

## The Stolen Generations: competing histories

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**Abstract:** The high rate of removal of Indigenous children from their families has produced a devastating impact on Aboriginal communities. In discussing how an ongoing failure to appreciate the intergenerational impact of forced removals has led to a failure in policy as well as the continued removal of Indigenous children from their communities today, this essay argues the importance of acknowledging the complexity of the Stolen Generations over simplistic narratives that foster divisiveness.

**Keywords:** Stolen Generations; assimilation policy; history wars; interventionism

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In 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an apology to Aboriginal Australians on behalf of the nation for the twentieth century child removal practices known historically as the ‘Stolen Generations’ (Australia, House of Representatives 2008). Through Rudd’s speech, Australia acknowledged the trauma caused to Aboriginal families and promised to ensure no such trauma would occur again. Whilst the noble intentions underpinning the apology were clear, the subsequent actions of Australian Governments across the country indicate a failure to implement this spirit of reconciliation. Instead, the impacts of a divisive contest over the Stolen Generations history have continued to impact policy. The conservative establishment has historically argued that the child removal policies of the twentieth century were underpinned by a desire to better the lives of Aboriginal people. Proponents of this position selectively point to positive experiences of Aboriginal children who were removed, ignoring the plethora of traumatic experiences. On the other hand, others have argued that the Stolen Generations were the result of a desire for genocide. Thus, the complexity of the impact of colonialism on Aboriginal culture has been lost in debates over what constitutes genocide and the desire to forget this history. The central argument of this essay is that Australia’s failure to learn from the historical trauma of child removal is the substantial cause of the continued policy of removing Aboriginal children from their communities. This failure to learn has arisen from the divisive nature of the Stolen Generations debate, which has largely been fuelled by politically powerful Anglo-Australians privileging simplistic historical interpretations of this event. In furthering the central argument of this essay, the following structure is implemented. First, this essay notes the current trends in the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities. Second, this essay



discusses the history of the Stolen Generations and its politicisation which has caused divisiveness and policy failure. Third, this essay outlines the impact of the Stolen Generations on Aboriginal families and individuals, and how a failure to appreciate this impact has contributed to a failure in policy. In conclusion, this essay will reinforce the importance of acknowledging the complexity of the Stolen Generations over simplistic narratives that foster divisiveness.

In 2016, Larissa Behrendt highlighted Australia's failure to support Aboriginal children remaining with their families. Behrendt acknowledged that between June 2007 and June 2015, the number of "Indigenous children in out-of-home care" had risen from 9,070 to 15,455 (Behrendt 2016, para.5). The Productivity Commission's 2018 Child Protection Services report highlighted the failure of Governments in Australia to enshrine the recommendations of the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). Governments are clearly failing to ensure Indigenous children are placed with Indigenous families in cases of child removal. The Commission's report exhibited how Indigenous people received a disproportionate amount of child protection services (Productivity Commission 2018, p. 16.9). Importantly, the Commission's report affirmed the level of deterioration in this area. As highlighted by Nick Evershed and Lorena Allam, "in 2007-08 the rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care was seven times the rate of non-Indigenous children. Ten years later, the rate of Indigenous children is 10 times that of non-Indigenous children" (Evershed & Allam 2018, para.5). According to this essay, a key reason behind this continued high rate of removal of Indigenous children from their families is a failure to come to terms with the complexity of the Stolen Generations. This conclusion builds on the work of Bain Attwood (2001) and (2008), Robert Manne (2001), Heather Goodall (2002), Peter Read (2002) and Partick Wolfe (2006).

The impact of politics on the Stolen Generations narrative has resulted in a pernicious divisiveness that has impeded changes in child removal policy. The nature of the Stolen Generations debate has pushed concerned parties into their respective corners as opposed to producing a new truth, the basis of which could sustain positive change. As Bain Attwood stresses, the nature of the debate "has severely limited the prospect for historical understanding among and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians... undermin[ing] an opportunity...for change" (Attwood 2001, p. 184). In order to foster change, the complexity of the Stolen Generations must be appreciated. This is a difficult task when political slogans and throwaway phrases dominate the debate. This acknowledgement was particularly visible in the form of the conservative backlash against the anticipated findings of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families culminating in the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). John Howard and conservative commentators viewed the report as unhelpful in moving Australia forward. They dismissed the report as perpetuating a 'black armband' (Attwood 2001, p. 206) view of history, causing Australians to be ashamed. However, it is not only the conservative establishment that has opted for a simplistic view of the Stolen Generations. In building the Stolen Generations narrative, many have viewed the removal of Indigenous children in the twentieth century as underpinned entirely by a nationwide desire for genocide. Attwood asserts that "a historical approach combining proximity and distance would have made clear that Aboriginal children were not separated by governments pursuing a policy of genocide" (Attwood 2008, p. 94). Instead, governments were pursuing "assimilation premised on the assumption that this was for the good of Aboriginal people, an assumption that is still prevalent in much of settler Australian culture today" (Attwood 2008, p. 94). This distinction offers insight into an explanation as to why child

