

## Epilogue

This memoir covers my family's reach across the twentieth century and in so doing is a story that covers race relations policy development and implementation throughout this period. The beginning of the twentieth century was chaotic for Aborigines and policies were made without much thought. On the one hand half-castes were institutionalised as useful labour, on the other people of full descent were concentrated on reserves and missions. By the 1920s the Federal government began to take an interest, albeit ambiguously, in Northern Territory Aborigines, on the one hand retaining aspects of the old protection policy while on the other changing protection to assimilation.

Following the election of the Whitlam government the idea that Aborigines were to run their own affairs descended into a bureaucratic nightmare. Australian nationalism meant something to white society but it seemed that Aborigines were never to be placed on the political agenda without a fight. Self determination as a policy meant people taking control of their own lives as individuals and collective institutions. Equally it meant people working towards developing their own economies in partnership with pastoral and urban capitalism. Institutions for improving the lot of the Indigenous peoples, such as health clinics, general practitioner services, community schools, libraries and sporting activities, run by Aboriginal leaders and community participants, were envisaged. Such activities would help to ward off poverty, unemployment, raise community consciousness and help develop democratic structures that fitted into the wider Australian political system. Aboriginal communities would have a surplus from their own products and that surplus capital could help them plan the future. Continuing community education could be bought in from institutions such as universities, business institutions and education structures such as tertiary training institutions and local schools. Institutions dealing with legal and human rights questions could form part of the community structures. Commonwealth governments created the funding and the ideology but states had only policy guidelines rather than legal ones to follow.

In general, however, state governments objected to funding gravitating directly to Aboriginal groups and communities and failed to work out or prescribe how their race policies were to be implemented. If their factionalised governments would not cooperate, nothing would happen. For decades Commonwealth funds were spent on bureaucratic solutions that neither of the major political parties cared about. 'Human rights', the post Second World War 'brave new world' for all based on international laws, were treated with contempt. As Australian national and state governments changed so too did race ideologies. These ideologies were built on the prejudices that Aboriginal heritage, material

culture, belief systems and languages had no basis in the face of Australia's national interests. Huge amounts of the national wealth was spent and wasted on European and British cultural institutions that both destroyed and codified Aboriginal ideologies. For example, St Francis House and other bodies were created along the lines of British workhouses and children's reformatories that changed the culture of people of mixed descent to that of middle class Christian ways of self-perception. Both self-management and self-sufficiency stood as barriers to Aboriginal democracy, human rights and equality. Employment strategies such as the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) acted as a bar to participation in the Australian capitalist economic system. Returning Aboriginal lands stolen by European expansion was an absolutely unacceptable notion in the face of the shibboleth of private property. Land rights, a major concern of Aborigines, was resisted by Australian governments and was depicted as an affront to the national interest, meaning that it prevented the economic development for the whole nation. Uranium mining, mineral extraction for iron ore, oil and aluminium were all seen as more important than Aboriginal rights, heritage, reparation and welfare.

Of course things have changed, albeit slowly, but much of the accounting of that change I leave to others. Every few years as self-determination policies took effect so new issues arose where confrontation seemed inevitable at every turn. Some sites of significance were returned while material objects, the plunder of colonial dispossession such as grave sites, were sporadically returned but large ceremonial caches were refused and retained in state and national museums. As Aboriginal political institutions such as the National Aboriginal Consultative Council grew in the 1970s and 1980s Australians lost patience with Aborigines as demands for reparation of material culture grew. When the new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission came into existence, greater powers flowed to that body to implement, more intensely, self-determination policies. At the same time a ginger group called the 'Council for Reconciliation' was situated within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet under Bob Hawke and later Paul Keating. This body was established in 1991 and quickly monopolised current ideas such as 'Deaths in Custody', borrowed from the South African revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. Influences also came from the Northern Lands Council and possibly the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, coupled with Eddy Mabo's legal lobby on 'Native Title'. These groups also had links to the National Aboriginal Land Rights lobby and the supporters of United Nations issues; it took some years to fashion an ideological position on 'Reconciliation' policy.

As a historian it is easy to understand that propaganda has always been an ingredient of traders of power and those involved in Aboriginal politics are no different. Propaganda is equally familiar to those involved in the scripting of the 'Reconciliation policy'. Beginning with a legislative cover the Council for

Aboriginal Reconciliation Council including Torres Strait Islanders had a ten-year sunset clause from 1999. It aimed to improve relations between Aborigines and Australians, but nobody was quite sure who was to say sorry to whom or for what. Many people simply said sorry but had no knowledge why they were doing so. Others began by blaming all the aggravation on Aborigines who were demonstrating without saying what their slogans meant. Reconciliation gradually came to mean to increase understandings of Aboriginal culture, history (their disadvantages and how their lands were taken) and a commitment to address issues in the timeframe leading to the anniversary of Federation in 2001. The exercise was not simply to produce 'motherhood' statements that would pave the way for a political 'compact' or bi-partisan approach to Aboriginal affairs but to gain the support of both left and right of Australian politics.

