

Australia: Palm Island's dark history of Aboriginal repression

Part Two

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This is the second of a two-part article on the history of Australia's Palm Island settlement. Part One was published on March 1.

The conditions on Aboriginal reserves exacted a terrible human cost. More than half a century later, in the 1960s, a medical survey of Queensland's Aboriginal reserves found that malnutrition was a key factor in deaths of 50 percent of the children under three and 85 percent of children under four. In addition, half of all neo-natal deaths and 47 percent of deaths of all children under 16 were from gastroenteritis or pneumonia.

To impose such harsh conditions required secondary penal settlements such as Palm Island. It was established in 1918 on the advice of Chief Protector J.W. Bleakley as a reserve that would be ideal for the confinement of "the individuals we want to punish".

The settlement initially consisted of about 200 people, made up of 14 different tribal groups removed from all over Queensland, a population which increased to 1,200 by 1948.

According to one study, many were exiled for "speaking out against the 'protection' laws and against unjust treatment as labourers". Among them were stockman Albert Hippi, removed to Palm Island in 1923 from Saxby Downs after he had "organised a petition amongst his fellow workers seeking greater control over their wages through access to their bank accounts;" Paddy Brooks from Millaa Millaa for "causing discontent"; Herbert from Camowear for "leaving employers"; Martin Joe from Cairns for refusing to work; and Frank from Cairns for being "an agitator". [1]

In addition to "troublemakers", Aborigines were sent to Palm Island for offences such as drunkenness, being unemployed, being found off an Aboriginal reserve and for being deemed to be "half-castes".

During the 1920s and 1930s Aborigines in chains were shipped to the island where their lives were made as harsh as possible. A rigid work regime, police brutality and constant surveillance were accompanied by poor quality rations and shelter.

Residents' lives were subject to the dictatorial control of a succession of superintendents. The first reigned from 1918 until

1930 when "he went berserk, killing his own children, shooting at other staff and burning down the main settlement." [2]

But the most repressive period, described by residents as "Gestapo times", came in the 1950s when ex-policeman Roy Bartlam arrived. Under Bartlam, the powers of Queensland's Department of Native Affairs were ruthlessly enforced. Police would arrest workers even "a minute behind time" for morning roll call. Those not working hard enough faced imprisonment—meaning confinement to a tiny cell for weeks at a time or banishment to neighbouring Eclipse Island, where they survived on bread and water.

Police were equipped with batons, three to five feet long and made from hard bloodwood, to assist them in the intimidation of residents. Police brutality was commonplace. According to elders, police beat two residents to death during "Bartlam's Time".

Most of the island's children were removed from their parents and confined in segregated, wire-enclosed "dormitories", officially designated as Industrial Schools. The curriculum was extremely limited and did not go beyond Grade 4. It was designed to prepare children for low-skilled manual work: as domestics, cooks, stock-workers, etc.

Details of life on Palm Island came to public notice only in the 1970s when Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan recreated a 1957 strike by hundreds of the Island's residents in the film *Protected*.

They recorded that "inmates were forced to salute all whites whom they passed by, to work without pay, to queue for rations of flour, tea, sugar and the offcuts of meat ... men would be confined (in jail) for 'offences' such 'being untidy' or 'failing to get a haircut', while women were imprisoned for wearing shorts or dresses above the knee. On one occasion, a group of people were arrested for laughing, and a man was imprisoned for waving to his wife." [3]

The trigger for the strike was a stepped-up work regime. Bartlett insisted that the task of building another jail was so urgent "that he employed the men to work over the weekend as well as Easter Monday, a practice not usual except in an emergency." The strike lasted for five days, when police

reinforcements, rushed from the mainland, conducted dawn raids on the homes of the strike leaders, who were subsequently banished.

In the 1960s, rising opposition to the oppression of Aboriginal people developed as part of an international movement of the working class and radicalised youth. Australian governments also moved to ditch the White Australia policy in an attempt to improve Australia's tainted international reputation and boost trade with Asia.

It was in this context that the struggles of the Aboriginal people, along with those of the working class as a whole, resulted in the granting of a range of partial and limited concessions. It was only in 1962 that Aborigines were given the right to vote in federal elections and in 1965 in Queensland elections.

The Queensland reserves became "communities", initially under the control of a government-appointed manager or missionary with wide-ranging powers. When old age, invalid and widows' pensions were made available to Aborigines in the 1960s, the government simply reduced grants to the reserves by an equivalent amount. In 1968, the system of queuing for rations was abruptly replaced with a system of paying cash for items of the same value.

Then in 1977, when Aborigines on reserves were granted award wages, two-thirds of the working population was sacked. Wholesale retrenchments severely affected the operation of essential services on communities and had a devastating effect on families. "In 1979 there were 22 people dependent on each wage earner at Bamaga, 43 on each wage earner on Cherbourg; 46 at Yarrabah, 50 at Edward River and Doomadgee, 61 at Weipa and at Palm Island there were 99 dependents for each wage earner." [4]

In addition, the state government hiked rents and increased service charges. "Electricity and store prices on the communities were no longer subsidised, making a bitter struggle for survival on the meagre weekly pay of only \$95 at a time when the State's minimum wage was \$124 and award wages stood at \$163." [5]

During the 1970s and 1980s, as state and federal governments began to cultivate a layer of Aboriginal bureaucrats, authority was gradually handed over to Aboriginal councils. But this only meant that the same levels of poverty and exploitation were imposed on Aboriginal people by an Aboriginal privileged elite.

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme was introduced in the late 1970s, essentially as the successor to the system of compulsory labour. Instead of paying Aborigines unemployment benefits, to which they were in theory entitled, government grants were paid to community councils, whose officials forced residents to "work for the dole" on pain of removal from communities.

The last vestiges of the notorious Act were only finally abolished in 1984. In 1985, the Queensland government

relinquished control of Palm Island, removing much of its infrastructure, including its timber mill, wharves, houses and shops. It passed title to the Palm Island Community Council in the form of the Deed of Grant in Trust, which allowed only temporary use of land.

Conditions on Palm Island have steadily worsened however. The disaster that has been created by a succession of governments, state and federal, is now being used to justify further inroads into the social position of Aborigines. In the name of "solving" Palm Island's problems, a layer of Aboriginal leaders is enthusiastically promoting proposals to turn "native-title" land holdings into collateral for business and housing loans. Land titles on Palm Island, which are in theory communally owned, would be transformed into private holdings.

The *Courier Mail*, Rupert Murdoch's Queensland daily, approvingly cited the comment of former Palm Island mayor, Paul Blackley, that Cameron Doomadgee would not have been drunk on the day of his death, "if he had a mortgage". Likewise, Labor Party national vice-president Warren Mundine, who is a member of the Howard government's recently formed National Indigenous Council, has described Palm Island as "an island off the coast of Queensland which every developer would love to have and yet 90 percent of our people are unemployed there."

Far from ameliorating the present social crisis, such plans would only deepen the chasm between rich and poor. Aboriginal people would be subject to the full forces of the "free market", the very system responsible for the historic crimes perpetrated against them.

Concluded

Notes:

1. Joanne Watson, "We Couldn't Tolerate Any More: The Palm Island Strike of 1957," *Labour History*, Number 69, November 1995.
2. Ibid, p. 153.
3. Ibid.
4. Ros Kidd, *A century of protection: Kitchener Bligh's story*, Ros Kidd web site, <http://www.linksdisk.com/roskidd/site/Speech6.htm>.
5. Ibid.



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