

The Cry of a Child

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It's nightfall in *Saltwater Country* and a loving Aboriginal mother walks and cradles her baby boy in her arms, searching her heart for the words that will soothe the cry of a child.

Yananymul Mununggurr, the strong willed CEO of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association, 18 small homelands in the Yirrkala region of the Northern Territory, had earlier summoned up all of her courage and conviction to tell Australia what had to be done to assure an equal future for all of our children.

Speaking in Darwin to a conference hosted by the East Arnhem Shire Council Yananymul declared that "only major changes to fully support the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" could end the tragedy enfolding so many young Aboriginal people.

A few days later, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, the grandmother of children at Utopia in Central Australia, is cheered by a packed Darwin audience when she is asked on the ABC's *Q&A* program what has changed in 50 years? She answers, "Nothing!"

Seeking a brighter future for all Aboriginal children this Anmatjierre/Alyawarr elder has travelled to Geneva to address the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, met the UN's leading Human Rights officials and raised her voice at forums around this country.

These Aboriginal women are not alone in their grave concerns for the future of Indigenous children.

Dr Djiniyini Gondarra, of the Dhurili people of Galiwin'ku, Elcho Island, has criss-crossed the globe several times to tell the world that Australia has the worst incarceration rate of young Aboriginal people, the deepest poverty and disadvantage of any developed nation and the most shameful discrimination institutionalized by Government policy and our Constitution.

Across this country Aboriginal mothers and fathers are pleading with Australians to get over our national guilt, take our hands from our ears and listen to the cry of the Aboriginal child.

Rex and Liz Bellotti, Nyungar parents of six children, are the living breathing proof of how each one of the individual personal tragedies, each one of the cries for help, goes unheeded.

In May 2009, 15 year old Rex Jr., the Bellotti's oldest son and an aspiring Australian Rules footballer, was rundown by a Police four-wheel drive vehicle late at night after an Aboriginal wake in Albany. In the darkness the young man was struck by the roof bar and dragged in such a way that his right leg was horrifically mutilated.

Concussed, traumatized and in danger of losing his leg, Rex Jr., according to his father, could have died in hospital. But he has survived, so far, to challenge the police account of that terrifying night.

His family and eyewitnesses say Rex Jr. was not intoxicated. They heatedly dispute police claims that in a depressed state he had deliberately moved in front of the police vehicle to end his life. Instead, it is alleged, that the police vehicle approached with its lights off, on the wrong side of the road, and then suddenly loomed out of the darkness with headlights glaring.

The conflict between the police account and witnesses is disturbing. After inflicting such severe and possibly life-threatening injuries, the police incredibly gathered no proper statements from witnesses for a month. An internal police inquiry first declared that it was “satisfied that every effort had been made by the WA police to undertake a thorough and transparent investigation.”

This brazen claim – a consequence of police investigating police – shows the grave injustice, hypocrisy and double standard applied to so many young Aboriginal victims.

The Corruption & Crimes Commission surprised some by appearing to agree with the Bellotti family. It ruled that “given the injuries suffered by Rex Jr it would be hard to accept that the lack of obtaining statements is merely an oversight.”

Words, mere words. The WA watchdog has made no admission of police racism, discrimination or criminal culpability.

After two and a half years of campaigning by the Bellotti Support Group Rex Jr. has had no apology or compensation.

Neither the West Australian Government nor any of its services have been able to provide a safe place, proper care or appropriate psychological counselling for a deeply distressed young man whose life has been shattered.

“Australia is a wonderful place for most of its children...but not for all of its children, especially its Aboriginal children.” So begins the 2011 Child Rights Taskforce Report, *“Listen to Children”*. It could be talking about Rex Bellotti Jr.

Compiled by UNICEF and some 100 organisations working with children, the report assails successive Australian governments for failing to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

“Unacceptable gaps in the legal protection of children’s rights...significant harm to the lives, survival and healthy development of far too many children and young people... Aboriginal children aged 10-17 are 24 times more likely to be jailed than non-Aboriginal children and ...almost 10 times more likely to be in out-of-home care.”

