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Black and White Poverty in Brisbane in the 1970s

Abstract

This chapter will describe community work efforts undertaken with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders living in South Brisbane and white single parents in Inala (a Western suburb of Brisbane) during the 1970s. The aim at that time was to assist both communities to confront repressive aspects of their poverty. The chapter reflects upon what was accomplished and attempts to show continuities with several difficulties facing both Indigenous people and lone parents in the 21st century.

Introduction

In 1970 residents of Brisbane, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, were about to enter tumultuous times. Twenty-three years of unbroken Liberal rule at the Federal level was drawing to an end whilst, at a State level, the Country-Liberal Party was consolidating its suppression of dissent (Masters 2002, Dickey 1988). The Vietnam War dragged on. The Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the Queensland Police Special Branch were ever vigilant in their efforts to ensure authority was not challenged: in schools, on the streets, at work and in universities.

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

During the 1950s, the official Federal Government policy was one of assimilation. The 1961 meeting of Federal and State Ministers in charge of Aboriginal affairs decided that assimilation: means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hope and loyalties as other Australians (cited in Pittock 1969, pp.12-13).

In 1965 the definition was changed:

...so that now the policy officially seeks (rather than means) that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain (rather than are expected eventually to attain) a similar (rather than the same) manner and standard of living. The words 'observing the same customs', are omitted, and so too is reference to their 'being influenced by the same beliefs' (Pittock 1969, p. 13 italics in original).

Between 1965 and 1972 the Federal Government's policy changed to integration and then in 1974, under the Whitlam Government, it became self-determination. The Howard Government considers the term self-determination inappropriate because it conjures the spectre of independent sovereignty. Instead, the Government prefers a limited form of self-management and practical reconciliation (a euphemism for their determination to continue with welfare handouts) rather than adopt a rights-based approach predicated upon a treaty (Koch and Karvelas 2005, Tomlinson 2003, Ch. 6, 2004).

Rosalind Kidd (1997), Charles Rowley (1972 [a], [b], [c]) and Henry Reynolds (1998) provide useful academic accounts of the reality faced by Indigenous people in Queensland in the 1970s. More political accounts were written by the Black Resource Centre Collective (1976) and Daisy Marchisotti (1978), which built on the earlier work of Campbell, Cameron, Keats, Poulter and Poulter (1958) and Bennett (1957). The poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, particularly in *We are Going*, provide a sense of the depth of racism at the time. The 1967 Referendum had come and gone and little had changed in the day-to-day lives of Aborigines. The infamous 1897 'protection' act, though modified, was still in place, controlling every aspect of Indigenous people's lives. People, not exempted from the act, had their wages, place of residence, employment and even choice of spouse controlled by 'protectors' (O'Shane 1979). Paddy Killoran, the long-serving Director of the Department of Native Affairs, kept tight control of his staff and system of 'protectors'.

There was a major division within organisations representing the interests of Indigenous people between those like the One People of Australia League (OPAL) with a 'welfare approach' and the rights-oriented approach of the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League - which was associated nationally with the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) [Taffe 2005]. The Aboriginal and Islander Tribal Council (Brisbane) was formed on the 7th December 1969

with the intention of bringing together representatives of all the disparate progressive Indigenous groups operating in Brisbane (Tomlinson 1974 Appendix H). There was also to emerge a Brisbane Chapter of the Black Panther Party of Australia in late 1971. With the exception of OPAL's welfare / housing activities these broader Indigenous organisations played little part in the issues which daily confronted Indigenous residents of South Brisbane.

South Brisbane: a brief history

The Brisbane River meanders through the city and forms the demarcation line between North and South Brisbane. South Brisbane at no time succeeded in rivalling North Brisbane as a commercial or social centre (Petrie 1904, Greenwood and Laverty 1959). Knight (1895) stated: "So marked indeed has become the contrast between the two divisions of Brisbane, that the south side has ceased to aspire to the position of first importance it for some years hankered after (p.58)." South Brisbane remained a separate municipality until 1925 when it was incorporated into the city of Brisbane. Changes to the transport system significantly affected the commercial decline of South Brisbane by the 1960's (Tomlinson 1974 Appendix F). The area also had a large and diverse migrant population (Tomlinson 1974 Ch.6).

