

'Saving the children' are the three most dangerous words uttered by white people

The long-term traumatic impact of children being taken away from their families deserves more than a short sermon

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A screen grab from Sunrise TV show on Channel 7. L-R Prue MacSween, Samantha Armytage, Ben Davis. Photograph: Channel 7/Sunrise

On the day of the Abbott-Turnbull leadership spill in 2015, the [Channel Seven](#) Sunrise host Samantha Armytage joined the talking heads from the other mainstream television stations outside Parliament House. It was the first parliamentary sitting day of the year and they were broadcasting live – all of them set up next to each other, less than five metres apart. But they could not have anticipated the backdrop.

That day various Grandmothers Against Removals groups from around the country had descended on Canberra to protest against the skyrocketing rates of Aboriginal child removal. It had been organised months in advance.

About 100 people, many of them grandmothers who had experienced their grannies being taken away, many of whom had been placed in white families, stood behind the cameras waving Aboriginal flags and chanting for justice.

The response from “journalists” Armytage and David Koch was worse than silence. In one of the ad breaks, they turned around and admonished those who had assembled behind them. Rather than

listen to their stories, rather than hearing about their children, they castigated them for daring to interrupt their broadcast. As Armytage “tsked tsked”, Koch told them to look at the charities he donated to before addressing him.

On Tuesday Armytage appeared to have a change of heart. Suddenly she was deeply concerned about the children – the Aboriginal children who in her words, needed to be saved from “rape, assault and neglect”. Three years before, she couldn’t have cared less. They were just a pesky nuisance – a rowdy crowd interrupting her pretty backdrop.

It seems only white people are capable of caring for black children, and so Sunrise invited two other white people onto a panel with Armytage today – the commentator Prue MacSween and the radio host Ben Davis, to respond to a story in the Daily Telegraph.

The story was splashed across the front page in three bold lines: “Save our children.” It relied on quotes from the federal assistant minister for children and families, David Gillespie, who said now was the time to place Aboriginal children with white families.

“Foster care is not ideal but there is a reluctance to put them in a more permanent situation for fear of creating another stolen generation,” Gillespie said in the paper.

Neither McSween nor Davis nor Armytage have any expertise in this area. None of them have any expertise in Aboriginal affairs. Their credibility rests on just one thing: they are all white. That has always been the most crucial criteria for a media commentator, after all.

It’s no surprise then, that all of them were in unison with McSween, who called for another stolen generation, claiming the debate was a “no brainer”. “You know we can’t have another generation of young Indigenous children being abused in this way, and this conspiracy of silence and this fabricated PC outlook that it’s better to leave them in this dangerous environment,” she said. “Just like the first stolen generation who were taken for their wellbeing, we have to do it again, perhaps.”

According to Armytage, the arguments against this were not coming from Aboriginal people, but “many bureaucrats, many of them white”, before throwing to Davis, who quoted Warren Mundine and claimed Aboriginal people are “the culture they are growing up and seeing, they are getting abused and hurt and damaged”.

Armytage then replied: “Let’s hope some sense prevails here, poor kids.”

For a journalist, Armytage is neither objective nor well-researched. There were many mistruths regurgitated in that short segment (and it’s interesting that despite their deep concern, they could only afford a few minutes to discussing it).

One, the idea that Aboriginal children are not being placed in white families is a lie. The kinship and Aboriginal child placement principles in many states and territories recognise the need for Aboriginal children to be kept in communities, or in extended families. But often, in practice this principle has fallen far short of its aims. A parliamentary inquiry into out-of-home care in 2015 heard that it can often come down to the whim of an individual child protection worker, and that the idea of placing a child with a non-Indigenous carer is not often a “last resort”.

Suelyn Tighe from Grandmother’s Against Removals NSW told the inquiry:

We have the Aboriginal placement principle, which states that you must follow this hierarchical system for placement of the children. That is not being adhered to at all – or only in very, very few cases. I do not think that I know anywhere it has been adhered to. I have not met anyone yet. The fact is that that is happening and it is law. The department is

continually superseding that. The Department of Family and Community Services supersedes the law of the Aboriginal placement principle with sibling placement policies. That is a departmental policy; it is not legislation.”

There was also the issue of child protection agencies not consulting with families about child placements, and children, even those placed in kinship care, being separated from their respective communities and cultures.

In Victoria, as reported by the Guardian’s Calla Wahlquist, a third of First Nations children are placed with Aboriginal kin, and 41.6% are placed with non-Indigenous carers.

