

INDIFFERENT INCLUSION:

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE AUSTRALIAN NATION

Russell McGregor

Aboriginal Studies Press (\$39.95) (September 2011)

by *Ellena Petinos*

Calls for a referendum to address constitutional issues facing Indigenous Australians have become more prevalent in the last couple of years. These calls mark an important aspect of change, not only through substantive reform in relation to the races power (s 51(xxvi) of the Constitution), but through symbolic recognition of Indigenous Australians as First Peoples in the Constitution's preamble. In light of this current political debate, *Indifferent Inclusion* by Russell McGregor successfully provides a much needed, plain English and digestible answer to a question on many minds: What *more* needs to be done since the 1967 referendum?

As the title would suggest, the themes of 'indifference' and 'inclusion' feature heavily throughout the book as reflectors, not only of the attitude of Australian society in the 1900s-1970s, but more so of the attitudes of government and those with whom the care and control of Indigenous Australians was placed.

McGregor takes an often informal yet informative approach to his explanation of various historical events and his objectivity was welcomed when sensitive issues were discussed.

Indifferent Inclusion's main quest is to set the record straight about the amorphous concept of 'assimilation' which finds itself frequently used to identify a range of policies used in relation to Indigenous Australians. McGregor begins by explaining that the idea of nationalism in Australia can be set on a spectrum. On the one extreme is an ethno-centric concept of nationalism where 'whiteness was the essential qualification of national membership.'¹

On the other, was a civic-centric ideal whereby inclusion into Australian society was pluralistic and based on ideas of collective assimilation – a group of individuals.

Chapter one is set in a pre-federation Australia, a time where ethnicity was the key that one would, and should,

hold in order to gain the rights to inclusion in the White Australian community. Such inclusion was sought to be achieved through a period of biological absorption of half-castes; the focus of policy being not on veracity, but plausibility.² McGregor's explanations of the foundations of this policy are often advanced and he goes to some sophisticated lengths to distinguish it from eugenics. Although this requires the reader to focus more attentively, it does create a solid background onto which the true notion of assimilation is developed.

Throughout the early chapters, McGregor systematically plots the development of society and government from this confined ideal along the spectrum, and we see the emergence of a post WWI sociological change – for *all* Aboriginals. Further, we also see some major catalysts begin to guide public discourse through this 'changing post war mood.'³

Perhaps one of the most important marks made along the spectrum at this time was during the inter-war and post-war years. Indigenous Australians had fought alongside their White neighbours for the protection of the Crown and the demand for inclusion began to change in a fundamental way – it now appeared to be earned.

Chapter four takes a look at the new catalyst of reform – the changing attitudes in the international environment. This occurred in two major ways. First, and less significantly, McGregor looks at the role of the United Nations but concludes that it had an often confused and discordant role towards the advancement of Indigenous people in Australia and had little effect on domestic policy. Instead, what features as the second, and stronger, theme was the relationship between the immigration policy and the rights of Indigenous Australians. As the vulnerability of Australia came to light in the later years of the war, so did the need to relax immigration policies to include continental Europeans. What this meant, McGregor explains, is a new concept of nationhood

moving further along the spectrum to nationhood towards a civic-centric ideal.

In the successive chapters, McGregor tracked the progress of certain, often successful, activists who seized these opportunities as springboards for greater recognition and fulfillment of Indigenous rights. Chapter five ends on a solemn note where we see Paul Hasluck advocating for the suppression and privatisation of the Aboriginal culture in order to achieve inclusion into the White community – an explanation of the chapters title, ‘To Live as We Do’.

This mood changes in chapter six when McGregor looks at the change in policy between ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’. Albeit he concludes that the change was purely semantic – a new slogan – McGregor does point out that the focus on the need to avoid ‘destroying the minority’s cultural heritage and collective identity’⁴ had occurred.

