The Last Refuge of the 'Un-Australian'

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> *This nation is an island. Its borders have never changed. We don't want our beaches violated. This is the best country in the world.*[1]

In 1860, with the establishment of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA), the Victorian colonial government formalised, through the legislative process, the alienation of Aboriginal people from our country. To ensure that we would become non-citizens in our own land the government incorporated the independently established Christian missions with existing and proposed government stations into a system of centrally administered Aboriginal reserves.

The previous thirty years or so had witnessed the widespread murder of Aboriginal people in Victoria who had defended their land against colonial expansion and its insatiable appetite for exploitable land. While this violence was reported to, and was at times actively supported by, representatives of the Crown, from the 1850s the British colony of Victoria rested in the comfort of selective amnesia whenever conversation turned to the very recent history of the dispossession of Aboriginal people.

Indigenous people, who prior to the era of violence and massacre were feted as abstract, acultural noble savages were now reconstructed and imagined by the coloniser as a ragged 'cultureless remnant', which had rapidly 'declined' as a result of a self-destructive 'propensity for alcohol and disease' (for details see *1858 Select Committee on the Aborigines, Victorian Parliamentary Papers*). Not only did the government wash the blood of violence from its hands, it reconfigured itself as the saviour, the 'Protector of the Aborigine', now regarded as a

landless and homeless refugee.

The regime of the government reserve system was framed within a passive language of state benevolence; whereby a people who had lost all but everything would now be 'saved' from further violence by a caring, paternal authority, until the inevitability of their 'passing' (yet another colonial term attempting to escape its own violence), came into being.

The reality was very different. Once incarcerated on a reserve or mission Aboriginal people suffered still further. They had ceremonial objects taken from them or traded in the lucrative market place. The basis of culture, their language, was often forbidden, while their children were taken from them so as the language of the foreigner would replace their own. And in the 1880s, when the Victorian Government realised that it had not been able to subdue Aboriginal people and destroy Indigenous culture, or bring into reality the 'passing of the Aborigine', it introduced the infamous *Aborigines Protection Act 1886*, more commonly referred to as the 'half caste act'.

This was a vicious piece of legislation which introduced a caste system into colonial Victoria and attempted to destroy both family and community vitality. This ideology and practice would later become the model for the attempted obliteration of Aboriginal communities across Australia in the twentieth century.

I know that I am raking over history here. Many readers will know of this history by now (and some will have actually come to accept it). But it is a history that I find myself having to revisit again and again. Sometimes for the students I teach, who have been fed a lean diet of so-called Aboriginal History, and little or none of the racism practiced by Australia's 'founding fathers'.

We need to revisit this history also for the misinformed or deliberately ignorant who regard the High Court's 1992 *Mabo* decision as a form of quasi-treaty. People need to be reminded that the 'ability to show continuity' (as expressed to Aboriginal people by the High Court) also serves to cruelly remind the dispossessed 'Aborigines' that they will most likely remain so in the eyes of the court.

We have for too long now been regarded as dispossessed in *our own land*, aliens *in our own land*, 'citizens without rights' *in our own land*. At times we have come to regard ourselves in the same way. As a result of the *Mabo* decision the High Court finally buried the myth of *terra nullius* (yes, the wheels of European justice turn ever so slowly). But it also upheld the realities of dispossession, whereby many more Aboriginal 'legal' claims to land will be 'washed away by the tide of history' (a phrase used by Justice Olney in the Yorta Yorta native title claim heard in the Federal Court in 1998) than will fit within the confines of 'continuity'.

Clearly, the 'darkest hour of [white] Australia's history', (a phrase used by the High Court in the *Mabo* decision) was so dark that it is unable to recognise the need for real justice. Since 1992 the parliament has delivered up a form of 'native title' and subsequent amendments, which further seek to disenfranchise some Aboriginal communities from their land, while perversely the same system has lined the pockets of sectors of the legal fraternity and its adjunct industry of anthropologists, genealogists and other 'expert' hangers-on, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Outside the courts another discussion has been taking place. It is about the past, about the role of history in Australia. While the prime minister, John Howard, may want us to think that he believes the teaching of history should begin with the 'noble sacrifice' of the ANZACs and end with an understanding of both the triumph and the tragedy of Sir Donald Bradman's batting average, he has waged a history war where it really matters to him, against the Aboriginal community.

