasia, Indonesia and eventually to Australia and New Guinea about 50,000 years ago. (see map) At one time, Australia was connected both to Tasmania and to New Guinea by land bridges producing a megacontinent termed Sahul.

The last ice age came to an end 15,000 to 10,000 years ago. During this warming period, called the Holocene, the sea levels rose and large areas of land were inundated in just a few decades. Many of the inland lakes in Australia subsequently dried up and vast deserts formed.

The Aborigines populated the entire continent of Australia for thousands of years. They survived as hunter/gatherers and existed in small groups. Aboriginal society was relatively mobile, or semi-nomadic, constantly moving due to the ever changing availability of food. Estimates put the total population of Aborigines between 300,000 and 750,000 separated into perhaps 600 distinct tribes that spoke around 250 languages and 700 dialects. Compare the map of modern day Australia (six states) vs the map of Aboriginal Australia

showing the historic distinct tribal regions . (see handout) In Aboriginal Australia there was no formal government. The Aborigines did not build permanent shelters, did not domesticate animals nor did they demonstrate evidence of land ownership or land use.

The history of the Aborigines would forever profoundly change following the 'discovery' of Australia by Lieutenant (later Captain) Cook in 1770. Although the Australian continent was occasionally visited as early as the 16th century by European merchant adventurers, mainly Portugese and Dutch, Lieutenant Cook explored the eastern shore and laid claim to the entire eastern coast for England. He first set anchor in the southeast entering the large bay of Gamay on April 29 in search of fresh water. He later named it Botany Bay because of the innumerable plants collected there by the botanists that accompanied him on this voyage. He initially encountered minimal organized resistance from the native population. In fact, Cook and his crew were met with almost total indifference. Once the sailors set up camp they encountered some sporadic, minor resistance but were largely shunned by the Aborigines. After 8 days at Botany Bay, Cook sailed northward. On August 22 he landed on Possession Island off Cape York (in Queensland), hoisted the English colors and claimed possession of the whole eastern coast for the British naming the land New South Wales. The name New South Wales came from the resemblance of eastern Australia's

wooded hills, headlands and beaches to the south coast of Wales. Cook claimed this land for England invoking the principle of Terra Nullis meaning “common land” or ‘nobody’s land.” Despite the presence of Aborigines, there was no recognizable government for whom to negotiate a treaty. There were no houses, villages, fields, domesticated animals, cultivation nor any system of land ownership or government that was apparent. There was nothing to suggest that a civilization existed. The principle of Terra Nullis would later be challenged and overturned in the Twentieth century.

The First Fleet under Captain Arthur Phillip set sail from Portsmouth, England on May 13, 1787 destination being New South Wales. The fleet landed at Botany Bay on January 18, 1788 after a 15,000 mile, 8 month voyage. (refer to map) The fleet was comprised of 11 ships, 717 male and female convicts and 290 seamen, soldiers and officers. The HMS Supply was the first ship to reach Botany Bay, followed by three transports the second day and the remaining ships in the fleet the following day, January 20, 1788. After exploring Botany Bay it was found to be unsuitable for settlement. To Captain Phillip’s dismay it lacked good soil, it lacked a good supply of fresh water, and the bay was so shallow that ships had to anchor too far offshore. The First Fleet relocated to a more desirable location just north of Botany Bay at present day Sydney. They officially hoisted the British flag on January 26, 1788 establishing the first European settlement in Australia.

January 26 is now celebrated as a national holiday known as 'Australia Day'. Some Aboriginal activists today refer to January 26 as 'Invasion Day' or 'Survival Day' in protest.

The purpose of the voyage was primarily to establish a penal colony. These prisoners had been convicted of mostly petty crimes in England. The idea to deport prisoners reflected the feeling at that time that criminals had a basic character defect and that to preserve mainstream society it was preferable to remove rather than imprison and attempt to rehabilitate them in England. Convicts previously had been transported to similar penal colonies in North America and were indentured to plantation owners as laborers. This process ceased following the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War in 1783. In addition to establishing a penal colony, the British also had other intentions. Australia was seen as a port of call and supply base for British ships traveling the Indian and Pacific Oceans and trading with China. Although shorter alternative routes were possible, by the mid 1780's, the British government was concerned that these routes might be cut if the Dutch went to war with Great Britain. At the same time, Britain was heavily dependent on Baltic countries for timber that could be used for masts and ship building and flax used for the manufacture of canvas, sailcloth and rope. As possible alliances between French, Dutch and the Russians could block the supply of these materials, Britain was anxious to find alternative sources. Captain Cook and others recommended

that Australia, New Zealand and nearby islands could be a potential source of timber and flax.

