

## DENIAL, IGNORANCE, AND GUILT: A REPLY TO MACGREGOR'S DISCUSSION OF 'SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S STOLEN GENERATION'

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Ross MacGregor recently published an article in *People and Place*<sup>1</sup> which was highly critical of our study<sup>2</sup> of the socio-economic effects of forcible separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their parents and communities. His paper is also critical of *Bringing them Home*,<sup>3</sup> the report produced by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) on the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. At no stage does MacGregor make any specific criticism of the results we presented or of our methodology. Instead, he simply denies our conclusions. We consider MacGregor's criticism serious enough to warrant an extended reply because of the importance of issues surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy to Australia's future.

MacGregor makes nine claims against our research paper:

1. That the 'the article's use of the term 'stolen generation' is provocative';<sup>4</sup>
2. That we 'have failed to appreciate the very finely defined category of children which is alone the subject of the (HREOC) report';<sup>5</sup>
3. That the use and analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) data 'cannot add to any knowledge discovered by the [HREOC] report because the people identified as separated were not all forcibly removed';<sup>6</sup>
4. That 'the authors are blinded to the fatal inadequacy of the NATSIS data for their purposes';<sup>7</sup>
5. That 'the authors of the article seem to be unaware that the category of 'Forcibly Removed Children' (FRC) contains an anomaly for their (the authors') strictly socio-economic purpose';<sup>8</sup>
6. That the article fails to 'pay consistent attention to the way in which different tendencies to identify as an indigenous Australian might influence their findings';<sup>9</sup>
7. That the authors 'can draw no conclusions at all about the relative outcomes for separated and non-separated children from the NATSIS data';<sup>10</sup>

8. That the article ‘does not achieve its goal because it does not have representative data on the key group’;<sup>11</sup>

9. That while ‘the authors conclude that child removal policies have been a "total failure" ..... there may be many FRC who are alive today only because of these policies’.<sup>12</sup>

We consider MacGregor’s approach to be ill-conceived and ignorant of the available facts. It is supported by an ideology which denies the existence of a large body of scholarly knowledge surrounding these issues. MacGregor also makes a number of other allegations against the HREOC report. In this article we will deal only with each of his claims against us.

### **1. That the ‘article’s use of the term "stolen generation" is provocative’**

We can only describe MacGregor’s use of the term ‘provocative’ as surprising, given his published record of provocative language in his recent publications. The terms ‘stolen generations’ and ‘stolen children’ are widely used and understood phrases in the academic and general community in Australia. One of Australia’s leading experts in the area, Peter Read, used the phrase ‘the Stolen Generations’ in the title of his seminal paper on the topic in 1982.<sup>13</sup> Federal bodies such the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) freely used the phrases in their submission to the HREOC inquiry,<sup>14</sup> and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation also used the terms in their report to federal parliament ‘Weaving the Threads.’<sup>15</sup> MacGregor presents no evidence at all that the term is ‘strongly resented by the Federal and most State governments’.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore simply a nonsense to say that our use of the term is provocative.

### **2. That we ‘have failed to appreciate the very finely defined category of children which is alone the subject of the [HREOC] report’**

MacGregor indulges in a major act of fantasy by making this assumption, and appears to be using our paper as an excuse to rubbish the HREOC. We make no reference at all to the category of children used in the HREOC report, other than to quote ABS statistics from NATSIS which were published in it. Had he properly read our paper, he would realise that the only references to the HREOC report occur in the introduction and as background to our research. The analysis and pre-publication drafts of our paper were in fact produced prior to the release of *Bringing them Home*,<sup>17</sup> and used none of the HREOC’s material.

### **3. That the use and analysis of ABS NATSIS data ‘cannot add to any knowledge discovered by the [HREOC] report because the people identified as separated were not all forcibly removed’**

This point seems to be one of the main focuses of MacGregor’s attack on our paper, and is at the heart of his points 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. However, here he manifests his ignorance of the issues and facts involved. The issue he raises relates to the question which was asked in the

NATSIS about separation. MacGregor incorrectly quotes the question in his paper as:

Were you taken away from your natural family by a mission, the Government, or welfare?<sup>18</sup>

He then proceeds to assert that the question fails to identify those who were *forcibly* removed. He placed in a footnote an acknowledgment of a so-called ‘prefatory statement’ about forced separation.

In fact, as we pointed out in our paper, both the NATSIS questionnaire<sup>19</sup> and the instructions to interviewers<sup>20</sup> make it very clear that the entire question reads, and must be presented to respondents, as:

The next question is about *forcible separation* of children from their families(our emphasis). Please tell me if you don’t want to answer this question. Were you taken away from your natural family by a mission, the government, or welfare?<sup>21</sup>

It therefore seems unreasonable to state, as does MacGregor, that NATSIS did not identify those ATSI people who were forcibly removed. A little over one per cent of NATSIS survey respondents refused to answer the question about separation, and were excluded from our analysis to remove any possibility of confusion or bias.

MacGregor proceeds improperly to state that it is likely that all indigenous peoples who had been brought up by non-parental relatives, orphaned, forcibly removed, or gone into care voluntarily, would answer ‘Yes’ to the question about forcible removal. We will comment later on his possible motives.