At the beginning of the twentieth century Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were generally excluded from inner Brisbane (both North and South). Certainly after sunset they were required to remain beyond the respective Boundary Streets in both parts of the city. Then, during the Second World War Black American soldiers were not allowed into the centre of Brisbane and South Brisbane became synonymous with Blackness - American and Indigenous. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders continued to live in the general area after the war and - despite ongoing attempts to get rid of them - they maintain a tenacious foothold to this day.

Why I was there

During the early 1960s, I had been active in anti-racist struggles, and with Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1964), Joe McGuinness (1991), Steve Mann and others had been involved in land and citizenship rights campaigns (Taffe 2005). I then spent three years working as a social worker for the Welfare Branch in Darwin, observing the remnants of a colonial frontier struggling to drag itself into the second half of the twentieth century.

Externally imposed colonial structures promote the interests of the 'metropolitan' country and ensure that the interests of the expatriate entrepreneurs and workers prevail over the interests of local entrepreneurs and those of the 'natives' (Fanon 1970, 1967, Cabral 1973). Australians who have not had the experience of living in the more northern or remote parts of this continent during the 1950s, 60s and 70s may not conceive of white / Black relations as resembling a colonial interface. But the language which governments of the day employed to describe their administration of Indigenous matters was not dissimilar from that of the British Raj, for instance, until 1966 the Queensland Government had a Department of Native Affairs.

In Darwin I had become disenchanted with the welfare approach to Indigenous issues and looked to community work and decolonisation as alternative approaches. Management of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch told me that community work would not be effective with Aboriginal people. So, in 1970, I began a research masters degree designed to look at community work with Indigenous people in South Brisbane. I chose this locality because many people (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous who did not live in the area) had described the Indigenous people there as "just a mob of metho-drinking no-hopers" (Tomlinson 1975 [a]). I thought that if I could show that this Indigenous community found community work a useful way to engage and improve things in their community then governments and welfare organisations would be hard pressed to continue to rely solely on welfare 'solutions' in their work with Indigenous people. In addition any successes they achieved in confronting the source of their oppression would make it harder for whites to continue to denigrate Indigenous people.

Indigenous people confronting their issues

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been fighting to retain sovereignty, maintain control of land, culture, families, and promote their political rights since at least 1606 (Sharp 1952, Rowley 1972 [a], [b], [c], Reynolds 1972, 1981, 1989, 1996, 1999, Turnbull 1974, Evans, Saunders and Cronin 1975, Robinson and York 1977, Roberts 1978, Lippman 1981, Goodall 1996 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission [ATSIC] 2001 [a] pp.27-34, Tomlinson 2003 Ch.6).

The Indigenous Community in South Brisbane

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw large numbers of Indigenous people leaving rural areas of Queensland, particularly missions and settlements. This was due to the fact that the segregation era of the 'protection' system was beginning to unravel and more attractive options were becoming available to Indigenous people in cities. As well, following the Arbitration Commission Aboriginal equal pay case in 1967, many farmers forced Aborigines to leave pastoral properties. Both non-Indigenous and Indigenous farm labourers found there was less demand for rural labour as a result of increased farm mechanisation. Many Indigenous people moved to the cities in the hope of finding a better life.

On arrival in Brisbane, Indigenous families frequently encountered racist attitudes when seeking accommodation and dealing with people in authority. Many had relatives or friends living in South Brisbane and such extended kin relationships sustained them till they could get on their feet. Others weren't so lucky and were forced to camp out under bridges or along the riverbank in places such as 'the Tank' (a disused water reservoir). Drinking has been associated with homelessness and the Indigenous community was no exception (Beckett 1964, Tomlinson, 1974, Ch. 3). Drinking in 'public places' brings increased police surveillance. Substantial parts of the infrastructure of South Brisbane were dilapidated or in the process of being demolished. Businesses in the area were in decline; entrepreneurial business spirit was in decline. So Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders arriving in Brisbane found it hard to find accommodation and work. They were frequently confronted by racism, police brutality and White indifference at best.

