

## Changing Rights & Freedoms of Indigenous Australians: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Government Policies

### PROTECTION

The origins of the protection policy were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of paternalism. Paternalism was the belief that Aboriginal people were unable to care for themselves or make effective decisions as they were inferior and uncivilized. It was therefore the responsibility of the government to act as their 'parent' or 'protector'. In 1909 the Aborigines Protection Act was passed in NSW, in what was seen as an act to save a 'dying race'. As part of the Act, a Board for the Protection of Aborigines was established. It had powers to control money for the assistance of Aboriginal people, restrict the movement of Aboriginal people within and across reserves, remove Aboriginal children from their families to 'educate' them in a civilized way of life, and supervise all matters concerning Aborigines.

### ASSIMILATION

In the 1940s government policy regarding Indigenous Australians shifted from protection to assimilation. Assimilation focused mainly on Aboriginal people of mixed blood and its aim was to have Aboriginal people living as 'white Australians', abandoning their traditional culture and beliefs. During the period of assimilation, the exemption certificate was introduced, supposedly giving Aboriginal people the same citizenship rights as white Australians - if they could prove they had abandoned their traditional way of life for that of civilized white society.

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## **INTEGRATION**

Following a wave of Aboriginal protest in the 1950s and 60s, the policy of assimilation was abandoned. It was replaced by a policy of integration, which influenced the government initiatives in the 1970s. The aim of integration was for Aboriginal people to participate in white society, while at the same time maintaining their identity within the wider community. Aboriginal families were moved off reserves and into housing estates, where they were scattered among non-Aboriginal families. Segregated reserve schools and segregated hospital wards were closed. In reality, the policy of integration differed very little from the policy of assimilation.

## **SELF-DETERMINATION**

The Australian Labor Party adopted the policy of self-determination for Indigenous Australians in 1972. Self-determination refers to Aboriginal people having the right to control all aspects of their lives at a personal, community and national level. During this period there was a resurgence of Aboriginal pride and cultural endeavors and the creation of Aboriginal organizations such as the Aboriginal Medical Service, National Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre and the Aboriginal Legal Service.

## **RECONCILIATION**

Reconciliation is the process of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians coming together to acknowledge the past and work together for a positive future. In 1992 the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established. It outlined three main points of recognition for the achievement of reconciliation:

- Indigenous Australians were the first inhabitants of Australia
- Indigenous Australians have been disadvantaged by the removal of their land
- White and Indigenous Australian should live together in harmony.

A major obstacle to the achievement of reconciliation in recent years has been Prime Minister Howard's refusal to say 'sorry' to Indigenous Australians for the injustices perpetrated against them since white settlement.