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## The Social and Political Contexts

Violent behaviour, such as threats and physical assault, occurs in every society. It grows out of the social order and can therefore be understood only in a social context.

— Emanuel Marx<sup>1</sup>

### **There is no comparison**

Suicide is suicide, but Aboriginal suicide is different.

In 1990–91, Australia had the world's fourth highest rate of male and female youth suicide.<sup>2</sup> New Zealand, after Finland, has the highest rates for young males; it has the highest rate for females, while Maori youth suicides doubled between 1984 and 1994.<sup>3</sup> If the Australian figures are even reasonably accurate, Aboriginal rates are probably between two and five times the non-Aboriginal. The study by Hunter and others (1999) for North Queensland shows that the suicide risk is much greater in the Aboriginal population.

Australia, as a nation, has a strong history (and sense) of assimilationism. However, after a long period of imposed segregation (rather than voluntary separatism), we have, in the past two decades, sought to 'mainstream' all, or most, things Aboriginal. But suicide is *not* a topic to be submerged within the national picture. To do so obfuscates the social realities which cause such high rates. Because Aboriginal suicide has unique social and political contexts, it must, instead, be seen as a distinct phenomenon.

That a problem exists is clear. An appreciation of its nature, causation and possible remedies requires the isolation and demarcation of the differences which distinguish the Aboriginal phenomenon. Very few Aborigines live 'non-Aboriginal' lives, divorced from their social and personal histories, origins, geographies, families, lifestyles, cultures and sub-cultural *mores*. This is as true of so-called 'urban part-Aborigines' as it is

of tradition-oriented groups in rural and remote Australia. In short, the overall context of Aboriginal life is determined both voluntarily by themselves, and, all too often, imposed gratuitously by non-Aborigines. Five or six factors or forces — such as poverty, unemployment, low esteem, low morale, ennui, drug or alcohol abuse — are common to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal suicides (and, I suspect, to Maori and *pakeha* [white] suicides). But variations in the intensity of these coinciding features are not sufficient to explain the clearly higher Aboriginal propensity to commit suicide and to attempt suicide. Additional historical and social factors pertain only to Aborigines in contemporary Australian society. These same factors are also likely to affect Maori and Pacific Islander youth in New Zealand, Native American youth in Canada and the United States, the Inuit youth of Canada, and certainly the Guarani of Brazil.

### Communities in crisis

There is a crisis in many Aboriginal communities. It is a legacy of past violations by a hostile and even genocidal settler society. Ironically, much of the ‘new violence’ has its origins in the attempts, by non-Aborigines and, on occasion, by Aborigines, to eliminate discrimination, stop segregation and bestow or gain civil rights. Some of the remedy rests with federal, state and municipal governments. Some rests with Aboriginal and Islander communities: the 352,970 people who comprise barely 2 per cent of the population.<sup>4</sup> My task is not to assemble statistical profiles and compare rates of youth suicide but, through analysis and diagnosis, to explain and so possibly mitigate some of that violence — the suicides and attempted suicides.

The Aboriginal crisis is remarkable because it arises in a materially rich, stable, liberal democracy which has embraced policies of anti-discrimination, affirmative action and social justice, and which unceasingly perceives itself as ‘the land of the fair go’, or more latterly in the land of Olympism, as ‘the land of the level playing field’. What outside observers see is a chain of behaviour tearing communities apart: drug and alcohol abuse, child molestation, domestic violence, incest, rape, serious physical assault, homicide, self-mutilation, attempted suicide and suicide.

Suicide has become a particularly potent portent of the contemporary Aboriginal existence. Why this violence? Why this particular response to life’s circumstances, when, on the face of it, things *appear* to be so much better than they were 30, certainly 40, years ago?

## A catalogue of pluses

In 1997, the historian Geoffrey Blainey disparaged the ‘black armband’ interpretation of Australian history. He defined this as the way in which the interpretation of Aboriginal issues has allowed ‘the minuses to virtually wipe out the pluses’. His balance-sheet did not define either of these categories. Nor have Prime Minister John Howard and the conservative politicians and journalists who have appropriated the term done so. Therefore, to appreciate the social order and social context of contemporary Aboriginal life, we need to look briefly at the ‘positives’ and the ‘negatives’.

Much more public money than ever before is spent on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; more social service benefits are paid directly to Aboriginal recipients, and there is more actual Aboriginal employment.<sup>5</sup> The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), by which people work for the number of hours which equate with their social service benefit, is well established. Some 32,000 Aboriginal people now work instead of ‘getting sit-down money’, as the Northern Territory Aborigines once described it. The scheme, albeit flawed in several respects, has brought some self-worth and dignity — a major achievement not recognised by those who have sought, lately, to attack the system.

