

# Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation

Russell McGregor

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On 20 August 1963, the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, addressed the Federal Parliament on the matter of two small bark petitions that had been sent to the parliament by members of 17 Aboriginal clans from north-east Arnhem Land. The bark petitions, as is now widely known, were statements of protest — exquisitely polite in their wording — against the excision of lands from the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve to make way for the development of a bauxite mine and township. And yet, notwithstanding the courteousness of their wording, Hasluck used his statement that day to reject the petitions, casting doubt on the legitimacy of this representation and the petitioners themselves.

That the clans from Arnhem Land had simply exercised that most symbolic of all citizenship rights by petitioning the parliament was a fact that should not have been lost on Hasluck. For Paul Hasluck, as Russell McGregor shows us in *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation*, had been arguing since 1951 for an understanding of the policy of ‘assimilation’ which, as McGregor puts it:

... emphasized the civic dimensions of national belonging [through which] Aboriginal people would become members of the Australian nation not through conformity to a common complexion, but through their adherence to the values and codes of conduct of other Australians and their enjoyment of equal rights and responsibilities. (McGregor 2011, p. 77)

McGregor does not mention Hasluck’s rejection of the Bark Petitions, although he might have. I say ‘might have’, if only because the episode captures the core argument at the heart of *Indifferent Inclusion*. That is, that the quest for Aboriginal inclusion in the Australian nation has foundered on the faltering, partial, and often contradictory attempts by white Australians to think through and respond to Aboriginal peoples’ claims for a legitimate place within the Australian nation. It is a quest, as McGregor reminds us in his conclusion, which continues to founder even in the present day. But this is to run too far ahead of this detailed and nuanced history which is, first and foremost, a history of the ideas and ideals that informed public policy and public debate about the place of Aboriginal people in the Australian nation, from the decade prior to Federation in 1901 up until the late 1960s. And central to McGregor’s analysis of this history of ideas

and ideals is that contested (often bitterly) idea of ‘assimilation’. As McGregor shows, ‘assimilation’ was a concept so capacious that it encompassed ambitions and projects that ranged from the eugenicist in the first decades of the 20th century to the liberal democratic in the decades after World War II. To show us how this was so, particularly given that many historians and others have read the policy more narrowly as being all to do with attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture and identity, is one of McGregor’s most original achievements.

*Indifferent Inclusion* opens at the point of the 10 years of debate prior to Federation: almost four decades prior to the beginning of the era of ‘assimilation’ as this is marked by most historians. Of course, McGregor is not suggesting that this pre-Federation period be understood in terms of ‘assimilation’, but rather that even at this early phase in Australian political history, Aboriginal people were regarded with scant indifference by whites. As McGregor tells us, there was no mention of Aboriginal people by any Australian delegate during the Federation debates, and the Constitution that ‘consummated the federation process’ mentioned Aboriginal people only twice. Both references were exclusionary. Section 51 (xxvi) empowered the Federal Parliament to make laws with respect to ‘people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws’. Section 127 stated that: ‘In reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted.’

McGregor argues that the explicit exclusion of Aboriginal people from the national community was informed by two distinct but related lines of reasoning. First, Aboriginal people ‘were considered a fleeting problem’, their ‘primitive’ culture fragile in the face of contact meant that they were a population ‘destined to extinction’ (p. xx). Second, the White Australia policy was a foundational feature of the Commonwealth, defining Australian membership of the national community on the basis of whiteness. Such exclusive nationalism worked to deny Aboriginal people a place within the Australian state and polity just as much as social Darwinist ideas about ‘primitive’ people and cultures.

When Chapter 1 opens at the point of the inter-war years, McGregor has in this sense very clearly laid the foundation for his argument about whites’ widespread

indifference towards Aboriginal people. But such a lack of care or concern, as McGregor also argues, was not universal. A minority of administrators in 'native affairs', together with a number of social reformers and an increasingly vocal Aboriginal leadership, railed against this apathy. Frustration with official inaction, however, was about all that united this very disparate group.