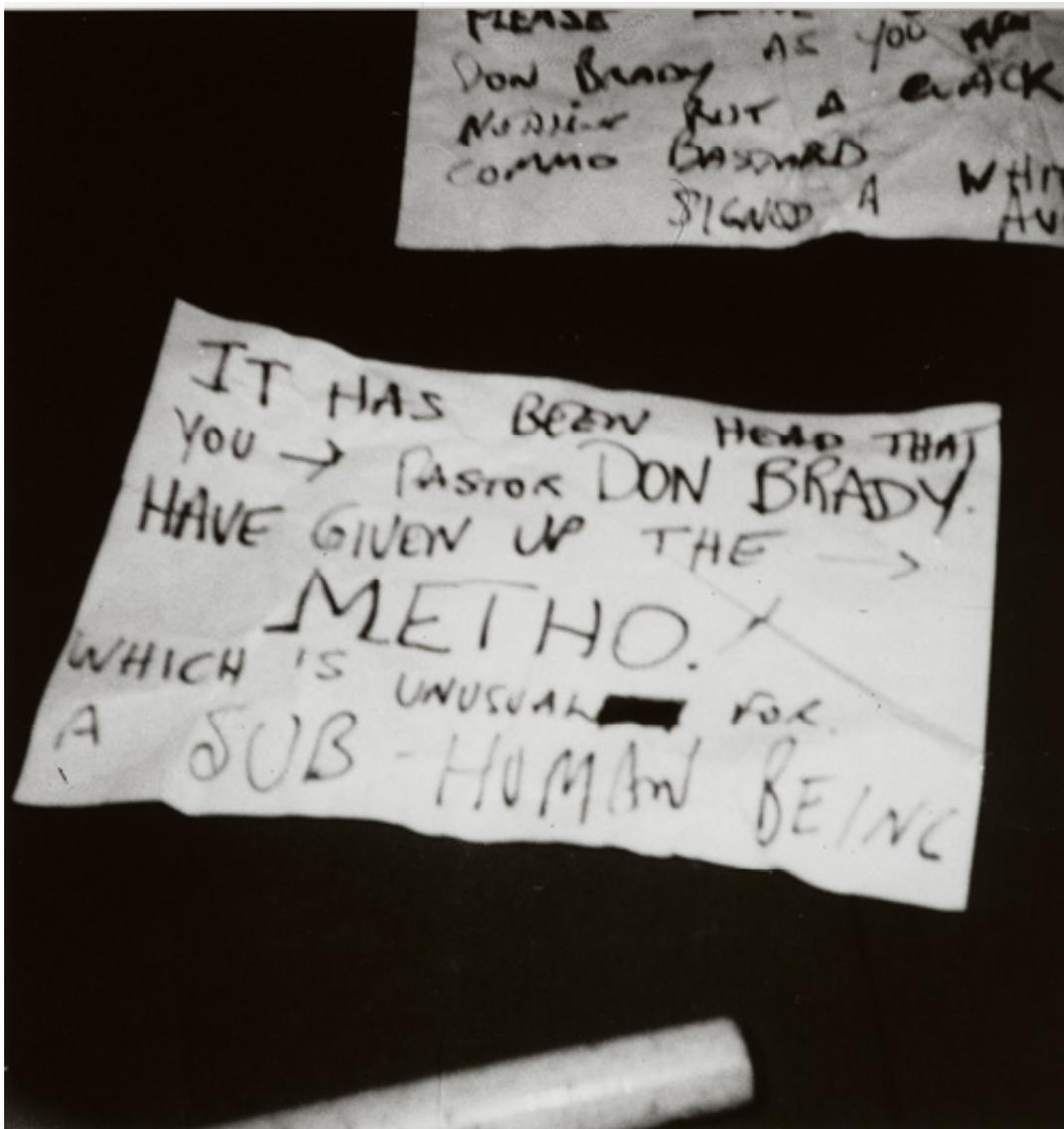


In the face of resistance from the white population, the Indigenous community in South Brisbane demonstrated that they were interested in struggling to confront the reality they faced. In South Brisbane arrest for drunkenness was virtually arbitrary. The police were often more drunk than the Aboriginal people they were arresting. I often saw police, after downing free drinks provided by the