removal continues. What Attwood essentially argues is that characterising the history of the Stolen Generations as underpinned by a ubiquitous desire for genocide potentially renders this a history Australians wish to “spurn any association with” (Attwood 2008, p. 93). Instead of reflecting on the policies that led to the Stolen Generations and understanding the “perpetrators” (Attwood 2008, p. 93), Australians may prefer to forget a period of the past that they believe could not possibly re-emerge. Thus, Attwood’s position suggests that a failure to engage with the reasoning of those implementing child removal policies has led to the undesirable practices of the Stolen Generations re-emerging. Instead of coming to terms with its past, Australia has alienated its history and thereby condemned itself to repeating prior mistakes. Patrick Wolfe’s notion of colonial destruction of Aboriginality as a “structure, not an event” (Wolfe 2006, p. 388) provides a framework for understanding the Stolen Generations as a result of settler desire for dominance. This allows Australians to move beyond notions of genocide which cause attempts to forget the horror of the Stolen Generations. It also allows Anglo-Australia to reflect on the Stolen Generations as an ever-evolving act and to begin to understand child removal as part of this act. Former Prime Minister Paul Keating undertook such a reflection in his 1992 Redfern Speech (National Archives of Australia n.d.), yet this need for Anglo-Australians to understand the impact of child removal policies remains today.

This essay also challenges Attwood’s notion that characterising the Stolen Generations as based on genocide rather than assimilation has significance compared to other simplistic narratives. Instead, this essay emphasises the impact of a simplistic approach emanating from powerful Anglo-Australian political figures. The genesis of such a sentiment and its permeating of the Stolen Generations narrative are visible in the words of Robert Donaldson MLA in 1909 as highlighted by Peter Read (2002). Donaldson’s view shed light on the ideologies underpinning Aboriginal child removal from their families in the twentieth century. Donaldson stated:

We have today 3,200 children growing up in our midst, three-fourths of whom range from half-castes to almost white, with no prospects ahead...under the present system, but lives of idleness and vice...under the evil influence and bad examples of the adults they almost invariably drift into an aimless, useless life of idleness and immorality...For adults we can only make their track as smooth as possible – they will soon pass away; but the children require our gravest consideration. (Read 2002, p. 55)

These deeply disturbing words reveal the original character of the argument used in justifying child removal. Aboriginal adults are described as inept and their children are the victims of an archaic culture constraining their potential and from which they must be saved. What is implied in this sentiment is that Indigenous culture must be dissolved in order for future Indigenous generations to prosper. The purely political desire of mainstream conservatives, most prominently former Prime Minister John Howard, to seek to unequivocally repudiate notions of the destruction of Indigenous culture and engage in a divisive history war leads Australia into continued child removal failures. The desire of those championing Australia as a nation with a flawless history to meet the trauma of the Stolen Generations with a fierce sense of national pride is a key source of division. It is important for Australians to champion the successes of their nation whilst maintaining the capacity to acknowledge the historical and continuing failures of Indigenous child removal. This notion that Australia is the sum of only the good that has occurred in its history leads to blindness to continued failure and ultimately division. As was stressed by Heather Goodall in summarising the words of historian Ian

Clark, “Australians need to acknowledge Indigenous accounts of invasion, massacres and exploitation...in return...Australians will be entitled to align themselves to the ancient history of the Australian continent” (Goodall 2002, p. 9).