The Aborigines initially greeted the new arrivals from the First Fleet with hostility. About 40 men met them with rattling spears and shouting 'warra, warra' meaning 'go away.' The First Fleet nevertheless established the first permanent settlement by the British. Penal colonies existed in Australia for 80 years and approximately 50,000 prisoners were transported to penal colonies in Australia during that time.

During the 19th century, immigration to Australia continued on a steady basis. The new arrivals were, no doubt, fascinated by this strange new land with kangaroos and other unique flora and fauna. The fertile lands attracted sheep and cattle ranchers. The reduction of import duties on wool from Australia led to the rapid expansion of sheep numbers. By 1860 there were 20 million sheep in Australia. The gold rush in the mid-1850's further promoted the influx of new immigrants. By 1850, 250,000 immigrants, mostly British and Irish, had settled in Australia.

Eventually, the Europeans outnumbered the Aborigines. The delicate balance between Aborigines and the environment was broken as the settlers cut down forests and introduced domestic animals. Sheep and cattle destroyed waterholes and turned grassland into semidesert- ruining the habitats that for tens of thousands of years had sustained the Aborigines food

resources. Competition for food and water inevitably led to warfare between Aborigines and settlers. Starving Aborigines speared sheep and cattle and then suffered bloody reprisal raids. The population of Aborigines steadily declined. This depopulation resulted chiefly from the introduction of diseases by the new arrivals such as smallpox, tuberculosis, measles, and mumps. The Aborigines had no immunity to these diseases and, particularly, smallpox proved fatal to many. In addition, the Aboriginal population declined in part due to violence and retribution by racist colonists. There were reports of numerous skirmishes and massacres that Aborigines endured at the hands of the new arrivals. Historians debate to what extent this activity actually occurred. By 1900 traditional Aboriginal society survived only among relatively small groups in central and northern Australia. By 1930, the Aboriginal population had declined to 60,000, an 80-90% reduction. Many thought that this rapid decline would lead to their eventual extinction.

The Australian government, since 1788, has enacted a number of policies designed to protect and improve the lives of Aborigines. Government policies directed towards Aborigines consisted of three broad phases—protection, assimilation, and integration. Most of these policies, though well intentioned, were not effective. Initially, the government promoted a policy of protectionism and segregation for the Aborigines. Protection varied over time and space and was designed to

protect the Aborigines from harmful colonial influences. At its best, protection eased the transition from traditional to modern Western society. At its worst the policy was coercive and racist. Protection initially involved the creation of reserves and missions in rural areas. There were few long term successes. The best ones helped to preserve the Aboriginal culture. Many were criticized for trying to stamp out Aboriginal customs and beliefs, being too authoritarian and paternalistic.

Twentieth century pressure to shut down missions was intended to help Aborigines but unfortunately has achieved the opposite result. Frequent criticisms claimed that the missions were too authoritarian, suppressed indigenous culture, customs and language and undermined families by separating children from their parents and making them sleep in single sex dormitories. While these criticisms had some validity, with the closing of many missions the situation became infinitely worse. There has since been a huge increase in substance abuse, domestic violence and crime and a sharp decline in health, education and jobs in the Aboriginal communities. Now only 40 missions remain (down from 211) in remote regions mostly located in the Northern Territory.

The policy of protection was subsequently replaced by a new policy of assimilation in the late 1930's. The intention was to enable indigenous people to have the same levels of education, health, employment and material comfort as the dominant

society. The ends were held to justify the means. In practice the rights of Aborigines were subjugated even further- government controlled everything, from where Aborigines could live and to whom they could marry. Most controversial was the policy that allowed the forced removal of mixed race children from their homes and placement in state institutions. The idea was to educate these children and help promote their assimilation into mainstream society. It was felt that mixed race ('half caste') children had abilities greater than full blooded Aborigines and they needed to be rescued from their primitive culture. By the 1960's, assimilation fell into disrepute largely because of the forceful removal of children from families, their institutionalization, and subsequent loss of racial identity. It is generally accepted that the trauma of this forced separation from family and culture, termed the 'Stolen Generation' has had wide ranging impacts on Aboriginal society and been passed on down the generations. The child removal policy officially ended in 1970.