There is more housing, through Aboriginal-run housing associations. In 2000, the army spent five months at Jumbun community, near Tully in North Queensland, installing a sewerage system, a project heralded as a fine example of ‘practical reconciliation’. There is language salvation in several centres; there is language maintenance in several schools, and there are literacy centres. There are more and better educational facilities, and perhaps six to eight Aboriginal-run community schools. More and more youth are sitting for the NSW Higher School Certificate, or its state equivalents, leading to university study. Aboriginal Studies is an elective matriculation-level subject in high schools, and many states offer the subject from the first year of senior school.<sup>6</sup> Aboriginal Studies units and courses proliferate in universities and TAFE colleges. There are work-skills programs and Aboriginal-run and -owned enterprises. Mining royalties are paid in a handful of areas, notably for uranium in Arnhem Land, and for oil and gold in Central Australia.

Aboriginal legal aid and medical services function reasonably effectively. A few thousand Aboriginal associations are legally incorporated. Many of the outstations — to which Aborigines have moved from the earlier missions and settlements — have resource centres. There has been a virtual end to the ‘old guard’ of Native Affairs or Community Services

Departments: the 'hard men', the untrained men, ill-educated in Aboriginal administration, have, with a few exceptions, departed the scene.

Everywhere, except in Western Australia, land rights are a reality. Even in the west, several sheep and cattle station leases are held by Aborigines. The much-disparaged Queensland system of 'Deeds of Grant in Trust'—by which land is granted in batches of 50 years on stringent lease conditions— is working well. There are strong land councils in the Northern Territory and New South Wales.

Darwin Aborigines own a television station; an Aboriginal radio station broadcasts from Alice Springs. Aboriginal programs feature nation-wide on ABC and SBS radio and television. On occasion, even the commercial channels offer positive programs. Black artists, writers, theatre and dancing groups are not only recognised, but lauded. Aboriginal sporting achievement — the subject of four of my books — is outstanding and is recognised.<sup>7</sup> The presence of ten Aborigines in the national Olympic team in 2000 certainly 'lifted the profile'. There is growing Aboriginal participation in political and parliamentary life, and greater local decision-making than before. Most states have passed anti-discrimination legislation. Aborigines have discovered that they have a greater chance of recovering or establishing rights through the legal rather than through the political system, and have won 16 of their last 23 forays before the High Court. Aborigines are now part of the national agenda and are no longer relegated, as over the last 150 years, to being 'merely' a welfare problem.

In practical, physical and legal terms, major changes have occurred since the 1960s: the repressive legislation has all but gone, albeit leaving scars that will take generations to fade; the system by which Aborigines were minors in law, seemingly in perpetuity, has ended, albeit with administrative remnants and relics still intact; the so-called 'dinosaurs'— the old boss superintendents and managers of institutions called settlements, reserves and missions, replete with powers of physical punishment and imprisonment — have gone; the old prohibitions on freedom of movement, religious and cultural practices have ended. Not least, Aboriginal issues have become a major concern for reputable international bodies — United Nations committees, Amnesty International and the Save the Children Fund, among others. The spotlight on ill-health, life expectancy, the stolen generations, mandatory sentencing laws, incarceration rates and deaths in custody has been at the initiative of these agencies and has been increasingly utilised by an Aboriginal leadership willing to go abroad for a hearing.

## An inventory of minuses

Despite these manifold improvements and advances, Aborigines remain the least healthy sector of Australian society. Infant mortality is high, notwithstanding claims of 'huge' reductions over the past 20–30 years. From a figure of 100 to 150 deaths per 1000 live (Aboriginal) births in the 1960s, the 1990 figure is about 23 in 1000 not surviving one year, compared with the national figure of 8 (Horton 1994, 1278–85). Life expectancy is not consonant with that enjoyed by the rest of our essentially affluent society. The highest life expectancy for an Aboriginal male is 58 (in Western Australia) and the lowest is 53 (in the Northern Territory). Most men do not live beyond 50 — some 25 to 28 years less than white Australian males. The Durri Aboriginal Medical Service at Kempsey states that male life expectancy is 40. A most telling example of these realities is the Australian (Rules) football team, the Rovers, which won the Far West premiership in Ceduna, South Australia, in 1958. By 1987, less than 30 years later, all but one of the 18 young men were dead, reaching neither 50 nor 55.