publican, walk out to Aboriginal men sitting quietly in the bar, tap them on the shoulder and say:
"You're coming with us."
"Why?"
"It's your turn."
They were then taken out to the paddy wagon.

The most vicious arrest I witnessed was that of a frail old Aboriginal woman who had been drinking and was unconscious on the footpath outside the Palace Hotel. She was picked up by two policemen who dragged her to within a metre of the back of the paddy van (the door of the van was open) then they flung her into the van where she landed with a sickening crunch against the front wall of the van. I lodged an official complaint but was told that the arrest had been carried out in line with official police procedures.

In January 1972, a few days before an anti-racism conference was to begin in Brisbane, the two plate glass windows of the Born Free Club, on which posters advertising the conference had been placed, were smashed by rocks around which Nazi Party leaflets had been wrapped. Notes written on the back of the leaflets threatened the lives of two Indigenous leaders of the Brisbane Tribal Council: Pastor Don Brady and Dennis Walker (Tomlinson 1974 Appendix G). Members of the Nazi Party were subsequently suspected of attempting to set fire to the Club in which 20 people were sleeping at the time.



A detailed account of the self-help efforts of the South Brisbane Indigenous community in the early 1970s can be found in Community Work with the Aboriginal Citizens of South Brisbane (Tomlinson 1974, 1975 [a]). It was a community, which managed to set up its own organisation to confront discrimination. Indigenous people in South Brisbane financed a social club (the Born Free Club), which also provided housing assistance. The Club's main income sources were: takings from pool tables, a jukebox and barbecues. The Born Free Club organised a major public march to protest against the ejection of Indigenous patrons from its lounge bar; this occurred despite the presence of hundreds of police in the area at the time of the march. The Club met with other business owners and managers



and worked with them to end practices, which discriminated against Indigenous people. In 1975 I predicted that my research would lead to further experimentation by Indigenous community workers who, working with their own community, would be likely to have even greater success (Tomlinson 1975 [a] p. 137).

The Born Free Club now runs two Hostels in the South Brisbane area, assists people get access to income support and health services, it has a funeral program designed to help families get bodies back to traditional country for burial and other funeral-related matters. Its staff are active in rights campaigns such as the current stolen wages campaign being spearheaded by Indigenous leaders, supported by Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (Queensland) [ANTaR (Queensland)] and the Queensland Trades and Labour Council.

Single parents

In the early 1970s, apart from the Widows Pension, there were no Commonwealth payments for single parents. Those who were not married had to rely on the State Department of Children's Services (now Department of Families, Youth and Community Care) for financial support. There was no fixed schedule of payments. Discretion and arbitrary moral judgments were the order of the day. This was also true of Federal Social Security at the time: people could be refused pensions and benefits, for which they otherwise qualified, if they were "deemed to be not of good moral character" (Kewley 1973, Jordan 1984). The provisions dealing with "character" and "non-deserving" were not removed from the Social Services Act until 1974 (Whiteford, Stanton and Grey 2001, p. 26)

In 1970 I went to the head office of the Department of Children's Services and asked what benefits they paid. I was asked on what basis I wanted such information. I pointed out I was a citizen – only to be told that such information was "classified". It was only when I said I would not leave until the senior officer on duty was prepared to identify himself and declare, in writing that he could not tell me what benefits were paid by the Department that any information was provided. Clearly, these were times when the financial viability of single parents and their children depended on the whim of Departmental staff. There was no concept of rights, eligibility, appeal or guarantee of procedural fairness (Grassroots November 1971, April 1972, Client Power 1975).

