

Yabbered to death – Part I

7th May 2013

Tony Thomas

Tony Thomas studied anthropology under Professor Ronald Berndt in Perth in 1961, and in 1974 co-authored, with Dr Carl Georg von Brandenstein, "TARURU – Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara". In 2010 he authored "Stolen Generations: The Pocket Windschuttle".

"Community safety in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory has improved in recent years."

— **Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2013**

(No supporting data was provided, other than comments about unspecified community surveys)

Australian governments' policies towards "closing the gap" of Aboriginal disadvantage generate heaps of flowery prose. The policies' impacts on domestic violence, child abuse/neglect, and crime, are at best negligible. The violence and abuse have worsened dramatically in the past decade, after also rising significantly in the prior 20 years.

The absurdities of official policies are suggested by SA government spending of \$360,000 on 30 motorbikes for youths in the remote South Australian desert (the bikes stayed unused in storage). At \$12,000 apiece, each bike was only a tad less expensive than a Harley-Davidson XL883L Superlow, at \$14,000. SA bureaucrats also bought for the remote locals five heavy-duty microwaves and six washing machines (\$10,000 each); and four baby-change tables imported from the US at \$2400 apiece.[\[1\]](#)

These are the same Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands where Australian Crime Commission figures show women are 67 times more likely than Australian norms to be the victim of domestic homicide, largely from bashings. In a population of 6000, 14 women were killed by partners from 2000-08, including six in 2006-08.[\[2\]](#)

Meanwhile, deep discussions about Reconciliations, constitutional recognitions, treaties, social justice, disadvantage and 'negative social indicators' continue, a type of national conversation that Peter Sutton dismisses as "yabber". Professor Sutton is a linguist and anthropologist with a lifetime's work for Aboriginal progress. He writes, "Such [bureaucratic] language...moves in a territory somewhere between euphemism, banality and propaganda. A murdered mother is not 'disadvantaged' – she has lost her life."[\[3\]](#)

Reconciliation, he says, has now "attracted the hideous Orwellian language of management-speak. In glossy-brochure land, in a galaxy far, far away, we were to read about governance, capacity building, partnerships, whole of government, benchmarks, stakeholders, leadership, targets, measureable outcomes, role models – and so it goes...It is the language of managerialist welfarism. But if you believe the media releases, it's the *Breakfast of Champions*. And where is our Kurt Vonnegut when we need him?" [\[4\]](#)

To pad out these official narratives, bureaucrats now insert colorful "Case Studies", each involving an individual Aborigine who has become a success story thanks to Program XYZ. Of course, there is never a case study involving failures. Suggested case studies of failure:

- In Alice Springs, there is quite a gap to be closed, with Aboriginal women there 80 times more likely to be hospitalised after assault than women living anywhere else.[\[5\]](#)
- There is so much persistent ear disease in the communities that 40% (urban) and 70% (remote) Aborigines have hearing loss and difficulties.[\[6\]](#)
- More than a third of the Indigenous children under 14 are in over-crowded housing. In remote communities, more than half the children live over-crowded.[\[7\]](#) About a third of the housing is also deficient in washing, sanitation and food storage and cooking facilities.[\[8\]](#) Even where new building and repair programs were active in the NT, housing

occupancy would fall on average only from “the high to the early-teens” – presumably from about 18 to 13 people per house.^[9]

- The rate of abuse and neglect confirmations nationally for Indigenous children under 17 years has risen from 2.2% of the Indigenous child population in 2002-03 to 4.2% in 2011-12. Protection orders similarly have risen from 2.3% to 5.5%.^[10]
- In the NT in the decade to 2010, child removals grew from 175 to 555, a 215% increase, including a 40% increase in 2008-10.^[11] Worse, removals are forecast to escalate while availability of Aboriginal carers diminishes.^[12]

The normally level-headed Productivity Commission cites one bizarre finding that, despite appalling living conditions in remote communities, the settlements “also possessed protective factors that can safeguard children and families from psychological distress, such as spirituality and connection to land, family and culture.”^[13]

Bureaucrats and politicians are prone to one-day flying visits to remote settlements. Aborigines smirk at these people ‘tippin’ elbow’ (checking their watches) “as the afternoon of their brief transit in the tropics wears on.” ^[14]

Sutton says the worst forms of violence are often ignored as too awful to tackle, and staff themselves may be threatened and assaulted, or just suffer burn-out. He concluded, “In the 2000s the statistics are now proving one vital point above all others: approaches to dealing with community violence in the recent past have been a hopeless failure.”^[15]

Anthropologist and author Inga Clendinnen, in a rather odd comment, complains, “From the 1970s on, a relative silence promoted and policed by the Left and by a number of Indigenous activists created a vacuum in public discussion on these (violence) issues that in the 1990s began to be filled by those pursuing ideologically conservative agendas”.^[16]

Examples of ‘burying’ the violence problem are common. In the mid-1990s, when half of Indigenous children were said to be victims of family violence or abuse, the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Commission (ATSIC) was spending only \$1.3m out of its billion-dollar budget on programs to curb domestic violence – and even that small amount had to be clawed out of its multi-million-dollar travel and information budgets.^[17]

The 1997 Bringing Them Home report of Ronald Wilson is 700 pages. Of those pages, only one page discusses family violence as a cause of child removals.^[18] (Incidentally, the NT Families & Children division has been arbitrarily putting Aboriginal children in and out of care, “with very little notice or appreciation of the devastating impacts of such decisions on both the children, the carers, and the natural children of carers.”^[19] So much for Kevin Rudd’s apology of 2008: “The injustices of the past must never, never happen again”).

Only two years after Bringing Them Home, the 1999 Queensland Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report, headed by Professor Boni Robertson, was writing:

“Violence is now overt: murders, bashings and rapes, including sexual violence against children, have reached epidemic proportions with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous being perpetrators.” The atmosphere in Aboriginal communities was described as one of ‘continuing fear from which there is no escape...Sexual abuse is an inadequate term for the incidence of horrific sexual offences committed against young girls and boys in a number of Community locations in Queensland over the last few years’. ^[20]

Failure of passive welfarism was predicted by the distinguished anthropologist Professor William Stanner as early as 1968: “Possibly the most dangerous theory, though it is scarcely that, is that things are now going well, that all we need to do is more of what we are already doing, that is, deepen and widen the welfare programs, and the rest will come at a natural pace in its own good time.”^[21]

Two decades later anthropologist Colin Tatz was writing of “an abysmal absence of historical perspective in Aboriginal affairs, resulting in a policy and administration myopia that is staggering in its implications and results. No one learns from the past, no one listens, no one learns, and hardly anyone stays around long enough to osmose anything. Everyone re-discovers the wheel.”[\[22\]](#)