Further supporting this essay’s contention that Anglo-Australia has fuelled the history wars over the Stolen Generations is the manipulation of Dr Lowitja O’Donoghue’s story. Dr O’Donoghue uncovered the complexity of the Stolen Generations experience by bravely admitting in an interview with Andrew Bolt that her experience differed from those of other Indigenous children. As Heather Goodall notes, Dr O’Donoghue “point[ed] out that she and her siblings were not literally ‘stolen’ because there may have been some...parental consent involved” (Goodall 2002, pp. 16-17). This was the consent of her father (Manne 2001, p. 1). Her mother, as Dr O’Donoghue pointed out to Bolt, did not provide informed consent if consent was provided at all (Manne 2001, p. 2). When Dr O’Donoghue’s mother was informed that one of her daughters had been seen, she waited on the roadside every day for three months for her child’s return (Manne 2001, p. 3). Dr O’Donoghue admitted to Bolt that she would never forgive her father for the pain experienced by herself, her siblings and her mother (Manne 2001, p. 2). Bolt took Dr O’Donoghue’s frank and open offering about her experience and spun it into a political battering ram. Bolt’s headline in the Herald-Sun read “I Wasn’t Stolen” (Manne 2001, p. 1). Prime Minister John Howard took the article and proclaimed that his government was “vindicated” (Manne 2001, p. 3) in its denial of the Stolen Generations. As Manne writes, “Howard called on Australians to cease what he called their pointless ‘navel gazing’ over questions of Aboriginal injustice and to move on” (Manne 2001, p. 3). The actions of Bolt and Howard reduced the complexity of the Stolen Generations experience into a simple, digestible history for their Australian audience. There was no accounting for the different experiences of Indigenous Australians removed from their families. Instead, the conservative establishment focused on the facts that suited a pre-determined political agenda in order to achieve the success it believed it could by perpetuating this divisive narrative. There is no question that powerful figures in the media and government perpetuating misinformation with regard to the Stolen Generations has had a continuing impact. It is no surprise that needless child removal from Indigenous families continues when the history of the Stolen Generations is reduced to a myth. As Robert Manne pointed out in relation to Dr O’Donoghue’s interview with Bolt, “her only error was to have mistaken a journalist-campaigner for a reporter with a concern for discovering the facts” (Manne 2001, p. 2). Thus, in order to avoid high rates of unnecessary Indigenous child removal in the future, the desire for simple historical narratives about the Stolen Generations must be rejected. This is not to suggest that the attack against uncovering the complexity of the Stolen Generations derives exclusively from conservative elites. Indeed, as Heather Goodall notes in relation to Dr Lowitja O’Donoghue’s story, Dr O’Donoghue “was attacked ...by some Aboriginal people, who accused her of undermining the campaign for just compensation” (Goodall 2002, pp. 17). This attack must be understood in its political and historical context. Politically, it is difficult to win the hearts and minds of the electorate for a particular cause when there are perceived divisions amongst those responsible for formulating the narrative of that cause – in this case, the Stolen Generations narrative. As was exhibited by the reaction of Andrew Bolt and former Prime Minister John Howard, any perceived division is capitalised on as a means of pushing back against Indigenous claims for compensation. For this reason, it is understandable that Indigenous activists would push for unity in the face of powerful sceptics. This is not to justify the pressure faced by Dr O’Donoghue. This is merely the acknowledgement that Indigenous activists have been forced into a political battle based on simplistic historical narratives by a conservative elite who defined the

terms of these history wars. Only by understanding the trauma of the Stolen Generations can such divisiveness be overcome.

The true impact of the Stolen Generations on Indigenous families is profound and continuous. Through establishing the nature of the pain and suffering caused to Indigenous families, Australian policymakers can move beyond child removal practices. As discussed, the impact on the family of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue was substantial. Dr O'Donoghue's mother lived her whole life with the grief of having been debarred from parenthood (Manne 2001, p. 2). Sally Morgan's story of her grandmother's experience echoes a similar sentiment from the perspective of a removed child (Morgan 1987). Morgan canvasses the sense of betrayal felt by Indigenous families under the child removal policies of the twentieth century. Morgan's grandmother, Daisy Corunna, recounts how "they told my mother I was goin' to get educated...I thought I'd be somebody real important" (Morgan 1987, p. 415). Morgan's grandmother movingly recounts to Morgan the anger of not returning to her mother, as was expected, and instead being subjected to a life of hard work away from her family. Had Corunna's mother known this, Corunna would never have been let go (Morgan 1987, p. 415). This sort of experience was not unique. A Western Australian submission in the *Bringing Them Home* Report from an individual by the name of 'Millicent' also captured the pain of forced child removal (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, p. 99). Millicent's is the story of a child who was removed by "The Protector of Aborigines and the Child Welfare Department" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, p. 99). Millicent states "they told me that my family didn't care or want me and I had to forget them" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, p. 100). Millicent then states "they said it was very degrading to belong to an Aboriginal family and that I should be ashamed of myself, I was inferior to whitefellas" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, p. 100). The continued high rate of removal suggests that Australia has failed to overcome the policies underpinned by such attitudes.

The trauma of child removal policies in the twentieth century impacted Indigenous communities across Australia. This statement is supported by the fact that "between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children" were subject to child removal policies "in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970" (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, p. 31). To read the accounts of Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue, Daisy Corunna and Millicent is to begin to understand the monumental impact of child removal to Indigenous Australians. Current policy does not reflect the credence that must be given to these painful accounts. Understanding the impact of child removal policies from the accounts discussed above provides the basis for repudiating the simplistic view of history perpetuated by the powerful conservative establishment.

The high rate of removal of Indigenous children from their families has produced a devastating impact on Indigenous communities. The continuation of this policy has arisen as a result of policymakers failing to learn from the history of the Stolen Generations. The trauma of the Stolen Generations has been lost in a power struggle to control the way in which this history is interpreted. In order to remedy the failures of contemporary child removal policy, Australia must therefore appreciate the complexity of the Stolen Generations and move beyond divisive and simplistic narratives.

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