Client Power

At this time the State Department of Children's Services provided assistance to single parents who did not qualify for Commonwealth Social Security payments, such as widows pensions, and controlled the placement of children taken into care. The clients of the Department were not told how their benefit payments were calculated. People in equivalent financial situations were paid substantially different amounts. Tutors in the Social Work Department of the University of Queensland (Cathy Bywater, Lyn Trad and Marg O'Donnell) and social work students worked with me to help organise clients of the Department in order to generate enough power to be in a position to insist the Department at least treated clients in an equivalent situation in a similar manner (Client Power 1975, Tomlinson 1975[b]).

There were many actors in the tableau, which unfolded. There were the officers of the Department of Children's Services, many of whom saw their role as being to carry out the orders of senior officers. The clients of the Department who felt there were many constraints on them brought pressure to bear upon these public servants. The majority of the staff of Children's Services was either hostile or indifferent to clients' needs, but the Department also employed some young social workers that were horrified by the injustices they saw daily. Most social workers working in other agencies averted their eyes from the excesses occurring at Children's Services. The Australian Association of Social Workers Queensland Branch (AASW [Qld]) had suppressed evidence of widespread Departmental maladministration, which was having major adverse impacts on clients (Client Power 1975 [editors footnote 2]). The staff of the School of Social Work at the University of Queensland was divided. Some lecturing staff attempted to undermine junior staff and students' attempts to organise clients of the Department of Children's Services. Other lecturers such as Harry Throssell were consistently supportive.

The group who contributed most to the change were poor women and their children who, though initially fearful, came to confront not only their uncertainties but also the Department's Director and Queensland politicians in order to gain some concessions. This group, through their contact with Bill Hayden (subsequently the Federal Labor Party's Minister for Social Security), played some part in the introduction of the Federal Government's Single Mothers Benefit in 1973 (Whiteford, Stanton and Grey 2001, p. 26).

Setting up Client Power

I obtained the addresses of clients of the Department of Children's Services from a source inside the Department. The Department made inquiries about this leak for months and subjected some younger social workers to frequent questioning. The Department approached some AASW [Qld] executive members who attempted to haul me before the ethics committee of the Association. Supporters of Client Power managed to get the matter brought before a special general meeting of the Association where the attempt to discipline me failed.

Many students and colleagues said they would help if "they could be sure that clients of Children's Services will not get hurt by joining Client Power". This sort of guarantee is not mandatory in casework services. Social Workers do not say: "I will only work as a caseworker in the Department of Children's Services if you (DCS) can guarantee no one will be hurt"! Client Power at present is operating on the basis of taking the regulations and asking the department to live up to its own regulations. The fact that social workers could not be certain that individual clients acting in their own interests and demanding nothing but justice would not be hurt should have been sufficient to provoke some effort on the part of these social workers (Tomlinson 1975[b] p.119)

Too many social workers, now as then, spend their day helping clients adjust to an unequal and unjust society. Writers such as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1971), Saul Alinsky (1969), Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1971), William Ryan (1971) and Bill Jordan (1973) inspired those associated with Client Power to try to change the way social workers interacted with their clients. This was to be a model where clients would be helped to see that the forces which impinged on them adversely could be confronted.

We visited clients of the Department in their homes and invited them to become involved. Inala, and later Redcliffe (a North Brisbane beachside suburb), were the main organising centres. Meetings were rotated around members' houses. Office bearers were elected and members were encouraged to recruit other members. Initially, clients had little success at recruiting mainly because they did not want to publicise their low status, namely, deserted wife. Those they called on saw them as relatively powerless and were not attracted to the idea of 'uniting in weakness'. Clients who were uninformed as to their entitlements tended to see the Department as all-powerful because of the arbitrary manner in

which the department dealt with them.

