

The idea of assimilation had been around since the 1930s but was not adopted as an official government policy towards the Aboriginal peoples until the 1950s. It became official government policy in Australia not just for Aboriginal peoples, but for all foreign migrants as well. In the late 1940s, Australia was still a very 'British' country, 97 per cent of the population was Australian, or British-born. The National Anthem 'God Save The Queen' was still sung after films in the cinema. Anyone who came to Australia from abroad was expected to fit in with this culture - they were expected to assimilate. Aboriginal peoples and migrants were expected to give up their own heritage and adopt the culture of the majority.



Many people were scared of new cultures coming into Australia and diluting the 'Australian' culture. Since the early 1900s there had been a 'White Australia' policy when it came to immigration. Only white people from Europe (and preferably Britain or Ireland) were allowed to immigrate. People from elsewhere, especially Asia, found it incredibly difficult to move permanently to Australia. When people did migrate to Australia they were expected to leave their old way of life behind. *See image 1*

The same mindset was applied to the Indigenous population. Since the first white settlers had arrived in 1788 they had tried to impose their own values, customs and beliefs onto the Aboriginal peoples. When they were forced onto reserves from the 1850s onwards, their traditional way of life was eroded even further. They were not allowed to have Aboriginal names or continue their traditional customs. Then in the mid-20th century, as many were forced off the reserves and into towns and cities, they were expected to leave their beliefs and traditions behind them. The Aboriginal Protection Board said they had to develop from 'their former primitive state to the standards of the white man'.

In 1951 the Federal Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, actively pursued the policy of assimilation in reference to Aboriginal people as a way of improving their way of life. He, like many others before him, believed that they could improve their treatment and conditions, if they could be encouraged to be more 'white'. Assimilation for Aboriginal people was seen as a positive policy by many people - as were the policies of paternalism and protectionism. They 'were only trying to help'. *See animation*

Between 1911 and 1930 almost half of the reserve land in New South Wales was taken for white people. The Aboriginal people had been promised they could stay on that land forever, but it was taken away. And as assimilation became a key policy for the government, more and more Aboriginal people were forced off the reserves and into the towns and cities. Many Aboriginal people wanted to move to cities and find work - to get away from the control of the reserve manager or the local authority. But when they arrived in the cities they came up against racism and discrimination. Instead of being assimilated into 'white' society, they were shunned and ignored and were forced to live on the fringes of society in poverty and unemployment. In many rural areas segregation became widespread. Aboriginal people were barred from the hotels and bars, they could only use swimming pools at certain times and sit in certain places in cinemas.

Another aspect of the assimilation policy was the lack of right to citizenship. The Indigenous peoples of Australia were not recognised as citizens under the constitution until a referendum in 1967. Before the 1940s, Aboriginal people could not become citizens, but after the Second World War they could be counted as citizens if they applied for a certificate. By having a certificate, however, they had to give up all ties with the Indigenous community, including their families. In New South Wales it was known as an 'exemption' certificate; it exempted someone from being a person of Aboriginal descent. To be able to vote, to be able to move around with no restrictions, to be able to buy alcohol; basically to be able to make any sort of decision about their lives, Aboriginal people had to deny their heritage and their families. The government saw citizenship as a lure to make Aboriginal people assimilate. They promoted the certificates as a good thing and encouraged those who were 'civilised' enough to apply for them. Understandably these exemption certificates were looked upon with contempt by the majority of Aboriginal people who compared them to dog licences. 14 000 eligible Aboriginal people lived in New South Wales at the time, only 1500 certificates were ever issued.

In 1953 the Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance makes Aboriginal people wards of the government.

In 1961 the Native Welfare Conference defined assimilation as;

'All Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians'.

Only four years later that definition had to be changed because it was clear that level of assimilation was not happening. There was not a 'single Australian community', nor was there likely to be. At the 1965 Native Welfare Conference, assimilation was re-defined as;

'The policy of Assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community.'

The assimilation policy did not work - Aboriginal people did not want to lose their traditional way of life or become white and British. The white community did not want to accept Aboriginal people into their society - racism was rife in Australia. Many people still thought like the early settlers - Aboriginal people were from an inferior race that was bound to die out. Assimilation was another government policy that was presented as being 'for the good' of the Indigenous people, but became just another way of destroying Aboriginal culture.

It has become obvious with hindsight that the logic behind assimilation was contradictory. Aboriginal people were always being told they had to be more 'white' but they were never given the freedom to change. They were told they had to take responsibility for assimilating into society, but they had never been given the opportunity to assume responsibility for anything - many of them had spent their entire lives being controlled by a reserve manager or a missionary. When some Aboriginal people did try to assimilate they were told they were not 'ready' yet to enter white society. Assimilation never gave Aboriginal people the same rights as other Australians, even though they were supposed to act like them.

By 1964 it became clear that assimilation was not working as it should. The rise of an Indigenous protest movement in the 1960s meant that more people were aware of the discrimination that was being perpetrated against the Indigenous population. In an era of liberalisation, assimilation no longer seemed to be the 'right' policy to pursue. Instead many people came to see 'integration' as a better way to move forward. When it became clear that the foreign migrants were able to keep aspects of their cultures alive while still living within Australian society, the Federal Government was more open to letting Aboriginal people integrate rather than assimilate. They were still expected to adapt to and adopt 'white' Australian culture, but they were given more leeway to practice traditional aspects of what was left of their own culture. The Australian government did not actively try to create a multicultural society until the 1970s, when policy towards the Indigenous population changed once more to self-determination.

The most tragic aspect of the assimilation policy was that it led to many children being taken away from their parents and families and placed in foster care or groups homes - they have become known as the 'Stolen Generations'.