At first, the Prime Minister's Reconciliation policy section fashioned ideas of 'Social Justice' for Indigenous Australians in 1991-92. Their statement covered every aspect of the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio anointing the ideas of fairness, needs, social disadvantage in health, education, law, employment and dependency, deaths in custody and the removal of Aboriginal children. However, in the end most of what 'Reconciliation' stood for failed and went by the wayside. Reconciliation policy became murkier than ever as Labor was replaced in 1996 by John Howard's Liberal-National coalition government. The Council was left without a bureaucratic arm when the sub-branch in Prime Minister Howard's office was disposed of.

The twentieth century began under conservative rule and ended the same way, beginning as a century of racial discrimination and ending with the dismantling of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Labor's Aboriginal democratic structure. This latter process began with John Herron the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs when he launched a book by a South Australian academic, Geoffrey Partington lauding Australia's British identity. Partington attacked ideas built by 'Nugget' Coombs and blamed him for dismantling the Liberal-Country Party's assimilation ideology. This set in train the process of the denouncing 'Black Armband' history. Left historians wanted a more scholarly revision of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal history of dispossession that reflected the conquest of the continent and its first peoples by British and Australian colonialism: the depiction of colonial violence, cultural genocide of Aborigines and their past. Of course, all governments attempt to rewrite their own perspective of their nation's past and John Howard entered the debate to defend his British perspective of Australia's past. All who were critical of his position were branded 'the thought police' and agents of 'political correctness'. As the debate heated up, who could ever forget Howard's disgraceful outburst in Melbourne at the Reconciliation Convention on 26 May 1997, where Howard proclaimed that his policy was to be called 'Practical Reconciliation'? From

this point the Howard government resisted all suggestions of direct Aboriginal democratic participation as a special group. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was suspended and the new Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Mal Brough dismantled all bureaucratic structures for providing policy advice, choosing to fill that role himself along with chosen advisers.

However, there are still reasons to be optimistic on the history front. The first development had its genesis in a Fred Hollow's fund-raising night in the late 1990s. Among the invited guests was Nigel Milan, the then chairperson of SBS television. Nigel was generally praising SBS for its approach to Aboriginal politics and social coverage, though on some points I disagreed. As the evening progressed, Nigel came back to me and said, 'What can I do to provide better SBS resources for Aboriginal development?' To which I replied, 'Nigel, you can give Aborigines back their history. Australia has diverse media institutions that could produce either film or television documentaries depicting the historic dispossession of Aborigines beginning with early Macassan contact, European contact up to Captain Cook and the various wars of resistance from Captain Phillip to the political resistances such as the 1967 referendum, the Aboriginal Embassy and the Redfern riots leading up to 1988.' I felt that perhaps I had been too harsh on Nigel as he shook his head. However, he never forgot that conversation! Some two years later at another Hollows Foundation annual general meeting Nigel came up to me with a great smile on his face declaring that he'd convinced the SBS organisation to produce a series of documentaries on what he called 'black white relations'. He had appointed Charlie Perkin's daughter Rachel as the director who was fresh from directing the highly praised film *One Night the Moon*.<sup>1</sup>

The production of *The First Australians* went to air in 2008 as I reached my 70th birthday. It was an important achievement because for the first time Aborigines reclaimed their history, interpreted to a wider national audience in the most engaging of communications – television. This ground-breaking documentary series covered the entire 200 years of Aboriginal/European contact. The chief Aboriginal presenters were Marcia Langton, Bruce Pascoe and me, along with other historians of note. The series was able to put forward Aboriginal people's points of view to the wider community in a way never before attempted. Widely acclaimed, the series helped many understand the impact of colonialism on the first Australians.

There are also happenings in a different but equally important media. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, the classic publication by the History Program of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, is beginning to show an interest in broadening its Aboriginal

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1 Perkins R 2001.

biography. The Dictionary began some 40 years ago and until recently retained an out-dated criterion of only including those who had been dead for at least 20 years. I would like to see this clause modified, along with a special program to include prominent Aboriginal people guided by a committee of Aboriginal scholars.

Where to now? Aboriginal health has been a continuing theme and interest throughout my adult life and is documented extensively throughout this memoir. It is therefore not surprising that much of my current intellectual thinking revolves around the ongoing debate and impact of poor Aboriginal life expectancy. Historically and with good reason, infant mortality has been seen as the biggest contributor to the poor life expectancy of Aborigines. During the 1970s work by epidemiologists such as Len Smith documented the chasm between the outcome for babies of Aboriginal mothers and those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. However, more recent studies show that although Aboriginal infant mortality continues to be high, the very real problem lies in the excess of deaths of Aborigines in the middle age groups from 35 to 50 years of age. Just when non-Aborigines are generally in the prime of their life having overcome the excesses of youth, Aborigines are dying of potentially preventable diseases such as heart disease and complications from diabetes.

It is probably too early to say whether the Labor government's Apology to the Stolen Generations will herald a new era of political inclusion for Aborigines. Now however, Aborigines themselves must do some soul-searching to articulate what they mean by the slogans they use in political rallies, in the daily press and in their literature and publications about themselves as a people. In concluding my writings I hope, for my part, that the twenty-first century, in which my children and grand children live, will be the era of greater liberty, equality and fraternity for Aborigines rather than the despair and anguish of the twentieth century.