After people had acclimatised to meeting procedures and discussing what was affecting them, they started to identify the things they had in common and the things they wanted to change. Some were prepared to intercede with Departmental staff on behalf of other clients when accompanied by student advocates. Later, the Client Power members advocated for themselves. A six page manifesto (a list of demands and compilation of grievances) was worked through with the membership and then, in 1971, it was widely circulated to politicians, Departmental staff and through progressive social work networks (Client Power 1975). There were demonstrations in the Department's Head Office and outside Parliament. A three-hour sit-in by mothers, their children and students in the Head Office of the Department only ended when the Director agreed to negotiate with the members of Client Power.

The surveillance of single mothers

One of the most objectionable practices engaged in by officers of the Department of Children's Services, was the surveillance of clients' homes in the hope of catching them with a man. If they could find a 'man in the house' the officer would cancel the woman's and her children's payments.

One male officer according to our informant parked outside one woman's home every workday for two weeks for at least an hour a day. He even questioned a Housing Commission employee who had been in the woman's home to fix her stove for a quarter of an hour. He asked him what he had been doing in there. The employee returned and informed the woman. The same Welfare Officer on another day entered the woman's home and stripped her beds and searched her bathroom for evidence of a man's presence. He questioned her in detail about a razor, which she used for shaving beneath her arms (Client Power 1975 p. 128).

What was achieved

Many members came to see themselves as people asserting their rights rather than as petitioners waiting for a handout. One member said:

Until Client Power got going, if they did something nice to me I thought they were being kind, if they took money from me I thought they had it in for me... the Department granted one woman a concession she had been trying to get for five years – she rang up the senior clerk, not to thank him, but to abuse him for not paying it five years earlier. Many of the members have come to see that they have the right to try to control their own lives (Tomlinson 1975[b] p.119).

The success which these low income-earning women and their children was most obvious in relation to their sense of taking control of their own destiny but it extended to expressing their common humanity with other single parents who were not entitled to Commonwealth income support payments.

A brief description of underlying issues in progressive community work

When working with any community it is important to identify the negative stereotypes that powerful people hold about that group and then investigate why powerful people hold such negative views about your community. It is important to look at the economic and social drivers that reinforce powerful people's perceptions. For example, "Aborigines were 'nomads' they didn't have any significant connection with the land, therefore it was a vacant land. We did not steal or invade the land it was never really theirs so we acquired it by discovery, settlement and development –terra nullius". This, still repeated 'observation', manages in the one breath to rationalise the seizure of the land whilst simultaneously denying the theft of Indigenous people's property rights.

It is then necessary to look at these negative stereotypes from the community's perspective and to seek out the contradictions between the opposing views. Operating in line with the community's view of the world, you act to negate the ideas of the powerful. Part of this process is identifying how your community sees itself and trying to understand how powerful people might respond to the community's perspective of itself.

There are two underlying themes in progressive community work. They are:

- * Work with and not for your community, you are there to take direction from the community, and
- * Operate in solidarity not empathy.

Solidarity is much more than understanding how people feel – it is about the interconnectedness between their wellbeing and yours (the issues raised here are further elaborated upon in Freire 1972, Galper 1975, Bailey & Brake 1975, Corrigan & Leonard 1978, Tomlinson 1982).

The twenty-first century

The struggles waged by Indigenous Australians in South Brisbane and those waged by the women of Client Power during the 1970s have continuing relevance.

The dispute over wages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders stolen by the 'protectors' who were appointed by the Queensland Government or withheld by the Government itself cannot be justly resolved when the Government is offering only one-tenth of the missing wages by way of reparation (Kidd 1997). There is also a continuing inadequate and insufficient supply of housing to Indigenous Australians. In 1970, the cost of the Australia-wide backlog in Indigenous housing was estimated to be \$3 billion (Lovejoy 1971). In the 2001-2 Budget the Howard Government promised an extra \$75 million over 4 years to assist with the housing shortfall. Geoff Clark pointed out that this "will make little dent in the \$3 billion deficit in this area (ATSIC 2001 [b] p.2)". At this rate of improvement in the availability of Indigenous housing, the Born Free Club hostels and other crisis accommodation centres will be needed forever. In the 2005/6 Budget spending on Indigenous affairs hardly kept up with inflation and the abolition of ATSIC means that non-Indigenous agencies now have total control of funding for Indigenous services.

