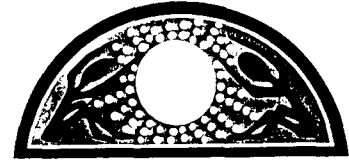


Guest Editorial from SNAICC



S.N.A.I.C.C.
Secretariat National Aboriginal Islander Child Care

This special edition of *Children Australia* has come at an auspicious time for SNAICC (Secretariat of Aboriginal & Islander Child Care). Firstly, the offer of the National Children's Bureau of Australia in the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples has allowed us an unique opportunity to get across our views about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in a widely read journal. Secondly, it comes in the year in which we will be celebrating ten years of our existence as a functioning secretariat.

Both of these events are important. International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples signifies the achievements we have made worldwide towards the recognition of our rights and our existence. One does not have to go too far back in time to remember when the notion or idea of indigenous rights let alone peoples was a fantasy. The very fact that this year is being held at all suggests that we have become stronger and that our movement is thriving both culturally, politically, socially and economically. The contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to these international developments has been very important. The early forays made overseas to the United Nations by a few individuals has turned into large delegations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. The discussion about sovereignty and other rights does not just take place at the domestic level. Indeed often we get a rather more sympathetic hearing overseas. Although these discussions may not yet specifically include the rights of child and their families, it is only a matter of time before this occurs.

Recognition of our rights as indigenous peoples will lead, at the same time, to the recognition of our rights in the other aspects of our lives, including our children. We cannot fight for the rights of our children separately from our own. It would be ludicrous to suggest, for instance, that our children's rights could exist separately from ours. If their families do not have rights then neither will they. If their families do not have the strength to resist the pressures of racism and assimilation and integration in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century then they will end up without identities. We have learnt through bitter experience that nobody will do things for us, indeed nobody can and only we know what is best for our people and for our own children. We must be doing something right if we weathered the kind of onslaught directed at us over the years including the forcible removal of our children, the dispersal of tribes and clans and the theft our land – the very basis of our identity and being.

We reject the notion that people are individuals who have no connection with each other, or no obligations to each others well-being. Our people have survived precisely because we have rejected the extreme individualism of European societies. We have survived because we have behind us a

long and deep alternative tradition that our oppressor has not been able to destroy. It is a tradition, culture and knowledge that is now being held up by many as a way that will provide the solution to the environmental and other problems of the world.

We are here to stay and there will be no turning back the clock!

SNAICC too has established itself as the voice of our communities who continue to demand a better deal for our children.

Since the establishment of the very first Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency in Melbourne in 1978, many others have been set-up. Whenever these agencies were established there was a strong awareness of the rights of Aboriginal people to bring up their children as they saw fit. This awareness and strong belief in the essential sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people motivated the development of separate and Aboriginal controlled services. Although at the time there was a parallel development in the growth of non-Aboriginal non-government sector, the ideas of the Aboriginal community that motivated those developments were usually based on the clear belief that we were acting out our sovereign status. This was in spite of the absence of treaties and therefore European symbols that recognised this sovereign status. We have never accepted that our sovereignty is based on European acceptance of it, something which holds equally in relation to the care of our children.

In the short history of relations between Europeans and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the struggle that has and continues to take place between the coloniser and us is played out in Australia in the nineties. This is a crucial point which must be understood.

Whether or not the Government, bureaucracy and the non-Aboriginal non-government sector accepts it, the view that we are happy with the comparatively new approach of involving us in the development of policy and in ensuring that we are visibly part of society and the workforce, does not mean that all the scores have been settled, or that somehow we will have forgotten about who we are. Our agenda continues to be dominated by our desire to have our sovereignty recognised. The special place we have in Australian affairs is, after all, a de facto recognition that there is something special about us which goes above and beyond our poor economic and social status, yet for years governments have skirted around the issue of official recognition of our sovereignty.

Sovereignty for us is the ultimate question. It is the fundamental question of our identity and our status in this society. Everyone else in this country has their identity established on their own terms and according to their choice, except us. This

is the final challenge for Australian society. Meet the demand of the world's Indigenous Peoples growing self-awareness or be judged by the whole world as the anomaly, the anachronism – the only ones with the blinkers still on. To us the choice is simple. It is only a matter of time.

In relation to our children, this means dealing with us on an equal footing. We are the ones who have always ensured that our children's rights are safeguarded and protected, not the law or international treaties. We have no illusions about this. If we as a community do not maintain our vigilance in these matters the law on its own will not do the job.

There may be many Aboriginal people these days who are making it, and do not associate their success with us – but we know that without our political action and our struggles they would most likely have not achieved their individual success. But this is what we also fought for – the right for our people to do what they want, individually and collectively. As the years go by however people forget, or succeeding generations may not know, how these things came to be.

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are accomplishing great things these days than ever before. We have created some space for them to live, and not just struggle, in. They in their turn will carry our struggle forward. They will help us to cope with, resist, adapt to and change a rapidly changing world. What the future holds is anybody's guess. Along the way however, we will establish our sovereignty and take our place with our children, alongside not just other Indigenous nations and Peoples, but alongside all the peoples of this world.

In conclusion SNAICC once again thanks the National Children's Bureau for this opportunity. A special acknowledgment goes to all those who contributed to this special edition. It would not have been possible without our Secretariat, especially Yolanda Walker, who is largely responsible for ensuring it happened, and of course Lloyd Owen the permanent Editor of Children Australia who made sure it happened. ♦

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

Children Australia will continue to welcome input about activities in Aboriginal communities throughout this year. We hope that AICCA's and MACS around Australia will contribute to the column *News from Our Place*.

Articles from workers and academics about issues relating to Aboriginal children and families are also welcome.

Chris Goddard's column will return in the next issue.

Lloyd Owen

I LOVE MY MOTHER

by Liz Flanagan

She wasn't wanted by her white mother
 Why wasn't she given to her black father
 to be raised by her people

Instead she was a slave
 A 'half-caste' in a white man's world
 Never really belonging

The unfortunate child, institutionalised
 who was never given a chance
 Never told the truth
 Dispossessed at birth

Disowned, no family
 No confidence, too vulnerable
 Beaten by her alcoholic husband
 Who knocked out her pearly white teeth
 left her eyes permanently black
 But she had nowhere to go

Following the expected pattern
 The welfare declaring her an unfit mother
 her children were taken
 Living in poverty and sadness

Meeting them late in life
 but never really knowing them
 They find her hard to accept
 and understand
 Many secrets, much hurt,
 too difficult to explain
 How can she get close
 and express her love

How could she have survived
 such physical and mental torture?
 She has the true forgiving heart
 of a Koori woman
 Thank goodness for that.