

Indigenous recognition: there are some wounds that defy time and kindness



[Stan Grant](#)

A Recognition Australia road trip takes Stan Grant to the girls' home where his great aunt lived as a child, and into discussions about an Indigenous treaty



'I am connected to this place. Here I can stand where my great aunt once stood.' Stan Grant at the girls' home where Indigenous children were taken from their families to live.

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Bob Glanville remembers them well, the girls in white gloves who would be marched in single file in and out of town. As a young boy he would speak to them sometimes, occasionally at the swimming pool or seated near them in class. But no one really got close.

These were the girls from the home on the hill. These were the girls everyone just assumed were orphans. But they weren't – they had families, mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. They had homes, but some would never see home again.

These girls were part of an experiment, a program of social engineering: to turn black kids white. They had been removed from their families, part of what we now call the Stolen Generations.

When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to these girls and hundreds of children just like them in 2007 it was a moment of healing, but here today walking the halls of the Cootamundra girls' home with Bob Glanville, I am reminded that there are some wounds that defy time and kindness.

I am connected to this place. Here I can stand where my Great Aunt once stood. I can recreate a photo that has always captured me: a black and white image of a group of girls lined up against the red brick walls of the home, and my Aunt – a small girl with a gentle face – is positioned against a window. Not many of the girls are smiling.

I stand next to that same window imagining what life must have been like all those years ago.



Stan Grant's great aunt Eunice Grant at the Cootamundra girl's home. She is fourth from the left in the back row.

My Auntie had a name – Eunice Grant – but here she was simply a number. Eunice Grant became number 658. This girl – number 658 – was recommended for removal by the manager of the Aboriginal station at Cowra. Number 658 was separated from her family along with so many others – over 1500 in the 20 year period from 1912.

Many were forever lost, never to see their families again. Number 658 was sent to work as a maid for white farming families. Auntie Eunice eventually found her way back, having to seek approval and permission to marry the man she loved and live on an Aboriginal mission at Condobolin with her husband and alongside her long lost brother, my grandfather.

Eunice Grant would die a young woman, only 37-years old, from the rheumatic fever she first contracted in the girls' home. She left behind six young orphaned children, lives still touched by this dark part of our country's history.

The lives of girls like Eunice Grant hover over discussions around constitutional recognition.

Recognise Australia has come to Cootamundra as the next stop in a road trip across New South Wales. This is a chance for Australians – black and white – to come together ask questions, debate and disagree, and to wrestle with the challenge of amending our nation's founding document.

The discussion is polite and respectful. A meeting the day before in nearby Cowra was by all accounts more boisterous and confrontational. Some local Wiradjuri people remain unconvinced by recognition, seeing it as a con or a sell out of Indigenous sovereignty. Some prefer a push for a treaty.

The question of treaty is raised again in Cootamundra. Recognise spokesperson Mark Yettica-Paulson says it doesn't have to be one of the other. He admits he is personally a supporter of beginning a conversation towards treaty, but that is a separate issue.

He explains the role of the constitution. It is he says a document that sets out how we are governed. It is not a document of poetry, but he says, something more pragmatic, something uniquely Australian.

He reminds people that the nation doesn't change its constitution lightly – only eight times has a referendum been successfully carried.

The most resounding carriage of a referendum was in 1967, to fully extend citizenship to [Indigenous Australians](#), to count them in the census and allow the federal government to make laws for Aboriginal and Islander people.

Mark Yettica-Paulson says recognition will address the unfinished business.

It aims to remove existing race clauses that have been used negatively against Indigenous people. But there are so many questions unanswered – what will be the referendum question? Will it have political and legal power? Will it carry popular support? Will it bring real change to the lives of Australia's most disadvantaged people?

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has said he would like the referendum put to the people as soon as next year. But there are others who are concerned the process is losing valuable momentum.



‘Wishing for family to come and take us home’ The wishing well at the Cootamundra girls’ home.

The message here in Cootamundra is that this is the business of completing our nation and healing an historical wound – a wound whose scars are etched deep into this place.

“It was bloody cruel what was done here,” says Bob Glanville.

As a boy he saw the girls from the Cootamundra home, Aboriginal kids just like him, but segregated even from other black people. He wondered then, about their lives – lives he could never truly know.

Now he knows. He has brought us here to what is now an Indigenous bible college and Christian leadership centre. But it remains a place of ghosts and their memory haunts him.

There was a sign, he says, hung on the walls of one of the dormitories “act white, think white, be white.”

“They were told they had to become white,” Uncle Bob says, “it was wrong, we know that now.”