

Australia's Federation– from an Indigenous Australian's perspective
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This year non-Indigenous Australians celebrate "Federation", the year in which they achieved nationhood, albeit under English control.

Is this a 100-year celebration for we, the Indigenous people? Certainly not!

As if invading our country and stealing our lands wasn't enough, in 1897 what became known as "The Protection" Act, was enacted, legalizing an ad hoc policy of snatching our children their mothers' arms then raising them in institutions without giving them information as to who their parents were (Nor were parents told where their children had been taken).¹ The Act empowered police to enforce our people at gunpoint into missions and reserves hundreds of kilometers from their spiritual lands. There slavery began under the euphemism "christianizing and civilizing".²

This Act was in full swing as non-Indigenous Australia raised its flag. During the celebrations my people were being moved from their homelands to institutions where conditions were far worse than prison-farms today. But my people had committed no crimes – my Grandmother, Uncles and Aunts died there. My mother now 92 years old remembers the day clearly when she was imprisoned with them.³ She can still hear their cries and see their tears as they wept for the country, the spiritual base from which they were removed – never to be allowed to return except by stealth for a brief visit.

Activities under the Act continued until circa 1975 in various States of Australia. In 1967 it had been decided we were to be counted in a census of the population, but we were not given the right to vote in elections under the same conditions as other Australians until 1985.

One can perceive some improvement in the last 16 years – perhaps this is a cause for celebration. A process of reconciliation had begun in 1990 (but the money to educate non-Indigenous people about the untold contact history they had catalyzed, had to be paid for out of our budget - \$40 million – a sum which would have helped improve living conditions and health for many of our people

As conditions for us begin to improve Australia is benefiting . Work by our artists brings in important export dollars, the few of our athletes who have had an opportunity have performed well at the international level, some of us have managed to achieve well academically. To do these things we have had to work harder than most non-Indigenous people. Covert racism exists in many institutions. People with power do not relinquish it willingly or easily "divide-and-rule games" seem to be the order of the day. As long as our people remain poor there will always be someone who can be "bought". It is therefore in the interests of the power hungry to ensure that economic progress for us is discouraged.

As I was writing this article I received a telephone call from a distressed woman. She was one of the children abducted under the Protection Act – she was still trying to trace her family to, as she said "find out who I am".

Daily tragic memories of the past 100 years are re-enacted throughout our country. After that call I was reticent about joining in the "Federation Trails". However, this time my people will be at the forefront of many celebrations across the nation. I don't want us to be forgotten again. There is a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel.

¹ "The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897–1901". There were later amendments.

² To avoid detection by the Exeter Hall Movement which had banned slavery throughout the world in 1830.

³ As a consequence of being slaves and having no money and nowhere to go, when restrictions were lifted, our family, immediate and extended, has been poor ever since.

I will join in the celebrations for my people, to honor the SPIRITS OF OUR LAND and to PAY HOMAGE TO MY ANCESTORS who suffered so much but left me with a legacy of courage and strength to survive. In other words I will celebrate OUR SURVIVAL!