At the Booroongen Djugun Aboriginal Corporation, which operates a nursing home and community care centre near Kempsey, Aboriginal persons are defined, for the purpose of aged care, as 42 if male and 53 if female. In Narooma, the Koorie Aged Care facility admits anyone over 45. Trachoma and malnutrition are prevalent. Obesity, heart disease and diabetes loom large. Renal failure occurs at a young age, often before 10 in towns in the far west of New South Wales. The second largest single cause of death, after 'circulatory diseases', is 'non-natural causes'.

The Jumbun army sewerage installation is presented as a special bonus, as a practical example of positive discrimination. One has to ask two questions about this innovation. First, why is the provision of a basic utility regarded as a bonus? Second, why is there no comment on the civic authorities' longstanding and deep-seated abdication of responsibility for such an essential service, a failure of local civic will and action which requires peacetime army units to remedy?

Aborigines are the poorest group in society. The 1996 census shows an unemployment rate of 22.7 per cent, compared with the national figure of 8.1 per cent; Aboriginal weekly income is \$135 per person, compared with the national average of \$273, and an Aboriginal adult's take-home pay packet is 25 per cent less than the average for a non-Aborigine.

Proportionately, Aborigines are the most arrested, the most imprisoned and the most convicted group in our society. The Criminology Research Council publishes statistics which regularly show the disproportionate

Aboriginal rates of arrest, conviction and incarceration — often for minor offences. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) addressed this matter at length: it found that Aboriginal representation in police custody was 29 times that of non-Aborigines: ‘Too many Aboriginal people are in custody too often’ (1991, vol. 1, 6).

Chronic housing shortages, appalling sanitation and garbage disposal facilities in many remote communities, poor roads and difficult access to facilities, increasingly short terms of service by support staff, constant budget cuts, and the almost total absence of sport, leisure and recreational facilities in many communities add up to a social index which places Aborigines at the bottom in all areas of action and endeavour.

### Confusion and ambiguity

Much in Aboriginal policy and practice is confusing, contradictory and ambiguous. Ambiguity can be a useful tool, especially in a democracy, when used as a controlling device, as a means of asserting power, regulating crises or handling or appeasing competing claims. In essence, it creates (sometimes unconsciously and without malice) *uncertainty, unease, ambivalence and a confusing diffusion of responsibility*. There is, however, a limit to how much ambiguity people can endure. Ambiguity in the Aboriginal context is not so much a contrivance as an *unintended* outcome of governmental insecurity and uncertainty about what to do or how to do it, about avoiding obvious breaches of human rights while remaining unwilling to commit Australian society to equality and to an acceptance of our native peoples. Ambiguity has serious consequences when a people are told that they live in an egalitarian society but find that their every action or feeling, indeed their very being, is highlighted as inferior, different, and of less importance.

The ambiguities and, often, their inherent contradictions, bewilder not only the Aboriginal and Islander peoples but also those responsible for bringing government policies to fruition. Dozens of examples can be cited and elaborated upon. I want to mention seven areas which illustrate ambiguity and which impinge directly on the daily lives of most communities: land rights; the question of a treaty or compact; Aboriginal participation in decisions affecting them; Aboriginal and Islander identity; the meaning of policy slogans like ‘reconciliation’; removed children and a national apology; and the ‘One Australia’ philosophy that brooks no special treatment for any one group.

### *Land rights*

There is much confusion about land rights.

Is it a political or social movement? Is it a philosophy, a political umbrella under which Aborigines and Islanders can cohere (as with Black Power in the United States several decades ago)? Is it a quintessential ownership without which Aboriginal life cannot be sustained, an embryonic or developing land-based nationalism? Or is it a means of reparation and restitution for the depredations and dispossessions of the past? For all Aborigines, the phrase signifies at least two things: first, the giving back of something, as opposed to two centuries of 'things' being taken away; second, and inherent in the first, a signal recognition that they exist and have some legitimate claims on the nation-state.

What a Labor government initiated in 1973, a Liberal government concluded with the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. The then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, displayed a reformist outlook, neither emulated nor respected by federal or state Liberal governments since. This was the first statute in Australian history which sought only to give rights, not to diminish or restrict them, even though one can criticise the very narrow concept it espoused, namely, that land could only be granted if people demonstrated religious and spiritual attachment to it. For a brief moment, we beheld acceptance of some valued conventions, as James Tully calls them: first, a recognition that Aborigines existed and had some legitimate rights; second, that any interference with, or change to, any people's rights had to receive the consent of all parties; and, third, that Aborigines as an identifiable, self-determining group would survive (1995, 119–27).