Anthropologist Professor Paul Memmott examined 130 remedial violence programs in communities in the 1990s. Only six had ever been formally evaluated. “There was, in fact, a total absence of discussion of program failure in the literature on the programs...”[\[23\]](#)

Remarkably, the same criticisms were made again in June 2011, this time by the House of Representatives standing committee inquiry into Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system.[\[24\]](#)

The committee quoted a Menzies School of Health Research report that interventions continue to be short-term, sporadic, un-rigorous, lacking in corporate memory and hence unable to learn from past successes and failures. Each new failure feeds into the downward spiral of powerlessness and cynicism among providers and clients, the School said.[\[25\]](#)

The committee said continuing government inability to identify what works and why, leads to wasted public money and bad relations between government and non-government providers, as well as with Aborigines. “The Committee insists that Australians cannot wait another twenty years to address this national crisis and urges that the Committee’s recommendations are responded to within six months from the tabling of this report,” it said.[\[26\]](#)

Fat chance. Nearly 24 months have elapsed with no serious response from the Gillard team. The intergenerational effects of the unsafe, violent communities may well be generating new crises in 2033. As just one example, numbers of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care through abuse and neglect at home, are skyrocketing. And there is a very high correlation between out of home care and later entry into the criminal justice system.

A further factor suggesting the problems are going to spiral, is the high annual population growth of around 2% in remote communities. By 2050, Arnhem Land could have more than 34,000 people and now-small communities like Yarrabah, Qld, 6000.[\[27\]](#) This natural increase will be augmented nationally by the compounding increase in Aboriginal self-identifiers. (Between 2006-11, 90,000 more people identified as Aboriginal).[\[28\]](#)

There are testable targets in Closing the Gap for half a dozen indicators — some important, like early-childhood mortality, and others flakey, such as enrolment in pre-school facilities (whether attended or not. NT Aboriginal children in 2010 comprised 43.3% of the child population, but represented only 10% of children attending early child care services).[\[29\]](#)

But despite all the recommendations, there are no Closing the Gap targets for reduction of the horrific violence against women, or the vast over-representation of Aboriginals in the criminal justice system. Rates of young Aborigines’ incarcerations are now worse than during the 1991 “Deaths in Custody” hearings, despite huge increases in miscellaneous program funding and bureaucratic resources. Latest Productivity Commission figures show that after age-standardisation, just under one in 50 Indigenes to be in gaol. That is 13.6 times the non-Indigenous rate. [\[30\]](#)

From 2000-10, the rate of Indigenes in prison rose 51% to nearly one in 50 (1891 per 100,000), while rates for non-Indigenes remained steady.[\[31\]](#) In WA the per capita rate rocketed to about one in 25 in custody, about 24 times the rate for non-Indigenes.[\[32\]](#)

- From 2000-10, Indigenous males in custody rose 55% and females, 47%.[\[33\]](#) They now comprise a quarter of Australian prisoners.[\[34\]](#)
- In 2008, over 40 percent of all Indigenous men in Australia reported having been charged formally with an offence by police before they reached the age of 25.[\[35\]](#)

- Young Aborigines are about 60% of all youths in detention, and their rate of detention is 28 times higher than for non-Indigenous juveniles.[\[36\]](#) About 22% of the young Aborigines in detention are 14 or under.[\[37\]](#)

A hidden but crucial issue in “Closing the Gap” is the rate of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) among young Aborigines. It is caused by excessive drinking by pregnant women. (Some women manage blood-alcohol readings of 0.4%). The children often suffer life-long brain damage and frequently get into conflicts with police.

Recent findings from Fitzroy Valley community in WA (pop. 4500, 80% Indigenous) involved a sample of 127 children. Half have FASD. The Fitzroy data is a wake-up call, given Indigenous FASD has normally been estimated at a mere 3-5 babies per 1000 births, or 0.05%.[\[38\]](#)

Dr Sharman Stone, (Murray, Liberal Party), chairwoman of Parliamentarians for the Prevention of FASD, suspects Australian Indigenous communities have the world’s highest rates of FASD. (For comparison, in Western Cape province in South Africa, FASD rates are 68-89 children per 1000, i.e. under 10%. Those rates have been viewed as high-end).

June Oscar, Chief Executive Officer, Marninwarntikura Women’s Resource Centre, who is helping the Fitzroy study, says: “This is the biggest issue facing the nation and I cannot understand why Australia has been so slow to recognise it as a major public health issue as it is in Canada and the United States.”[\[39\]](#)

The needs of the FASD children alone are sufficient to swamp available health services. Follow-up treatments needed at Fitzroy Valley include occupational therapy, 53 % of children; speech pathology, 53%; psychology, 50%; physiotherapy, 31%; optometry, 10 %; and dietician, 4%.

Sharman Stone says, “[The disorder] is filling jails with young kids who break the law. It is a drain on the health system and to police, and is linked to high incidence of youth suicide and chronic unemployment.” FASD is even promoting ‘cultural genocide’ as youngsters become incapable of learning their traditions, she says.

The federal government is providing about \$7m for FASD work. This compares with \$10m gifted towards a campaign by Reconciliation Australia to promote constitutional recognitions, and \$63m over four years for the new Indigenous TV channel.

One scourge in remote communities is simply parental neglect. In the NT, the bulk of child removal cases involve parental failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene or medical attention. Adult drugs and gambling distract parents from supervising children, and introduce many strangers into homes. Environments where there is substance abuse and where gambling is prevalent will also impact on parental vigilance and the supervision of children, and can involve entry of strangers in the home, propagating vice to children.[\[40\]](#)

As a much lesser health issue, a third of Aboriginal adults are obese, compared with a sixth among non-Aboriginals.[\[41\]](#) Aborigines are also smokers at two and a half times the rate of non-Aboriginals.[\[42\]](#)

How “Closing the Gap” can succeed in the face of such data, is a problem. It’s difficult even to get Health departments to cooperate with Justice departments on offenders with FASD.

Many children are growing up without their family. From 2007 to 2012, Aboriginals in out-of-home care increased from 36.3 to 55.1 per 100000 Aboriginal children, whereas non-Aboriginal care cases rose only slightly. [\[43\]](#)

One study found children in care were 68 times more like to face a court than other children. Nearly half the Indigenous adults in NSW prisons in 2009 had been in care. Moreover, high numbers of inmates said a parent had been in care.[\[44\]](#)

In New South Wales, 9.1% of sexual assault victims under the age of 18 years were Indigenous, and 12.6% of under-18 victims of domestic violence were Indigenous.

Victims of child abuse and adult violence also tend to move on to prisons. About 70% of Indigenous women in NSW gaols said they had suffered sexual abuse as children, 44% had been sexually assaulted as adults, and nearly 80% had been violence victims as adults. Virtually all those sexually assaulted as children now had a drug problem.[\[45\]](#)

The Representatives' committee concluded by noting that each young Aboriginal now winding up in the justice system, is likely to re-offend and create fractured families with absent kin. (A little-recognised fact is that, for the past five years, Aboriginal deaths in custody have run at only half the rate of non-Aboriginal deaths).[\[46\]](#)

SO WHAT is being done about these community-safety and prison issues?

