



Minutes of Evidence Curriculum & TRP

Topic 5: 'An age of democracy/freedoms. Egalitarianism' - but again, for whom?

Key theme(s): Justice

Additional theme(s): Ownership; tradition; community; identity

Victorian Curriculum link:

Intended and unintended causes and effects of contact and extension of settlement of European power(s), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ([VCHHK134](#))

Patterns of continuity and change and their effects on influencing movements of people, ways of life and living conditions, political and legal institutions, and cultural expression around the turn of the twentieth century ([VCHHK136](#))

Causes of the struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for rights and freedoms before 1965 ([VCHHK152](#))

If the above hyperlinks do not work in PDF – visit the curriculum via:

<http://tinyurl.com/j85w2pg>

Part 2 – In a land of freedoms, Aborigines are increasingly restricted.

In an age of increasing freedoms for the European population of Victoria, Aboriginal people living on reserves were subjected to increasingly tighter controls by the Board. Beginning with the 1869 *Aboriginal Protection Act*, and underlined by the 1886 and 1890 Acts, Indigenous people living on reserves were circumscribed in almost every part of their lives (Pepper and De Araugo 1985). It was the intent of the government, working through the BPA, that Aboriginal people would be 'absorbed' into the general population; the framing of legislation was aimed to achieve this end. For these reasons the policies

enacted through legislation had continuing impacts on Aboriginal Victorians, impacts that extended over the next couple of generations (Broome 2005).

The major impacts of the government's policy included:

Limiting the freedoms of Aboriginal people: By the last decade of the 19th century the control of the BPA entered every facet of the lives of Indigenous people living on reserves. Under the Acts these residents were wage slaves and virtually economic prisoners. At Coranderrk it was the labour of the Indigenous residents that allowed BPA to make hundreds of pounds by growing and selling hops, while providing only minimal and irregular wages (MacFarlane 1993). Indigenous residents were also tightly controlled in where and when they could travel away from the reserves. Permission had to be sought, and given in the form of a pass or certificate, before any movement could be made, even to visit family outside the reserve (Broome 2005). Under the Act people were not free to marry whom they wished; the Board assumed the practice of vetting marriages by residents of the reserves, to ensure that the policy of absorption remained in force. Although the Board could not legally prevent them, it frowned upon marriages between full blood and mixed race Aborigines because such unions did nothing to 'absorb' Aboriginal people into the general population (Broome 2005).

Forcing people off the reserves: The 1886 'Half-caste' Act defined who was considered to be Aboriginal and thus could remain on a government-run reserve (Nanni and James 2013). By excluding those people aged less than 35 who were of mixed race the Act reduced the viability of places such as Coranderrk and Ramahyuck in a number of ways. Firstly, these stations relied on the labour of the younger men, the vast majority of whom were of mixed race. Without that labour less could be produced and the farming aspects of the reserve declined. Secondly, the population that remained on reserves such as Coranderrk and Ramahyuck comprised the older residents, whose numbers were more likely to decline, further reducing what remained of the workforce (Barwick 1971; Christie 1979). Thirdly, the Act was a cruel blow for those residents who had relied on an income provided by younger men who worked off the reserve.

While it was clear to many of the individuals who had been forced from stations in Victoria that their ability to act was severely limited, it was apparent to some of the young Aboriginal men that freedom of a sort was to be found across the Murray River. Many families that were excluded from Coranderrk by the 1886 Act moved firstly to the

mission station run by Daniel Matthews at Maloga on the NSW side of the river; they later moved to the government station at nearby Cummeragunja (Barwick 1998). It was from this latter reserve that Aborigines like William Cooper, Bill Onus and Doug Nicholls moved into Victoria in the 1920s and founded the Australian Aborigines League in 1932 (Attwood and Marcus 2007). This was the first major Aboriginal political organisation and led to the creation of other groups, such as the Aboriginal Advancement League in 1957. Thus, while the passing of the 1886 Act broke up communities and families it also sowed the seeds of an Aboriginal protest movement that bore fruit a generation later (Barwick 1998).

Removing children from their families: The *Aborigines Act* 1890 extended the provisions of the 1886 'Half-caste' Act. One effect of this was that the BPA could transfer Aboriginal children to state 'care', even when they were not orphaned (Broome 2005). This was the beginning of the Stolen Generations in Victoria. In June 1889 the Secretary of the BPA, Captain A.M. Page, penned a memo to Heinrich Stähle, Manager of Lake Condah Mission, for him to pass on to the parents of Maggie Turner. It informed them that the Board had decided (for unspecified reasons) that Maggie should be placed under the care of the Manager and his wife. The memo also pointed out that any obstruction of this directive would bring a £20 fine (Australian Archives, B329 Item 4).

Because the movement allowed to Aborigines was already tightly controlled by the Board, one consequence of this separation of families was that on many occasions, one or other of the parents would have to write to the BPA to ask if they could visit their children, or have them sent to be with their parents. In 1886 Margaret Harrison, a resident at Ebenezer Mission, heard that one of her children had died at the Lake Condah reserve. She wrote to the BPA Secretary Captain A.M. Page, asking that her two remaining daughters be sent to her. She hoped that her letter would be successful and wrote (Australian Archives, B313 Item 122):

Please do not disappoint me for my heart is breaking to have them with me.
Please to send them up here as I cannot leave this Station. Please to ask Mr
Stahle to let them come.

Margaret Harrison's request was granted but she likely was an exception.