
SO LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN 50 YEARS FOR FIRST PEOPLES

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The Australian
27 May 2016

Efforts to assimilate indigenous Australians into mainstream society continue apace

I recall the hype of 1967. There were great expectations within the Aboriginal communities in Victoria, where I was at the time - expectations of positive changes for our peoples and in the perceptions of us in the wider community. The Aboriginal rights struggle, the greatest rights struggle of any peoples on this continent, - appeared to be culminating. But even then I reflected on what this would mean to the tribal lands and the people on those lands.

The difference in world views, in how we all looked at modernity and its values, could not have been more apart. The nobility of the first peoples and their humanity and their spiritual truth was -absent from the discussions we were having. This disturbed me greatly, so much so that, in 1969, I left the religious order that I had valued and instead contemplated where I was as a first -nations person.

The promises of change were being subsumed by controls, by betrayal and by exploitation. The policies coming out of Canberra were reductionist, still assimilationist. In the three years on from 1967, we went from great expectations to once again being completely controlled, and all the while we watched the destruction of the cultural essence of the first nations existence even in the -remaining heartlands.

In 1977, with my husband, I -returned to Alice Springs and felt the changes that had taken place in my home, in my community. I noticed that customary practices had been eroded, broken down, and life as I knew it within the -tribal system was disintegrating. This was a shock to me. I had to adjust from the manner in which I had grown up, adjust from the way I had been reared to address the norms of the day. The continuum of a long ancestry was threatened.

Today, we can look back to the decades past. We fought for land rights but where are we today? The attacks on us have been -relentless, on one of the world's longest, continuous human existences. The Northern Territory emergency response - the -intervention - four decades after the 1967 referendum, was part of the cruel relentlessness. The Australian Army was sent into our communities, trampling the human spirit and our right to be.

The guise was a fabrication - that there were pedophile rings operating in -Aboriginal communities. This horrific dehumanising of our peoples perpetrated the dislocation of many first nations people and has culminated in the sky-rocketing of depression

among our peoples; we have witnessed an abominable increase in self-harm and suicide.

The intervention dismantled what we did have of self-determination. Super shires descended on us and took over our community-controlled councils. Today, a half-century after the referendum, we see the processes of assimilation in full swing.

Are there any positives? My contemplations turn to my grandmother's stories. My ancestors welcomed each other as well as others to this part of the country, to central Australia. Our people cared for newcomers to our lands, provided for their wellbeing, shared food, led them to the water sources. I am proud of our history of giving, caring and sharing, of our humanity. I stand today staring at the shattered communities, at the fracture, fragmentation of our peoples.

I wonder if Australia will ever acknowledge that there are wonderful, inclusive cultures that continue, that can flourish, that should be able to share and enjoy this country of ours. Instead we are ravaged by assimilation, many of our peoples brought to their knees. Government policies seek to control us, to diminish us, -instead of supporting us. Our cultural being should be protected, our knowledge retained, preserved. We should be standing as the first peoples of our lands. This is achievable. But a superiority complex in the oppressor continues to spawn perpetual social engineering.

Today, on the anniversary of the 1967 referendum that allowed first nations peoples to be -counted in the Australian census, I ask myself what the goal really was. It appears for the purpose to have carted us into the runaway train to assimilation. The policies of old continue, rebadged. We are targeted.

Historically, significant numbers of the Australian community stood alongside us, supporting our rights as first nations peoples. They rallied, they marched, they voted in the 1967 referendum. All of us have been betrayed. They did not realise the treachery that continues at the very top, by the government.

Yes, we are sovereign peoples. We are the first peoples of this continent. Yes, we have never ceded any of our lands. Yes, we -retain what is known as allodial title over our lands. But we, unlike those with their relentless attacks on us, desire to bring all of us -together. Our heritage is one of grace and nobleness. We must do all that we can to prevent a colonialist-born, neoliberal regime from destroying us.

We can live and thrive side by side. To do so we must accept each other and -appreciate the value of difference. To establish this rightful passage of where we stand alongside each other, there must be the agreed understandings, for all to read and know.

Treaty can bring us together. I remain hopeful that in my lifetime a treaty will be signed, and I hope I live to see us accept each other. This continent is beautiful but it is up to us to ensure its -humaneness. Rosalie Kunoth-Monks has devoted her life to indigenous issues and to defending her people's traditional way of life. Her career began in 1955 when she starred in the classic Australian film Jedda. She is chancellor for the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.