There was a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) round table on community safety in 2009. Ministers agreed that unless communities could be made safe, the other big Closing the Gap targets in health, education and housing would be unattainable. Understandable, given that Aboriginal women are about 35 times more likely to be hospitalized for domestic assault than non-Aboriginal women.[\[47\]](#)

Through 2011-12, Aboriginal groups were lobbying COAG for targets on safe communities. As the National Congress of First Peoples complained:

"As at June 2012, discussions between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments were at a preliminary stage. It is not clear what the timeframe will be for finalisation of the [community safety] Strategy, whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations will be consulted, or what might be included in the Strategy. There now appears to be no commitment from the Commonwealth Government to a National Partnership Agreement..."[\[48\]](#)

But at the December 7, 2012 COAG meeting, such targets didn't even make the agenda for discussion. Fast-forward to the latest COAG meeting on April 19, 2013. It found time to consult and issue communiqués on purchasing locally-made cars and sorting out the States on the Royal Succession, but Safe Communities for Aboriginal Women and Children again failed to get a mention.[\[49\]](#)

Hence there is still no agreed national funding strategy for the community safety issue, despite previous pledges by the Gillard government to negotiate such a strategy. There is only the 2012 Federal "Stronger Futures" deal with the NT involving \$620m over ten years. But there are plenty of National Partnership Agreements (with funding commitments) on other topics, including health, housing, early childhood development, and even "Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access".

Here's a glimpse of how things subside in the bureaucracy:

Several years ago, the Federal Attorney-General's Department, according to First Assistant Secretary Katherine Jones, was supposedly working with state counterparts on closing-the-gap justice targets, for approval in mid-2010. As the House of Representatives committee put it in June 2011:

"At the time of tabling this report, the Attorney-General's Department informed the Committee that no further developments have been made on Indigenous justice targets."

This committee then urged that the Commonwealth develop a National Partnership Agreement for Safe Communities and present it to the Council of Australian Governments by December 2011. It is now mid-2013. Action: nil.

Katherine Jones hinted at one aspect of the inertia: not only do the Commonwealth and the States pass the buck rather than cooperate, but within the States there is buckpassing and territorialism among agencies for corrections, police and justice.

Individual workers on Aboriginal programs may be champions, but as a WA Magistrate complained, "Then very soon they are shifted to some other location and all of their good work is lost."

Katherine Jones at the time was running the AG's Social Inclusion Division. Her portfolio ranged from human rights (whatever they are) to wild rivers and distinctions between traditional owners and native title holders. She has since moved sideways to work on combating international crime. A certain Kym Duggan now runs the "Social Inclusion Division" with its forlorn heritage on national cooperation for safe Aboriginal communities.

In February, 2013, Prime Minister Gillard reported that her government is working towards 'an overarching policy framework' on community safety, 'with a view to developing advice to COAG...later in 2013'. Naturally, 'significant progress continues to be made'.[\[50\]](#) I'm sure Peter Sutton would put all that in his 'yabber' category.

PAR FOR the course in government agencies is duplications, gaps, role confusions, and funding by multiple agencies for the same thing in the same place, rather than complementary activity. Planning goes uncoordinated and with unrealistic time frames, such as rushed building of inappropriate housing. Agencies refuse to share their data, putting alleged privacy considerations ahead of client welfare. Huge staff turnovers and inadequate training arise from impossible case-loads, leaving agencies with chronically unfilled positions and poor supervision and morale. Talented staff are ruthlessly headhunted from existing jobs.[\[51\]](#)

One example of gaps in service is the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation Night Patrol in Darwin, described in the 2011 report. The people manning it were volunteers with no legal power, but they operated seven nights a week and picked up about 150 people per night, mainly drunks and unsupervised children. The patrol was funded by the NT Department of Justice. But there was only one 32-bed sobering up shelter in Darwin, and only two re-hab clinics, each with long waiting lists. The service needed also to operate in daytime, but has great difficulty winning funding tenders from governments. It has limped along but last year the NT mini-budget cut its funding and it was facing closure this June. In April it was rescued with some federal funding.

There are many similar small Aboriginal groups in youth justice work, which are unable to negotiate the government funding labyrinth, against competition from professional white groups.

Peter Sutton's blueprint for improvement is for governments to scrap the plethora of racial-identity-based programs and simply focus resources on where needs exist: "Aboriginality itself, of course, would not be removed, any more than Jewishness or Greek ethnicity are negated by their absence from the state apparatus." [\[52\]](#)

He says many, if not most, of the Indigenous elite live in middle-class suburbs, marry non-Indigenes, and enjoy a professional lifestyle.[\[53\]](#) Their common factor is not race or culture but descent from an Aboriginal ancestor, no matter how remotely.

Given the high out-marriage rate with non-Indigenous people (71.4% in 2006), "it will not be too many more generations before most Australians share some Indigenous ancestry. That might defuse the issue if it is still with us. Or will the racial wall be downed by then?"[\[54\]](#)

His priority areas would be early childhood socialization, health and education; communities safe from endemic violence; primary and preventative health care; encouraging job and social mobility between settlements and mainstream Australia; ending of heavy funding of non-viable communities; and seeking reconciliation as a personal matter rather than a collective and bureaucratic one.[\[55\]](#)

The long history of Aboriginal violence — Part II

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It is not polite to say that pre-contact Aboriginal society was abusive to women and generally violent. This would undercut the long-standing official view that current violence in Aboriginal communities reflects colonial dispossession and on-going victimhood.

For example, a fact sheet from the federal government's Closing the Gap Clearing House says that, as is typical for Indigenous populations elsewhere, Aboriginal disadvantage "is a consequence of the historical and *continuing* impact of colonialism and dispossession, which has left many (Aboriginals) impoverished, marginalised, discriminated against, in a state of poor physical and mental health, and with inequitable access to necessary public and private services."[\[1\]](#)

Aboriginal lawyer Dr Hannah McGlade in "Our Greatest Challenge" similarly blames colonialism: "The linking of Aboriginal culture to family violence and child sexual assault diminishes the grave harm inflicted on Aboriginal people through colonialism...the way in which colonization systematically deprived Aboriginal people of basic human rights."[\[2\]](#) But feminist author Stephanie Jarrett, in her introduction to "Liberating Aboriginal People from Violence, says, "It is important to acknowledge [the] link between today's Aboriginal violence and violent, pre-contact tradition, because until policymakers are honest in their assessment of the causes, Aboriginal people can never be liberated from violence...Deep cultural change is necessary, away from traditional norms and practices of violence."[\[3\]](#)

Bess Nungarrayi Price, in her foreword to Jarrett's book, says, "My own body is scarred by domestic violence...We Aboriginal people have to acknowledge the truth. We can't blame all of our problems on the white man...This is our problem that we can fix ourselves..."[\[4\]](#)

"The Racial Discrimination Act was there to protect us from white racism and we needed that protection. But it has not protected our people from ourselves. We need an act, we need laws that recognize that the problem now is blackfellas killing blackfellas and killing themselves[\[5\]](#)."

