

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION CONFERENCE

World Congress Centre

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It was astounding to me when I went to university in the 1980s to read a doctoral thesis by an anthropologist who had come to my mission in the early 1960s and interviewed my aunts and grandfathers and people whom I grew up with and loved, who asked her: 'Is there any foundation to the suggestion that perhaps we as a people are somehow the missing link between humanity and the ape kingdom?'

It was, for me, testament to the fact that the notion of Aboriginal inhumanity was indeed embedded in popular belief, particularly in regional Australia. That legacy lives on. There is still in the Australian community a lingering suspicion about that inhumanity.

But we have made a great deal of progress, and that progress started to steamroll after 1967. It took ten years to convince the Australian community to vote overwhelmingly to include Indigenous people in the Commonwealth. And of course, the subsequent struggles at Wave Hill, the Tent Embassy, Noonkanbah and the 1982 Commonwealth Games, and the struggle by Eddie Mabo, gathered pace. And we made progress, the like of which our founding fathers, William Cooper, Jack Ferguson and Jack Patten, perhaps had the imagination to believe was possible, but which they could never have believed would happen easily and would happen in time.

Let me tell you about my personal views on citizenship. Like many Indigenous people in this country, I am equivocal about my Australian citizenship. I don't think I have embraced my Australian citizenship; let me express some of the reasons why I harbour this equivocation.

My great-grandfather Arrimi was a Kuku Warra man, whose people were almost entirely annihilated in the wake of the Cooktown to Palmer River gold rush from the 1870s. This was one of the bloodiest episodes in the colonial occupation of this continent. He eventually died, a fringe dweller on the outskirts of Cooktown, during the Second World War.

My father and grandfather told me that he spent all of his adult life evading the police. They wanted to take him to Palm Island or to Yarrabah or to Cherbourg. They wanted him to be part of the history of stolen generations, and he utterly and absolutely refused to submit to this European law. So his identity was entirely the traditional identity of the Kuku Warra people prior to the British acquisition of sovereignty over this country. For him, whatever had legally and symbolically happened in 1788 in Sydney Cove had no relevance to his identity and to his person.

My grandfather Ngulunthul, also known as Charlie, was taken away as a ten-year-old to the Cape Bedford Lutheran Mission at the turn of the century. And his identity gathered a layer that his father didn't have.

That layer was the identity of a mission Aborigine in a new community of children who were the victims of a diaspora spreading from Winton in central Queensland to the tip of the Cape York Peninsula. The mission community was a gathering of young strangers that developed an identity of its own. So my grandfather took on a new

mission identity and a new Aboriginal identity; he became a Guugu Yimithirr– speaking Aborigine, and adopted the language and culture of the people onto whose land he was relocated. And he became a stockman.

My father was also a stockman, and he also grew up in the Hope Valley Lutheran Mission and inherited the identity of my grandfather.

I have to say that in all of the years I spent with them, I could never really say how they felt about being Queenslanders and about being Australians.

I never heard from them any rejection of those layers of identity, but I expect that it did not mean all that much to them. Indeed, if they felt connected to anything outside the mission, it was to the church community to which they belonged: the wider Lutheran church in which they shared faith.

For my part, I spent only two years as a constitutional alien before the 1967 referendum was passed. And I inherited the identity of my father and grandfather. I also inherited their equivocal feelings about our place beyond the mission.

I went down, harbouring this equivocation, to a Lutheran secondary school in Brisbane. I suppose the thing that most tipped me towards being enthusiastic about being a Queensland, and then about being an Australian, was seeing successful Aboriginal sportsmen. And nobody filled me with pride so much as the Ella brothers. It started to make sense to me why being an Australian might not be such a bad thing. I don't know whether this was ever their intention, but that was the result.