

# Australia: Palm Island's dark history of Aboriginal repression

## Part One

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*This is the first of a two-part article on the history of Australia's Palm Island settlement.*

Last November 26, the Aboriginal residents of Palm Island, 65 kilometres from Townsville in the northern state of Queensland, stormed the island's police station, barracks and courthouse after the death in police custody of a local man, Cameron Doomadgee, 36. He was found dead in a police cell at 11:20 a.m. on November 19—just an hour after he had been locked up for the minor offence of “causing a public nuisance”.

The riot was triggered by the Queensland State Coroner's partial release of an autopsy report indicating that Doomadgee may have been beaten by police. It found that Doomadgee had died of internal bleeding, after suffering four broken ribs and a ruptured spleen and liver. His death was not an aberration. Since 1980, nearly 300 indigenous people have died in custody in prison cells or police lockups.

As soon as the riot erupted, the police invoked far-reaching emergency powers and flew in at least 80 officers, including members of the Special Emergency Response Team (SERT), to take over Palm Island. Backed by the state Labor government, they took control of the airport, school and hospital, closed roads and launched police raids on homes.

An official inquiry into the incident is being conducted by the Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission, (CMC), which is relying on the police to gather evidence. Every other such inquest held since the late 1980s, including the 1994 hearings held by the CMC's predecessor, the Criminal Justice Commission, into the police killing of 18-year-old Aboriginal dancer Daniel Yock, has exonerated the police.

In the wake of these events, Premier Peter Beattie's state government and the corporate media attempted to blame Aboriginal residents themselves. By any measure, Palm Island is a social and economic catastrophe. Its population of approximately 2,500 people is crowded into 200 homes. Their average life expectancy is 50 years—30 years less than Australia's average. Unemployment levels are between 80 and 90 percent.

Several days after the Palm Island riot, Queensland Police Minister Judy Spence declared: “Sadly, I think it's a product of the fact that many of the communities we're talking about are very dysfunctional and while we're doing a lot of good work in those communities, there's still unacceptable levels of violence and the courts are responding to that violence by sending people to prison.”

However, an examination of Palm Island's past demonstrates that the appalling conditions on Palm Island, as in other Aboriginal communities, are the product of two centuries of oppression. For most of the twentieth century it functioned as a brutal prison for Queensland Aborigines. Established as a penal colony, its purpose was to enforce the “good behaviour” of Aborigines confined on the state's reserves. Its history can only be understood as a product of the capitalist settlement of Queensland, one of the last regions of Australia to be cleared of its indigenous

population.

Queensland came to self-government late. It was proclaimed a colony separate from New South Wales only in 1859, by which time the pastoral land in the southern states had been swallowed up. At the same time, Queensland still had a substantial indigenous population. In *The Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of Queensland*, A.H.Campbell calculates that the population was at least 70,000 but cites the estimate of 200,000 made by the government's so-called Southern Aboriginal Protector, Archibald Meston. [1]

By comparison, Tasmania's Aborigines had been completely wiped out by 1847. Ten years later, and a year before Queensland was officially gazetted, a government report observed that Aboriginal tribes in the southern mainland state of Victoria had been largely destroyed. A Report of the Select Committee on the Aborigines noted: “The state of Victoria is now entirely occupied by a superior race, and there is scarcely a spot, excepting in the remote mountain ranges, or dense scrubs, on which the Aborigine can rest his weary feet.”

As the north of the Australian continent was opened up, relations between the Aborigines and settlers spiraled downward, along a familiar and brutal path.

The missionary William Ridley described the effect of pastoral expansion on Aboriginal tribes around the Balonne River in Queensland: “Before the occupation of this district by colonists, the Aborigines could never have been at a loss for the necessities of life. Except in the lowest part of the river, there is water in the driest seasons; along the banks game abounded; waterfowl, emus, parrot tribes, kangaroos, and other animals might always, or almost always, be found. But when the country was taken up and herds of cattle introduced, not only did the cattle drive away the kangaroos, but those who had charge of the cattle found it necessary to keep the Aborigines away from the river....

“After some fatal conflicts in which some colonists and many Aborigines have been slain, the blacks have been awed into submission to the order which forbid their access to the river. And what is the consequence? Black fellows coming in from the west report that last summer very large numbers, afraid to visit the river, were crowded round a few scanty waterholes, within a day's walk of which it was impossible to get sufficient food....that owing to these combined hardships many died.” [2]

Aborigines, deprived of their traditional food sources, turned to hunting the sheep and cattle, actions which quickly developed into outright warfare and a policy of exterminating indigenous inhabitants. In *Black Pioneers*, historian Henry Reynolds concluded: “(T)alk of war was commonplace in Queensland in the second half of the century, many people agreeing with the local politician who told his parliamentary colleagues in 1861 that ‘(T)he people of this colony must be considered to

be, they have always been at open war with the Aborigines’.” [3]

In this war, the government allowed the settlers complete freedom to take whatever action they considered necessary, usually the use of guns or poison or both. It also employed black troopers in the Native Mounted Police for punitive expeditions to track down and kill resisting tribes.

By 1897, according to Campbell, nine out of every ten Aborigines south of Cape York Peninsula had been eliminated. By the government’s own count, the state’s population of Aborigines had plunged to 15,000 by the end of the century, of which only 5,000 lived below Cape York Peninsula. Numerous contemporary accounts testified to their wretched state.