#### **4. That ‘the authors are blinded to the fatal inadequacy of the NATSIS data for their purposes’**

This statement is based on MacGregor’s perception that the NATSIS data and therefore our paper considers a wide group of people, including those not forcibly removed. The evidence we have presented above shows his position to be incorrect.

#### **5. That the authors of the article seem to be unaware that the category of ‘Forcibly Removed Children’ (FRC) contains an anomaly for their [the authors’] strictly socio-economic purpose’**

This supposed ‘anomaly’ is the most pernicious piece of revisionism we have ever come across in an academic paper. MacGregor single handedly redefines the Stolen Generations to include *only* those children forcibly taken away *before* 1935 in Tasmania, 1940 in NSW, 1954 in Western Australia, 1957 in Victoria, 1962 in South Australia, 1964 in the Northern Territory, and 1965 in Queensland. This new ‘definition’ is not accepted by any of the commentators, academics, or participants that we have read. At worst, he is guilty of deliberately trying to mislead. At best, we consider his redefinition ignorant, as it denies so

many of the facts of the matter:

- that indigenous children were treated differently from white children after the ‘non discriminatory legislation’ was introduced;<sup>22</sup>
- that government policies of segregation, merging, assimilation, and integration introduced at different times did little to reduce the rate of forcible separation;<sup>23</sup>
- that intergenerational effects of forcible separation have been documented as very severe;<sup>24</sup>
- that indigenous children have continued to be forcibly removed at massive rates after the introduction of MacGregor’s so-called ‘non-discriminatory laws’;<sup>25</sup>
- that while assimilation policy was the driving force behind forced separation in the past, it is now the juvenile justice and welfare systems which perpetuate it.

**6. That the article fails to ‘pay consistent attention to the way in which different tendencies to identify as an indigenous Australian might influence their findings’; and**

**7. That the authors ‘can draw no conclusions at all about the relative outcomes for separated and non-separated children from the NATSIS data’**

These two points refer to an important issue, that of indigenous identification, which MacGregor trivialises in his efforts to discredit everything associated with the HREOC and our paper. We openly acknowledged in our paper that changes in identification continue to be a problem in the enumeration of Australia’s indigenous peoples.<sup>26</sup> This issue has been known since the mid 1970s,<sup>27</sup> and is therefore hardly new. As pointed out by Taylor,<sup>28</sup> there have been significant improvements in the methods used to collect indigenous statistics in recent years, a trend which we trust will continue. However, our analysis is based on the NATSIS data, which is the best and most comprehensive data available, and is clearly able to distinguish between forcibly separated and non-separated people. MacGregor’s criticisms are vacuous.

NATSIS and the census are the sole official sources of information about indigenous Australians, and on which Federal and State policy development are based. Examination of the process and outcomes of the survey by independent academics, including a significant monograph,<sup>29</sup> has resulted in strong support for the results and particularly the continuation of the survey,<sup>30</sup> preferably at intercensal or better intervals. Only through acquisition of these data, and a better understanding of the cultural components of identification, can we move forward in this area.

**8. That the article ‘does not achieve its goal because it does not have representative data on the key group’**

This claim is a continuation of MacGregor’s misguided idea that NATSIS does not distinguish between those children who were forcibly removed from those separated in other circumstances. This is patently untrue, as illustrated previously. The sample and survey

methodology was conceived by ABS, the national statistical agency, with extensive experience in sample survey development. There is no evidence of substandard sampling technique, and it is accepted by both the ABS and researchers in the field<sup>31</sup> that the sample is representative of the Aboriginal population. The identification problem outlined above does not change our general conclusions.

**9. That while ‘the authors conclude that child removal policies have been a "total failure" ..... there may be many FRC who are alive today only because of these policies’**

This is yet another of MacGregor’s unsubstantiated claims which muddy the waters of social scientific research, this time through use of the ‘ecological fallacy’.<sup>32</sup> As far as we are aware, no one has denied that some individuals may have benefited from separation; the real point is that there is now *overwhelming evidence* that the vast majority of those who were forcibly removed from their families have suffered grievously in many, many ways.

MacGregor’s cheap shot using the words of Marj Harris, a forcibly removed woman<sup>33</sup> who believes she is better off as a result of having been taken away from her family, is answered by the hundreds of transcripts of those who have suffered quoted in *Bringing them Home*.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

It is interesting to consider the implications of accepting MacGregor’s position on the Stolen Generations. He says we can draw no conclusions about hardship or disadvantage suffered by either separated or non-separated children, and that forcible separation resulted in the survival of many children who would otherwise have died. Further, his revisionist views allocate the title ‘Stolen’ only to those of ‘mixed ancestry’ separated before the ‘relevant’ dates in each State. The result is to reduce the number of those who may be considered eligible for whatever form of reparation (if any) *he* deems suitable, a conclusion supported by his statement that ‘it is necessary to be scrupulous in recognising the distinctions .... for the purpose of attributing guilt and securing damages and compensation’.<sup>35</sup> Such a narrow and bitter view is sad indeed. We suggest that MacGregor at least scan through ‘*Bringing them Home*’ and the wealth of other material describing the fate of the Stolen Generations before he tries to spread his ideological vitriol any further.

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