Jarrett says that misogynist violence and child abuse in Aboriginal communities are at "catastrophic" levels. At the same time, Aboriginal culture must not be criticized, as though the violence sits outside the culture. Liberal democracies should welcome diversity, but not customs that violate human rights, she says.[\[6\]](#)

Dave Price, non-Aboriginal husband of Bess Price, was shocked by elders' open comments in 2009 that their women could and should be executed for sacrileges. The comments came after a policewoman drove onto men's ceremonial grounds while young men were being initiated at Lajamanu in the remote NT. Lyndsay Bookie, chairman of the Central Land Council, told ABC TV news:

"It's against our law for people like that breaking the law, they shouldn't be there. Aboriginal ladies, they're not allowed to go anywhere near that. If they had been caught, a woman, aboriginal lady got caught she [would] be killed. Simple as that."

Dave Price said Bookie had, for once, openly expressed what all involved with the traditions know but keep silent about. "Both men and women are threatened with execution and grievous bodily harm for offences against the Law. Rape was added to possible punishments in the case of women...This is a fact of life. Lyndsay didn't invent this Law, it is unchanging, it comes from the Jukurrpa, the Dreaming.

It wasn't Lindsay's statement that disturbed me so much. It was the deafening silence of the human rights activists, the opponents of capital punishment, of the feminists and domestic violence activists, of that army of righteous whitefellas inflamed by any public expression of what they deem to be racism or sexism that happens to pop up in the public domain...So I can only assume that threatening to execute women is OK in Australia as long as it is done by someone who is male and indigenous, it is done for cultural reasons, and the women threatened are also indigenous. It's OK. It's their culture. They know the rules. They have to cop it sweet."[\[7\]](#)

Some male Aboriginal groups have acknowledged their culpability. In 2008 there was an apology from nearly 400 men from the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC):

"We acknowledge and say sorry for the hurt, pain and suffering caused by Aboriginal males to our wives, to our children, to our mothers, to our grandmothers, to our granddaughters, to our aunts, to our nieces and to our sisters"[\[8\]](#)

However, Jarrett says there is also willful blindness to traditional causes of violence, focusing instead on blaming whites. Such a rationale allows men to retain core privileges of law, gender hierarchy and kinship obligations.[\[9\]](#)

JARRETT spends more than 30 pages critiquing the 2002 National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Social Survey (NATSISS) of 9,359 Indigenous. This survey was the basis of influential work by Lucy Snowball and Don Weatherburn, purportedly showing that current violence is not an outcome of traditional culture but rather reflects poor living conditions and substance abuse. The researchers concluded:

"Our findings provide strong support for lifestyle/routine activity theory, moderate support for social deprivation and social disorganization theories, but little or no support for cultural theories of violence."[\[10\]](#)

Their multivariate analysis did not find violence strongly correlated with traditional homelands, Aboriginal-language speakers, and remote communities.

These findings have involved on-going academic debate, both over the original survey validity and the researchers' methodology. Jarrett for example, notes that the most violent households are too dangerous for survey-takers to approach. In many other vengeful households, only a foolhardy woman would admit to having suffered violence. Jarrett says household violence is catastrophically worse in the remote communities, compared with Aborigines in mainstream locations, and this fact destroys the rationale for encouraging "traditional lifestyle in self-determined communities". The political problem, she says, "is blunting critical scrutiny of Aboriginal violence statistics even at the highest echelons of data analysis and report-writing. This is a national travesty."[\[11\]](#)

Author Louis Nowra complains that sometimes a whole community will protect a vicious abuser. In November, 2006, Judge Michael Finnane, in sentencing the Aboriginal rapist Phillip Boney to 23 years jail, criticized the Moree Aboriginal community, which refused to help police find the rapist after his first attacks. By protecting him, the community allowed Boney to rape again. Within the space of one month, he kidnapped the woman on three occasions, assaulted her and raped her five times.[\[12\]](#)

Indigenous communities, Nowra says, have to recognize they are part of Australian society and grasp the idea of personal and individual responsibility for their actions.[\[13\]](#) Romanticising remote life is dangerous. There have been instances of white women or urban Aborigines moving into relationships in remote communities. After getting their first or subsequent "proper good hiding" they are lucky to escape.[\[14\]](#)

Violence levels are evidenced for thousands of years into pre-history.

Paleopathologist Stephen Webb in 1995 published his analysis of 4500 individuals' bones from mainland Australia going back 50,000 years. (Priceless bone collections at the time were being officially handed over to Aboriginal communities for re-burial, which stopped follow-up studies).^[15] Webb found highly disproportionate rates of injuries and fractures to women's skulls, with the injuries suggesting deliberate attack and often attacks from behind, perhaps in domestic squabbles. In the tropics, for example, female head-injury frequency was about 20-33%, versus 6.5-26% for males.

The most extreme results were on the south coast, from Swanport and Adelaide, with female cranial trauma rates as high as 40-44% — two to four times the rate of male cranial trauma. In desert and south coast areas, 5-6% of female skulls had three separate head injuries, and 11-12% had two injuries.

Webb could not rule out women-on-women attacks but thought them less probable. The high rate of injuries to female heads was the reverse of results from studies of other peoples.^[16] His findings, according to anthropologist Peter Sutton, confirm that serious armed assaults were common in Australia over thousands of years prior to conquest. ^[17]

From 1788, British and French arrivals were shocked at local misogyny. First Fleeter Watkin Tench noticed a young woman's head "covered by contusions, and mangled by scars". She also had a spear wound above the left knee caused by a man who dragged her from her home to rape her. Tench wrote, "They are in all respects treated with savage barbarity; condemned not only to carry the children, but all other burthens, they meet in return for submission only with blows, kicks and every other mark of brutality."^[18]

He also wrote, "When an Indian [sic] is provoked by a woman, he either spears her, or knocks her down on the spot; on this occasion he always strikes on the head, using indiscriminately a hatchet, a club, or any other weapon, which may chance to be in his hand."

Marine Lt. William Collins wrote, "We have seen some of these unfortunate beings with more scars upon their shorn heads, cut in every direction, than could be well distinguished or counted." ^[19]

Governor Phillip's confidant, Bennelong, in 1790 had taken a woman to Port Jackson to kill her because her relatives were his enemies. He gave her two severe wounds on the head and one on the shoulder, saying this was his rightful vengeance.^[20]

Phillip was appalled that an Eora woman within a few days of delivery had fresh wounds on her head, where her husband had beaten her with wood.