Thus, a mine manager described the Aborigines in the Burke district in northern Queensland in 1891: “They are driven back in the spinifex ranges and when I was up the Nicholson they were living on ants. They dare not come on to where there was game for fear of kidnapping parties. They were the poorest things I ever seen—perfect skeletons.... nothing to eat and sleeping in holes in the ground....”

Observers noted not only the poor physical state of the Aborigines, with malnutrition, opium addiction, gonorrhoea and leprosy widespread, but also their traumatised psychological condition. A Police Commissioner reported in 1896: “...driven from place to place; though not daring to resent insult, outrage or even murder committed by the whites... they are yet a trouble to the settlers through their broken-hearted ignorant helplessness.”

The first 40 years of colonial settlement in Queensland consisted of “keeping the blacks out” of pastoral stations, a policy which meant the extermination of the majority of Aborigines. They were “kept out” due to the fundamental incompatibility between the developing pastoral capitalist society of the settlers and the tribal hunter-gatherer society of the indigenous population. By the end of the 1890s, the remnants of Aboriginal tribes who had survived were to be “let in.”

The legislative framework for the new policy was the 1897 Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (“the Act”). Hailed as a benevolent law, ostensibly to save Aborigines from extinction, its function was not only to serve as a system of control but also to create a cheap and reliable labour force.

It was difficult to coerce Aborigines to adopt the capitalist work ethic—labouring without rest from dawn to dusk on successive days—while other means of subsistence remained. Employers complained that in the course of clearing land, because it was the Aborigines’ habit never to pass by food, the discovery of wild yam, a bee’s nest or a wallaby would result in all hands immediately ceasing work for however long it took to procure the food source. Another barrier to the “desire for steady employment” was the Aboriginal habit of “shielding the indolent” by sharing the proceeds of the day among their fellows, meaning that everyone received some return whether they worked or not.

The move to establish legislative controls over Aboriginal labour was also bound up with the political imperative of establishing a federated nation in 1901, in order to strengthen the strategic and economic position of the emerging Australian capitalist class. The Queensland government had initially sought to meet employers’ demands for a ready supply of cheap and tractable labour by setting up schemes for importing indentured labourers, particularly from China and the South Pacific islands.

Federation, however, was founded on the “White Australia” policy. As part of the political settlement underpinning Federation, the employers agreed with the trade union and Labor leadership on a platform of excluding “coloured races”, in order to divide Australian workers from their Asian-Pacific brothers and sisters. Federation was accompanied by the passing of “whites-only” labour laws, from which Aborigines were conveniently exempted.

It was in this context that the Queensland government directed Archibald Meston, the Southern Aboriginal Protector, to devise a scheme to solve the “Aboriginal problem” for the colony. His extended tour of the

state impressed upon him the degree to which the colony’s economy was already dependent on Aboriginal labour, the chief virtue of which, Meston wrote, was its “cheapness and servility”. [4]

On the cattle stations, an industry vital to Queensland, Aboriginal stockmen outnumbered white stockmen by 5 or 6 to 1. Aboriginal labour was also widely used in the towns. One official estimated that in Normanton at the turn of the century, 150 Aborigines were employed on a daily basis in a town with a total population of 500.

Meston drew up plans to regulate the labour of Queensland’s indigenous population and to train its future generations for a life of exploitation. “In three or four years,” he wrote, “there would be hundreds of Queensland aboriginals available to do work for which we now employ Papuans.”

Under the guise of “protection,” the Act turned Aborigines into the property of the state, subject to removal to distant missions or reserves, which were located on areas not wanted for pastoral or other commercial activities. Aborigines were only permitted to leave reserves in order to take up regulated employment. A police officer, or a pastoralist, merely had to point to an Aborigine for him or her to be “under the Act” and they could be ordered into forced labour for up to 12 months.

“Protectors” were given the right to decide which industries Aborigines worked in, who could employ them and what wages they were to be paid, although Aborigines, whether working on reserves or “contracted out” frequently received no monetary payment at all. Payment was commonly in cast-off clothes, food scraps, alcohol or opium dregs.

Any wages were invariably paid into a fund, under the control of the local Protector, with Aborigines receiving only a fraction as “pocket money.” Aboriginal workers, particularly those in the pastoral industry and on the reserves, were paid well below award rates. For example, in 1966 when the carpenter’s award rate of pay was \$48 per week, builders on the Cherbourg reserve were paid only \$10. The award rate for apprentices was \$21, but apprentices on the reserve, who received no structured teaching or training, were paid \$3. [5]

According to recent estimates, from the 1890s to the 1970s the amounts confiscated from Aboriginal workers under compulsory contract to the Queensland government totalled \$500 million in wages and savings.

On the reserves, compulsory labour was mandatory for every able-bodied individual, including children and women. Under-age child labour was commonplace and Aboriginal girls were routinely sent from the reserves at the age of 10 to work as domestic servants in town households or on cattle stations.

The Act also gave the state the power to regulate the most personal aspects of Aborigine’s lives, including whom they married and whether they could keep their own children.

*To be continued*

#### Notes:

1. Campbell A.H., *The Aborigines and Torres Islanders of Queensland*, Brisbane Western Suburbs Branch, United Nations Association, 1958.
2. Reynolds H, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Penguin, 1981, p. 67.
3. Reynolds H, *Black Pioneers*, Penguin, 1990, p. 122.
4. Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders, Kathryn Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland—a history of exclusion, exploitation and extermination*, University of Queensland Press, 1975, p. 112.
5. Kidd Ros, *The Price of Justice*, Hecate, 1996, p. 69.



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