Since that landmark Act, land rights in all jurisdictions but Western Australia have been achieved with varying degrees of rejection, reluctance and legal challenge. In 1984, the federal government promised uniform land rights legislation. By 1986, that notion was dead, and the two major political parties fought the West Australian state election on a platform based on the extent to which each would *restrict* land rights. At century's end, there was a costly campaign to enact legislation to establish state and territory regimes by which native title can be permanently extinguished and the right of the Aboriginal people to negotiate access to traditional land can be seriously restricted. The Coalition's 1998 Wik legislation is a defining moment: it sees a recently 'encitized' community 'uncitized' in land law. This is not, as the protagonists claim, because of racial discrimination, which is assuredly what it is, but in the cause of 'equal citizenship' and 'good property law'. Earlier, the High Court had ruled that where Aboriginal rights and those of pastoral *leaseholders* (not owners) conflicted, the latter's interests should prevail. Nevertheless, the Wik judges made the sensible decision that Aboriginal and pastoral rights could, and should, coexist. The present Coalition government's view is that

Aboriginal rights should not in any way impinge on what is believed to be a solely white domain. Accordingly, Aboriginal rights should be extinguished because they are unable even to coexist with white property interests.

In 1998, the Coalition government appointed John Reeves QC to review the 1976 Land Rights Act. The object, according to political journalist Alan Ramsey, is 'to shred the integrity' of the Act by breaking down the powers of the Central and Northern Land Councils, and by giving the essentially anti-land rights — and essentially anti-Aboriginal — Northern Territory government greater control over Aboriginal land.<sup>8</sup> It is hard to disagree with this analysis. In Aboriginal eyes, there has been a serious turning back of hard-won achievements since the Mabo 2 High Court judgement.

### *The matter of a treaty*

There is confusion, uncertainty and unease about a proposed 'treaty'.

For nearly two decades, discussion, debate and continuing argument about a treaty — a compact or a settlement of some kind — has occurred.<sup>9</sup> In November 2000, a member of the executive of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation stated: 'The whole question of an agreement, without using words that are loaded, is something that the Council has for over the past 10 years discussed, and everyone is of the common view that it is something that has to be achieved — whether it be called treaty, compact or agreement'.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 10 of the *Reconciliation — Australia's Challenge* report<sup>11</sup> insists that, after ten years of deliberation and consultation, there must be some formal settlement of the issues presented. Most Aborigines are not demanding an equal voice as a 'nation', but they do seek the credence and credibility of being able to sit at a negotiating table to discuss 'reconciliation', land use, and levels of autonomy. The ink was not yet dry on the report before the Prime Minister rejected any such formal compact, and several major newspapers inveighed against the idea (as blocking the path to reconciliation).<sup>12</sup>

Other countries have such treaties, compacts or agreements. New Zealand has recognised the Maori as a 'first people', worthy of negotiation. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi has been ruled a legally enforceable instrument, resulting in a special Waitangi Tribunal that listens to Maori claims and makes substantial compensations.<sup>13</sup> South Africa has faced the past from 1960 — the somewhat strange date set by the government — through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and there is ongoing discussion about the size and nature of reparation. In 1996, Canada's Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded that 'there must be an acknowledgement that great wrongs have been done to Aboriginal



people', the 506,000 Amerindian and Inuktitut who now form 1.7 per cent of the population. The new Territory of Nunavut is one major outcome of their 'first nation' status.

Prime Minister John Howard has rejected any movements towards a national reparation, or a treaty: *that*, he claims, implies two nations, a notion he 'will never accept' (Tatz 1999, 46–7). In December 2000, the Prime Minister rejected the treaty notion, then declared 'reconciliation is and should be an unstoppable force', thereby signalling some change in his hitherto hard-line stance. In the same month, he awarded the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio to the Minister for Immigration as an adjunct, not primary, responsibility. For the first time since 1973, there is no longer a minister responsible solely for Aboriginal Affairs. The very first utterance of the new minister, Philip Ruddock, was a rejection of any treaty consideration because such would imply two nations — and that is deemed divisive.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the federal government's rationale, the result is ambiguity.

### *'Aboriginalisation'*

There is uncertainty about Aboriginal control over their own affairs.

From the 1960s, Aborigines were told by Aboriginal advancement organisations and political parties that Aboriginal control over their own affairs was a universal goal. By the early 1970s, most advancement leagues and progress associations had 'Aboriginalised'. But, as of 1973, they all began to be dismantled as a result of federal Labor's policy and practice of recruiting as many Aborigines of talent as possible into its own government bureaucracy. Thereafter, all federal governments adopted 'Aboriginalisation' as a matter of course.

