

The Australian experience - Black lives matter & always should have

Phil Glendenning

When the First Fleet arrived in Sydney Cove in January 1788, Australia had a population of up to a million indigenous people whose presence stretched back for over 60,000 years. By 1900 that number had dropped to less than 100,000, prompting the Australian Human Rights Commission **to describe what had happened to the Aboriginal people since colonisation as genocide.**

For a long time, Black Lives did not matter in Australia.



The Black Lives Matter movement originating in the USA focused initially on police killings of African Americans. It soon expanded to address systemic racism particularly against the descendants of slaves and their fight for rights and justice. What we saw in the US resonates deeply with the experience of Australia's Aboriginal people which is just as shocking, yet attracts minimal international attention.

Australia's relatively small population of 25 million could explain a lack of global awareness about the situation of Australia's First Peoples — the US African American population is 43 million people; Australia's Indigenous population is just 800,000 — but it is deeper than that. In the US, African Americans make up about 14% of the population, and roughly 30% of the country's inmates. Indigenous Australians make up 3% of the inhabitants yet make up 30% of its prison population.



Indigenous Australians are four times more likely to be locked up than black Americans. It's an even more jarring in the youth detention system, where about 50% of all detainees are Indigenous.

A 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody has still not seen its recommendations acted on. Since it ended, 438 Aboriginal people have died in custody. No one has been convicted in relation to these deaths.

The reality is that many people still do not comprehend the impact that colonisation and dispossession have had, and continue to have, on First Nations People. Since 1788 land, language, culture and even children were systematically taken away, often violently. **The aim of these policies was to subjugate, erode and eventually erase the presence of Aboriginal people from Australian history.**

It is no coincidence that representatives of the National Party of South Africa visited Palm Island in Queensland before implementing the apartheid system. They wanted to see how to do it. (Palm Island was where Aboriginal people were sent after being forcibly removed from their ancestral lands).

Unlike similar countries with a history of colonisation - New Zealand, Canada, the US, Finland – Australia has never had a treaty with its Indigenous people to right some of these historic wrongs.

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He was co-founder of Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) and for 10 years was National President.

He is currently President of the Refugee Council of Australia.



In terms of health, there is still a 17-year gap in life expectancy between black and white Australians, and the Australian Government recently announced that those most at risk from the Covid virus included anyone over the age of 70, but if you were Indigenous you were at risk at 50 years of age. This is the face of systemic inequality.

Despite this, the First Nations Peoples of Australia recently offered the country a process to begin the healing of history. The **Uluru Statement from the Heart**, developed by Aboriginal



[Work on the Uluru Statement from the Heart. See video](#)

leaders, calls for a Voice to Parliament enshrined in the Constitution, a makarrata or treaty making process to right historical wrongs, and begin truth-telling about Australia's shared history.

This should be an international issue. After all, those who arrived in tall ships from Britain in 1788 to establish a penal colony in someone else's country, did so without the permission of the people who had

lived there for over 60,000 years. In so doing they ignored their King's instructions "to occupy the lands and waters only with the consent of the native people".

Consent was not asked for and it has never been given.

Australia's First Nations Peoples are the custodians of the world's oldest living continuous cultures. They have survived. They have worked to restore land, language, culture and re-unite families with their children. This is an amazing human achievement that a reconciled nation and a world that values justice could revere and celebrate.



So, along with the marches and the protests, the time has come to implement the peace offering that is the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

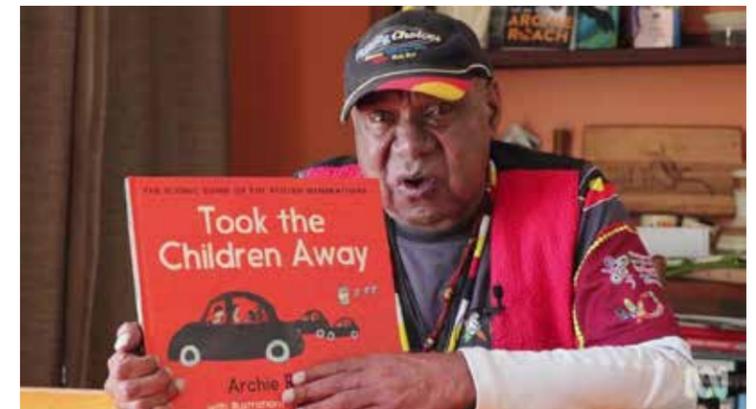
Then, Australia can join with the international community, and send to the dustbin of history the colonial lie that Black Lives do not matter as much as the lives of everybody else.

They do matter and always should have.

