

Australia's enduring shame

Once again, the neat, placid surface of white Australia is disturbed by those who owned and cared for this country and remain its internal exiles. On 15 February, a crowd of Aboriginal youths set fire to a railway station and fought riot police in a run-down area known as The Block, in the Redfern district of Sydney. It is the last redoubt of Australia's original inhabitants in the centre of a city built on land from which their forebears were first evicted 216 years ago.

On a hot Saturday morning, 17-year-old Thomas "TJ" Hickey was impaled on a metal picket fence in circumstances which the police, politicians and journalists say are "in dispute". There is no dispute in The Block. TJ was being chased by police, or at the very least riding his bike as fast as he could to get away from a provocatively cruising police car. There is no dispute, because every Aboriginal youth in The Block, and in every city and town in Australia, can expect to be harassed incessantly by police; the vast majority are arrested for petty offences and end up in custody. In the Northern Territory, 89 per cent of an average day's prison arrivals are Aborigines, who comprise 2 per cent of the Australian population. Once inside, many die by their own hand, and some are beaten to death. Think of Stephen Lawrence many times over and you get the picture.

White Australians know this. They know, or they ought to know, that the life expectancy of Aboriginal people is one of the lowest in the world, and that their health is the worst in the world. An entirely preventable disease, trachoma, which has been beaten in many third world countries, still blinds black Australians because of untreated cataracts and appalling living conditions. Epidemics of rheumatic fever and gastroenteritis ravage black communities as they did the slums of 19th-century England.

The cause? Poverty and dispossession. In a society obsessed with property values, 90 per cent of overcrowded households are Aboriginal. A few years ago,

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Dr Richard Murray, of the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council, told me: "What it comes down to is a lack of political will to allocate resources. The federal government spends about 25 per cent less per capita on the health of Aboriginal people compared with the rest of the population. Look at the phenomenon of suicide, which comes from a lack of opportunity and hope for the future. It is the young men who bear the brunt. In a typical community where there are, say, 50 men up to the age of 25, one or two will kill themselves, two or three will try and another dozen will give it some serious thought. They come from families that have to live with constant grief. It is a heart-wrenching truth that the outside world knows little about."

Gail Hickey, the grieving mother of TJ, says police were "after him" in their home town of Walgett, New South Wales. Soon after the family arrived in Sydney, he was beaten up by police, according to his aunt. "They claimed it was mistaken identity," she said. Whatever the fine detail, the events leading to TJ's death are typical. Recently, I wrote a funeral eulogy for Leila Murray, an Aboriginal friend and the mother of Eddie Murray, who was found hanged in a police cell in the town of Wee Waa, New South Wales, on 21 June 1983.

Eddie had been arrested and taken to the police station; his crime was being drunk. At least one policeman lied at the inquest, and the coroner concluded that Eddie had died "at the hands of a person or persons unknown". And that was that. Except that Eddie's parents, Leila and Arthur, began a tenacious 21-year campaign for justice. They petitioned three New South Wales attorney generals, they provided compelling new evidence, and they finally won the right to exhume their son's body. The new autopsy revealed that Eddie's sternum had been crushed, as if subjected to blow upon blow.

Leila and Arthur demanded an independent inquiry but instead came up against a new wall of indifference and silence. Having fought for justice through the system, they had barely rippled the surface of white Australia. When the heroic Leila died, not a word appeared in the mainstream media. The other day, the Sydney Morning Herald interrupted its lifestyle coverage to offer this lecture: "The Redfern Aboriginal community should understand that no one should be immune from the processes of the law if an offence has been committed."

Tell that to the Hickeys, and the Murrays, and to the countless other black Australians who, denied justice and health and employment and hope, have been betrayed time and again by the law. The Australian high court's judgement in the "landmark" Mabo case in 1992 was said to recognise that Aborigines had land rights. But it did not order stolen land to be handed back, and in a follow-up

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judgement, the “moral victory” became a war of legal attrition fought against Aboriginal groups. The ensuing litigation has cost several billion dollars, which might have improved living conditions in ghettos such as The Block and provided jobs and decent health services. The bitterness felt throughout Aboriginal Australia was expressed by the anger of the 4,500 Yorta Yorta people, who had suffered a lifetime of peonage and whose claim to their stolen homelands was rejected in 2002 by the judiciary, which heard from a powerful array of white political and corporate interests.

Australia, like white South Africa, has a deeply racist history of dispossession and cruelty, buttressed by “the law”. But even history is a battleground, in which “revisionists” – the likes of Keith Windschuttle, a self-publishing and much-publicised “new historian” – can suggest that Tasmanian Aborigines lacked humanity and compassion. Not anywhere in the world with indigenous populations, not in North America, New Zealand, even South Africa, could you get away with such a slur.

Windschuttle has been the darling of an influential group of white supremacists, who buzz around the far-right magazine *Quadrant* (once funded by the CIA). They deploy their arguments in a manner not dissimilar to the way David Irving used his history texts to promote Holocaust denial, with the difference that they have been given generous space and tacit support in the press. In rejecting what they call “the black armband view of history”, they claim, absurdly, that mass killing and resistance in Australia did not happen, nor many of the horrific separations of Aboriginal children from their families, ordered by the state. They are supported by Prime Minister John Howard, who is famous for sending the Australian military to turn away leaking boats carrying refugees, and to kill Iraqis in their own country. Howard often expresses the jingoistic national “pride” that comes with uniforms, flags and cricket.

Lyall Munro, a much-respected Aboriginal elder, referred to the real thing. Standing where the riots took place in The Block, he told his people: “There’s been a stand made here [by] some really brave young black people that we are immensely proud of.” **JP**