

Australians Denounce Their Racist Government

By Kim Bullimore

On 28 May 2000, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia in solidarity with the nation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Over the next few weeks, ten of thousands of ordinary people followed suit in other state capitals around the country.

The huge turnouts were in response to the continuing racist attacks by the government of Prime Minister John Howard on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Ignored by the government, ordinary Australians wanted to show that they did not agree with Howard, or the statements of his ministers for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation.

For the last four years, the indigenous population of Australia has had to face an increasing hostile backlash against the limited legal and social advances they have won over the years. The Howard government has launched attacks on Native Title (i.e. land) rights, slashed funding to Aboriginal programmes and education, denied the existence of the Stolen Generations (those children who were forcibly removed by past governments from their families), refused to apologise for this injustice and to compensate those affected, and refused to overturn the racially discriminatory mandatory sentencing laws in

Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The Howard government's neo-liberal agenda has attempted to obscure the fact that Australia's indigenous population still remains the most socially and economically disadvantaged in the country, with:

- an infant mortality rate three times higher than the national average;
- an imprisonment rate 20 times that of non-indigenous Australians;
- a life expectancy around 18 years less than other Australians;
- one of the highest rates of unemployment;
- low rates of secondary school matriculation (33 percent compared to 75 percent for the wider community); and
- low university attendance and matriculation.

Indigenous women are often doubly affected by these attacks. One of the starkest examples can be found in relation to the mandatory sentencing law in the Northern Territory. The law is designed to target minor property crimes, civil disorder crimes, such as drunkenness, unlawful entry of property, offensive language and vagrancy—offences which are disproportionately committed by people caught in the poverty cycle. Under the mandatory sentencing regime, offenders are automatically jailed for their first offence, with the discretionary powers

of the magistrates removed, limiting their ability to impose a lesser sentence and fitting punishment to the crime.

For indigenous women, the introduction of mandatory sentencing has been disastrous. While the jailing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Unfortunately, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women suffer the double burden of racism and oppression as women. Already, Australian women as a gender are disproportionately affected by poverty, increasingly being forced into less and less secure employment, a narrowing of access to educa-

exacerbates their situation. What is needed are programmes focusing on the alleviation of poverty, homelessness, discrimination, child abuse, family breakdown, exclusion from employment and education—which are often the cause of these petty crimes.

Land and Culture

The government's refusal to honor Native Title claims and land rights should not only be viewed as a violation of the sovereignty and property rights of indigenous Australians but also an attack on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander religious and cultural beliefs. While this has occurred many times, the most notable example of this can be found in the attacks on the Ngarrindjeri women in South Australia.

In 1993 to 1994, a group of Ngarrindjeri women petitioned the then Federal Labour government to stop the building of a bridge from the South Australian mainland to Kumarangk (or Hindmarsh Island as it is known by whites). The women argued that the building of the bridge would disturb sacred women's sites, specific to reproduction on the island. As a result, the Keating Labour government conducted an inquiry into the significance of the area. During the inquiry, the Ngarrindjeri women presented a submission detailing secret women's business (that is, laws, customs and religion that are specific to women, which men do not have access to). The submission requested that in accordance with Aboriginal law and custom, no men, indigenous or non-indigenous, should have access to reading the submission.

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men has skyrocketed in the last year and a half, the figure for indigenous women is even worse. According to a recent report made to the UN Human Rights Commission by the Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, Dr Bill Jonas, there was a 223 percent increase in the number of indigenous women jailed in the first year of the Northern Territory legislation; by 30 June 1999, indigenous women comprised 91 percent of all women prisoners in the Territory.

The primary reason for the over-representation of both Aboriginal men and women in the Australian prison system is the over-policing of the Aboriginal community. This is a result of the racist premise that all indigenous communities are troublesome, untrustworthy and given to criminality. Thus, many Aboriginal men and women are being jailed for relatively trivial and victimless offences.

tion opportunities and welfare programmes. Moreover, they are expected to take up the role of unpaid carers for the young, sick and elderly in society.

For indigenous women, this situation is even worse. Often they are the least employed and least economically secure group in Australia because of a combination of lack of educational access and opportunities, as well as racism and discrimination. It is this low socio-economic standing and entrenchment in the poverty cycle which often propels Aboriginal women into minor crime or public order offences. The most common offences committed by Aboriginal women are the crimes specifically targeted by the mandatory sentencing regime.

Instead of helping indigenous women or others caught in the poverty cycle, a stricter law and order regime, like that of mandatory sentencing, only

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However, some of the documents found their way into the office of Liberal Senator Ian McLachlan, who opened, read and photocopied the documents. (McLachlan was later forced to resign over this.)

In 1994, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner announced that the Federal Labour government would place a 25-year ban on the building of the bridge, because of the relevance of the site to the Ngarrindjeri women. However, in 1995, the same government announced a Federal Inquiry into the authenticity of the secret women's business. The Royal Commission was in response to the claim of a second group of Ngarrindjeri women that no secret women's business existed, the primary reason being that they did have any personal knowledge of it.

The allegation of the "dissident" women needs to be viewed in the context of European invasion and colonisation of the Australian continent. The Ngarrindjeri people, like many other indigenous nations in Australia, were dispossessed of their land. They were forbidden to speak their language and


to practice their culture. As a result, cultural knowledge was forcibly restricted, with only a few men and women receiving sacred knowledge from their elders.

The Royal Commission reflected once again not only the institutionalised racism in Australia, but also sexism. The cultural value of women's business was viewed through the lens of patriarchal Eurocentric values, with women's business holding little value except as a curiosity or as amusing drama. Before, during and after the Commission, the Ngarrindjeri women who defended their religion and sacred places were hounded and trivialised by the media and the politicians. When the women refused to testify in court (so as to not break their customary law), the Royal Commission, despite conflicting evidence, declared that the secret women's business was a fabrication.

Ultimately, what the Commission meant was that European social values were the only way to measure religious beliefs. By attempting to force Aboriginal women to prove their religious beliefs, the Australian courts, state and Federal parliaments and the media su-

perimposed their own Eurocentric belief system, usurping the right of indigenous people to determine their own religious beliefs and sites of cultural and religious significance. However, despite the finding of the Royal Commission, today the Ngarrindjeri women are continuing the battle to protect their sacred site on Kumarangk.

While the issues of mandatory sentencing and land and cultural rights are two important issues affecting indigenous women in Australia today, they are by no means the only ones. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, like their male counterparts today are still fighting a battle for survival, a life-and-death struggle that has been going on for over two hundred years.

The tremendous turnout for the Reconciliation walks has given heart to many indigenous Australians, but we know the battle is far from won. While many ordinary Australians may be listening and willing to offer their hands and hearts in solidarity with indigenous Australians, there are others who have chosen to wage the war against them. Until the Australian community as a whole, addresses the systematic and institutionalised racism in Australian society, the social and economic disadvantages suffered by the indigenous peoples will never be overcome. 

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