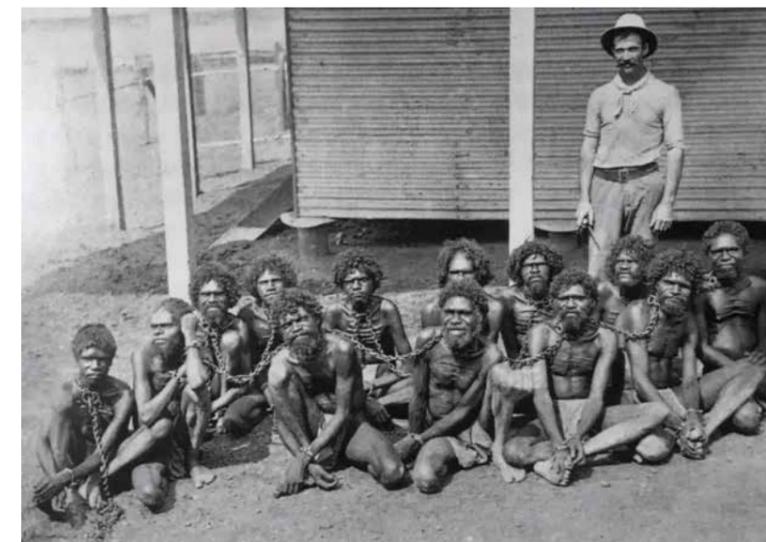
On the next two pages Phil offers a list of resources to stimulate our own thinking - and to use with students.

We have chosen three short videos to introduce the potential.

1. Archie Roach tells the story 'Took the Children Away'. It is his story. It is about the stolen generation, the children taken from their parents. He tells it in the most gentle manner. [\[Click on photo\]](#)



2. Stan Grant speech: ["My people die young in this country"](#). A moving introduction to the key issues about the Black experience in Australia.



3. Chapter 1: Restricted rights and freedoms in Western Australia.

Aboriginal people have faced discrimination for generations. Historically, control over Aboriginal people's lives in Western Australia was often enabled by laws that restricted their rights and freedoms.

This introduces the that history.

[\[Click on photo\]](#)



Learn More About Australia's First Nations People the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

What's it like to be an Aboriginal person in Australia today?

Many Aboriginal people often find themselves the only black person in the room, especially in Australia's cities. This resource helps people understand what that is like.

<https://www.abc.net.au/life/when-you-are-the-only-indigenous-person-in-the-room/10793748>

Support the Uluru Statement from the Heart

These organisations' websites offer detailed information about the Uluru Statement From the Heart and how people around the world can support it and the rights of Aboriginal Australians.

<https://ulurustatement.org>

<https://antar.org.au/campaigns/constitutional-recognition-0>

https://www.erc.org.au/constitutional_recognition

Resources for Teachers and Students

If you are a teacher or a student these online resources provide a comprehensive examination of **First Nations history and culture**, ideas for lesson plans, stimuli for discussion and ideas for campaigns.

<https://education.abc.net.au/home#!/topic/494038/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-histories-and-cultures>

<http://www.aboriginalstudies.com.au/teacher-resources>

<https://www.creativespirits.info/resources/>

<https://humanrights.gov.au/education/teachers/bringing-them-home-2017>

https://www.erc.org.au/resources_for_schools

Something To Watch

Stan Grant's "**My People Die Young In This Country**" Speech. This is a moving speech by well-known Australian journalist and former CNN anchor Stan Grant, a proud Wiradjuri man from south-west NSW, reflecting on what it was like to grow up black in Australia, racism and finding a way forward for all Australians.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA3UsF8yyho>

Something To Listen To

Archie Roach's "**Took The Children Away**" is a poetic lament that outlines the story of the Stolen Generations, Aboriginal children taken away from their parents.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL_DBNkkcSE

Paul Kelly & Dan Sultan "**Every day I hear my mother's voice**", a song about combatting racism and resilience reflecting on the life of AFL footballer Adam Goodes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3OJ0kzSXQE>

Midnight Oil have released an album to promote the Uluru statement

See Website and You Tube "The Makkarata Project" - Midnight Oil

<https://www.midnightoil.com/the-makarrata-project-out-now/>

It includes new songs "First Nation", featuring Jessica Maubouy, and "Gadigal Land"; a reading of Uluru Statement from the Heart by prominent Aboriginal Australians and some great songs.

Take Action!

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation are a great resource for campaigning and taking action. Visit these sites for some great ideas:

<https://antar.org.au>

<https://antar.org.au/campaigns/reconciliation>

Something Special To Read

Bruce Pascoe's Dark Emu is a compelling challenge to conventional thinking about Aboriginal life in Australia. He details the Aboriginal economy and shows how Aboriginal societies were not simple hunter-gatherer economies but sophisticated, with farming and irrigation practices:

Pascoe, B. Dark Emu, Magabala Books, Broome, Western Australia 2018

Thomas Mayer has written two books on the development and understanding of the Uluru Statement, after spending two years travelling the country visiting Indigenous communities big and small. Some great ideas for action in both!

Finding the Heart of the Nation— *Journey of the Uluru Statement towards Voice, Treaty, Truth - published by Hardie Grant, Sydney 2019*

Finding Our Heart - *A Story about the Uluru Statement for Young Australians.*