In 1802 an explorer in the Blue Mountains wrote how, for a trivial reason, an Aboriginal called Gogy "took his club and struck his wife's head such a blow that she fell to the ground unconscious. After dinner...he got infuriated and again struck his wife on the head with his club, and left her on the ground nearly dying."^[21]

In 1825 French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville wrote "that young girls are brutally kidnapped from their families, violently dragged to isolated spots and are ravished after being subjected to a good deal of cruelty."^[22] George Robinson in Tasmania said in the 1830s that men courted their women by stabbing them with sharp sticks and cutting them with knives prior to rape. The men bartered their women to brutal sealers for dogs and food; in one case such a woman voluntarily went back to the sealers rather than face further tribal violence.^[23]

Also in the 1830s ex-convict Lingard wrote: "I scarcely ever saw a married woman, but she had got six or seven cuts in her head, given by her husband with a tomahawk, several inches in length and very deep."^[24] Explorer Edward John Eyre, who was very sympathetic towards Aborigines, nevertheless recorded:

"Women are often sadly ill-treated by their husbands and friends...they are frequently beaten about the head , with waddies, in the most dreadful manner, or speared in the limbs for the most trivial offences..."

"Few women will be found, upon examination, to be free from frightful scars upon the head, or the marks of spear wounds about the body. I have seen a young woman, who, from the number of these marks, appeared to have been almost riddled with spear wounds."[\[25\]](#)

TRIBAL warfare and paybacks were endemic. In "Journey to Horseshoe Bend", anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow described a black-on-black massacre in 1875 in the Finke River area of Central Australia, triggered by a perceived sacrilege:

"The warriors turned their murderous attention to the women and older children and either clubbed or speared them to death. Finally, according to the grim custom of warriors and avengers they broke the limbs of the infants, leaving them to die 'natural deaths'. The final number of the dead could well have reached the high figure of 80 to 100 men, women and children."[\[26\]](#)

Revenge killings by the victims' clan involved more than 60 people, with the two exchanges accounting for about 20% of members of the two clans. (When Pauline Hanson, then member for Oxley, quoted this account in 1996, an Aboriginal woman elder replied, "Mrs Hanson should receive a traditional Ugarapul punishment: having her hands and feet crippled.")[\[27\]](#)

Escaped convict William Buckley, who lived for three decades with tribes around Port Phillip, recounted constant raids, ambushes, and small battles, typically involving one to three fatalities. He noted the Watouronga of Geelong in night raids 'destroyed without mercy men, women and children.'[\[28\]](#)

Historian Geoff Blainey concluded that annual death rates from North-East Arnhem Land and Port Philip, were comparable with countries involved in the two world wars, although Blainey's estimate could be somewhat on the high side.[\[29\]](#)

Other black-on-black massacres include accounts from anthropologist Bill Stanner of an entire camp massacre, an Aurukun massacre in the early 20th century, Strehlow's account of the wiping out of the Plenty River local group of Udebatara in Central Australia, and the killing of a large group of men, women and children near Mt Eba, also in Central Australia.[\[30\]](#)

Strehlow's wife Kathleen Strehlow wrote:

"It would be no exaggeration to say that the system worked as one of sheer terror in the days before the white man came. This terror was instilled from earliest childhood and continued unabated through life until the extremity of old age seemed to guarantee some immunity from the attentions of blood avenger or sorcerer alike for wrongs real or imaginary...children were not exempted from capital punishment for persistent offences against the old tribal code."[\[31\]](#)

The Murngin (now Yolngu) in NE Arnhem Land during 1920s practiced a deadly warfare that placed it among the world's most lethal societies. The then-rate for homicides of 330 per 100,000 (which Jarrett suggests could be grossly under-estimated) was 15 times the 2006-07 "very remote national Indigenous rate" of 22, and 300 times the 2006-7 national non-Indigenous rate. That Murngin rate was worse than in Mexico's present Ciudad Juarez drug capital (300 homicides per 100,000), and more than three times worse than the worst national current rate (Honduras).

Jarrett says that surely no aspect of Murngin culture, such as polygamy, was worth the lives of the many young men sacrificed in war to maintain it. [\[32\]](#)

Yolngu punishments are deemed valid for wives if they leave scars but do not kill. In one 2008 case, a husband stabbed his wife multiple times with a steak knife, which was within traditional bounds. The husband got a short sentence and this minor punishment was quashed by Southwood J.[\[33\]](#)

Jarrett wrote: “Even if Australian governments on grounds of harm minimization allow traditional physical punishment, there are some settings – wrong or disputed accusations, a person’s refusal to submit to traditional punishment, and traditional punishment for non-crimes – where such appeasement is either unworkable or particularly immoral.”[\[34\]](#)

Mass violence today can involve large numbers of Yolngu, with a 300-person riot in 2008 and another of 400 people on Elcho Island. At Galiwinku Council Offices in late 2010, 500 people were involved.[\[35\]](#)

A blacked-out past — Part III

8th May 2013

Tony Thomas

Tony Thomas studied anthropology under Professor Ronald Berndt in Perth in 1961, and in 1974 co-authored, with Dr Carl Georg von Brandenstein, “TARURU – Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara”. In 2010 he authored “Stolen Generations: The Pocket Windschuttle”.

Warfare was only one aspect of death-dealing traditions in pre-contact Aboriginal society. Death could result, for example, from accidentally witnessing ceremonies, or performing them incorrectly. According to TGH Strehlow, “it was this readiness to kill persons who had committed sacrilege either knowingly or unwittingly that caused a great revulsion against Aboriginal religion in Central Australia after the arrival of the white population.”[\[1\]](#)

Violence against girls and women is reflected in many accounts in the past century. Noted anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski surveyed the literature for his 1913 book on the family in Aboriginal society: The husband ‘had a nearly unlimited authority, and in some cases, when he had special reasons (and undoubtedly deemed himself to be within his rights), he might use his authority for a very brutal and severe chastisement.’[\[2\]](#)

Solicitor/historian Joan Kimm wrote: “The sexual use of young girls by older men, indeed often much older men, was an intrinsic part of Aboriginal culture, a heritage that cannot easily be denied.”[\[3\]](#)

Playwright and author Louis Nowra concurs: “Despite local variations, there is a consistent pattern of Aboriginal men’s treatment of women that was harsh, sexually aggressive (gang-rape for instance) and , in our term, misogynist. Given its pervasive nature across the whole of Australia, we can say that it was ancient and long-lasting.”[\[4\]](#)

Nowra quotes Walter Roth (1861-1933) a doctor, anthropologist and Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland. Roth described at the turn of the previous century how, when a Pitta-Pitta girl first showed signs of puberty, “several men would drag her into the bush and forcibly enlarge the vaginal orifice by tearing it downwards with the first three fingers wound round and round with opossum string. Other men come forward from all directions, and the struggling victim has to submit in rotation to promiscuous coition with all the ‘bucks’ present.”[\[5\]](#)

Even worse was his description of practices around Glenormiston:

“A group of men, with cooperation from old women, ambush a young woman, and pin her so an old man can slit up the shrieking girl’s perineum with a stone knife, followed by sweeping three fingers round the inside of the virginal orifice. “She is next compelled to undergo

copulation with all the bucks present; again the same night, and a third time, on the following morning."

