

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

From: Nicola Coles

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Submission:

I am non-Indigenous, a member of the privileged colonial majority, born in 1935. I do not have a lifetime of experience with First Nations (FN) people to relate. This fact is the crux of my submission.

Like almost all Australians who are non-Indigenous I was brought up in total ignorance of the original inhabitants and of the true history of our invasion of this continent. At home we were anglophile, with relatives in England, which our parents regarded as 'home'. It was assumed that after school and university, we would return to the mother country, possibly for further education, and, of course, to meet the relatives.

I attended East Ivanhoe State School, where we saluted the flag, and the only mention of FN people in our curriculum was in the state school newsletter which quoted from Aeneas Gunn's 'Children of the Never Never'. There was a picture of a 'native' with a spear standing on one leg. We read English literature inspiring us with a love of the English countryside, farming and seasons - with the exception of Dorothea Mackellar and Henry Lawson (both colonial writers who scarcely mentioned FN).

I was ten or so when I had my first glimpse of Aboriginal people. We were driving down to the Gippsland Lakes for our annual camping holiday. From the car window I saw a small group of people walking along the road: they were barefoot, badly dressed with unkempt hair. 'Who are those people??' I asked. 'They are Aborigines' was the reply without further explanation. I was shocked, and have never forgotten that first encounter. Years later I learned that they were from Lake Tyers.

When I was six in 1942 we were evacuated to the Hermitage on the Black Spur beyond Healesville, not far from Corranderk. We never heard mention of that name or its inhabitants. Out of sight out of mind. The original inhabitants were banished and invisible. But that encounter remained in my memory. Decades later I joined a support group in Canberra called SWAAG (Solidarity With Aboriginal Australians Group) in an attempt to fill in the blank space. Several people in the group had real experience, and brought FN friends to talk with us. And I used to visit the Tent Embassy, to talk with us. And I used to visit the Tent Embassy, which was an education in itself - often the hard way. There is so much to learn.

Fourteen years ago I moved back to Melbourne, where I joined the 'concerned Australians' (cA) group, formed at the time of the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention (NTER), to provide support and a platform for FN people trying to come to terms with this disempowering legislation which has undermined any hard won self-determination, and is still operative under another name. Of course the NT is not Victoria, which is the subject of the Yoorrook inquiry. But Victorian FN people are even more disadvantaged, more decimated by colonisation.

A 'Homelands Movement' would be impossible here where there is so little land not occupied and farmed, and alienated, and where a successful farming community (Corranderk) was eliminated by colonial antagonism. The magnificent forests of Gippsland and elsewhere have been almost entirely destroyed, together with their endemic flora and fauna. And the miners are putting pressure on Country, especially Sea country, e.g. in the Bight. I have little direct contact with FN people here, apart from Senator Lydia Thorpe and other political leaders; and

some beggars asking for alms. It is indicative that they are still largely invisible, outside of the growing political movement.

It is impressive that Victoria is the most advanced of any jurisdiction in moving towards Treaty and self-determination. I applaud your work, and await the outcomes with optimism. I make one final comment. We, the colonisers, will learn, very likely when it is too late, that we have destroyed a great deal of value in our greed and ignorance: precious, irreplaceable natural resources, and the culture that preserved them for thousands of years. If we have any hope of adapting to the catastrophe of the changing climate, we must make amends and try to learn from the original inhabitants who are still here and waiting for us to come to our senses.

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