For several years, the newly created federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) had an Aboriginal permanent head in (the late) Charles Perkins. In 1990, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) replaced DAA. It is an elected body of commissioners who believe that they are intended to be the policy makers.

For a year (1998–99), ATSIC maintained a vote of no confidence in the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator John Herron. He turned elsewhere for advice, yet, by June 1999, he had only one Aboriginal person in his immediate group of some 30 advisers. Ambiguity enveloped this minister, more so than any of his predecessors in this difficult portfolio. Aborigines perceived him as always subordinating their interests to the Coalition's interests in mining, tourism and development. In 2000, his views on the stolen generations, and the number so taken, further alienated

any Aboriginal support he may have had. He was, in effect, sacked by the Prime Minister at the end of 2000.

The growth in the employment rate of Aborigines in the public service since 1973 has been enormous, including a handful of appointments at the most senior levels. There is, however, no doubt that Aboriginal affairs agencies rank low in the public service hierarchy, and that, within specific Aboriginal agencies, non-Aborigines hold much or all of the power.

### *Identity*

There has been a battle over Aboriginal and Islander identity.

Until the repeal of the special Acts and ordinances which applied solely to Aborigines and Islanders, mainly between 1958 and 1984, Aborigines were defined on the basis of their 'degree of blood'. In 1969, when W.C. Wentworth was the minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs, self-definition was adopted: any person, descended from Aborigines, who says he or she is Aboriginal, and who is accepted as such by the group, is Aboriginal. Aborigines applauded this rational approach. While the racist and eugenicist element in society lamented the disappearance of 'bloodness', and all the controls which went with it, this was a major advance.

However, in the almost 30 years since, there has been an artificial dichotomy between two 'races'—'Kakadu Man', tribally rich and tribally pure, and 'Redfern Man', urban, poor, and pretending to be what he is not. At various times in the past 20 years, branches of Liberal and National parties have called for a 'tightening' of definitions, mostly centred on 'darkness' of colour or on 'real Aborigines', those people 'who dance corroborees' and 'hunt kangaroos'.

Aborigines have engaged in a long struggle for the right to name themselves, culminating in the 1980s and 1990s in the now common usage of *Koori* in New South Wales and Victoria, *Nunga* in South Australia, *Nyungar* in the West, *Murri* in Queensland and *Yolgnu* in the Northern Territory. Torres Strait Islanders were officially accorded a distinct status in 1990 and South Sea Islanders were formally granted their separate identity by the Queensland government in 2000.

These distinctions are of importance to the people concerned. Yet they are currently universalised as 'indigenous Australians', a term neither sought nor endorsed by the majority of the people. It has become cute and fashionable shorthand for the media, governmental agencies and academics: it is less clumsy than referring to 'Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders'. However, the term is producing unnecessary heat and debate about who is indigenous, that is, born *in* or native *to* Australia. Despite the superficial attractions of the term, the next census cannot possibly ask: 'Is the

person of indigenous origin?’ Nor, in 40 years of research in these communities, have I heard anyone refer to him or herself as an ‘indigene’, or as someone who has an ‘indigenist’ approach to life.

It should be noted that New Zealand is not free of this identity issue either. There are some 40 ‘methods’ of defining Maori, and there is much inconsistency in their applications. (‘Maori’ and ‘*pakeha*’ are used in this book in deference to current preference.) Identity bedevils police reporting, coronial findings, and even the generally excellent suicide research by academics.

### *Policy slogans*

Few people can claim to understand and appreciate Aboriginal policy.

Policy slogans disappear soon after they are born. Little time is given to their implementation before another new (and temporary) broom sweeps in, producing yet more confusion. Since the discredited assimilationist philosophy was meant to end in the mid-1960s, there has been a series of terms: self-determination, self-management, Aboriginalisation, land rights (as a mantra covering all things), and now, reconciliation. All have had their share of problems — problems of universal understanding, acceptance of the values which underpin them, communication of these ideas and their practical significance to the people they are intended to advance, and in the training and education of staff who implement them.

