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NATIONAL ABORIGINES DAY - A PERSONAL THING *

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I wonder what significance the ninth of July this year holds for so many Aboriginal people. To many, I suppose, it is to commemorate those of our ancestors whose tribes have vanished into the mists of time and with them the very roots of our being - our culture - my culture. Yes, let us never forget them for on these memories are we building the emerging Aboriginal Society of today.

For me, National Aborigines Day this year is a reminder of my identity - an identity one is striving to establish. You see, thousands like me have really had no identity, flotsam and jetsam, in this our country, Australia. From the formative years of our lives, we were taught to despise our people. We were sent to missions and settlements because of the "wrongdoings" of our people and so we strove to be like somebody else we could never be and in so doing, we became empty inside. I speak from experience, not from what I have learnt in books and learned writings. And to fill that emptiness, we drank heavily. But that only served to deepen that dark pit. From the very beginning of my family, we were forcefully cut off completely from our people and our culture. Our particular tribe was caught by a punitive expedition of white cattleowners between Kuranda and Mareeba and shot - every man, woman and child they could see. But what they did not see, were two little boys hiding in the topmost branches of a tree. Those two survived - my grandfather and my grandfather's brother. They were too young to have learnt much of the culture from the old people and so when they became men there was nothing that they could pass on to their sons and their sons.

To deepen the pit of despair, our Aboriginal mothers were transported from our traditional country to missions and settlements, places like Palm Island, top security Aboriginal Settlement. Their

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crime being that they had "half-caste" children. I know. We didn't even have that one last thing left, an association with traditional country.

"Enough Phil, we've heard all this before", you well may say. "You speak too much of the past!" And so I might, but this has happened and not so very long ago. It has happened in our lifetime and before one can project himself into the future with confidence, one must have the history, no matter how sad it has been, on which to plant his feet, to hold his head high and to face the direction in which he wants to travel.

It is only in the last few years that many Aboriginal people like myself have done some deep soul searching. "Who am I?" "What am I?" and so we are embarking upon a long, difficult and in some cases, a traumatic journey to establish our identities. I have visions of making a pilgrimage to my grandfather's and grandmother's traditional land to find out where they were born and to what tribes they belonged. Just to be able to stand in these spots, would fill me with an 'unfelt-before' feeling. That is a first step. There are many more to take.

And what worries me more than anything else today, are the Aboriginal children who are growing up as I had grown up. Must these children again suffer the eventual traumatic situation that many like myself face today? Must they feel inferior because they are Aboriginal? Must they be brought up to despise our people?

I hope not, oh God I hope not.

And so as I think about Trucanini on National Aborigines Day, 9 July, I make these two pleas.

To the non-Aboriginal: Don't turn your backs on us. We are looking for your sympathetic advice and support. Now is the time you can help us.

To the Traditional Aboriginal: Don't call us 'yellow-fellers'. It hurts. We are looking to you for comfort. Only you can give us what our forefathers couldn't. I am of your blood too. *I am an Aboriginal!* and I am proud.

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