There are now more Indigenous people in jail than in 1970 (Cunneen 2001) and more dying in custody (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 2002 Ch.1). The latest Indigenous health statistics would shame any civilised nation. The Census figures show that the average age of death of Indigenous men in the early 1980s was 56. The latest available figures show that the average age of death for Indigenous Australian men is 56 years and 62 years for women. This compares with 76 years for non-Indigenous men and 83 years for non-Indigenous women. In Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory three-quarters of Indigenous male and two-thirds of Indigenous female deaths occurred before the age of 65 years compared with one-quarter of male and one-sixth of female total deaths in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [ABS and AIHW] 2003, p.183).

The Whitlam Government was the first Federal Government to take the issue of Indigenous education seriously. The Indigenous educational allowance, the Aboriginal Benefit Study Scheme, was starting to address educational inequality until the Howard Government amalgamated the Aboriginal Benefit Study Scheme and the mainstream student study assistance program. The few economic and cultural advantages received by Indigenous students have dissipated – making it harder for them to proceed to tertiary studies. This has led to a drop in the number of Indigenous students attending university since 2000 (Wright 2005).

The need for Indigenous-owned and controlled legal, health, housing educational and community services is ongoing. It is also necessary to come to a just treaty, to negotiate land and other Indigenous rights issues while, at the same time, significantly reducing the socio-economic disparity between white and Black Australia (Tomlinson 2003 Chs. 5 and 6).

Clients of the Department of Children's Services in the 1970s fought for their rights to be recognised, particularly their right to procedural fairness. Their struggle began just before the welfare state in Australia became more comprehensive, generous and procedurally fair. This period continued until Brian Howe became Minister for Social Security in the Hawke Labor Government. Howe started to tighten eligibility criteria for benefits and required welfare recipients to 'reciprocate' in some way (Tomlinson 2003).

The 1996 election of the Howard Government installed a socially conservative and economic fundamentalist regime. Australia today is a more unequal society than ever before (Argy 2005, see also the Australian Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union's [LHMU] submission to the Senate Inquiry into Poverty 2003). In the financial year 2001-2, Centrelink issued 386,946 breaches against social security recipients - which meant they were forced to live on income substantially below the poverty line (Schooneveldt 2004). The Howard Government has imposed dole diaries, compulsory literacy classes, 'work for the dole' and other 'mutual obligations' on poor people. The Brotherhood of St Laurence and St Vincent de Paul 2003 report entitled Much Obligated asserts that people who become long term unemployed have so much of their time taken up just meeting the obligations imposed on them that they don't have time to find work: the report concludes the mutual obligation regime "is failing the most disadvantaged job seekers. Overall the system operates...not as 'welfare to work' but 'welfare as work' (Ziguras, Dufty and Considine 2003, p.43)". It is clear that (within the Australian social welfare system) there has been a major ideological shift from a social democratic noblesse oblige to a compelled conservative compact (Tomlinson 2002).

Since 1975 Australia has, as a result of the adoption of economic fundamentalist policies, become a

dramatically less egalitarian society (Gregory 2000, Briggs and Buchanan 2000). Once again, we need to develop the sort of partnership between welfare recipients and progressive forces, which made the Client Power, story a success. The 1998 amendments to the Native Title Act in the wake of the Wik judgement, and the deceit and vicious treatment meted out to Asylum Seekers demonstrate the depth of racism, which inspires the Howard Government (Lock, Quenault and Tomlinson 2002). There is an urgent need to build a progressive union of men and women, rich and poor and Indigenous and non-Indigenous to confront this Government's attack upon our national integrity and to promote the social and economic rights of all Australian citizens.

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