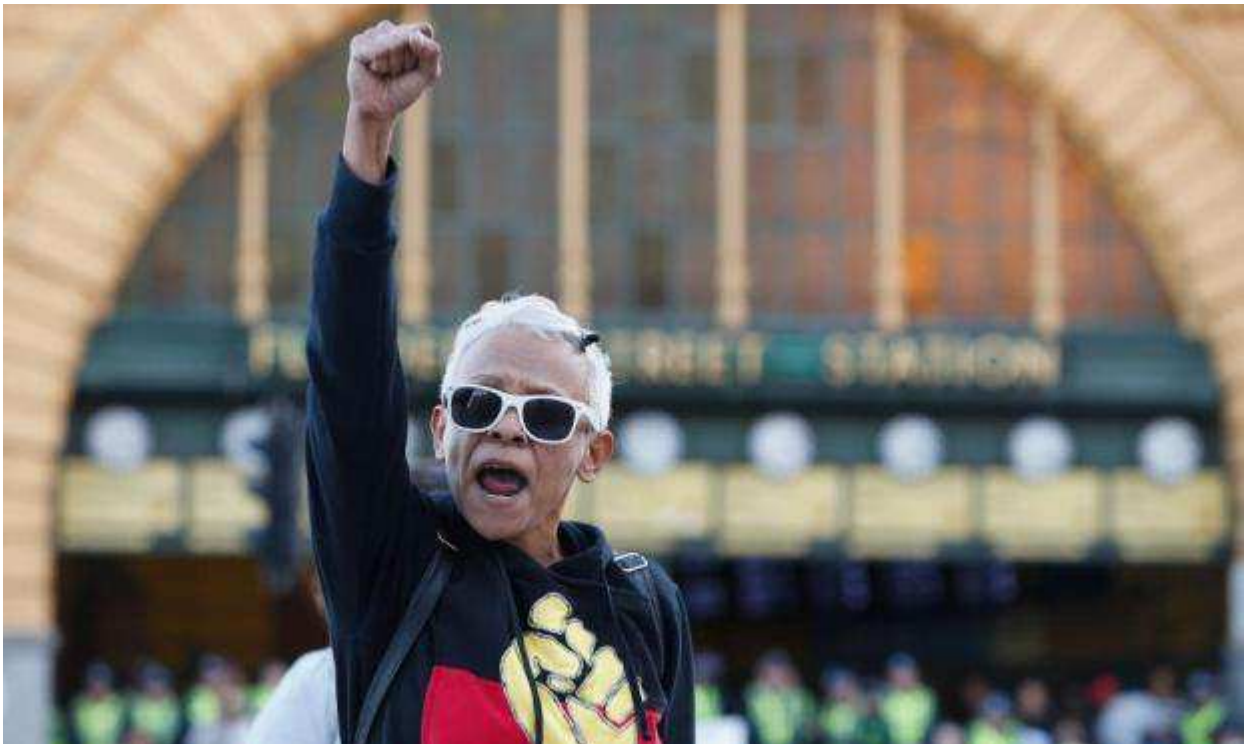


Evicting Indigenous Australians from their homelands is a declaration of war

[John Pilger](#)

Australia occasionally interrupts its ‘normal’ mistreatment of Aboriginal people to deliver a frontal assault, like the closure of Western Australia’s homelands



A woman protests the eviction of Indigenous Australians from remote communities in Melbourne, March 2015. Photograph: Darrian Traynor/Getty Images

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Australia has again declared war on its Indigenous people, reminiscent of the brutality that brought universal condemnation on apartheid South Africa. Aboriginal people are to be driven from homelands where their communities have lived for thousands of years. In [Western Australia](#), where mining companies make billion dollar profits exploiting Aboriginal land, the state government says it can no longer afford to “support” the homelands.

Vulnerable populations, already denied the basic services most Australians take for granted, are on notice of dispossession without consultation, and eviction at gunpoint. Aboriginal leaders have warned of “a new generation of displaced people” and “cultural genocide”.

The prime minister, Tony Abbott, has revived this assault on a people who represent Australia's singular uniqueness. Soon after coming to office, the federal government cut \$534m in Indigenous social programs, including \$160m from the Indigenous health budget and \$13.4m from Indigenous legal aid.

In the 2014 report [Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators](#), the devastation is clear. The number of Aboriginal people hospitalised for self-harm has leapt, as have suicides among those as young as 11. The indicators show a people impoverished, traumatised and abandoned. Read the classic work of apartheid South Africa, *The Discarded People* by Cosmas Desmond, who told me he could write a similar account of Australia.