During the 1950's and 1960's the concept of a multiracial society developed. Gradually the policy of assimilation was replaced by a policy of integration, whereby Aborigines could maintain a distinct cultural identity while pursuing equality of living standards and opportunity. Integration is still the Australian Government policy, for it enables indigenous people to retain their identity in a pluralistic society. Integration also provides a choice between Western urban society and the

more traditional but less comfortable life in remote communities.

The 1960's were a watershed in Aboriginal affairs. By 1965 all indigenous people of Australia, whether literate or not, were enfranchised. The 1960's ushered in both the civil rights movement and the land rights movement in Australia. Perhaps the greatest catalyst for indigenous advancement was the student movement, which first brought discrimination against the Aborigines to public attention. A group of students in 1965 departed from Sydney on a highly publicized 2,000 mile bus tour, termed a 'Freedom Ride', across New South Wales to investigate possible discrimination against Aborigines. These students exposed an informal color bar entrenched in some country towns. Aborigines were confined to separate sections of cinemas, refused service in hotels, barred from clubs. Aboriginal children, in one instance, were excluded from a public swimming pool. Soon, these racist attitudes along with reports of atrocious Aboriginal living conditions were headlines in the world press.

In a 1967 referendum, Australians voted to give the federal government power to legislate for Aborigines in all states. This was a very monumental event. Prior to this time, the federal government had responsibility for Aboriginal policy solely in the Northern Territory with its exceptionally large population of Aborigines. The federal government finally was

empowered to coordinate a national policy and pass national legislation in Aboriginal affairs.

After the referendum, the federal government set up an advisory body called the Council for Aboriginal Affairs. Existing definitions of 'Aborigine' were abandoned in favor of self-identification combined with biological descent and Aboriginal community acceptance, an important policy change that enabled people of part descent to assert their Aboriginality. The Council also influenced a change in official policy from assimilation to integration, recognizing that Aborigines have the right to live their own lifestyle rather than expecting them to merge into Anglo-Australia.

To achieve a gradual social adjustment but be able to maintain cultural traditions, Aborigines needed to secure land ownership. The issue of land rights soon became the principal rallying cry of the Aboriginal cause. The first Aboriginal Land Rights Act was established in 1976. The Act was very limited and only applied to the Northern Territory but, importantly, did recognize Aborigines as traditional land owners for the first time in Australia.

The Mabo Case: The most significant legal decision in Australian history occurred in 1992 after a 10 year legal battle. The Mabo decision was a 6-1 ruling by Australia's High Court that recognized indigenous title to land based on prior

occupation. The ruling was essentially a full frontal attack on the principal of Terra Nullis—the idea that Australia was uninhabited at the time of British colonization. The plaintiffs were Eddie Mabo and other Mer Island inhabitants in the northern Torres Straits in Queensland. The plaintiffs were able to conclusively establish continuous usage of this land and continuous historic links to that region by the local Murray Islanders. This landmark case affirmed the principle of native title to the land and overturned the principle of Terra Nullis. This ruling recognized that indigenous Australians have rights to land based on prior occupation and where they remain on their land, these rights or ‘native title’ survive. In response to the immediate fear and anger from pastoralists and mining interests, the federal parliament passed the Native Title Act in December, 1993. This Act defined the principle of native title but limited claims solely to vacant Crown land, and only when continuous links to the area could be proven by indigenous claimants. The intention was to limit native title to land that no one owned or leased. The Act did not adequately address the issue of native title when conflict existed with pastoral leases. The Act stated that when Aborigines successfully claimed land, they would have no veto power over development. This helped to calm the fears of pastoralists and mining interests who were alarmed by the Mabo decision.

The Wik Decision: Another landmark court decision occurred in 1996. The Wik people made a claim in federal court for native land title in the Cape York peninsula (northern Queensland). The area claimed included two pastoral leases neither of which had been used for grazing purposes. The Wik people had been in continuous occupation of this land. They argued that native title coexisted with the pastoral leases. The High Court agreed. This ruling stated that native title was not automatically extinguished by leasehold grants of land and that pastoral leases did not automatically extinguish native title. The High Court ruling opened all Australian land to native title claims. The court refused to establish a general principle as dozens of different kinds of leaseholds existed in Australia. Each case would have to be decided individually, Thus the decision did not deliver certainty over pastoral leases, which covered 40% of Australia, and which formed about 2/3 of those lands under native title claims.