The West Australian Government should take note. The State has the world’s highest Indigenous incarceration rate. Over 40% of its prisoners in 13 gaols are Indigenous.

The young are locked up for many offences that a Royal Commission and other legal inquiries have recommended should be decriminalized including alcohol related behaviour.

The West Australian Police Commissioner, Karl O'Callaghan, says Police will target hundreds of Perth youth this summer, picking them up and taking them to 'crisis centres'.

Is this really going to improve the tense and troubled relationship between West Australian police and young Aboriginal people?

The truth is neither the police nor Government are listening to young Aboriginal people such as Rex Bellotti Jr.

Yes, Australia can count the 379 known Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. We can count the numbers of Aboriginal kids who give up on school or are in the ranks of the unemployed. We may even count the suicides, the frightening contagion of despair that is scything through the heartland. But as a nation we have stopped *seeing* these children as *our children*. We don't even know how many are here.

The 2011 Child Rights Taskforce notes that 13 per cent of babies born in 2005 to Aboriginal mothers were not registered. This is another dismal failing under Article 7 of the UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child. The poverty of so many parents, their inability to pay a fee, language difficulties and illiteracy mean that these children will struggle to prove their identity in their own land.

The Australian Education Union believes that at least several thousand children in the Northern Territory alone have never been enrolled for school. Thousands more do not attend schools that do not address their Culture, their language or their contemporary concerns.

No political leader in this country, Aboriginal or otherwise, has been able to prove that threatening young people or their families improves their education or their wellbeing.

On the contrary, UNICEF and others on the 2011 Child Rights Taskforce conclude that the Northern Territory Intervention "represents a culture of decision-making that is not informed and underpinned by the rights and principles enshrined in the Convention."

From the day they are born to the day they die Australia never really knows who these children are. Even the official statistics claiming that the Aboriginal gap in life expectancy has dramatically fallen from 20 years to 17 years and now 11 years are highly suspect because many states have such poor records of Aboriginal births and deaths. The methodology almost certainly produces a desired improvement rather than government policies that still deny Aboriginal children their rights.

The Aboriginal answer, according to Yananymul Mununggur, is for Aboriginal people to be afforded the legal right and the economic entitlement to determine their own future and that of their children, to manage their own affairs and become self-sufficient.

Instead of relentless assimilation and control, Australian Government must recognize that by supporting the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the other international covenants this nation has an obligation to deliver on the rights of every child to health, education, housing and other essential services. The wealth of Aboriginal lands is part of that sovereign entitlement.

The 2011 Child Rights Taskforce concludes that for Australia to even begin to meet its commitments to Aboriginal children and young people it must first comprehensively incorporate into law the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Other recommendations include a *National Plan of Action for Children and Young People* and an *Independent National Children's Commissioner* to allow the voices of Aboriginal children to be heard. The report concludes, "*Australia must learn to listen to children.*"

Will anyone now listen to Rex Bellotti Jr.'s cry from the Rangeview Remand Centre at Murdoch in Western Australia?

As I have been writing this I have had an anguished call from his parents.

After allegedly spitting at a policeman the kid who was once the high flyer for his Albany AFL team is sinking deeper into despair.

His father tells me that his son is struggling to cope with the severity of the mutilation that has ruined his dream of an AFL career. Equally disturbing, he feels no one has listened to him or the other young Aboriginal witnesses who saw the police vehicle run him down.

The anguished father says he can barely countenance the thought that his son might end his life in prison. The five younger Bellotti children also have been visibly traumatized by this ordeal, either full of anguish about their identity or angry and confused over what is happening to the older brother they idolized.

Now 17 years old, Rex Jr. is locked up, agitated and at risk. Dreading a court appearance scheduled for November 23rd, the Bellotti family are right on the edge.

Will we heed their cry?

www.facebook.com/pages/Bellotti-Support-Group