While in opposition, both the federal Liberal and National parties attacked the *Mabo* decision, which although it offered, as I have argued, very little for many in real terms, did serve a symbolic purpose in its refutation of the absurdity of *terra nullius*. It also provided political and intellectual forces on the Right in Australia with the ammunition to wage a war of hysteria in relation to the outcome of the *Mabo* decision, ('your backyards are not safe'). Included in the Right's arguments about the past the question of the personal family and communal history of 'real' as opposed to 'unreal(?)' Aborigines was also repeatedly raised, ostensibly to ensure that only those

who were legally entitled to partake in the native title process would be able to. In reality, it was yet another attempt to render the life and history of Aboriginal people as illegitimate, and therefore absent of moral or legal standing.

These arguments, although relative to the post-*Mabo* legal environment, more importantly and determinedly upheld that mid-nineteenth century mythology of a rag-tag collection of refugees who no longer maintained a rightful culture or subsequently any right to land or control over the articulation of our history. Once in government, the Liberal-National coalition used this argument to justify its policy of advancing nothing in the way of land rights or giving recognition to other colonial abuses of Aboriginal people.

Regardless of any real or rhetorical threat posed by the post-*Mabo* native title arrangements it was, and is, vital that Aboriginal people be disenfranchised and devalued at a more immediate level of social value for many in this country to remain psychologically, if not legally, within the secure space offered by terra nullius. It is the Aboriginal body and its claims to its own history and identity that must be destroyed.

It is important to note that when the 1886 'half caste act' was introduced most Aboriginal people in Victoria had been killed or forcibly removed from their country and held virtually as prisoners within the reserve system. (If any reader wants to argue for agency here, please keep it in perspective. The fact is, if the government wanted to remove a woman's child from her and take it hundreds of miles away to be interned on a reserve, for instance, it was simply done, with ruthless bureaucratic efficiency).

Aboriginal people, therefore, had no control over their land and no immediate prospect of regaining it. And yet they posed a real and persistent threat to colonial society. That threat was their very being, their continued existence. And the existence of Aboriginal people is what has continued to affront those sectors of Australian society who live within the mythology of a British outpost established on land that was empty and never peopled.

Following the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report, which investigated the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

children from their families, the federal government and its cronies, including journalists, academics and publications such as *Quadrant* magazine, further abused the past, through both a defence of the racist policies and practices of 'assimilation' and the refusal to accept the histories of Aboriginal people who had been affected by the removal policies.

It has been necessary to present those children who were removed from family and community as suffering pathologically from 'faulty' memory or 'repressed memory syndrome'. Some Aboriginal people have simply been labelled as liars. If the government were to accept the history of generations of stolen Aboriginal children the outcome would do more than inflame discussion of that dirty word, compensation. All of the stock clichés of Australia's European history, many of them peddled during this year of the centenary of Federation, such as 'the Australian character', 'the battler', 'a nation forged through collective adversity' (to name but a few of an endless parade of shallow, nationalistic slogans), would be rendered absurd.

Some might argue that they are regarded as such anyway. It has been widely stated this year that Australians don't care much for the Federation celebrations, that the party, if not meaningless, has been boring. That may be so. But a point is always missed when the discussion of the Australian public's supposed apathy toward the past is discussed. History, as served up by the dominant white sector of Australian society is something that is digested with great familiarity (maybe like a meat pie?). People get so used to it, that it is taken for granted. Its enjoyment and relevance becomes embedded in the subconscious, and at times is forgotten. But try taking it away? Or introducing something new to the diet? Then you will quickly discover that a very staple and particular view of the past matters quite a lot.