In July, 1998 the Native Title Amendment bill was passed. The legislation was passed without Aboriginal input. The law was criticized for weakening some provisions in the original Native Title Act. The Amendment included a list of specific leaseholds which, in the opinion of the government, extinguished native title. The result was that native title was then lost on a significant amount of Australia's lands.

1990 to the Present

In 1990, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) was created and given a decade to achieve reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. This 25 member council, with bi-partisan agreement, resolved that Australians needed to know more about both sides (indigenous and non-indigenous) of the country's history, to apologize to indigenous people for past wrongs, and demand a better way forward. Ten years were spent on nationwide consultations to promote cross-cultural understanding. The culmination was the Corroboree 2000 held at the Sydney Opera House. A Reconciliation March was organized and included over 200,000 people who marched across the Harbour Bridge in Sydney. There the Prime Minister was presented with an Australian Declaration and Roadmap towards Reconciliation. Key points included reaffirmation of the human rights of all Australians, an apology to Aborigines for injustices of the past, and a pledge to stop injustice, work to overcome disadvantage and respect that Aboriginals have the right to self-determination.

After a successful decade of promoting the idea of reconciliation, the most pressing needs now are to improve Aboriginal disadvantage, health, living conditions, and educational achievement. This agenda has been somewhat sidetracked by the demand for a treaty. A treaty, you may ask?

Some leaders in the Aboriginal movement today see Australia as two nations, indigenous people and the 'others' who can only be reconciled by a treaty. Others feel that this is a divisive issue liable to undo the goodwill generated by a decade of reconciliation. Furthermore, many feel that the matter is not practical and legally impossible .

Aspirations for separate sovereignty and self government are even less realistic in modern Australia, where most Aborigines have lost their language (most speak English) , religion and traditional lifestyle. 70% now live in towns and cities. 27% of Aborigines live in remote settlements often located on the site of former church missions. 80% of urban Aborigines have now 'married out' or have non-Aboriginal partners. Ethnicity is now simply self-identification as a 'person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.' The indigenous population doubled between 1991-2006 and further increased 20% in the past 5 years. It is a much younger population with the mean age of Aborigines being 21 vs 37 for the general population. Today there are almost 520,000 indigenous people in Australia representing 2.5% of the population.

Indigenous status has become not only something to be proud of but it also brings certain benefits in the fields of health care, legal aid, educational grants, and 'indigenous preferred' jobs.

A Long Way to go

Over the last 30 years of self-determination and improvements in the political and legal spheres, a measureless human tragedy has unfolded in many Aboriginal communities. Tackling Aboriginal disadvantage is the major challenge of the new millennium. Infant mortality, health and life expectancy are appalling, educational standards are abysmal, unemployment astronomical, substance abuse and crime horrific. Aborigines die 20 years earlier than non-indigenous Australians, are 15 times more likely to be in jail, and 10 times more likely to be murdered. By the time young Aborigines are 10 years old, only 65% of them can read to the required benchmark, compared to the national figure of 90%. In remote communities, domestic violence and sexual abuse of children is rampant and substance abuse is rife. Sexually transmitted diseases are up to 20 times higher than in the general population. Alcoholism is the major cause of the horrific levels of sickness, mortality and violence in many Aboriginal communities but drugs are playing an increasing role.

At the present time, the well-being of Indigenous people, especially those in rural locations, is still well below that of other Australians and little better than a decade or so earlier. The 2007 report, 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in Australia', found that indigenous disadvantage was inter-generational. Their unemployment rate was reportedly four times that of other Australians and labor force participation rate only three-quarters of other Australians. Aborigines were

twice as likely to be in the lowest income bracket. Rates of chronic disease, such as diabetes and kidney illness were reportedly three times higher than other Australians, and their life expectancy seventeen years lower. Their educational achievements were below other Australians and graduation rates from secondary school was half of other Australians. Although Aborigines comprise 2.5% of the general population, they occupy a disproportionate 25% of the prison population.

