



The removal of Indigenous children from their parents was not a new idea, it had been happening for years on the stations and reserves. The children of white men had often been taken away from their Indigenous mothers after birth and given to a white family. As a specific policy by the authorities, Indigenous children had been removed from their homes since the Aboriginal Protection Board was set up in the 1880s. But the removal policy was definitely stepped up with the introduction of the assimilation policy. By taking the children away from the 'bad influence' of their parents and family it would be easier to make them more 'European', to force them to fit in to white society.

Indigenous children were taken away from their parents for many different reasons but the policy's foundation was essentially a racist one. The white authorities believed that Indigenous parents were unable to look after their children properly and so they were removed. The importance and worth of Indigenous culture was once more completely ignored by the government and those who were supposed to be 'protecting' the Indigenous people. Again, as with the earlier protection policies, many people thought they were doing the right thing by the children when they took them away from the only family they knew. Others had more sinister motives.

For many years Indigenous children who had European ancestry were removed from their parents so that they could be 'socialised' into being 'white'. In the 1920s and 1930s this socialisation was taken a step further by some in Australian society. The Aboriginal Protector in Western Australia A. O. Neville (and others like him) thought that the Indigenous race should be bred into extinction. This was a belief that many people held in the early part of the 20th Century, known as 'eugenics'. It was related to Darwin's theories on evolution - that the stronger race could overcome the weaker through selective breeding. Neville believed that biological assimilation could be achieved by separating children with European ancestry and not letting them marry people of Indigenous ancestry. He said that eventually the European blood would 'overcome' the Indigenous blood and that in a few generations there would be no 'black' characteristics evident. When the horrors of the Eugenics programme in Nazi Germany were revealed, the ideas of Neville and others who believed in similar biological assimilation policies, were no longer seen as acceptable. See *image 1*

By the early part of the 20th century the reserves were overcrowded and were becoming too expensive for the board to maintain. The definition of 'Aboriginal' was narrowed so that children who had more European ancestry than Indigenous, were no longer defined as Indigenous. They, therefore, did not qualify to live on the reserves. In this manner, hundreds of children were able to be taken away from their families. Just because they were not 'Indigenous' enough to live on the reserves, that did not mean the board gave up their control over their lives. They were sent to training homes so they could be assimilated into non-Indigenous culture.

Many families had been moved around so often because of the reserves closing down, that they were living in extreme poverty and were in poor health. This gave the board an excuse to remove the children because of apparent neglect. Again, the differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures were not taken into account. The Protection Board could come in and check the cupboards in an Indigenous house. If there was no food in them, then a child could be removed. They did not take into account the fact that a family may be eating fresh food that had been hunted in the bush.

Part of the assimilation policy was to make Aboriginal people more 'white' through education. As on the missions, it was believed that educating the children would mean they would turn away from the 'savage' ways of their parents. Many parents had their children taken away because they were supposedly not educating them properly, yet there were laws in New South Wales that allowed Indigenous children to be excluded from schools if one white parent objected. If they were turned away by the schools what were they supposed to do? How could they educate their children properly? Why would they willingly put their child in a situation where they were going to be discriminated against and treated badly?

Not all the reasons for removal of children were part of the assimilation programme. Quite a few children were removed because they were genuinely in danger. Some children were being abused by clan members because

they had white fathers, but many other children who had European ancestry were not abused and they were taken anyway.

Not all children who were taken were 'stolen'. Some of the non-Indigenous fathers thought their children would be better off in a place where they could be raised in a stable white environment, so they sent their children away and paid for their board and education. Some Indigenous parents also believed that they were doing a good thing for their children by sending them away to be educated. They did not realise that by doing that they may never see their children again.

The removal of children was ultimately aimed at destroying the Indigenous race, either through biological or social assimilation. If the children could be raised to think 'white', then they would be better off. European culture and way of life was deemed to be far superior to that of the Indigenous people - they could not possibly look after themselves, never mind children. The idea of improving the welfare and lives of the Indigenous people through better living conditions was never given any real consideration. Instead the authorities believed it was better to remove children from the only home they had ever known and in many cases put them to work. It is these children who were taken who have become known as the 'Stolen Generations'. Not only were they stolen from their families, but they also had their heritage and identity stolen from them. *See image 2*