Among the state and Commonwealth administrators in 'native affairs', the position of Chief Protector of Aborigines was perhaps the most powerful of all — not least because of the lack of political interest in the field. During the inter-war years in the Northern Territory, this position was held by C.E. Cook, and in Western Australia, A.O. Neville. Both men were committed eugenicists, proponents of efforts aimed at the biological absorption of Aboriginal people into the white population. Alarmed by the increase in the Aboriginal population of mixed descent in their states and across the continent — an increase which the fathers of Federation thought impossible — these two men determined to reverse the growing visibility of what was becoming known as 'the aboriginal problem'. That is, the growing number of Aboriginal children with mixed parentage (almost always white fathers and Aboriginal mothers).

C.E. Cook and A.O. Neville's solution to this 'problem' was to orchestrate the forcible removal of children of mixed parentage from their Aboriginal mothers and families. Their rationale for this: that in four generations the 'colour' could be 'bred out of' the Aboriginal population. Biological absorption in these terms, as McGregor argues, was in part driven by the ambition that both men had to see Aboriginal people become a part of the Australian community. That is, they 'sought to incorporate a minority by maintaining a myth of shared ancestry'. That Aboriginal inclusion in the Australian nation could only take place when Aboriginal culture and identity had been eradicated confirms the contradiction at the heart of this eugenicist vision.

The theft of Aboriginal children from their families, McGregor shows, was a policy pursued with vigour by these two men in their respective jurisdictions during the inter-war years. Elsewhere across the continent, however, the policy was implemented in a much more haphazard — but no less destructive — way. And although Cook and Neville found some support for their efforts among the scientific community, there was not a single Aboriginal leader or spokesperson who endorsed their vision of the eventual assimilation of Aboriginal people in the Australian nation via a program of planned 'inter-breeding' otherwise known as miscegenation.

As McGregor demonstrates in Chapter 3, the Aboriginal activists William Cooper, Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson completely rejected the claim of white superiority that the concept of engineered biological absorption rested upon. Rather, they argued that inter-marriage between whites and Aboriginal people had no deleterious effects

and further, that those Aboriginal people designated as 'half-castes' were the equals of white Australians. And although William Cooper certainly believed that the future for Aboriginal people lay in their adoption of European culture and British loyalties, he never argued that this must involve the dissolution of Aboriginal culture and identity. Indeed, the three activists' understanding of assimilation was anchored in their tireless efforts to obtain equal treatment, opportunity and citizenship for Aboriginal people.

In the Australian community more widely, however, neither the eugenicist conception of assimilation nor that of those Aboriginal activists who argued that Aboriginal people were equal with whites and therefore deserved citizenship had much traction. The majority of white Australians opposed both understandings on 'nakedly racist grounds as a violation of white Australia'. The ideas and ideals that characterised understandings of Aboriginal peoples' place within the Australian nation in those first four decades after Federation — whatever versions of inclusion they incorporated — were all based on a concept of 'race'. The idea that biological differences were socially significant was in this way a guiding principle of Australian state formation. As McGregor argues in Chapter 4, it was a principle that only began to come under challenge from the late 1940s, primarily as a result of a series of changes precipitated by World War II. Key among these changes was first, the shared experience of war itself.

During World War II, white soldiers served alongside Aboriginal servicemen in all the major theatres of conflict: the Middle East, the Pacific and Europe. As one administrator at the time put it: 'Strong bonds of sympathy developed during that association, an influence which will undoubtedly be brought to bear in press and politics in future questions connected with aboriginal welfare.'

Second, the Northern Territory experience of the war generated important shifts in race relations and the terms of the debate about the place of Aboriginal people in the Australian nation. Throughout World War II the Northern Territory had come under military administration, and 'Army Aboriginal Camps' were established on Aboriginal Reserve lands. For the first time, many Aboriginal people were paid equal wages with whites working alongside one another in the camps. And while Bill Ferguson, Jack Patten and William Cooper had been arguing since World War I that military service had surely earned Aboriginal people the right to citizenship, it was only after World War II that this argument began to be articulated by a number of white Australians in positions of authority.

Third, in the aftermath of World War II the United Nations began the process of addressing the issue of universal human rights, as well as (to a lesser extent) the rights of colonised peoples and the duties of countries such as Australia who held mandates over foreign territories — in Australia's case, the Territory of Papua and New Guinea. While eugenics had been thoroughly discredited as a result of Nazism, the issue of race relations became a

frequent theme in international commentary on the fitness of countries like Australia to govern subject populations.