In announcing that the Australian government would no longer honour the longstanding commitment to Aboriginal homelands, Abbott sneered, "It's not the job of the taxpayers to subsidise lifestyle choices." The weapon used by Abbott and his redneck state and territorial counterparts is dispossession by propaganda, coercion and blackmail. The minister for Indigenous affairs, Nigel Scullion, has been [accused](#) of threatening to stop providing basic services unless Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory sign 99-year leases. According to Scullion, "this is about what communities want". In fact, there has been no real consultation – only the time-honoured co-option of a few.

Both Coalition and Labor governments have already withdrawn the national jobs program and the community development employment projects from the homelands, ending opportunities for employment, and prohibited investment in infrastructure: housing, generators, sanitation. The saving is peanuts.

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The reason is an extreme doctrine that evokes the punitive campaigns of the early 20th century "chief protector of Aborigines", such as the fanatic AO Neville who decreed that the first Australians "assimilate" to extinction. Influenced by the same eugenics movement that [inspired the Nazis](#), Queensland's "protection acts" were a model for South African apartheid. Today, the same dogma and racism are threaded through anthropology, politics, the bureaucracy and the media. "We are civilised, they are not," wrote the acclaimed Australian historian Russel Ward two generations ago. The spirit is unchanged.

Having reported on Aboriginal communities since the 1960s, I have watched a seasonal routine whereby the Australian elite interrupts its "normal" mistreatment and neglect of the people of the First Nations, and attacks them outright. This happens when an election approaches, or a prime minister's ratings are low. Kicking the blackfella is deemed popular, although grabbing minerals-rich land by stealth serves a more prosaic purpose; and driving people into the fringe slums of "economic hub towns" satisfies the social engineering urges of racists.

The last frontal attack was the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention, when John Howard sent the army into Aboriginal communities to "rescue children" who, claimed his minister for Aboriginal affairs, Mal Brough, were being abused by paedophile gangs in "unthinkable numbers".

It was a shameful episode in which the media played a vital role. In 2006, the national TV current affairs program, the ABC's *Lateline*, broadcast a [sensational interview](#) with a man

whose face was concealed. Described as a “youth worker” who had lived in the Aboriginal community of Mutitjulu, he made a series of lurid, unsubstantiated allegations. Subsequently exposed as a senior government official who reported directly to the minister, his claims were discredited by the Australian Crime Commission, the Northern Territory police and a damning report by child medical specialists. The community received no apology.

The intervention allowed the federal government to destroy many of the vestiges of self-determination in the Northern Territory, the only part of Australia where Aboriginal people had won federally-legislated land rights. Here, they had administered their homelands in ways that allowed the dignity of self-determination and connection to land and culture and, as Amnesty International reported, a 40% lower mortality rate.

It is this “traditional life” that is anathema to a parasitic white industry of civil servants, contractors, lawyers and consultants that controls and often profits from Aboriginal Australia, if indirectly through the “free market” corporate structures imposed on Indigenous organisations. The homelands are seen as a threat to white power, for even in poverty they express a communalism at odds with the neo-conservatism that rules Australia.

The current political attack was launched in the richest state, Western Australia. Last October, the state premier, Colin Barnett, announced that his state could not afford \$90m for basic municipal services to [282 homelands](#): water, power, sanitation, schools, road maintenance, rubbish collection. It was the equivalent of informing the white suburbs of Perth that their lawn sprinklers would no longer sprinkle and their toilets no longer flush; and they had to move; and if they refused, the police would evict them.

Where would the dispossessed go? Where would they live? In six years, Barnett’s government has built few houses for Indigenous people in remote areas. In the Kimberley region, Indigenous [homelessness](#) – aside from natural disaster and civil strife – is one of the highest in the world, in a state renowned for its conspicuous wealth, golf courses and prisons overflowing with impoverished black people. Western Australia jails Aboriginal males at more than eight times the rate of apartheid South Africa. It has one of the highest incarceration rates of juveniles in the world, almost all of them Indigenous. In 2013, the former prisons minister, Margaret Quirk, told me that the state was “racking and stacking” Aboriginal prisoners. When I asked what she meant, she said, “It’s warehousing.”

In March, Barnett changed his story. There was “emerging evidence”, he said, “of appalling mistreatment of little kids” in the homelands. What evidence? Barnett [claimed that gonorrhoea](#) had been found in children younger than 14, then conceded he did not know if these were in the homelands. His police commissioner, Karl O’Callaghan, chimed in that child sexual abuse was “rife”. He quoted a 15-year-old study by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. What he failed to say was that the [report](#) highlighted “neglect” – in other words, poverty – as the most prevalent type of maltreatment. Sexual abuse accounted for less than 10%.

