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## heritage



Photo: Cathy Freeman of Australia carries the Australian national flag, left, and the Aboriginal Community Flag during her lap of honor after winning the Women's 400 meters at the World Track and Field Championships in Athens on August 4, 1997. Courtesy: AP Photo/Michael Probst.

### Australia's Blacks Threaten to Disrupt Olympics

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Leaders of Australia's Aboriginal community have vowed to disrupt the Olympic Games, set to start on September 15 in Sydney, after the Australian government refused to apologize for the 19<sup>th</sup> century policy of forcibly taking Aboriginal children from their parents to be raised in white families, a practice which continued until the late 1960s. Activists claim that under the policy an estimated 100,000 children – dubbed "the stolen generation" – were taken from their families; they demand that those affected be compensated and that the government work to improve the deplorable conditions in which many Aborigines live. Conservative Prime Minister John Howard dismissed the claims as "exaggerated," and declined to involve the federal government in issues of police brutality and mandatory sentencing, a policy in some states that has resulted in the imprisonment of Aboriginal youths for offenses as minor as food-stealing.

"Certainly the Olympic Games will now be in jeopardy," said Charles Perkins, a veteran Aboriginal activist and a member of the "stolen generation." "We did not want to target the games, but we have nothing to lose now. We have racism at the highest level of government... We're going to show to the world that Australia's got dirty underwear... We're going to expose Australia for what it is: very racist."

One hundred and eighteen Aboriginal land councils in New South Wales have voted to march in protest on September 15. "Aboriginal people will rise up in this country and show the world how racist Australia is," said Lyall Munro, a delegate to the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council. Evelyn Scott, chairperson of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, who met Queen Elizabeth II in Canberra in April to promote the cause of racial reconciliation, said many black Australians would be traumatized by the government's rejection of Aboriginal claims. "It's like saying every one of the thousands of Aborigines who were taken from their families are liars," she said.

Aborigines, Australia's original inhabitants, were gradually dispossessed and displaced with the start of British colonization in 1788. Although socially organized in numerous tribes speaking many different languages and referring to themselves by various tribal names (usually based on the word in their language for "man"), since the 18<sup>th</sup> century Aborigines were called "blacks" by colonists and white settlers, and eventually came to identify with the label as both a political and cultural identifier. Like black Americans, Aborigines were subjected to Jim Crow-style discrimination laws, which banned them from many private and public gathering places, and were legally excluded from the national census until 1967.

Debates on the "stolen generation" have dominated the Australian media for over a year now, the latest flashpoints in the country's historically strained white-Aborigine relations. In 1997, an Australian Human Rights Commission report deplored the policy of forced separation, and concluded that the 30,000 surviving victims should be compensated. Critics have decried the policy as "a form of attempted genocide intended to breed out the blackness of indigenous Australians." In March 1999, a landmark trial opened in Australia in which Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, two members of the "stolen generation," sued the government for having stolen them from their parents to be raised as "white children." They demanded compensation and punitive damages for what their lawyers described as lifelong psychological trauma and mental distress.

Prime Minister Howard has expressed personal remorse for the inhumane practices of previous governments, but has refused to apologize to the Aboriginal community or to pay compensation, saying the present generation cannot be held responsible for what happened in the past. John Herron, the Minister of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, declared recently that no more than 10 percent of Aboriginal families had been affected by the removal policy, not entire generations as is usually alleged. He said children were only ever removed from their families for lawful reasons "as occurs under child welfare policies today."

The closest Australia has come to an official apology was "Sorry Day," a day of mourning in May 1998 in honor of "the stolen generation" and their parents. Across the country, ceremonies were held and thousands of people signed "Sorry Books" in contrition for the policy.

Recent media attention to the "stolen generation" controversy has eclipsed the older, more intractable land rights dispute, which has long engendered bitter conflict between Aborigines and white Australians. Although historically the government has not recognized Aboriginal land rights, a string of recent court decisions in favor of native land claimants has legitimized Aboriginal demands.

In December 1993 the government passed the Native Titles Act to provide a system for Aborigines to claim rights to land taken during colonization. The Act stipulated that if native Australians could demonstrate a "traditional

connection" to their land, they could have native title provided the land had not been sold to anyone else. Hundreds of Aboriginal land claims were consequently filed, including claims for the Sydney Opera House, the Parliament building in Canberra, and the entire city of Brisbane.

In August 1998, Prime Minister Howard's government reversed the Native Titles Act, passing legislation refuting Aboriginal rights to vast areas of farmland. Aboriginal leaders charge that the new law is discriminatory and violates United Nations conventions; the United Nations Committee to End Racial Discrimination agrees, reporting that, "Australia's racially discriminating land practices have endured as an acute impairment of the rights of Australia's indigenous communities." In March 2000 the Geneva-based UN Committee censured Australia again, attacking the country's record on Aboriginal rights and calling for the Australian government to apologize for past injustices and to reform mandatory sentencing laws that target Aborigines. Human rights groups have long called on the federal government to overturn laws in the Northern Territory and Western Australia that allow children to be put in prison. Recently, a 15-year-old Aborigine allegedly hung himself after being jailed for stealing pencils, and another young Aborigine was jailed for a year for stealing a box of biscuits. And a government-mandated report released in early April found a disproportionately high number of Aborigines in prison.

Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer accused the UN committee of being influenced by political lobbies and taking a "blatantly political and partisan approach," and suggested that Australia may no longer cooperate with the committee's investigations. The opposition Labor Party, however, said it would be "utterly hypocritical" of Australia to deny the UN the right to review its performance.

Australia's indigenous population makes up 2.1 percent or 399,000 of the country's 19 million people, and most Aborigines still live in run-down suburbs and rural outback towns with poor health care, education and housing and rampant unemployment. An April study released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that Aborigines are three times more likely than other Australians to die in infancy and that about half of those who survive childhood will die before they reach the age of fifty, primarily of circulatory and respiratory diseases, diabetes, cancer, and injury. Murders, suicides, and injury were all substantially higher among Aborigines than the rest of the population, with 70 percent more suicides among Aboriginal men than other male Australians. Mortality rates for Aborigines, the study found, were higher in almost all age groups than those of Native Americans and New Zealand's indigenous Maori community. The Australian Medical Association recommended that the government allocate more funds in its upcoming May budget to address Aboriginal health issues.

Australia's current political climate, however, is not favorable to increased welfare spending and state subsidies. In fact, Prime Minister Howard's campaign slogan is "Beyond Welfare," indicating his party's intent to phase out public assistance. Herron, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, said his government aimed to break "the cycle of permanent welfare dependency," and that "the complete failure of Labor's approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs during its 13 years in government is highlighted by the fact that despite the expenditure of A\$16 billion, 60 percent of indigenous Australians remain dependent on welfare."

The rise of the extreme right wing One Nation party is also emblematic of the intolerant political climate. Pauline Harrison, the party's leader, openly calls for an end to all health programs aimed specifically at indigenous Australians and says the A\$130 million a year spent on such programs

should be redistributed for the benefit of all Australians. Peter Coleman, a former member of the One Nation party and current leader of Australia's Ku Klux Klan, recently boasted that his followers had set up "Klaverns" in three states. "Our aim is for a white Australia, a fair Australia," Coleman said. "I am happy to shout it from the rooftops."

Despite government denunciations of the far right and Prime Minister Howard's A\$27 million initiative to promote literacy among Aboriginal children, a third of whom cannot read or write, the conservative politician's efforts have been overshadowed by his persistent refusal to apologize to the Aboriginal community. Many Aborigines were also upset by the Prime Minister's decision in February not to sign documents that are being prepared by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The Council plans to present a draft of reconciliation documents at the Opera House on May 27 at an event called Corroboree 2000. The declaration is expected to call for a public apology from the government and to affirm the role of indigenous people in Australia as custodians of the land and to grant them greater political control over their affairs. Mr. Howard has said the draft documents are imperfect and that the time for formal reconciliation is not yet right.

Mr. Howard's intransigence has encouraged many indigenous activists to view the Olympic Games as an opportunity to draw the world's attention to their plight. After the Prime Minister's statement, activist Charles Perkins told the BBC, "The Olympics are going to be very violent. We are telling all the British people: please don't come over. If you want to see burning cars and burning buildings, then come over, enjoy yourselves." Later, on Australia's Channel Nine, Perkins said, "It's 'burn, baby, burn' from now on. Anything can happen."

Some members of the Aboriginal community have distanced themselves from such militancy. Australian runner Cathy Freeman, an Aborigine who won a gold medal in the 400 meters at the World Track and Field Championships in 1997 and ran a victory lap carrying both Australian and Aboriginal flags, has refused to take a political stance at the Olympics. "Leading up to the Olympics, much will be made about me being an Aborigine," she recently wrote in *The Herald Sun* of Melbourne. "This fact should be celebrated, not abused. I love where I come from, but I am not at the Olympics to be political. I don't think to myself that I've got to make this next move for the Aboriginal cause." Freeman said her goal is to unite all Australians, and more importantly, to win an Olympic gold medal.

Other Aboriginal athletes will also be under scrutiny, including Nova Peris-Kneebone, who became the first Aboriginal gold medallist in Atlanta as a member of the women's field hockey team (but has now switched to track and field), sprinter Patrick Johnson, and the hurdler, Kyle Vander-Kuyp. Australian rugby league star Anthony Mundine has criticized Freeman's apolitical stance, saying she "is being used" by the government and the organizing committee to "defuse the Aboriginal issue."

Although both Aboriginal and Australian flags will fly at the Sydney stadium on September 15, and Aboriginal culture will feature prominently in the opening ceremony, race relations in Australia will probably remain strained long after the games. According to a recent survey, most Australians oppose an official apology from the government for the historical treatment of Aborigines because they fear it might lead to Aboriginal claims for financial or land compensation.

However, says Perkins, "The apology is not so much about money or compensation. It's about symbolism, psychology, a feeling, identity."

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