In Birdsville, a hardwood stick two feet long with a crude life-sized penis carving at the top, was used to tear the hymen and posterior vaginal wall.

"In the Tully area, a very young man would give his betrothed to an old man to sleep with her and train her for him. The idea was that the elder would 'make the little child's genitalia develop all the more speedily'. There was no restriction on age or social status at which the bride would be delivered up. As Roth observed, 'It is of no uncommon occurrence to see an individual carrying on his shoulder his little child-wife who is perhaps too tired to toddle any further.'"[\[6\]](#)

Accounts from the missionary era are daunting.

- In 1905 the local telegraph operator at Fitzroy River reported that a five-year-old half-caste girl, Polly "was out with the old woman, Mary Ann, when a bush black took her away for two nights during which time the blacks here said he made use of her. Such actions as that of Polly and the men are very common among the natives." [\[7\]](#)
- Anglican lay missionary Mary Bennett in 1934 testified, "The practice to which I refer is that of intercision of the girls at the age of puberty. The vagina is cut with glass by the old men, and that involves a great deal of suffering...I remember my old Aboriginal nurse speak with horror of the suffering which she had been made to undergo." [\[8\]](#)
- A practice as bad as female genital mutilation is still inflicted on hundreds of boys annually – involuntary sub-incision, the slitting open of the male urethra. [\[9\]](#)

The controversy continues into the current period.

In the 1970s John Coldrey, later a judge of the Victorian Supreme Court, appeared for a Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service client in Alice Springs. The traditional man, drunk, had inflicted 201 separate injuries on his wife who then bled to death. She had been passively crouching, and there were no defensive wounds. The man was punishing her for having been with other men that day. He had not wanted to kill or seriously injure her, he said. J. Coldrey belatedly discovered that the wounds were on traditional punishment areas of the body, and the conviction was then of manslaughter, not murder. [\[10\]](#)

Peter Sutton finds it distressing that in north and central Australia, relatives of small children "cruel" them by inflicting pain to make the child angry and violent, even from six months old. He believes this is a tradition dating from earliest times when aggression needed to be instilled in children. [\[11\]](#)

NOWRA WROTE his book "Bad Dreaming" after a spell in Alice Springs hospital in 2005, when he saw numerous Aboriginal women and young girls with severe injuries from domestic violence. He visited outback communities and found them astonishingly brutal:

"Some of the women's faces ended up looking as though an incompetent butcher had conducted plastic surgery with a hammer and saw. The fear in the women's eyes reminded me of dogs whipped into cringing submission." [\[12\]](#)

In contemporary Australia, polygamy and traditions of promised-brides continue in Arnhem Land and other remote areas. Until recently, the judiciary was lenient in such cases involving forced under-age sex. Jarrett writes:

"There are Aboriginal men who still claim these modern young girls as their promised possession, and have cars, guns, outstations and kin to help them secure and punish these resistant girls, well away from public purview. ..A man's traditional sense of entitlement, and use of violence to enforce it, can still triumph over the emancipation of a young Aboriginal woman's mind." [\[13\]](#)

In 2004 at Yarralin near Katherine, a 55-year-old married man physically and sexually assaulted his 14-year-old promised bride for two days while she pleaded she was too young for sex. In August, 2005, in an under-the-tree session, Justice Brian Martin noted the cultural context, and gave the man a one-month sentence suspended. On appeal the sentence was increased to three years and a defence appeal to the High Court was lost. Justice Martin later admitted he had been too lenient.^[14]

In 2002 at Maningrida, Jackie Pascoe Jamilmira, a 50-year-old wife killer, had forced sex on a 15-year-old promised bride, for whom he had given presents to the 'bride's' parents. He then fired a shotgun into the air to warn off the girls' family members. Justice John Gallop of the NT Supreme Court sentenced him to 24 hours gaol for unlawful sex, saying the matter should never have come to court. Pascoe, he said, was exercising his conjugal rights in traditional society and the girl 'knew what was expected of her. It's surprising to me [that the defendant] was charged at all'.^[15]

The North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service relied on expert anthropological evidence to argue that promised marriages were common and morally correct under Aboriginal law, and supported his application to the High Court.^[16]

Nowra also cites the case of a middle-aged Aboriginal man who anally raped a 14-year-old promised bride, and who was sentenced merely to detention for the duration of the NT court session.^[17]

Lawyer Joan Kimm recounts the tragic case of 37-year-old Jennifer Cook on Bathurst Island, who killed her husband David Mungatopi. She had been promised to a very old man, who had bequeathed her to his grandson. Mungatopi. That man flogged her daily for 18 years. In May, 2000, after a remorseless beating, she stabbed him. Justice Riley said that 'after years of [her] black eyes, and coughing blood, he did not think that she ought to serve an actual sentence'.

However, she then became a pariah on Bathurst. Mungatopi's relatives took her six children and Mungatopi's memory is so honored that the local Snake Beach was closed for two years in tribute.^[18]

The Gordon inquiry in WA in 2002 had referred the issue of whether violence to women and abuse of children were 'traditionally sanctioned' , to the WA University Centre for Anthropological Research.

The Centre found that family violence or abuse "are invariably within the sphere of traditional practice, ritual or the operation of customary law. We have found little material that suggests that violence or abuse per se are condoned, or took place with impunity, outside traditionally regulated contexts."

Gordon concluded that "that family violence which occurs in traditional societies appears to be no different to any other societies in the world." However, the comment ignored the sanctioned violence.

In fact, says Kimm, the Gordon report had established that young girls were the property of their community, the arrangement for the promise was made without their consent, they were 'handed over' and they were the reward for 'male accomplishment'. It is a matter of little grace that actual marital sexual relations did not start until after puberty when this could occur at ten years...^[19]

Lawyer Hannah McGlade, however, quotes her mother, Mingli Wanjurri McGlade, a Noongar elder, who talked to an East Kimberley elder, who told her "We have to look after our women. They look after us, they cook for us, they mind us when we're sick, they give us our children. They are very precious."