When the Australian Democrats Senator Aden Ridgeway addressed a United Nations forum in March this year and rightly stated that there exists in Australia a lack of political leadership in relation to Indigenous issues, he was attacked by both John Howard and the opposition leader, Kim Beazley, for behaving in an 'un-Australian' manner. There is nothing worse than being 'un-Australian' in Australia, particularly

when celebration is in the air.

When the genocide against Aboriginal people in this country is discussed for what it is, the apologists for the Australian nation say it cannot be so. Nor can it even be discussed, because such a term, let alone a history, of genocide is 'un-Australian'. If Aboriginal people, as supposed citizens of this country attempt to pursue their rights through the legal system in relation to their removal from their family they are regarded as 'un-Australian'. To raise matters concerned with the physical and psychological abuses suffered by Aboriginal children over many decades, to speak of the anguish experienced by the Aboriginal families left behind, who now carry the burden and unnecessary guilt of the theft of their children, is decidedly 'un-Australian'.

Members of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children who had been taken from their families were not only disloyal for speaking out about this to the 'Stolen Generations' inquiry, or seeking justice before the courts. They were disloyal to the nation because they were a stolen generation. Being a 'removed' rather than 'stolen' child seems easier for the nation to swallow. Additionally to be referred to as 'stolen' rather than 'removed', by either yourself or others is, to quote one of the Prime Minister's favoured terms when denying realities of the past, to be 'ridiculous', and I would add 'un-Australian'.

Australia imagines itself as a liberal-democracy, founded on mutual struggle. In order to uphold this the Australian nation has attempted to ensure that the history of the treatment of Aboriginal people not stand in the way of this stock legend. So we wage a struggle, a history war, to ensure that the history of colonisation and dispossession is no longer relegated to the status of out-of-sight out-of-mind, as it was in the past. If we feel that this is important to ourselves as Aboriginal people, then we must also assert more moral authority and ownership of this country. Our legitimacy does not lie within the legal system and is not dependent on state recognition. It lies within ourselves. We need not feel dispossessed when a man in a black robe and silly wig tells us that our rights have been 'washed away by the tide of history'. We need to claim our rights, beyond being stuck in an argument about the dominant culture's view of land rights or identity. And we need to claim

and legitimate our authority by speaking out for, and protecting the rights of, others, who live in or visit our country.

Recently, when a Pakistani migrant who had been granted permanent Australian residency in 1996 set himself on fire outside the federal parliament, as a result of his unsuccessful application to the Immigration Department to have his wife and child join him here, the Immigration Minister, Phillip Ruddock stated '[self-immolation is] not something we are used to or experienced with ... sadly, he sought to do so'.[2] This man had done something that was very 'un-Australian'. He had publicly expressed his grief and anguish at his treatment at the hands of Australian government officials. He had raised an issue that might tap away at all of those cliches of national foundation and celebration. It is not only 'un-Australian' to be, through experience, a whistle-blower against nation-building mythology. Simply 'to be' one of those who have been abused by the Australian nation is to be 'un-Australian'.

It is also 'un-Australian' to intern people without trial for up to four years, to subject people to months of isolation in solitary confinement. It is 'un-Australian' to remove those people to remote parts of the country where they cannot be visited by family or friends, to where the activities of the multi-national company that profits from their incarceration cannot be scrutinised by the media or the legal representatives of the imprisoned. It would be 'un-Australian' in the extreme to use water cannon, tear-gas and truncheons against people imprisoned without trial, who are rightfully protesting about the abuse of their human rights.

I cannot, as a trained historian, state this with empirical certainty, but it is a mathematical probability that it is 'un-Australian' to disparage and devalue the worth and lives of refugees by claiming, without evidence, that many of them 'may be' associated with 'terrorists'.[3] Likewise, the propagandist need to focus more closely on the supposed threat that the approximately eight thousand 'illegal' arrivals in the last ten years pose to 'our way of life' rather than overturn a policy that contributed to more than three hundred and fifty people drowning trying to get here in just one year (1999), is somewhat 'un-Australian' I would think.

