

Keynote Address

Indigenous Australians Plight From Denizens to Citizens 1967-2007

Florence Onus

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"Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era"

This feminist event is for all women who denounce the escalating violence and oppression that mark the 21st Century, who rage against the continued exclusion and silencing of women throughout the world, and who are convinced that a strong feminist response is essential for the creation of a fairer future.

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First of all I'd like to Welcome you to Country on behalf of my elders the Bindal traditional owner group and also acknowledge our neighbouring clan the Wulgurukaba people. My fathers people are from the Birra gubba nation that occupied the region from Cape Cleveland to the Bowen region and was sent with his family to Palm Island which was a penal settlement. My mothers people are from central Queensland from the Bidjara, Kairi and Jagalingu clans.

On May 22nd this year, Australians celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum that gave recognition to Indigenous Australians as citizens in their own country. The Anniversary celebrations held in Canberra brought together past and current activists and leaders representing Indigenous, Women, the Church, Unionists, Socialists and Politicians who have all had a role in shaping the nation. It was a time to reflect on the past achievements, the good and the not so good and a time to look forward, for some at least.

As I watched this commemorative anniversary I was moved to tears as I remembered all the wonderful past achievements of my people. I cried for the valiant leaders; the visionaries; the passionate activists who have fought so long and so hard; I cried for all those who have sacrificed their lives for the cause, for justice, equity, recognition and basic human rights of my people. I cried because all of those hard fought victories have all been disregarded and discarded by this current government.

Before we look at the current political climate, I'm just going to rewind the clock a bit and give you a snapshot of what life was like for Aboriginal people living in Qld and other states and I will draw from my families' journey.

Prior to 1967 the States had the power to legislate and comprehensively control the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The 1967 Referendum gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate and improve the condition for Indigenous Australians.

In Queensland the government passed the 'The Aboriginal Protection and the Sale of Opium Act 1897. It was under this Act that established the first Detention centres for Aboriginal people commonly known as 'Reserves' and 'Missions'; however there is no doubt that they were detention centres.

Throughout this era families were regarded as inmates and were fed rations of flour, sugar, tea and the leftover meat scraps. Basic decisions of where they could walk, or who they could talk to or marry was the onus of the Protector or Superintendent of Police. Mandatory health checks on our young were the norm and forced sterilization for young women.

The establishment of the Reserves was the final measure needed to ensure absolute control of the remnant of the Aboriginal population.

The strategies were drawn to ensure the breakdown of Aboriginal society and the disintegration of the cultural practices, in particular - the language. Children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in dormitories to adopt the British culture and English names replaced language names. Every Aboriginal person belonged to a language group therefore it was inevitable that language would be lost and this strategy ensured communications between Aboriginal people were broken.

In 1938 my family were forcibly removed from their homelands to live within the confines of a detention centre called Woorabinda. For my Great grandparents, my grandparents and my mother and her siblings, Woorabinda became home to 3 generations and remains home to this current generation. However, my Mother Violet always maintained that home was a place called Springsure, a place of tranquillity and home to the Bidjara, Kairi and Jagalingu clans of my mothers' people, for more than 40,000 years. Our land, culture and language is central to our identity. Men were trained as labourers and stockmen to run cattle for the pastoralists and our women were trained domestic servants to work the homesteads. The 'half caste'

children were a result of the on-going sexual abuse of our young women throughout this era.

Throughout the 1950s the rations were replaced by wages due to a number of strikes led by courageous leaders such as the 1957 Palm Island Strike... this year marked the 50th Anniversary and the Wave Hill Strike. However, those wages were not paid to our people but kept in Trust by the government of the day who used these wages to build roads and hospitals and other public works... thus the Stolen Wages Campaign is an ongoing campaign for my people as I speak.

This era was known as 'Living under the Act' or 'Protection', Protection from who? This is still one of the greatest mysteries to most of us.

Leading up to 1967 through to 1970s was another policy era called "Assimilation" and one of the process of assimilation was 'Exemption'. 'Exemption' meant that you were given the opportunity to leave the detention centre under specific conditions – similar to that of an inmate going on parole.... exemption from living under the Act. One of the conditions was that you had to deny your Aboriginality or cease to be an Aborigine...so I ask how does one cease to be an Aborigine and more importantly when did we become an Aborigine again?

So you can image how confusing this was for my people in regards to their Identity...and then around the 1990s the government established another law or rule that says you now have to prove your Aboriginality!?! And it doesn't matter whether you have obvious aboriginal features, colour and speak aboriginal languages.... if you cannot prove your identity as an aborigine then you are denied the basic rights to assistance for education, housing, health and employment if your lucky.... I mean real lucky, that's why they call Australia the 'Lucky Country'!!