Fourth, post-war reconstruction required a large labour force, and immigration was the one way to secure this. Post-World War II immigration also contributed to the processes of white Australia's unravelling as large numbers of migrants from countries other than the British Isles made Australia their home. It was not until 1951, however, with the appointment of Paul Hasluck as Minister for Territories that the Commonwealth Government sought to erase the notion of 'race' altogether from policy and legislation concerning Aboriginal people. It was, as McGregor argues in Chapters 5 and 6, a moment that marked a shift away from a conception of national community based on ethnicity to one based on principles of civic nationalism. A revised conception of assimilation was central to this shift.

Paul Hasluck always maintained that he 'did not inaugurate the policy of assimilation but merely inherited pre-war inter-governmental decisions' (Hasluck 1988, p. 79). It was an honest claim. In 1939, just before the outbreak war, the then Commonwealth Minister responsible for the Northern Territory, J.E. McEwan, had announced a 'New Deal' for Aborigines. Assimilation as Hasluck pursued it was a revised version of the 1939 'New Deal' inasmuch as Hasluck's policy, like the 'New Deal', was premised on the 'eventual goal of citizenship for Aborigines'. As McGregor shows, however, to erase 'race' and therefore all references to 'Aborigines', 'Aboriginals', 'full-bloods', 'half-castes' and so on from the relevant legislation resulted not in citizenship for Aboriginal people but rather their designation — seen at the time as temporary — as another category of people altogether. That category was the 'ward', a term no less demeaning than all those previous terms used to describe the First Peoples of the continent. As one missionary at the time made clear in his stinging criticism of the legislation, Aboriginal people were to now to be categorised together with 'lunatics, delinquents and children'.

Paul Hasluck held the position of Minister of Territories for 12 years, a longer period than any of his predecessors or successors in Indigenous affairs. And, although as McGregor argues, these were years marked by the rhetoric of inclusion — that Aboriginal people would come to live like white Australians and enjoy all the benefits of citizenship with white Australians — they were also years in which the limits to white Australians' conceptions of inclusion became all too evident. The contradiction between, on the one hand, the goal of citizenship, and on the other, legislation which understood Aboriginal people not as potential citizens but wards in need of the state's guardianship was just one (albeit striking) example of multiple

inconsistencies within this version of the assimilationist project.

By 1963, and with Hasluck's departure from the portfolio, these inconsistencies only became more pronounced, not least because they also interlinked with newly reinvigorated social forces in Australian life. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as McGregor shows us in Chapter 7, intellectuals and artists began to work more widely with Aboriginal motifs, themes and issues. And although much of this work produced some appalling stereotypes, particularly when taken up in popular culture, it nonetheless led to a developing appreciation of Aboriginal culture across the non-Aboriginal population. What's more, this developing appreciation of Aboriginal culture connected up with wider forces of intellectual and social change driven in large part by the efforts of a new generation of Aboriginal activists and their supporters.

'Land rights' had always been central to the arguments of previous generations of Aboriginal activists: they had just framed those arguments in keeping with ideas about their peoples' rightful place as citizens with land upon which to make a living and raise their families. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the younger generation of Aboriginal activists was impatient with the promises of citizenship and equality that had characterised Hasluck's assimilationist rhetoric. These activists, as McGregor shows in Chapters 8 and 9, began arguing for land rights, voting rights, drinking rights and rights to 'self-determination'.

McGregor's detailed analysis of these six decades of the 20th century, weaving as he does a coherent and persuasive narrative about the changing nature of Australian nationhood, from ethnic to civic conceptions of belonging, successfully disturbs our understanding of assimilation as being code for the destruction of Aboriginal people, their culture and identity. In dissecting the complex lines of non-Aboriginal reasoning about who Aboriginal people were and what their place in the Australian community was over the period from 1901 to the early 1970s, McGregor cautions against more emphatic definitions of the ideas and ideals underscoring policy and administration. For this reader then, my only quarrel with McGregor is to say that there is no need to restrict himself to ideas and ideals. For behind them lay a material reality, that of the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people, many of them eking out an existence on reserves, pastoral leases, the fringes of towns, and the poorest areas of the nation's cities. Under these impoverished circumstances, many people were relocated (often forcibly) to make way for non-Aboriginal interests; as with the Swiss mining company that Hasluck issued a mining lease to on the lands of the Arnhem Land clans. No wonder he rejected the bark petitions.