Mingli also mentioned that Catholic male elders of Turkey Creek commented about 'their promise' (bride) – "it was very clear that there had been no consummation or intent to consummate those traditional marriages with young girls. Minglie's experience on law grounds in Broome and Kununurra was that women talk about respect for men's law, and men talk about respect for women's law." ^[20]

"In Noongar culture women were always very strong, and sexual violence against children unimaginable." She quotes Pat Baines, an anthropologist who says that traditional Noongar culture featured strong women. Baines quotes a 1988 film by Indigenous filmmaker Tracey Moffatt, conceived by some Perth based aboriginal women, including McGlade, promoting strong Noongar women, "not because we are 'cultural revisionists' but because it is what we know to be true from our own knowledge of our history and culture..."

"Noongar people will also say that we have no words to describe the sexual violence and abuse of children that is occurring today – it is not part of our culture, but something that has happened as a result of colonization and the breakdown of our Noongar ways."[\[21\]](#)

Kimm argues, however, that male Aboriginal leaders have focused not on women's rights to security but on political rights such as land rights, treaties, sovereignty, self-determination and the need for customary law. "The continued public denial that violence is part of traditional culture remains a large part of the 'root of the problem'." [\[22\]](#)

Specific examples of abusive traditions are disquieting:

"[An Aboriginal] Ngabidj related a Kimberley practice, the prelude to which, in his account, was of a child bride being taken crying from her parents, who then go far away. The child then had to bear sexual relations by many men before being taken over by her husband."[\[23\]](#)

In Warrabri in the 1960s:

"...old men looked upon their young wives 'as their pension ticket'; it was also a matter of prestige to have a young wife. The wives parents also benefited. In the 1970s when a young girl from Yirrkala was badly beaten for refusing to marry, a journalist observed that with the conversion to money economy, bride prices to be paid to the parents were from \$500 to \$1000."[\[24\]](#)

In a 1997 case, a man, his wife and her brother were drinking around their campfire. The husband said something out of place to his wife, and the brother, instead of punishing the husband, hit his sister on the head with a heavy stick, massively fracturing her skull. An elder of the Ngukurr gave evidence that this was a hangover from customary law: "That's her punishment – you know. She got to take that...In olden days, you know if one breaks down, one little thing, he's dead. You know, speared — just like that!" [\[25\]](#)

One man at Ernabella in 1978 still felt guilty because, when he was very small 35 years earlier, he had crept out to watch a corroboree. The next morning the group killed his mother over it and he was deposited by the group into the care of Ernabella Mission.[\[26\]](#)

Men could inflict "sacred rape" on a woman or group of women as punishment, to prepare a girl for marriage and penetrate girls upon puberty:

"Women were offered in conciliation to raiding warriors. If their sexual services were accepted it signified there would be no fighting. In the Kimberley a woman might be sent over to a whole group of men visitors.

If a Kimberley woman was thought to be 'running around', a group of men would take her into the bush, and so cut her genitals that she would be incapable of ever again having sexual intercourse."[\[27\]](#)

Other Kimberley accounts tell of girls of nine being impregnated and suffering long and severe labour, only to die at the end. Mother and the baby, whether dead or alive, were buried together.[\[28\]](#)

Boys have been subjected to sometimes equivalent violence.

Boy-wives as young as five were assigned to young unmarried men as lovers. In 1992 Fred Hollows was filmed talking about the practice of Aboriginal elders in some remote communities sodomising boys during initiations, and he complained about the HIV infections. The footage was aired only recently (mid-2000s). Nowra says, "It is highly probable his comments were considered too inflammatory and regarded as culturally insensitive."[\[29\]](#)

Lyla Coorey in a 2005 report to the Senate, said some elders were abusing boys in fake initiations. Gary Lee, an indigenous researcher, said boys as young as eight are being used for sex, with almost cultural sanction.[\[30\]](#)

In 2004 in a remote NT community, three brothers under 10 were tied to a tree, stripped naked and sexually assaulted repeatedly by a gang of men. The distraught mother had been abused since 13 and fled with the boys to the bush for weeks living off plants until picked up by the police.

In 2005 a four-year-old boy from a Northern Kimberley community was raped by a man until the boy lost control of his bodily functions, had surgery in Perth, was sent back to his community and then brutally raped again, this time by a 12-year-old.

Between April and August 2006, five men and five youths aged 12-39, were charged with sexually assaulting an 11-year-old boy 37 times, initially when he was stoned on marijuana. He was raped by all nine, then later by another three. Later when swimming, he was threatened and assaulted by five men, one of them raping him with a 20cm stick. On the way home he was raped again by the five. The case was unconcluded when Nowra wrote the book, but the five men had been granted bail.[\[31\]](#)

Sutton relates that "at Watha-Nhiin in the 1970s (a girl named Ursula Yunkaporta) had been one of a number of lively, sassy, school-age kids. In the 1990s she presented at Aurukun Hospital scores of times over a two-year period of heavy drinking, repeatedly bashed by her boyfriend and others with whom she also fought. She was treated after being savaged by dogs at night, and was twice examined after giving details of how she was pack-raped by local boys. In the end she took her own life by hanging, at twenty-seven..."[\[32\]](#)

Sutton concluded his book, "If men refuse to do anything then they are responsible for the slow death of the many wonderful aspects of their culture, traditions and customs, and their communities will continue to be on a nightmarish treadmill to cultural oblivion."[\[33\]](#)

When the horrific is mundane — Part IV

9th May 2013

Tony Thomas

Tony Thomas studied anthropology under Professor Ronald Berndt in Perth in 1961, and in 1974 co-authored, with Dr Carl Georg von Brandenstein, "TARURU – Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara". In 2010 he authored "Stolen Generations: The Pocket Windschuttle".

"There are so many appalling stories within the indigenous community in Australia and it is hard to know where to start to do something about it... We must stop this appalling violence being inflicted one upon the other by members of the Indigenous community."

— Victorian Supreme Court judge Betty King, April 26, 2013

The brutally fatal rape of a 23-year-old woman, known as Braveheart, in a New Delhi bus last December shocked people worldwide, including in Australia. So did the two-day series of rapes

and torture in the same city, of a five-year-old girl in April. Few Australians comprehend the equally horrific violence that can be inflicted on Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men. This is not to disparage Aboriginal traditional culture *per se*, which I find captivating in its knowledge of the environment, complex social life and droll 'take' on life's ups and downs.

Violent misogyny in some Aboriginal communities, however, is endemic.

Even to read these instances is daunting. Although Prime Minister Gillard abhors violence against women, she is yet to recognize the dimension of the problem in Aboriginal communities. As she told high school students on the ABC's Q&A this week [May 6], **"I mean, we've still got problems and challenges**, but if we look at our near neighbours, you know, PNG, many of the islands of the Pacific, many of the countries in which we do aid and development work, the violence against women there is truly staggering..." (*My emphasis*)

Solicitor/historian Joan Kimm wrote in 2004: "The intensity of this violence needs to be understood by non-Indigenous Australians. When working as a solicitor with non-Indigenous clients, I encountered infanticide, homicide, suicide, betrayals, violence, incest and other child abuse. These were tragic cases but in none was the violence equivalent to the horrific circumstances of Aboriginal violence...Aboriginal women are disadvantaged in that Aboriginal culture has become an inviolate space in our society where abuse of women often occurs with impunity because of distorted views of the respect which must be paid to Indigenous rights." [1]

The local instances below starts several decades ago but current data show the violence remains appalling and in the past few years has soared.