The current policy slogan is ‘reconciliation’, exemplified by the statutory Aboriginal Reconciliation Council and a week in May set aside as National Reconciliation Week. It appeals as a sane approach, ethical and moral. It offers hope, harmony and ‘humane-ness’. It suggests an end to enmity and a settling of differences. Reconciliation is, however, never defined: it is simply parroted, leaving ambiguous assumptions and a struggle to discern meaning or purpose. Reconciliation began as a non-Aboriginal concept at the start of the 1990s, conceived by Robert Tickner (then Labor’s Aboriginal Affairs minister). It was to be a ten-year program aimed at improving race relations through an increased understanding of Aboriginal and Islander culture and history, and then through an appreciation of the causes of continued Aboriginal disadvantage in health, housing, education and employment.

For some proponents and believers, it means a moratorium — that is, each party desisting from causing injury to the other. For many, it can only mean the national Australian government bringing itself to use the ‘sorry’ word for the forcible removal of children, to articulate atonement and to find a means of restitution or reparation for these practices. For

the authors of the final Reconciliation report, it means a people's movement and capitalising on the new-found broad public good will in order to complete the nation's 'unfinished business'. For others, it means 'a place in the sun' for 'indigenous Australians'; or an end to the bickering and the meanness; or it means not the history or the causes of poor health, housing, education and employment but their alleviation and improvement; or, for a number of concerned Australians, it means 'walking together' and/or 'forging a new relationship'.<sup>15</sup> A glance at the book, *Reconciliation*, edited by Michelle Grattan and published in May 2000 to coincide with the presentation of the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council working documents, shows just how divergent is the understanding of this word — which remains, in essence, little more than a slogan.

### *The stolen generations*

The forcible removal of the children known as the 'stolen generations' has caused a great deal of unease, frustration and anger in both Aboriginal and mainstream societies.

My research overlapped with the inquiry into the 'Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from Their Families' and the publication of its report, *Bringing Them Home* (HREOC 1997). Of the 120 judicial inquiries, parliamentary committee reports and royal commissions into aspects of Aboriginal affairs in the twentieth century, this is by far the starkest and strongest indictment. It concluded that Australia has wittingly committed genocide through the forcible transfer of children — not just yesteryear but as recently as the 1980s.

The Howard Coalition, succeeding Labor in March 1996, declared 'the Government can see no equitable or practical way of paying special compensation to these persons, if compensation were considered to be warranted'.<sup>16</sup> An array of defences has since been offered for the Commonwealth's 'no compensation, no apology' policy. Restitution will 'produce new injustices and inequities', 'create serious difficulties', cause 'adverse social and economic effects'. It will be 'very difficult to identify persons', it is all 'problematic', and, rather ominously for existing programs, it will 'divert resources in mounting or defending cases'. The government's conclusion is that 'there is no existing objective methodology for attaching a monetary value to the loss suffered by victims'. The government also takes the view that, in judging these practices, 'it is appropriate to have regard to the standards and values prevailing at the time of their enactment and implementation, rather than to the standards and values prevailing today'.

The Coalition government regularly expresses irritation and anger at the continued rejection of these 'principles'; it insists that the many vociferous critics are merely peddling 'political correctness' and, in so doing, are harming the reconciliation process, which it sees as *burying* the 'mistakes' of the past.

The 'assimilation factories' ceased very recently: the Retta Dixon Home in Darwin in 1980; Sister Kate's Home in Perth in 1987; St Francis' Home and Colebrook in South Australia in 1957 and 1978, respectively; and Bomaderry in New South Wales in 1988. The problem is not one which affected only past generations: it goes on affecting many people living now, including many of the suicide victims in this study. The Coalition talks about these events as being removed from our time and values, yet the repeal of the 'removal' laws began only as late as 1964 and continued, one state at a time, through to 1984. The last child removed was in Perth in 1970, when the authorities defied a judge's order to restore a child to its natural parent. Children continued to be removed well beyond 1970.

The Howard government has steadfastly refused to make a public apology on this matter. On Anzac Day 2000, the Prime Minister announced in Paris that he saw no inconsistency between his and the Turkish government's spoken 'sorryness' over events in 1917 and his refusal to say 'sorry' about Aboriginal child removals here so much later. Aboriginal family organisations state that there can be no reconciliation unless that matter is fully addressed, and then redressed, legally and politically. They note the Canadian and New Zealand apologies, as well as England's public regret at sending Liverpool children to Australia during World War II. They also note the formal state (but not Northern Territory) government apologies, and they point to former Prime Minister Paul Keating's 1992 'Redfern speech' in which he acknowledged, *inter alia*, that 'we' brought the diseases, the alcohol, 'we committed the murders', and 'we took the children from their mothers' (Tatz 1999, 41).