I guess its similar to magic rabbit trick in the Native Title legislation that states that you have to prove you have maintained your traditional practices to be recognised as a Traditional Owner.... regardless of the fact that we've had all these processes imposed upon us.... It's like that song by well known Australian artist John Williamson "I've been every where man.... We've been through.... invasion, protection, assimilation, integration, self-determination, reconciliation.... and now

we've returned to ...invasion....all because they failed at ...annihilation! Hey I've been everywhere man!

“Assimilation’ policy saw the removal of over 60,000 Aboriginal children from their families to be raised in institutions and white foster families, I alongside my siblings was one of them, this is commonly known as ‘The Stolen Generations’. Many of these children were far removed from their communities as far as Europe and America and grew up believing they were of another cultural background such as Asian, Indian, Greek, Italian to name a few so you can imagine the shock of discovering that their heritage was Aboriginal and how this led to the Identity crisis that many have experienced and for those still trying to locate family.... sadly some of their lives have ended prematurely from suicide, alcoholism, substance abuse and other health issues due to the impact this has had on their lives.

The loss of land, culture, language, family is central to our Identity...how can you prove your identity if you don't know who you are or where you come from.... this is a real dilemma faced by my people.... being denied their basic human rights as citizens in our own country.

From the 1970s to the present came policies of Integration, Self Determination and Self Management and Reconciliation...Throughout this period we witnessed some landmark decisions and changes such as the establishment of Aboriginal housing, health, legal services, child care, media. NT Land Rights Act, Uluru Handover, the establishment of ATSIC, Mabo Decision and establishment of Native Title, WIK Decision, DOGIT Communities to name a few. It was also my generation that was given the opportunities of education, employment and choices that my forefathers were denied. Our elders have certainly ridden the highs and lows and we are still working towards self-determination and self-management.

But how can we achieve this when we have a government that is continually stripping us of our basic human rights?

In 2000, thousands of Australians marched across the Sydney Harbour bridge and across this great country to support the Declaration of Reconciliation...Unfortunately,

the lack of leadership by the Prime Minister Mr Howard by refusing to say 'Sorry' to Australia's Indigenous people has led to ongoing 'Sorry Business'. In 2004 the present government abolished the only peak Indigenous representative body ATSIC, since then all Indigenous programs have been mainstreamed and the watering down of the Native Title Act in the interest of miners, pastoralists and multinationals.

The Prime Ministers current welfare reforms are racist as they target Aboriginal communities only and identify those Aboriginal people who are not living according to the standards set by this government. Once again by using punitive measures of removing our children from our care; placing us on food rations; conducting mandatory health checks for all children under the age of 16; telling us where we can or cannot live; and all of this is being enforced by the military and the police.... sound familiar? According to the Government these reforms are in the interest of aboriginal people who don't know how to control their lives and have totally messed up the opportunities the governments have given them...and in case you forgot the governments have given us opportunities through Invasion, Protection, Assimilation, Integration, Self Determination and Reconciliation, all in just over 200 years! Of course these issues need urgent attention with the impending federal elections just around the corner...first it was the Children Overboard and this years theme is Aborigines Overboard. The changes to Aboriginal Land Rights Acts in the NT and the abolishment of the permit system will allow the public full access to aboriginal land and give grog runners open season that will definitely assist with the prohibition of alcohol in these communities according to John Howard!

In regards to child abuse why is this being caste as an Indigenous issue. The physical and sexual abuse of children is a national issue that crosses all culture, race, social and economic boundaries. Within Australia, child abuse and domestic violence in communities is regarded as a social issue and not a crime and this needs to be challenged. The government's solution to child abuse is to further punish the children by removing them from their families and placing them in care. Why is this so?

I believe that the government needs to remove the perpetrators of this crime and deal with them as they do all criminals. Why are children being continually punished?

A National Inquiry into Violence against Indigenous Women and Children was recently conducted and the Report and Recommendations have not been implemented by governments. We have been calling on the government for over a decade to address these issues and that a wholistic healing approach for our children and our families needs to be facilitated at the grass roots level and fully supported with adequate funding. Until the government invite Indigenous people to the table to discuss long-term solutions; the mental, physical and spiritual health of my people will continue to deteriorate.

Incarceration of Aboriginal people will continue to rise and the biggest concern is the increased number of women being incarcerated. Aboriginal women are the backbone of our communities. They are the producers, caregivers, the nurturers, healers to name a few and for many families the sole provider.

I know that many of you are aware of these issues as we've been talking about them for the past 50 years, and a number of royal commissions and national inquiries have been conducted regarding all of these issues, however, the government has failed to address these.

Therefore I call on this Summit and all sister networks around the globe to put pressure on the federal and state governments to implement the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody Recommendations, the National Aboriginal Health Strategy and the Recommendations from the National Inquiry into Violence and Abuse of Aboriginal Women and Children.

Enough is enough!