There are horrendous stories I have heard of children being effectively stolen from their families with no consultation – being taken from schools or communities by police. When a child is taken away, it is very hard for families to get them back, even after a parent has done everything the department tells them they have to do.

The greater lie is that Aboriginal children are not being taken away and are being kept in dangerous situations for fear of a stolen generation. That does not gel with the statistics: Aboriginal children are being taken away at exponential rates and these rates have grown every year since Kevin Rudd gave his apology to the stolen generations and promised it would “never happen again”.

Claiming that the stolen generations were not real, and that the removals were carried out “for their own wellbeing” is overwhelmingly disrespectful to the testimony of so many of our elders, aunties, uncles and grandparents who continue to live with the trauma of forced removals.

There are now more than 16,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. These are rates higher than those taken under the stolen generations – prompting some to say this practice never stopped, it just changed its skin.

While non-Indigenous children are more likely to be taken away for physical and emotional abuse, Aboriginal children are largely taken away because of “neglect”, which is often seen as a subjective term based on cultural interpretation.

As Aboriginal children and families are being torn apart due to their poverty, there is little investment in the community – there is little focus on what can be done to make community and families safer so that children can remain at home, and grow up with their family. It is not because Aboriginal parents don’t care about their children.

As the Aboriginal researcher BJ Newton found in her thesis on how Aboriginal parents view child protection, there was an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness about being able to change their circumstance.

“A good example was where there was a mum with a young family,” Newton told me last year. “They had the choice — they could either be homeless, or they could be moved to a place in town, but the public housing was only available in the middle of a drug-fuelled area.

“The mother and father had had a lot of problems with [substance abuse] in the past, and they were trying to overcome that.

“The mother was very angry with the Department of Housing for placing her in that local area when she was trying to get her older children back. She knew there was no way she would have a chance of getting them back if she was placed there. So she felt powerless.”

Of course, you would not hear the testimony of this mother on a show like Sunrise – which is focused on centring white outrage.

Taking a child away is not the best option. We already know that children who have been placed in the child protection system are more likely to end up in juvenile detention, and then adult jail. They are also likely to experience traumatic stressors which follow them through their life and impact on their development. These are not simple issues. These are not “no brainers”. These are complex situations that do not deserve the two-minute sermonising from white people who have no understanding and no real interest in Aboriginal children.

Of course we are in a situation now where children are sometimes not safe in some homes. This situation is based on a continuing legacy of colonisation that has compounded intergeneration trauma, and resulted in behaviours including alcohol dependency, drug addiction and violence.

Trauma is not just a word easily swatted away like a fly – it has real physiological, psychological and biological impacts on a person, regardless of race. The difference is Aboriginal people have had to deal with complex and collective trauma that has compounded throughout the generations.

So that means of course there are some children who need to be taken away. But there should be a concerted effort to place children with families – with aunties, uncles or grandparents and, if not, other members of the community. And there should be a concerted effort to support Aboriginal mothers and fathers so they can raise their children in a safe and loving environment.

We have seen in so many cases how violent the child protection system can be. Think of young Tiahleigh Palmer, who was murdered while in foster care with a white family. Think of the little 20-month-old Aboriginal baby who died in foster care in central western New South Wales in 2015.

If children are taken away from their families they are placed in the care of the minister. Shouldn't there be accountability? How can we be assured that they are not placed in more danger than what they were in, given the state of the child protection system?

That's not to say there aren't many great carers out there – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – but the removal of children should always be the last resort. The media favours the opposite – taking away more and more black children under the pretence that they are “saving them”.

“Saving the children” are the three most dangerous words uttered by white people. In this debate, Aboriginal children have not only been ripped away from us, there has in the rhetoric of front pages like the Daily Telegraph been an attempt to assimilate them. Suddenly they are owned by Australia, they are “ours”, they are homogenised into a mass where they can be pitied and rescued by white saviours.

This is dangerous because Aboriginal Australia does not want or need saving. There are many Aboriginal people working in this very area, all across the country, who are calling for a more nuanced, evidence-based conversation that prioritises the need of children to not only be safe and healthy, but also to be raised in their culture and their communities.

If Armytage and her colleagues really cared about black children, they would have taken a few minutes to listen to those strong grandmothers outside Parliament House three years ago, grandmothers who have first-hand experience of the child protection system stealing their children. Instead they turned up their noses, and then turned their backs.