The low-water mark of the Coalition government's intransigence was Senator John Herron's support for, and endorsement of, a paper written by bureaucrats to a Senate inquiry in April 2000, one which, in effect, denigrated and diminished the stolen generations issue, much in the vein of the Commonwealth's submission to the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry (discussed above). Senator Herron contended that since an entire generation was not removed but perhaps only one in ten children, one could not use the phrase 'stolen generation(s)'. This sophistry produced a national outcry which further fuelled Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) determination about this matter.

In November 2000, a Senate inquiry reported on the federal government's implementation (or rather, non-implementation) of the *Bringing Them Home* recommendations.<sup>17</sup> It recommended, among other things, a motion for a national apology, a formal apology to members of the stolen generations by the Northern Territory government, a national memorial and a reparations tribunal. This painstaking report was hardly the work of 'vociferous black armband critics' or of those dedicated solely to 'political correctness'.

More confusion has arisen with the growth of a small, but busy, 'industry' of denialism. At one end of that endeavour, the Prime Minister has asked that school texts reflect glorious achievement rather than the unpleasant past. At the other end, a coterie of journalists — Paddy McGuinness, Piers Akerman, Andrew Bolt, Christopher Pearson, Michael Duffy and Frank Devine, among others — has joined with former cabinet minister Peter Howson, former bureaucrat Reg Marsh, former Governor-General Bill Hayden and barrister Douglas Meagher in denying that children were ever removed — except at parental request or agreement, or for the child's welfare. McGuinness has gone so far as to say that the entire body of evidence in the *Bringing Them Home* report is a hoax and an anthology of 'false memory'.<sup>18</sup>

### *The level playing fields*

The 'level playing field' philosophy is possibly the most confusing and irreconcilable point of all.

John Howard, when leader of the federal Liberal opposition in 1989, declared that, in the name of the just society, there can be no special favours, no positive discrimination for any one group, especially not for Aborigines. He pledged repeal of existing land rights legislation, because no other group has such special benefits. The Liberal and National parties also proclaimed, in the 1990s, that none should be advantaged over another, expressing the philosophy that we are One Australia. The then Queensland Premier Rob Borbidge gave a practical example: he insisted that there can only be one Australian law, one that prevents non-Aborigines and Aborigines alike from taking crocodiles for food on Aboriginal reserves.<sup>19</sup>

The ideological implication of the 'level playing field' is the withdrawal, or elimination, of all special pleaders, so creating equality of treatment for individuals. It is a populist 'philosophy' which ignores the presence on the playing field of those who are already powerful. It is also a perspective lacking any appreciation of history. Canada rejects this and has adopted an antithetical view: the premises of the philosophy that 'all

Canadians are equal are very wrong'; that the 'equality approach', which ignores inequalities, 'is the modern equivalent of the mind-set that led to the Indian Act, the residential schools, the forced relocations — and the other nineteenth-century instruments of assimilation'.<sup>20</sup>

Conservative politics in Australia does not discuss or acknowledge the original reasons for legislation which attempts to protect, advantage or compensate Aborigines and Islanders. Nor does it acknowledge that no other group has had as disadvantaged a past as Aborigines. One could be tempted to dismiss much of the political rhetoric as mere election talk, but, in proclaiming such a 'just society', Howard obliterated — as did Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in the 1960s — all Aboriginal and Islander personal, social, political, economic, cultural and legal history. The Howard–Trudeau proposition infers that, as of a given date, previous histories and legacies of injustice and inequality are expunged to make way for, at best, a clean slate or, at worst, a reconciliation slate.

The implications of this philosophy have devastating consequences. It is as if Aborigines, like new immigrants, have 'just arrived'; and, to share in the 'just' and 'equal' society, they must compete on equal terms. The Aboriginal question is thus merged into a 'multicultural society', one in which Aborigines are no different from recent immigrants. (It is significant that Aboriginal Affairs is now, in 2001, conjoined with Immigration and Multicultural Affairs under Minister Ruddock.) Past violations are disregarded, thereby absolving anyone from atonement or compensation.

On election, Howard began a systematic campaign against the 'black armband' interpretation of Australian history. Priority, he said, should be given to health, literacy and other practical programs. Although he has no jurisdiction over state school systems, he requests that syllabuses be rewritten to accommodate his view. Howard sympathises with those 'Australians who are insulted when they are told we have a racist, bigoted past'. Of note was Australia Day 1997. Prime Minister Howard declaimed that Australia should not be 'perpetually apologising for sins of the past'. In contrast, the Governor-General, Sir William Deane, said 'the past is never fully gone'; 'it is absorbed into the present and future' and it shapes 'what we are and what we do'—and, unless Australia achieves reconciliation by 2001, 'we'll enter the second century of our nation as a diminished people'.

