



History of the British nuclear tests in Australia and their impact on the Indigenous people in the areas

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Reportedly the first words of Indigenous Australians on the arrival of Captain Cook when he landed in Botany bay in 1770 was "worooworoo" loosely translated as 'piss off'. They knew trouble when they saw it. In reading the history of the British atomic tests in Australia one is struck by the poignancy and chilling prophecy of the greeting.

Thank you for inviting me to what is a most interesting and informative few days. My background is as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. I work in Indigenous communities in Central Australia where the effects of displacement on the physical and psychological state of the people are very clear. I have written papers on the psychological effects of colonisation in Australia and the interrelationship of psyche and environment. I am a member of WILPF and NFIP. I am also a member of AWWA. West Papua being Australia's closest Pacific neighbour.

In this brief presentation I shall look at the history of the British nuclear tests in Australia and their impact on the Indigenous people in the areas. I will then examine some pressing present and future concerns as Australia gears up for nuclear dumping.

The impact on Indigenous people is manifold and I, particularly as a non-Indigenous Australian, cannot hope to do represent adequately what has been another dark chapter in Australia's history. I have therefore decided to concentrate on two overlapping areas that relate to my general interests - health and issues of land.



THE BOMBS

Australia's experience of nuclear testing occurred between 1952 and 1967. During this time 3 tests were carried out at Montebello, 2 at Emu fields and 7 at Maralinga. Australia was chosen at the behest of the British government who began planning how to enter the nuclear club in 1947 and found a willing enthusiast in the then post war Prime Minister of Australia, Menzies - who was enamoured of Britain and extremely anti- communist. He therefore welcomed the tests, often making unilateral decisions without help from cabinet or colleagues. Menzies was most trustful about British assurances of health implications. Before I examine these implications I will briefly examine some areas of displacement from land.

LAND

From the very start of the nuclear tests the culture and connection to land of the Indigenous people was scarcely considered. At that time Indigenous Australians were not regarded as citizens, and were not on the census till 1967. Records were basically inexistent.

These absences continued during the testing. The South Australian government prepared for the testing by handing over traditional lands to the federal government as testing sites. Indigenous people were forcibly prevented from entering these lands so essential to their identity and life of for hunting, visiting and religious ceremony. Although in the past Aborigines were usually ordered off trains, the British government started to pay their fares to go to Western Australia or Port Augusta areas some 300K away. Traditional peoples were moved to sites outside their traditional geography and language groups and no follow up arrangements were made to accomodate people in their new destination. One of the main holding areas Yalata was reknowned as a hell hole of violence and alcohol abuse.

A sole patrol officer, joined after 4 years by a second officer, was given the task of finding and warning all Indigenous people in a 80,000 square Kilometre area. This officer estimated that between 1 thousand and 15 hundred people were living in the area. His main concern appears to have been the traumatic effect of rapid displacement and the dependency engendered by the impact of many soldiers and technicians. I myself have seen the long term effects of these dislocations in my work in the communities with their high levels of unemployment, violence, substance abuse, suicide and premature deaths. It is a acute on chronic trauma of whole communities. Land displacement has severe effects on health and I believe this was probably the greatest ill effect of the nuclear tests for Indigenous people.

Direct effects of radiation.

There was no official recognition of the damage to the health of Indigenous people in the area. In 1959, it was admitted that because of their life style, ie living off the land, sleeping on the ground, shoeless, scant clothing etc the Indigenous people were more susceptible to radiation. Why this was finally conceded long after the testing had commenced has never been made clear. One fears that there may have been evidence of damage which has been suppressed.

In 1953, a atomic test was undertaken in Emu even though it was contrary to official advice because the weather was adverse. Apparantly it was decided that a visiting British war lord should be afforded the opportunity to see the testing. By all accounts the effect was terrible.



Indigenous and non indigenous people in the area described an extraordinary black mist which came over and stuck on vegetation and household items. There are anecdotal stories of vomiting, people ill and dying, increased miscarriages and malformed fetuses. It was subsequently revealed at the Royal Commission of 1987 that the radiation was sixty times the allowed safety level.