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The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, a federal agency, recently released a [report](#) on the “fatal burden” of third world disease and trauma borne by Indigenous people “resulting in almost 100,000 years of life lost due to premature death”. This “fatal burden” is the product

of extreme poverty imposed in Western Australia, as in the rest of Australia, by the denial of human rights.

In Barnett's vast rich Western Australia, barely a fraction of mining, oil and gas revenue has benefited communities for which his government has a duty of care. In the town of Roeburne, in the midst of the booming minerals-rich Pilbara, 80% of the Indigenous children suffer from an ear infection called [otitis media](#) that causes deafness.

In 2011, Barnett's government displayed a brutality in the community of Oombulgurri which the other homelands can expect. "First, the government closed the services," [wrote Tammy Solonec of Amnesty International](#):

It closed the shop, so people could not buy food and essentials. It closed the clinic, so the sick and the elderly had to move, and the school, so families with children had to leave, or face having their children taken away from them. The police station was the last service to close, then eventually the electricity and water were turned off. Finally, the 10 residents who resolutely stayed to the end were forcibly evicted [leaving behind] personal possessions. [Then] the bulldozers rolled into Oombulgurri. The WA government has literally dug a hole and in it buried the rubble of people's homes and personal belongings.

In South Australia, the state and federal governments launched a similar attack on the 60 remote Indigenous communities. South Australia has a long-established Aboriginal Lands Trust, so people were able to defend their rights – up to a point. On 12 April, the federal government offered [\\$15m over five years](#). That such a miserly sum is considered enough to fund services in the great expanse of the state's homelands is a measure of the value placed on Indigenous lives by white politicians who unhesitatingly spend \$28bn annually on armaments and the military. Haydn Bromley, chair of the Aboriginal Lands Trust told me, "The \$15m doesn't include most of the homelands, and it will only cover bare essentials – power, water. Community development? Infrastructure? Forget it."

The current distraction from these national dirty secrets is the approaching "celebrations" of the centenary of an Edwardian military disaster at Gallipoli in 1915. In recent years, governments in Canberra have promoted this imperial waste of life as an historical deity to mask the militarism that underpins Australia's role as America's "deputy sheriff" in the Pacific.

In bookshops, "Australian non-fiction" shelves are full of opportunistic tomes about wartime derring-do, heroes and jingoism. Suddenly, Aboriginal people who fought for the white man are fashionable – whereas Aboriginal people who fought against the white man in defence of their own country, Australia, are deeply unfashionable. Indeed, they are officially non-people. The Australian War Memorial refuses even to recognise their remarkable resistance to the British invasion. In a country littered with Anzac memorials, not one official memorial stands for the thousands of native Australians who fought and fell defending their homeland.

This "great Australian silence", as the anthropologist WH Stanner termed it, is ubiquitous. In Sydney, the Art Gallery of New South Wales currently has an exhibition, *The Photograph and Australia*, in which the timeline of this ancient land begins, incredibly, with Captain Cook.

The same silence covers another enduring, epic resistance. Extraordinary demonstrations of Indigenous women protesting the removal of their children and grandchildren by the state, some of them at gunpoint, are ignored by journalists and patronised by politicians. More Indigenous children are being wrenched from their homes and communities today than during the worst years of the Stolen Generation. A record [15,000](#) are presently detained “in care”; many are given to white families and will never return to their communities. Abbott’s cuts to the Aboriginal legal services have meant the suspension of critical help for this new stolen generation.

Last year, the West Australian police minister, Liza Harvey, attended a screening in Perth of my film, *Utopia*, which documented the racism and thuggery of police towards black Australians, and the multiple deaths of young Aboriginal men in custody. The minister cried.

On her watch, 50 City of Perth armed police raided an Indigenous homeless camp at Matagarup, and drove off mostly elderly women and young mothers with children. The people in the camp described themselves as “refugees ... seeking safety in our own country”. They called for the help of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees.

Australian politicians are nervous of the United Nations, and Abbott’s abuse of the UN is a cover for this. The closure of Indigenous homelands breaches Article 5 of the International Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Icerd). Australia is committed to “provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for ... any action which has the aim of dispossessing [Indigenous people] of their lands, territories or resources”. The Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is blunt. “Forced evictions” are against the law.

An international momentum is building. In 2013, Pope Francis [spoke](#) out for “Indigenous peoples ... who are increasingly isolated and abandoned”.

It was South Africa’s defiance of such a basic principle of human rights that ignited the international opprobrium and campaign that brought down apartheid. Australia beware.

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