## The violence syndrome

There is a causal link between ambiguity and patterns of behaviour in many Aboriginal societies. The stages are: a feeling of *frustration*; followed

by a sense of *alienation* from society, of not belonging, of foreignness; then *withdrawal* from society, no longer caring about membership, about loyalty, or about law-abiding behaviour; and then the threat of, or actual, *violence*.

The anthropologist Emanuel Marx (1976) talks of ‘appealing violence’ and ‘coercive violence’. The former, discussed in the next chapter, is essentially about harm to self or to others, a cry for help when one is at the end of one’s road. The latter is where a person uses violence in a premeditated and controlled manner, ‘as an extreme but often effective means towards achieving a social objective’. At present, the harm in Aboriginal life is confined to self, to kin and, at times, to those who work with and for communities. At no point in Australia in this century have Aborigines resorted to coercive violence.

Earlier, I stated that things appear to be better now than two or three decades ago. Yet several key aspects of the present and prevailing socio-economic and living conditions are worse than when I first began looking at Aboriginal administration in the early 1960s. Then, there were virtually no human or civil rights, but the highly respected values of kinship, family reciprocity, child-rearing practices, care of the aged, incest prohibition, and punishment for offences against a strong moral code were relatively intact. While Aboriginal society was politically disadvantaged in, and removed from, the broader Australia, it had retained, within itself, many elements of social cohesion.

Today, by contrast, the agenda is external, concerned with relations with the broader Australia: land as property, land councils, High Court actions, cultural representation, Aboriginal participation in political and economic arenas, artistic recognition, sporting adulation and an enormous public consciousness about Aboriginality. Meanwhile, in many groups, the internal values of what once were ordered societies, even if that order was maintained by settlement and mission discipline, have disappeared, leaving rampant the values of disorder.

## Notes

1. Marx, *The Social Context of Violent Behaviour*, 1.
2. Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, *Youth Suicide*, 22–3. The document cited Australian youth figures, aged 15–24, as 26.6 per 100,000 for males and 6.2 per 100,000 for females. The New Zealand figures were 38.7 and 6.7, respectively. By 1995, the New Zealand rates in the youth category were 44.1 for males and 12.8 for females (Ministry of Health, Youth Suicide Statistics).
3. Ministry of Health, *Suicide Trends in New Zealand*, 23–4.



4. The 1996 census shows a figure of 314,120 Aborigines, 28,744 Torres Strait Islanders, and 10,106 who are either of the above, or both, or South Sea Islanders.
5. For elaboration of what follows, see my article, 'Race Relations in the 21st Century', and my chapter, 'A Question of Rights and Wrongs'.
6. In the past two years the number of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies in New South Wales has declined: students, teachers and parents tend to shy away from 2-unit subjects in the Higher School Certificate. Strong efforts are being made to recruit students.
7. Particularly, *Obstacle Race*, and, with Paul Tatz, *Black Gold*.
8. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 1999.
9. Tatz, 'Aborigines and the Age of Atonement'. My view of the treaty idea, the 'Makarrata proposal' as it was known, was published in 1983. I opposed the notion, for reasons which were and which remain cogent. My opposition to the notion, and its workability, does not mean that the present Aboriginal insistence on a treaty is wrong. Their reasons may be as valid as mine.
10. *Australian*, 9 November 2000.
11. Commonwealth of Australia (2000).
12. For example, *Australian*, 8 December 2000.
13. The *Press*, Christchurch, 24 September 1997. In 1997 the Crown apologised to the South Island Ngai Tahu peoples and restored Maori authority over lakes, mountains and other property, providing at least \$170 million in compensation. Two years earlier the Tainui Federation of Tribes of the North Island won compensation of \$170 million and restoration of 15,400 hectares.
14. ABC News, 22 December 2000.
15. Australians for Native Title & Reconciliation, ANTaR, is the latest of several suburban groups seeking a fresh approach to Aboriginal matters.
16. The material following is from Tatz, *Genocide in Australia*, 43–50.
17. Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, *Healing: A Legacy of Generations*.
18. See *Quadrant*, vol. XLIV, no. 11, November 2000, for the views of McGuinness, Kenneth Maddock, Keith Windschuttle, and Douglas Meagher; see also Manne, *In Denial*.
19. '7.30 Report', ABC television, 12 March 1998.
20. *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, People to People, Nation to Nation*, highlights from Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Minister of Supply and Services, Canada, 1996, 9.