

NAIDOC Speech, 2014: “Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond”

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NAIDOC Week is borne from a deep history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous protest in fighting for civil rights and citizenship for Indigenous people.

Before the 1920's, Aboriginal rights groups boycotted Australia Day celebrations in protest of the status and treatment of Indigenous Australians. Largely ignored, these protests were formalised through active rather than passive protest movements and by the mid 1920's and 30's the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association and the Aboriginal Advancement League were formed as active, visible protest movements.

The fight for Aboriginal rights began to gather pace in the 1920s and 1930s. On Australia Day 1938, one of the first large scale civil rights protests in a western democracy occurred in Sydney, with over 1000 people gathering in the streets to begin the annual “Day of Mourning”. This yearly gathering in the week before each Australia Day was formalised in 1940 as “*Aboriginal Sunday*”. Aboriginal Sunday became not only a day of protest, but also a day of cultural celebration for First Nations People and non-Indigenous supporters.

In 1957 a National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC) was formed with support and cooperation from Federal and State governments, churches and major Indigenous organisations. Its aim was to promote Aboriginal Sunday as a day to focus community attention on the plight and successes of the nation's Aboriginal people.

It wasn't until 1988 that the committee's name was changed to—National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee—to acknowledge Torres Strait Islander people. Soon after that it became a week-long celebration. We celebrate through the first full week of July, the rich, vibrant, sophisticated and unique cultures of over 300 distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, languages and cultures as THE oldest living cultures on the planet.

Importantly, NAIDOC Week is a way of celebrating and promoting a greater understanding of the peoples, cultures, histories, and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and of the rich history of non-Indigenous activism in support of Aboriginal Australia.

The theme of this year's NAIDOC celebrations is “Serving Country: Centenary and Beyond”. The theme is chosen to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have fought serving country, in defence of country, and in defence

of our country, and it is appropriate that this theme is chosen in the year of the centenary of the beginning of WW1, to celebrate the achievements of Indigenous warriors and military heroes.

The theme “Serving Country” to most people who apply it in an Indigenous context may immediately think of Indigenous people as “the traditional custodians of the land”, which we are. People may think of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are connected physically, culturally and spiritually to the land. People may think of how we are entrusted to preserve and maintain the land and our culture according to cultural practices and laws, and in more modern times, how this knowledge can be incorporated into Western scientific understandings of environmental management.

Significant ways in which Indigenous people have served country is through what are now known in the Indigenous community, and contentiously in parts of the non-Indigenous community as *the frontier wars*.

I say contentiously, as there are many people... politicians, historians, and social commentators who would deny this history. The labelling of aspects of Australian colonisation, pre-WW1 as a *war, or war-like* for these people would disrupt the national narrative of our war history, which in modern times is based squarely in the legend of Gallipoli, WW2, and the spirit of ANZAC.

This carefully crafted and cultivated Australian narrative is written overwhelmingly by non-Indigenous historians, commentators and politicians to create a national identity with the ANZAC legends placed squarely at the centre of the national story. That the ANZAC's fought to defend England, the British Empire and Australia is uncontested, and in no way is it my intention to disparage the sacrifice of so many men and women.

Rather, the intention of my remaining remarks is to reflect on a few points in history that illustrate the tale of Indigenous sacrifice in defence of country during the early stages of the colonisation process, as this year's NAIDOC theme suggests.

My intention is to help you see how the sacrifice of Indigenous men and women who served as a part of the British and Australian armed forces in the Great Wars in defence of Australia was altruistic, at a time when Indigenous people returned from war to a country that gave them no rights as citizens.

And, my intention is to discuss our current day Indigenous warriors, the ongoing fights for recognition and equality, and how these modern warriors are forging a path of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

First, in discussing the frontier wars, I want to draw upon one of my heroes, my country man, leader and resistance fighter from the Wiradjuri Nation of Central Western NSW, Windradyne.

In defence of country, Windradyne, a leader and hero of the Wiradjuri people waged fierce resistance against European colonisers.

It was not until 1813 that three explorers, Wentworth, Blaxland and Lawson finally found a route to the *unexplored, wild West* with the help of Indigenous guides. In their own words, they claimed to have seen “enough grass to support the stock of the entire colony for thirty years”. What they failed to recognise though was the “grass” they were referring to was already someone’s home. It was Wiradjuri land, home to one of the largest, most diverse Aboriginal nations in the country.

At the time Governor Macquarie was adamant that any settlement of the interior should proceed slowly. He met with the local leaders, exchanged gifts and by all accounts the contact was peaceful. Even 5 years after Macquarie had ordered and completed a road into Wiradjuri country, the interior European population stood at only 114 people.

Upon the resignation of Governor Macquarie and with the appointment of Major General Sir Thomas MacDougall, Wiradjuri lands were opened rapidly to settlement and cultivation. The eventual destruction of sites of cultural initiation for men and women proved to be too much.

A campaign of intimidation ensued, and farmers were driven from farming lands. In 1823, Windradyne was implicated in a skirmish that ended with the deaths of two farmers. Military personnel were sent to track and capture Windradyne, and it took 6 men and a musket butt to the head to subdue the warrior.