One of the affected people was a young boy called Yami Lester. In 1953 he lived in Wallatina a small Indigenous community some 200 km to the north of Emu. In the years immediately following the explosion and mist he became blind. Yami became educated in braille and became a very active leader of Indigenous Australia working in Central and South Australian communities. In the early eighties he heard a white man, later identified as Titterton (the Australian scientist who had master minded the tests for Britain) denying any black mist. Yami campaigned against this untruth and he became the main instigator of the Royal commission into the nuclear tests. This inquiry finally took place in 1987, held in both the UK and Australia. The commission concluded that there had been faults, secrecy, lack of safety and pollution of the land in the tests. However they stated that there was no firm evidence of health effects directly related to irradiation.

Evidence tendered at the time by Indigenous people was harrowing. For example, we were told of how Australian servicemen in the area instructed an Indigenous nomadic family to remain on the road and not to go into the bush to hunt because of poison. They had become so terrified of the "poison" that they obeyed instructions implicitly and 4 of the family of 6 eventually died of starvation. It is worth keeping in mind that at the Royal commission Aboriginal people were asked to prove their stories and tell their history within a non-Indigenous framework. People from Maralinga were asked to prove the instances of cancers, birth defects, of genetic defects passed down because of exposure to ionising radiation, they were asked to prove that in a Western court of law and of course they couldn't. They did not have medical records; they had no death records, and their traditional law does not permit them to speak the name of a deceased person.

Present Day Health Effects

There is a disproportionately high death rate of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory from thyroid cancer and there is some speculation, though no rigorous investigation or scientific conclusions, as to the link between this and the tests. John Condon, the Northern Territory epidemiologist believes it warrants further investigation.

I have already referred to the high level of stress and dysfunction in the remote Indigenous communities. In the Pitjintjara communities there has been an epidemic of youth suicides. Much of the problem is due to unemployment and government lack of funding. I have visited communities where children are hungry because of low level poverty and these are "dry" communities where no alcohol is permitted.

Issues of land in 2006

In the early 1990's the High Court of Australia overturned the doctrine of terra nullius and the two hundred year old fallacy that when the British arrived in Australia there was nobody living in Australia. As a result, the legal concept of native title was given legitimacy and Aboriginal people are afforded a minimum of legal standing. South Australia recognised native title in 1984 and handed over the Maralinga lands with the exception of the contaminated areas of



Maralinga and Emu. An amount of 11.5 million was given to the Maralinga people for loss of their land during the tests. In 1994, taking into account the recommendations of the Royal Commission of 1987, it was agreed that Britain and Australia decontaminate the Maralinga lands and in particular the area of Taraniki, where minor tests involving plutonium were carried out in the sixties. 104 million dollars was spent but many, the most outspoken of whom is Alan Parkinson believe that the work was not carried out effectively. Plutonium was just put directly into 2 metre deep pits. Cost cutting appears to be the main reason. Mr Parkinson has written and spoken on these matters. I enclose an interview he gave to the ABC in 2000 which gives details

For the Indigenous people there are further concerns and complications. It is now fifty years since the tests in the area. The Federal Government wishes to close the situation and return the lands to the Indigenous people. It has agreed to give a further amount of 5-7 million. However there is the worry and responsibility for the community if the land is not decontaminated. They can refuse to accept the land. Additionally since our Prime Minister returned from his latest trip to visit Mr. Bush he has become keen on the concept of Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. This would involve mining, enriching, exporting and reimporting the waste for storage at the former nuclear site at Maralinga. Presumably there will be a high rent for the use of the site. At present there is a big media emphasis on the dysfunctionality of the Indigenous remote communities. Many of the facts are true but little is done to remedy the situation. One wonders if there will be a link between the possibility of a nuclear dump in Maralinga and greater wealth and "self sufficiency" for Indigenous people.