

# Northern Territory

**Note:** This overview is based primarily on the *Bringing them home* report and provides a background to the policies and practices that authorised the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. It is not intended to be used as a comprehensive historical document.

## Occupation of the Territory

The north coast of Australia was proclaimed a British possession for King George IV in 1824. A settlement at Fort Dundas on Melville Island soon followed. Two further settlements were set up at Fort Wellington (1829) and Port Essington (1849). These early attempts at settlement in the Northern Territory were short-lived. Illness, geographic isolation and the lack of trade prevented any growth.

In 1862, the South Australian Government supported an expedition by John Stuart to gain control of territories in the north. While the first settlement at Escape Cliffs met the same fate as previous settlements, a successful site was established at Port Darwin in 1869.

Very soon explorers such as Leichhardt and Giles trekked across the Territory in earnest. This exploration revealed the great wealth of natural resources in the Northern Territory that would bring a flood of mining companies, pastoralists and gold diggers. By the late 1880s most lands were occupied for some kind of development, much of it by large companies.

The occupation and exploitation of land in the Northern Territory was achieved by dispossessing another community – Indigenous people. Forced off their land, Indigenous people moved to work on farm stations or in the mines (with Chinese immigrants). The farm stations were particularly dependent on Indigenous labour, but paid barely subsistence wages in the knowledge that Indigenous people had few other choices.

Other Indigenous people set up camps on the outskirts of non-Indigenous townships.

The rapid pace of development and non-Indigenous expansion gave rise to violence on both sides. The police, played a strong role in controlling this violence, though usually by taking the side of the non-Indigenous developers.

Unlike other settlements in Australia at the time, the difficulties in accessing the region effectively deterred the establishment of missions in the Northern Territory. The Hermannsburg Mission was not founded until 1877. Shortly after arriving, these Lutheran missionaries rounded up Indigenous children for schooling, using rations as persuasion.

## Segregation of ‘half-castes’

The growing number of mixed-descent children in the Northern Territory and the sexual exploitation of young Indigenous women by non-Indigenous men began to cause public concern. The government’s immediate response was to take these children away from the communities in which they were living and place them in the care of missions. This was the first step in legal segregation of Indigenous people based on whether they were ‘full-bloods’ or of mixed descent.

By 1909, the ‘half-caste’ population was estimated at 200. The significant number of mixed-descent children since settlement was due to the few non-Indigenous women living there. However, it was not until this period that non-Indigenous people feared being out-numbered by a mixed-descent population. For the government, the answer lay in a policy of segregation through reserves and compounds.

In 1910, the *Northern Territory Aboriginals Act 1906* was passed, establishing the Northern Territory Aboriginals Department. The Chief Protector, a position created under the law, was appointed the ‘legal guardian of every Aboriginal and every half-caste child up to the age of 18 years’. When the

Commonwealth took control over the Territory in 1910, it confirmed these laws. This would provide the means through which segregation could be legally achieved.

In town areas, compounds were established to contain all Indigenous people. They were required to undertake farming to make their compound self-sufficient. The first of these, the Kahlin Compound, was set up outside Darwin in 1913. Those living in rural areas were removed to stations, which were under the control of a Superintendent. Similarly, they were trained in industrial and farm work.

In 1918, the Chief Protector's powers were extended. Under the *Aborigines Ordinance 1918*, all Indigenous females (regardless of age) were under the total control of the Chief Protector unless they were married and living with a husband 'who is substantially of European origin'. To marry a non-Indigenous man they had to obtain the Chief Protector's permission.

During the 1920s, the pace of removals increased rapidly. An immediate result of this was severe overcrowding in places already in poor condition. Overcrowding was a particular problem at the Kahlin Compound and The Bungalow (near Alice Springs).

The Methodist Missionary Society offered to relocate the children living on the Kahlin Compound to a mission on Goulbourn Island. The proposal was declined because it threatened the availability of cheap domestic labour from the Compound. Instead, in 1924, a new building was occupied next door for the girls and younger boys. It was known as the Half-Caste Home.

Within four years, the Half-Caste Home had also reached critical overcrowding levels, with 76 inmates living in a house large enough for one family. In 1931, the boys were moved south to Pine Creek.

Meanwhile, at The Bungalow, 50 children and 10 adults were living in three exposed sheds. Referring to conditions at The Bungalow, a newspaper gave the following report in 1924:

**At the Alice Springs bungalow the appearance of everybody and everything convicts the Home and Territories Department of the progressive destruction of 50 young promising lives and souls.**

When conditions there reached crisis point in 1928, the children were moved to a temporary home at Jay Creek. This 'home' consisted of a corrugated iron shed and two tents for staff. The children suffered from a severe water shortage, extreme cold in the winter and lack of protection from the rain when it came.

In spite of these conditions, 132 children were again living at The Bungalow by 1935.