Shortly after, not knowing anything of Western property and ownership laws Windradyne's wife harvested potatoes from a field, planted on Wiradjuri lands. The perceived thievery was repaid with murder of Windradyne's entire family by an organized hunting party. War shortly followed.

After consulting with his Elders Windradyne began a campaign of calculated retribution according to local laws and custom, attacking farmers who settled on and destroyed sacred sites. White lives were lost, and the retaliation from the colonial government and farmers was brutal. By the end of the war over a third of the Wiradjuri population was wiped out.... men, women and children.

This war, known in some circles as the *War of Bathurst*, and similar events are played out all over Australia. But you will have never heard of this war, nor any other of the hundreds of frontier wars played out across the landscape.... you will not read of them in high school, and you will not find them in most books of Australia's war time history. But they are important battles and wars fought on the lands of numerous Indigenous nations. They are important in the forging of Indigenous identity and the modern Australian state.

Moving forward to The Great Wars, we have numerous examples of Aboriginal men and women serving in the British and Australian armed forces. The reasons for service were similar to non-Indigenous soldiers: patriotism, protecting your country, the pay was good, and for some, it was the chance to show you were as good as a white man.

Where the differences lay between Indigenous and non-Indigenous soldiers, was in the need for Aboriginal men to deny their identity in order to serve. Many were rejected on the basis of skin colour but some slipped through by denying their identity as Aboriginal men.

Upon return from the wars Indigenous personnel received no pension, no dental or hospital benefits, and were denied entry to the Returned Services League of Australia for a time. Only one record exists of an Indigenous soldier receiving a settler's block of land, even though settler blocks, given to returning servicemen were on Aboriginal lands.

For me, it is hard to fathom how a person who was considered a soldier on the battlefield, but not a citizen in his own country would choose to serve in such a capacity. And yet, these men and women, who are legends of Aboriginal communities across Australia, bore the burdens of war for us all, but given nothing in return for their sacrifice. It is only in recent years that their stories are being told, that their sacrifice is being recognised, and their lives memorialised as rightful heirs to the ANZAC tradition.

Beyond the physical wars that have been played out, post-1967 Indigenous warriors in partnership with our non-Indigenous brothers and sisters have fought a different sort of war. Numerous battles played out on the political landscape have been significant, hard fought and won over the last 50 years so that today we have reached a place where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia attempt to achieve reconciliation through a mutual understanding and respect of difference and similarity.

Battles fought include The Freedom Rides of 1965, led by Charles Perkins, which highlighted the plight of Indigenous town camps.

The 1967 Referendum

The 10 year battle by Eddie Koiki Mabo for land rights for the Mur peoples of the Torres Strait, which ultimately saw the High Court of Australia rule in favour of Aboriginal land rights, and overturn the false legal concept of *Terra nullius*.

The 20 year battle by the world's Indigenous populations which saw the adoption by the United Nations of the UNDRIP in 2007, and which was formally recognised by the Rudd government in 2008.

We have the National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, a long awaited healing moment in the nation's history which has seen a collective movement toward healing and reconciliation on a national scale.

Today we are all currently engaged in a battle to provide adequate health and education access to Indigenous Australia, to empower all Indigenous people and communities with the tools for personal and community prosperity.

And we have in our audience tonight the future warriors of Indigenous Australia being educated at Flinders University, supported by Flinders Living, forming friendships and partnerships with people from across the country and the world at this occasion of Indigenous celebration and recognition of our cultures and histories.

I tell you of these things, of hidden and controversial parts of our nation's history, of battles won and lost, of Indigenous and non-Indigenous political successes, to open to you a historical narrative that allows you to see the hard fought battles by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians for the rights, equality and recognition of First Nations People.

I tell you these things in the hope that you see how much progress has been made, to share the victories, hard fought as it has been, and so that you can see how much further we have to travel in achieving equality and a lasting reconciliation. It is my hope, that the future battles to be fought will be more kind, more respectful, and easier to win, than those of the past.

Our cultures are rich, vibrant, and above all resilient. Indigenous people have survived through deep resilience. We now have resurgent cultures across the continent through languages, art, dance, song, photography, political activism and a renewed sense of Indigenous identity, hope and cultural vitality.

It is in a spirit of reconciliation and shared cultural exchange and respect that this renewal continues to move forward here tonight.

Thank you for celebrating with us the 2014 NAIDOC week, and in strengthening a tradition at Flinders University of the celebration of Indigenous culture at this important time of year.

All of this is correct. But serving country from the Indigenous perspective has a much harsher reality, and one that is not known widely enough. Since colonisation in 1788 and up until 1931, the most conservative estimates suggest that the original population of Indigenous nations combined was approximately 300,000. By 1931, through a number of processes directly linked to colonisation, the Aboriginal population was reduced to 31,000. A 90% reduction from conservative pre-colonisation population estimates. Much of this reduction was caused by disease. Even before European colonisation of South Australia, small pox has spread to the Kurna Nation and wiped out over half the local population. This is a story repeated across the nations and across the continent.

According to the Australian War memorial, approximately 400 men served in WW1. Some estimates have it as high as 1500. Whatever the number, it is generally accepted that Aboriginal soldiers were, for the first time, treated equally whilst serving on the frontline.

Officially, by 1917, restrictions were eased so that so-called 'half-castes' could serve, so long as the examining medical officer was satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin.