

# ANTAR WHITE BLINDFOLD EVENT

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“I feel singularly inadequate to be on this stage for this event; I think it’s fair to say my white blindfold only came off fairly recently, and until that time I didn’t know that I had it on. But perhaps that’s the real point.

Let me tell you two stories. First.....

Six years ago, a young girl who’d been born in Footscray got sick and was taken to hospital. The people at the hospital weren’t particularly impressed with the child’s parents, and one of them had some friends – a childless couple who lived in Toorak. They formed the view that the little girl would have a much better life if she were brought up by that childless family in Toorak, than if she were returned to her parents in Footscray.

And so, without notifying anyone, they gave the child away to the Toorak family, and for the following six years, no-one, apart from the Toorak family, knew what happened to the child. When it became publicly known, you can imagine the public uproar that the story caused.

That story is NOT true, (at least, I don’t know that it’s true). But it *is* easy to understand or imagine the public outcry that such events would provoke.

Think, for a moment, about forty odd years ago, the Beaumont children disappeared. You only have to mention the name ‘Beaumont children’ to people over a certain age in Australia, and they will immediately respond with sympathy and concern, for both the children and parents, because the fate of the children had never been known and the parents still grieve. The children just disappeared.

But, at around about the same time as the Beaumont case, or slightly earlier, another real story occurred, one which has been echoed again and again. And I know this one for a fact, and in detail:

Bruce was 13 months old when he got gastro and was taken to the Children’s Hospital. He was put in the Children’s Hospital by people other than his parents, because his parents didn’t have a car that was capable of driving to the hospital. After a few days his gastro had cleared up as the hospital records show, and two weeks after he had been admitted to hospital, the Aborigines Department gave him away to a white family, because it was thought that ‘he would have a better childhood with a white family’. When his mother wrote in, asking where Bruce was, and when he was coming home, and how he was doing, they wrote back saying, “He’s doing OK but the doctors say he’s not well enough to come home yet”. That letter was written by a public servant in early 1958 to the parents of young Bruce who was then 14 months old. For the next 6 years, as the records show, they actively prevented the parents from knowing where Bruce was.

This all happened, despite the fact that the Crown solicitor had given formal legal advice to the Aborigines Department that they *did not* have legal power to remove Aboriginal children from their parents.

Bruce suffered the sort of consequences which all the psychiatric literature will tell you children suffer if removed from their parents. The earliest recorded example of his suffering is in the Children's Hospital records when he was admitted at age 3, because he was tearing his own hair out. By the time he was 7 he was on tranquillizers and anti-depressants. By the time he was 14 he was an alcoholic. His preferred drink was orange juice with methylated spirits.

He's had a catastrophic life. His story *is* true; and has been played out again and again and again.

Why has there been no outcry about cases like that? Examples can be found again and again and again throughout the 1950's, and 1960's, and even into the 1970's in this country.

The reason, of course, is the white blindfold.

We would think the story was terrible if we knew it in detail, but it does not seem sufficiently important to anyone to talk about it so that we *do* know the details. As a society, we are indifferent to the suffering.

Compare that indifference to the response you can imagine for the little blonde-haired girl given away to a Toorak family because she might have a better chance with them.

I suspect another reason there has been no outrage to the fate of the entire stolen generation is captured by something Raimond Gaita wrote in his book 'A Common Humanity'. He made the point that we grieve, but "grieve"; that we suffer, but they "suffer"; that we love, but they "love", as if their inner lives do not have the same richness or depth or importance, as ours.

And that is the white blindfold in action.

To adopt the position which we have, it seems, adopted for 2 centuries is to assume that the Aboriginal owners of this land are less human than we are ..... and yet I doubt even Mr Keith Windschuttle would be prepared to stand up and say Aborigines are less human than other people. Although everything he says, and does, and no doubt his influence on the ABC Board, will reflect that unstated idea.

The same phenomenon as we have seen in the making of the stolen generation is seen in a deeper and more widespread way in relation to traditional ownership of land.

It took 214 years of white settlement before we recognized that the connection between the original owners of this land, and the land itself, is something *far* deeper than our connection with the land. We understand land as something which can be bought and sold, dug up, built on, owned, and exploited.

For Aborigines the connection is more like that of kinship. The Aboriginal people see the land as their parent. And so, in a way that is literally accurate, we have taken away their parents, and we've taken away their children. *And yet we can't understand that there is anything that needs to be acknowledged.*

It is the most astounding blindness, I think, that I could ever imagine a country seeing, and yet.....there it is.

We do not understand what Justice Brennan, in the Mabo decision, pointed out in his judgement in 1992, when he says (speaking of racism and the implicit racism that underlies the doctrine of *terra nullius*) that the racist is utterly unable to recognise that the person, his victim, has an inner life which is *just as rich and deep as his own*. And it is because he finds that unintelligible, that he is able to mistreat his victim in ways that he could not possibly mistreat another person whose inner life he acknowledged as equivalent to his own.

And that is the white blindfold.

You might have hoped that after the judgement in Mabo, the country might collectively have removed the white blindfold, which made *all* of us incapable of seeing the reality of what we've done to the traditional owners of this country. It seems astounding to me that we have failed to acknowledge that, when Ancient Greece and Rome were flowering, the Aborigines were already here. When Ancient Egypt was flowering, the Aborigines were already here. When Dynastic China existed, the Aborigines were already here, and they had been here for thousands of years before any of those civilizations.

We knew they were here. We knew they occupied the land, but we simply took it; and we still can't acknowledge the wrong that we did to their ancestors and to subsequent generations, right down to the present.

And a lot of people in Australia, I think, take the view that you can ignore the suffering of Aborigines because after all they behave so badly, and whenever the authorities are lucky enough to fasten on someone like Geoff Clark who makes an easy, cheap target, they go for broke; exploring every possible aspect of his life, for the purpose of trying to vilify all Aborigines. To do that, from one case and generalise to the rest, is self-evidently wrong; but to do it at all, is to deny the consequences of what we did to generations before and generations before that. If we don't understand that our mistreatment of them has been the cause; if we don't understand the consequences that have echoed down the centuries, we will never, ever manage to reconcile ourselves to what we've done.

It is now, surely time to remove our white blindfolds, and see what we have done. This is not to say that we are responsible, because apart from ignoring it, we aren't responsible: we did not do it, our ancestors did. But, as many people have observed, our Prime Minister takes pride in the heroic deeds of soldiers of this country a century ago; he goes to Gallipoli every year to take advantage of photo opportunities and show how much he values the spirit of Gallipoli. If we can take pride in the courage of our ancestors, surely we can acknowledge also

the wrongs that they did. And once we start doing that, the process of healing can begin.

May I end with a short afternote:

Bruce's story is true. It was the subject of a case which ran from last November through to March this year. A very interesting thing happened during that case.

I first met Bruce in August last year. He struck me immediately as the most broken and dispirited individual I have ever met in my life. By the time the case was over, he seemed to have improved. He has had a life blighted by what was done to him. But at last it has been acknowledged, and the healing has begun. I think it is because he recognises that the entire system has taken seriously what happened to him from the age of 13 months on.

It shows you what you *can* do if you are prepared to remove the white blindfold and **acknowledge** the wrongs of the past so that the healing can begin.”