## Chief Protector Cook

In 1927, the Commonwealth Government set up an inquiry into Indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory. The inquiry was led by J.W. Bleakley, the Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines. In his report, Bleakley estimated the Territory's Indigenous population to be 21 000, of which 8 000 were 'half-castes'. He also found that many Indigenous people were not being paid wages, living conditions were appalling and that government-run institutions 'were badly situated, inadequately financed and insufficiently supervised'.

Bleakley recommended that missions be given responsibility for Indigenous children. By the early 1930s, there were seven missions operating in the Northern Territory, mostly in the north. The brutality experienced by Indigenous people meant that the missions were often the only place of safety.

Even so, the missions were in poor condition, and disease was widespread. At the Hermannsburg Mission, many children died from whooping cough in the late 1920s. At a mission on Groote Eylandt, almost 50 percent of one generation of mixed-descent children suffered from leprosy. The government provided little financial support to the missions to overcome these conditions.

When Dr Cecil Cook was appointed Chief Protector in 1927, he was wholly unsupportive of the missions. This was partly because of the poor conditions. More importantly, Cook had a similar vision of assimilation as West Australian Chief Protector A.O. Neville. Cook supported biological assimilation.

**Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-Castes will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white.**

Genetics and breeding out 'race' was Cook's key to assimilation. The missions, who were more concerned with education and protection, threatened his vision. Instead, Cook relied on the compounds and homes as a means of segregating and controlling the development of Indigenous children.

Cook's vision, however, ignored the critical and dire state of these compounds and homes. Conditions at Temple Bar, the Half-Caste Home and The Bungalow had not improved. Cook was forced to admit to the situation when complaints were presented about these homes to the Commonwealth-State Conference on Indigenous Affairs in 1937.

Even so, he continued to defend his policy. Cook argued that 'everything necessary [must be done] to convert the half-caste into a white citizen'.

## The 'New Deal' and World War II

In 1937, John McEwan was appointed federal Minister for the Interior. His responsibilities included Indigenous affairs. Soon after being appointed, he visited The Bungalow and Half-Caste Home and was shocked by conditions at both homes. *"I know many stock breeders who would not dream of crowding their stock in the way that these half-caste children are huddled"*, he said.

In response to this, McEwan announced the 'New Deal' policy in 1939 – it was based on assimilation through education and employment. This new policy replaced Cook's vision of biological assimilation. One of the first priorities was the education of 'half-castes' to the 'full white standard'. Children of mixed descent were to be removed to government institutions where they would be given care and education up to a certain age. The missions would also receive greater financial support from the government. Also, the Bagot Aboriginal Reserve was opened in Darwin.

However, these plans were cut short in February 1942 with the bombing of Darwin by Japanese forces in World War II. The bombing forced the evacuation of missions and reserves, with the children being sent to homes and institutions in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria.

After the war, the forcible removal of Indigenous children continued. Patrol officers and police were required to report on the presence of mixed-descent children living in Indigenous communities, and make plans for their removal to settlements and missions.

In 1949, one of the patrol officers made an official protest against these removals. This, combined with protests from the Aborigines Advancement League, led to significant debate in government circles. While the Director of Native Affairs (who replaced the Chief Protector) argued that the removals were necessary, the age range of children who could be removed was narrowed down significantly.

## Assimilation through welfare

The introduction of the *Welfare Ordinance 1953* signalled a movement towards assimilation through general child welfare laws.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous children were now covered by the same law. Those under government control were called wards. A ward was any person who 'by reason of his manner of living, his inability

to manage his own affairs, his standard of social habit and behaviour, his personal associations ... stands in need of personal care'. People who were made wards were denied the most basic human rights concerning their person and property.

Many non-Indigenous people expressed concern about this new law, fearing their children would be removed. In response, the terms were narrowed so that only those who had no voting rights could be made wards. At this stage, most Indigenous people could not vote. Further, the lack of proper housing and welfare benefits directed to Indigenous people meant they were more likely to fall within the definition of a ward.

Gradually, the government began to move away from removing children to institutions and missions. In 1955, it decided that Indigenous children should ideally be transferred to one of the southern states where conditions in the institutions and homes were much better. This scheme began in 1956, and within four years 63 children had been relocated to the southern states.

Towards the end of the 1960s, children were increasingly placed into foster care instead of institutions and homes, which were quickly closing down. In 1971, 97 percent of Territory children in foster care were Indigenous.

## Towards self-management

The assimilation policy was formally abolished by the Commonwealth Government in 1973, in favour of self-management by Indigenous people.

In 1979, an independent community-controlled child-care agency was established. Karu, the new agency, received financial support to recruit Indigenous foster parents, and reunite Indigenous children and families. By this time, there was a marked decrease in the number of Indigenous children taken into government care.

The Northern Territory was the first to adopt the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle when it did so under the *Community Welfare Act 1983*. Under this, an Indigenous family must be the preferred placement for an Indigenous child in need of alternative care. The Principle has also been included in the *Adoption of Children Act 1994*.

## Links

- National Archives of Australia Collection: Indigenous Peoples:  
[http://www.naa.gov.au/the\\_collection/indigenous\\_records.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/indigenous_records.html)