



RACE AND RACISM: 20th CENTURY MANAGEMENT OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

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Introduction

From the time of first contact and the resulting colonization of Australia, the dominant Anglo-European culture has not been able to leave Aboriginal people alone. They [Aborigines] have been subjected to systems of control and rule imposed upon them through social and political policies based on conceptions of racial inferiority and inequality. Many of these were established on beliefs of the 18th and 19th centuries especially that of Social Darwinism (Jones,1980). Though subsequently refuted these are still effective in modern society.

In this treatise contemporary race relations in Australia will be examined through looking at what racism is, how it is demonstrated and how it has been used to manage the destiny of Aboriginal people throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

What's It All About Alfie?

What is meant by racism? One definition states that it is 'a belief that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.' (Longmans,1985.1138). An expanded and more flexible interpretation is given by Peter Jackson.

"Racism involves the attempt by a dominant group to exclude a subordinate group from the material and symbolic rewards of status and power. It differs from other modes of exclusion in terms of the distinguishing features by which groups are identified for exclusion. However, racism need not have recourse to purely physical distinctions but can rest on the recognition of certain 'cultural' traits where these are thought to be an inherent and inviolable characteristic of particular social groups (Jackson,1987.cited Hollinsworth,1998.3."

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Using this understanding of racism we will assess the racist levels of Australian society through the following examples of prejudicial disadvantage perpetrated against Aborigines.

THE STOLEN GENERATION issue is one of primary focus in the current social and political arenas with a lot of media attention. The actual occurrence of this traumatic activity continued through two centuries and its impact is still resounding through the Aboriginal communities nationally. Children became the tool(s) for governments, churches, missionary groups and educational organizations to control the Indigenous population. Forced removal of children, notably those who were identified as being only 'part-Aborigine', was deemed not only necessary to 'save' their non-Aboriginal heritage but to promote assimilation and through that process lead to the breeding extinction of the race.

With traditional culture and life seen as primitive, degenerate and even depraved, Aboriginal children were taken from their families, their traditional lands, their clans and kinship groups to rehabilitate or reform their development into a more acceptable and respectable outcome. They could then blend into the dominant white society. All this was precipitated under the auspices of the current child welfare laws and the Aboriginal Protection Board established in 1883 by the New South Wales government. The Board had no official power until 1909 when the Aborigines Protection Act was legislated. Children could then be legally taken without parental consent, on the basis of 'neglect' as the main reason. Placed in residential institutions such as the Cootamundra Home for Orphaned and Neglected Aboriginal Children (est.1912) and the Kinchela Boys Home (est.1924), children were subjected to a program of immersion in an attempt to remove all vestiges of their aboriginality so that they could be assimilated into the broader community and cease to be a burden on the State (Linkup and Wilson,1997.61). Here the system of separation by blood quantum and physical appearance was used to its full extent. Fair-skinned children were deemed to have advantage over dark-skinned inmates including siblings. Thus guilt and shame were instilled through psychological conditioning to establish an identity different from their now severed cultural and familial ties. Training in domestic skills, base labour and station work was provided and seen as the only skills capable of being achieved (Read,1981). Identity was fragmented or lost. Self-esteem and a sense of worth were destroyed, not only to those who had been taken but also to the parents and families who were left behind. (HEROC,1997.198.217). Marriage to persons of fair skin or from white society was encouraged, even promoted, and thus breeding extinction would become inevitable. But what of the 'real' Aborigines and their dilemma, what was happening to them?

THE SEGREGATED RESERVE made its appearance. All those persons identified as Aborigines were now subject to laws of repression and protection. Families, even whole communities were forced to leave their lands and they had to be put someplace, so the Reserves were established. And many were already working Missions and Stations. Legislated against, these families and individuals now found themselves confined to these places and exposed to further oppression. Even for those who had fled, escaping police

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and other authorities, life did not improve as they lived under the constant threat of detention or removal. This affected almost every Aboriginal family and the Reserve became another tool of control. They were subjected to rules and regulations of managers, strict even violent discipline, plus their loss of privacy and autonomy. Members of different groups were put together which created more stress and internal conflict as well. Their traditional way of being was gone, their ceremonies repressed or forbidden and language undermined by the imposition of the Anglo-European ways. It created a whole new communality, but also great frustrations that continue until today (Hollinsworth,1998.115-118).

THE URBANIZATION OF ABORIGINES is a notable example of where previous events and legislation has led. While many people [Aboriginal] still live on Reserves or in remote communities, the greater number has moved into urban life within Australian cities and towns. Here they are still marginal in social and economic structures. Most live below the poverty level and feel that this has been an imposition of the dominant system. This in turn has led to what are still perceived to be socio-cultural disabilities, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, poor health, abandonment of children or spouses, lack of employment, minimal education and high incidence of crime. This seems to support those refuted theories of inferiority and inequality still. Stereotypical images like who is or is not a 'real' Aborigine and what that means in a cultural and traditional sense persist. People continue to be referred to as being 'part-Aboriginal'. This is simply another imposed term of legal and social status with application to cultural insignificance. Insensitivity from workers in government and social services and the denial of those services are still evidence of marginality in communities (Langton,1981.16-21).

Conclusion

Global colonization and the development of a capitalist society led to the ideology of racism as a concept to define characteristics of inferiority and superiority. The arrogance of Europeans in assuming a cultural theocracy as a result of physical and biological differences led them to conquer or at least subdue the world as they chose. With this came the dispossession of First Nations people, their cultures, religions, social structure, languages and identities, worldwide. Everything was done for the benefit of the dominant powers and racism arose in the extreme form of denial of human rights to non-Europeans which eventually lead to the death of millions of Indigenous people(Hollinsworth,1998.29-43).

Australia still denies the underlying causes of Aboriginal disadvantage and inequality being maintained by previously implemented ideals and legislation based upon racial superiority. Governments refuse to consider the potential creativity that has been suppressed in Aboriginal life while encouraging it in the mainstream. Progress has been made through the social and political movements of Aborigines themselves, with support from public sectors and even some politicians, in changing legislation. However, the Australian government still refuses to negotiate fully regarding the control of Aboriginal destiny and granting [Aborigines] their inherent rights as the First Nations of this land. Now in the first six years of this new millennium we have seen the abolishment of

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ATSIC, the federal representation and national voice of Aboriginal people within the government. We have witnessed the disclaimers of Aboriginal history in Australia by pseudo scholastic works of historians like Keith Windschuttle. We have witnessed constructed and fabricated media reporting to suit a political agenda to gain unrestricted access to Aboriginal lands and communities (ABC, Lateline 2006). And most recently a public statement by the current Prime Minister John Howard, who was quoted as saying that the “black armband view of history was a threat through its portrayal of Australian history as a litany of racism, sexism and class warfare.” (Courier Mail, Madigan, M. October 4, 2006.

Is this still management in the 21st century? You bet it is.

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