This paves the way for chapter seven where the spectrum moves further towards pluralism (collective assimilation) not only in relation to cultural preservation, but also in the attitude generally. Australian society, he argued, ‘understood the issues in moral, rather than merely political or legal, terms.’⁵ He illustrated this move in terms of a series of social-cultural developments including lobbying for the capitalization of A (for Aboriginals) to be used as a sign of respect as well as from sporting achievements from Lionel Rose to the Redfern All Blacks Rugby League Club, even if it was still ‘on terms set by white Australians.’⁶

Although being mindful to point out the superficiality of much of the appreciation, often in a cynical way, he was quick to add that a superficial aesthetic appreciation may be a necessary prelude to later, deeper cultural engagements.⁷ Chapter eight and nine then wrap the book up by detailing the move towards the 1967 referendum as well as offering an explanation of its result and of what it eventually meant for Indigenous, and White, communities in Australia at that time.

McGregor recalls the referendum as ‘mis-remembered as the moment when Aboriginal people won equal rights’⁸ but this was not necessarily portrayed in a negative way. He explains that although vital Indigenous rights had already been attained prior to 1967 (the right to vote and to consume alcohol), the public affirmation of Aboriginal acceptance as fellow citizens of the ‘nation’ and particularly ‘the Australian ideal of mateship’ had become embedded within society.

Although McGregor ultimately suggests that it was Australia’s international reputation which provided the last straw before the referendum was eventually called, he does acknowledge that it was largely ‘dependent on the Australian people welcoming their Aboriginal compatriots into the national community.’ This inclusion marks the final signpost in the move to a civic-centric approach to nationhood.

Regrettably, the momentum gained in chapter eight is deflated in chapter nine when the realities of ‘disillusionment’ began surfacing in post-referendum life. Further, the governments ‘lethargy’ and adherence to a policy of assimilation, compounded with societal ‘indifference’, meant that a radical Aboriginal youth took on the plight for liberalisation from their Tent Embassy bringing to the foreshore of public discourse the ideas of land rights (on the basis of indigeneity) and Aboriginal nationalism (self-determination). These reforms were seen as radical and before their time and often left Indigenous Australians irritated, annoyed and doubting whether the referendum had even achieved substantive change at all or just mere symbolism- it is upon this temperament that the book ends.

In the middle of the book, McGregor has included an impressive insert of various images and related captions which illustrate some of the classic literary, artistic and political symbols discussed. Of particular interest is some of the political propaganda used for the 1967 referendum and some earlier images of the Tent Embassy. These images allow the reader to appreciate some of the realities of this time on a higher level.

It appears that McGregor’s ultimate sentiment is that the call for reform that echoes through the book never truly becomes answered. Unfinished Business – the title of the books’ epilogue – correctly reflects the somber yet hopeful attitude of the Indigenous Australians at that time towards real and practical change. Whether the required change comes in the form of an increased awareness and recognition of Indigenous rights, or transferal of responsibility of Indigenous issues back to the respective communities, what is clear is that not enough has been done.

The major need for such reform comes from the fact that Australian society to this date constantly finds itself resorting to preconceptions (read: misconceptions) about the history of the treatment of Indigenous Australians and what achievements have been made to date. In this regard, *Indifferent Inclusion* provides a useful device

for those wanting to understand and break down these barriers in perfect time for the opportunity to realise real change. I thoroughly recommend the book for those with a keen interest in the legal and political advancement of Indigenous Australians.

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- 1 Russel McGregor, *Indifferent Inclusion: Aboriginal People and the Australian Nation* (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011) 2.
- 2 *Ibid* 7.
- 3 *Ibid* 20.
- 4 *Ibid* 100.
- 5 *Ibid* 120.
- 6 *Ibid* 136.
- 7 *Ibid* 139.
- 8 *Ibid* 143.

From the Storm of the Past to the Light of Their Future
Nyree Reynolds

*Acrylic & natural ochres on canvas
650mm x 890mm*

The young Stolen generations children are led by their big sister out of the suppression of their past to the hopeful light of their new future due to the day of The Apology, 13th February, 2008. They are daring to hope.