But of course the representatives of the Australian people, the federal government, engage in such behaviour on a daily basis. So to ensure that such practices are not perceived as 'un-Australian' we not only transfer refugees to remote areas of the country, we un-people those who arrive here by reconfiguring them as 'the ungrateful', 'the terrorist', 'the queue-jumper', and legally as 'the non-person'. 'We' can then protect Australia and 'our way of life' against the alien invader as 'we' did against 'the Aborigines' in the past, because they failed to adhere to the doctrine of *terra nullius* by unpatriotically refused to reclassify themselves as 'non-people', in claiming their rights and identity as Indigenous people.

The Department of Immigration lists thirty-seven countries that it regards as a threat to Australia, in that visitors who arrive from these countries, by boat or otherwise, are regarded as those most 'at risk of overstaying their visa'.[4] The countries listed include Bangladesh, Chile, India, Poland, Samoa and Vietnam. Most are non-white and none are Anglo or English speaking (as a first language). And yet approximately 20 per cent of arrivals to Australia who overstay their visas are British. There is no mention of Britain in the blacklisted countries. Nor do we see the fair skin of the back-packer behind the barbed wire of the detention camps.

White Australia would not tolerate such treatment, as to incarcerate thousands of British citizens for remaining illegally in the country, to see such an image on our television screens would be for many Australians like looking in the mirror. It would be as 'un-Australian' as one could imagine, to do such a thing.

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Several years ago I was asked to speak to an East Timor support group at a dinner organised by students at the University of Melbourne. An objective of the group was to bring local Aboriginal people, students and the East Timorese community in Victoria together so as we might share in some way our belief in social justice. I immediately said yes to the invitation. To be involved in such an experience was a noble gesture. But I quickly realised, that from my own experience at least, it was nothing more than a gesture, and a shallow

one at that. As I sat listening to the stories of students in Dili, who had been dragged from their beds and 'disappeared' in the night, I realised that since the invasion of East Timor by the Indonesians in 1975 I had never lifted a finger to help this community beyond gesturing about 'how awful' the invasion had been.

So when I stood up to talk at the dinner that is what I said. I felt ashamed of myself. But shame for me, as an Aboriginal person, is not a negative emotion. It is a realisation of honesty that has the potential to bring about change. After that night, at rallies and meetings held in support of the East Timorese, its community members would find me in a crowd of sometimes many thousands and think me for my support. I did not feel ashamed any longer. I felt humbled. And I felt empowered, as a member of the community, and as an Aboriginal person, supporting the rights of a people who were visitors to the country of my elders.

We have a situation in Australia today where we are witnessing the human rights abuses of many people. Aboriginal people continue to be abused as a result of crimes committed by white Australia both in the past and contemporary society. The abusive treatment of refugees is similar to the treatment of Aboriginal people in this country in that they pose a threat which, more than being based on any material manifestation, either real or imagined, is a threat to a way of life erected on xenophobia, selfishness and a fear of difference.

We must transform the culture of Australian life by screaming to our politicians that such an idea is genuinely un-Australian and that we will not tolerate it. And we must do this beyond the act of the political gesture. Activism can be a loaded word, but still, to be active in some way, to speak, to write, to march, to protest, to be angry and put that anger into expression and action is a suitably un-Australian idea at this time.

Notes

1 Peter Lyssiotis and Nick Petroulis, 'New Troy', *Meanjin* no. 3, 2000.

2 Kerry Taylor And Mark Forbes, 'Man Sets Himself Ablaze In Immigration Protest', *Age*, 3 April 2001.

3 Dr Gary Klintworth, former member of the Refugee Review Tribunal, *Age*, 2 April 2001.
4 Angela Mitropoulis, 'The Blacklist-Federation and the White Australia Policy', xborder, <http://www.antimedia.net/xborder/05_whiteaustralia.html>.