**1950s - Peak of the Assimilation Era**

Again we continue our meander through aspects of Aboriginal history you may or may not know, and the lessons to be learned from that history. This time we look at the 1950s, the peak of the assimilation era. In doing so I take time to reflect on a key element of the notorious Assimilation Policy and consider similarities with policies being espoused and pursued today.

The decade of the 1950s was just four days old when one of the great NSW Aboriginal activists of the 1930s, Bill Ferguson passed away. Ferguson had been a Labor man all his life but in early 1949 he resigned from ALP in disgust at their failure to support his campaign for Aboriginal rights. He decided to stand for parliament as an independent in the Dubbo electorate in the 1949 Federal election but was soundly defeated by the ALP candidate. He entered into a deep depression and died just two weeks later on 4th January 1950.

The tragic passing of Bill Ferguson is repeated throughout the history of the Aboriginal resistance. Every generation of Aboriginal activists have died knowing that despite their lifetime of valiant effort, nothing really had changed by the time they passed. I know that the present generation will die with the same knowledge.

One year after the death of Ferguson the Policy of Assimilation was strongly endorsed and reasserted at a conference of Commonwealth and State officials and Aboriginal affairs administrators. This national conference in September 1951 had been convened by Federal Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck and was attended by all mainland states except Victoria, which claimed to have ‘solved’ it’s Aboriginal ‘problem’. The Native Welfare officials in attendance ‘agreed that assimilation is the objective’. And further that ‘acceptance of this policy governs all other aspects of native affairs administration’.

The Policy of Assimilation, which required the imposed and forced absorption into white Australia was made difficult for officials to implement due to the appalling conditions in which most Aboriginal still lived, as well as a persistent burning resistance (both passive and active) from within Aboriginal communities themselves.

Despite Aboriginal opposition and resistance the Assimilation project went ahead full steam and the key element for the promoters of assimilation was ‘education’. This idea was best enunciated by eminent anthropologist Prof. W.E. Stanner when he described it thus,

To rely on ‘education’ to bridge the gap between the old way of life and a new way independent of it... The Aboriginal future was to be one of ‘development through individualism’. The new Aboriginal was to be made into an ‘independent unit’ in a life-system like ours. It did not matter if Aboriginal society and culture fell to pieces. We could fit them together again in a better way.

If this sounds remarkably like some of the words used today by the Noel Pearson Brigade, that’s because they ARE some of the words used these days! So it is interesting to note what the same eminent Professor Stanner thought of such ideas. He said,

Since the 1950s we have known that it is a false assumption, but we have often persisted with substantially the same outlook and new methods. There was already pretty plain evidence in the 1950s that what we were requiring the Aborigines to do was radically maladaptive for them. What clearer meaning could sickness, drunkenness, alcoholism, criminality, prostitution and psychic disorders have?

Stanner’s opinion matters because he is a hero figure to some today who aggressively promote these ideas that he despised. And what it shows is that even conservative, respected experts such as Stanner could see 40 years ago how discredited the idea was for education to be used as a tool and weapon to destroy one’s Aboriginality to achieve assimilation. It also reveals that the underlying intent and ultimate result of advocating education for educations sake, and thereby undermining cultural integrity in the process, is in fact Assimilation dressed in different clothes.

Assimilation was described by historian Adam Shoemaker as a ‘potentially and actively destructive doctrine’. But we didn’t need academics to tell us that, did we folks?

I was one of the generation for who it was decided ‘education’ was the answer. My generation in NSW in the 1950s was the first to be offered the chance of a reasonable education, though for the purpose of preparing us for assimilation. But what little chance they gave us in terms of access to that education was hampered by deeply institutionalized racism, as I discovered when I was expelled from my High School for the crime of being young, gifted and black.

But as the saying goes, ‘a little education is a dangerous thing’. So whilst it took me another 30 years before I was able to go to university, even at the age of 17 I was able to put my thirst for knowledge to good use and discover that half the world had been though colonial exploitation and racist brutality. So I realized we were not alone and joined a large number of young like-minded Aboriginal youth and we set out to change the world.

I would argue that we did change the world, although the world changed itself back.

What we did also as a generation of young black activists was use the best weapon the system gave us, ie our education. Limited though it was, it gave us the tools with which to develop our own understanding of history and the world around us. This enabled us to challenge the legitimacy of the system of which we were products. The lunatics had taken over the asylum, and we succeeded in bringing an end to the old, hated policy of assimilation.

That’s why it’s a pity today that some of our educated ‘leaders’ are using their knowledge as a tool to destroy Aboriginality and promote assimilation, rather than using it as a tool to defend Aboriginality and to resist the new assimilation.

Next edition I will talk about significant Aboriginal organizations and events of the 1950s era of assimilation.

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