A new consensus:

The poison of long term passive welfare dependency has been recognized as a major social problem. The root problem of welfare dependency can be traced back to government actions taken several decades ago. After the Second World War, the federal government focused its attention towards improving the pay and living condition of Aboriginal pastoral workers who resided on cattle and sheep ranches, or stations, as they are called in Australia. At that time, large numbers of Aborigines worked and lived on these cattle ranches in remote regions. In return for low wages, the Aborigines and their families were provided with room and board. Low wages that were paid to the Aboriginal workers were felt to be discriminatory by some and laws were subsequently passed requiring equal wages for all workers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. The laws were passed despite grave concerns by pastoralists that providing equal pay would result in Aborigines losing jobs because it would become impossibly expensive to

pay them equal wages and also feed their many dependents. To a large extent this is exactly what happened. The dilemma that policy makers faced at that time was that Australian law would not allow discrimination against Aboriginal ranch workers. It was clear to everyone that the institution of equal wages would result in the whole-scale removal of Aboriginal people from cattle station work and place them on welfare permanently. The decision to institute equal pay has had tragic consequences for the Aborigines. Equal pay led to the loss of contact with traditional lands, massive social and cultural impact, long term welfare dependency, passivity and disempowerment, leading to much of the current 'dysfunction' in the Aboriginal communities.

The lack of responsibility in the Aboriginal community is a significant problem that must be addressed. Political solutions have been suggested to instill real economic activity in the Aboriginal community. The goal is to make indigenous people self-sufficient and take control of their own destiny. Aborigines must be willing to accept personal and collective responsibility for their behavior and recognize the importance of educational achievement. Alcohol abuse, petrol sniffing, and drug addiction are all major problems in the Aboriginal community that must be eliminated.

In 2004, the Port Douglas Accord, attended by a dozen Aboriginal leaders, agreed that a dialogue with government was essential to tackle the issues of Aboriginal disadvantage

head on. The principle of mutual obligation or shared responsibility was felt to be essential to promote a change in behavior in the Aboriginal community.

Subsequently, the National Indigenous Council met and agreed that essential goals must include the reduction of welfare dependency and violence in Aboriginal families. The Council emphasized that indigenous and non-indigenous people must now 'walk the talk' and work together to make a real difference. The most pressing needs are to empower communities to enact programs such as zero tolerance of violence, substance abuse and truancy, and providing sufficient scholarships and business partnerships with private enterprise-so that success can be realized.

Past decade—On June 21, 2007 a 'national emergency' was declared to combat the abuse of indigenous children in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory is inhabited by an unusually large percentage of Aborigines (32.5%). The percentage of Aborigines in the entire Australian continent totals just 2.5%. The Northern Territory National Emergency Response, termed the 'Intervention', was launched in response into allegations of child abuse among indigenous children. The government imposed strict measures including a five year control of Aboriginal communities by the government. The policy included the dispatching managers, police, and the army: compulsory health checks of children; the quarantining of 50% of all welfare payments to ensure payments were

spent on essential goods (food), with further money possibly docked for non-school attendance, and forcing welfare recipients to clean homes and streets. Also, a temporary ban was imposed on alcohol sales in all Aboriginal communities. The intervention policy has been harshly criticized by some because it limits 'individual autonomy' and that it is racially motivated and discriminatory as it only applies to Aborigines. Some Aboriginal leaders fully support the policy and believe that protection of the rights of children is paramount. The Intervention has continued.

Recent employment data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that in 2011 just 46.4 % of adult Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders had a job. The indigenous population in the workforce has shrunk since 2006 despite federal government intervention, labor force programs, and private sector initiatives in Aboriginal communities. For every 100 people added to the adult Aboriginal population in the past five years, only 22 had a job while 78 were unemployed or outside the workforce.

Closing the Gap - has become the focus of government activities in addressing Aboriginal disadvantage.

Aboriginal disadvantage is stark, but given that Indigenous people make up less than 3% of the Australian population, it is a challenge within the capability of an affluent country to meet. Difficulties are created by the fact that that a significant

number of indigenous Australians live outside the capital and regional centers, where services are poorer. Also, the indigenous population is younger than the total population, creating greater needs for early childhood education and housing services. However, disadvantage is not universal and many community success stories exist.

For most Aborigines, leading a traditional life is no longer feasible, and many living in less remote regions have accomplished the difficult transition into the modern world. Many problems remain in the Aboriginal community. Much more government assistance is needed, but there are numerous outstanding cultural and economic ventures and indigenous people have distinguished themselves in every walk of life. It has been a long journey from the first footprint on an Australian beach more than 50,000 years ago to the present day, but the Original Australians have shown outstanding courage and resilience throughout. The world's oldest living culture has survived the disruption of colonization and lives proudly on.