- In 1980, an Aboriginal man, Ivan Imityja Panka, was angry with his wife because she refused to cook meat for him. Both were drunk. He decided to punish her for being 'cheeky'. After thrashing her within an inch of her life, Panka forced a piece of rippled reinforcing steel up her vagina, killing her. [New Delhi's "Braveheart" died from a similar assault by thugs who used a jack handle]. Panka's defence relied on a husband's traditional rights of chastisement if provoked.[2]
- In Numbulwar, NT, a man severed a limb off his sister while he was drunk. He went at her with an axe as well as a spear."[3]
- Veronica Hudson 42, on April 26, 2013 was gaoled for six years for manslaughter for stabbing her partner Woody Heron in the chest in Bendigo on December 26, 2011. Three days earlier, he had slit her throat from ear to ear, though not deeply, and cut her arm and hand. She was then released from a psychiatric hospital into Heron's custody the day before she killed him. Heron had been gaoled for five years for assaulting her by kicking, biting and stomping on her head, breaking her jaw. He had also pulled her teeth out with pliers. On sentencing, Hudson sobbed to Justice Betty King: "I just want to say I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." [4]

Recent child-abuse cases, from Central Australia and Queensland, included a seven-month baby taken out of her home and raped, and who needed surgery under general anaesthetic. A two-year-old girl left unattended while her mother drank, was sexually assaulted by a man and also needed surgery. A three-year-old was sexually assaulted by three men, and ten days later another man raped her twice, once using a mangrove stick

A six-year-old girl was followed to a waterhole and while playing there was anally raped while being drowned. A 10-year-old girl was tied to a tree and repeatedly raped. One health worker examined a 14-year-old girl 'so raw from being raped – she had been abused since the age of three – that she screamed throughout her examination.' [5]. [6]

Morgan Jabanardi Riley, 27, sexually assaulted a two-year-old at Tennant Creek in 2004, digitally penetrating her vagina and anus as she screamed in pain. He got 4.5 years non-parole, later increased to 6.5 years.

Gerhardt Max Inkamala, 21, in 2003 digitally penetrated a 7-month-old girl's vagina, causing serious injury, at Hermannsburg. His sentence was increased after appeal from only five years to nine years, with non-parole of seven years. [\[7\]](#)

These cases are in the minority which get to court, author Louis Nowra wrote. The Robertson report in 1999 estimated near 90% of rapes in the Indigenous communities went unreported. [\[8\]](#)

The Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce (ACSAT) 2006, visited 29 NSW Aboriginal communities and child sexual assault was described as a 'huge issue' in every one of those communities. Aboriginal witnesses told the inquiry that the assaults on girls and boys were massive, epidemic, and a way of life. They were perpetrated by grandfathers, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, cousins and brothers, often important men, and including some non-Aboriginals. [\[9\]](#)

Writing in *Quadrant* last November, Bubbles Segall, a worker for 36 years in Northern Territory community health, instanced these cases of violence:

"A woman is repeatedly evacuated from a remote community health centre to hospital with multiple fractures to the bones in her hands and burns to her vagina. On each of these occasions, her husband, in fits of jealous rage, has put burning sticks into her vagina and broken the bones in her fingers..."

"A nurse is called out at midnight to attend to a woman who has been brutally bashed by her husband. She is six months pregnant with her first child. In a jealous, drunken rage, her husband accused her of talking to another man earlier in the evening. She is bleeding profusely from a head wound caused by a partial avulsion of her scalp. She has also sustained a partial tear to an earlobe. She is bleeding copiously from her vagina. Her husband has kicked her repeatedly in the abdomen. Her wounds are treated, she sustains a miscarriage and is evacuated by air ambulance to the nearest hospital that night."

Segall finishes:

"These situations are not unique or far and few. They are everyday occurrences in many communities, and there are thousands of similar examples which to health workers gradually become overwhelming and disheartening."

These instances could be called anecdotal. For those preferring data, see the NT crime statistics for 2007-12, released late last year by the new CLP government. [\[10\]](#) They show that nearly 11% of Indigenous NT women in 2011-12 were assault victims, more than 12 times the non-Indigenous rate. The number of victims was up 61% from 2006-07. [\[11\]](#)

When examined by age group, the victim rate in 2011-12 for 15-17-year-old Indigenous girls was 11%; and in the group 20-39 years, an extraordinary one-in-five Indigenous women that year were assault victims. The rate for NT non-Indigenous women overall was under 1%. [\[12\]](#) In the six years from 2006-07, the Indigenous woman who was most assaulted suffered 20 assaults. Keep in mind that these figures only involve assaults that come to official attention.

In the most remote areas of the NT, assault rates were up 66%, compared with 2006-07, including a 19% rise in the latest year. [\[13\]](#) There were a third more alcohol-related assaults than in 2006-07, but 175% more non-alcohol related assaults. [\[14\]](#)

Louis Nowra published his 90-page essay "Bad Dreaming" in 2007. He wrote then that the brutality was increasing, with spears, rocks, knives, bottles and bricks used [in other words, violence has been accelerating both pre and post-2007]. Rape and especially gang-rape had become more common, Nowra said, with violence more ferocious and sometimes beggaring belief:

“Victims are viciously gang-banged, during which they are smashed with iron bars, rocks, pieces of concrete or lumps of wood that cause massive physical injuries and permanent facial deformities. A particularly nasty strain of this violence that is showing an alarming rise, is the number of women being set on fire.” [15]

The Age’s Russell Skelton in 2006 reported a case where a young man doused petrol on his 18-year-old girlfriend’s stomach and genitals and set her clothes on fire when she refused to have sex.

Nowra quotes Dr Kate Naphthall of Darwin who on one Friday night from 5pm to 8am at Tennant Creek Hospital saw 28 cases of domestic assault – and those were just the ones that presented. The worst case she recalled was a woman of about 28 who had a saucepan of boiling water poured over her face, scalding her eyes beyond recognition. “When I looked in her files, she had between 40 and 50 similar presentations of assault against her by her husband,” Naphthall said. [16] (Tennant Creek Indigenous assault victims have risen 19% since 2006-07. [17] The assault rate there is now well over three times the NT average – which itself is high. [18])

Some women became sleepwalking targets-for-violence, rather than human beings. One woman was so injured to injuries she no longer felt them. Her husband put a barbed spear right through her arm and another man pulled it out. No-one reported the incident because she was attacked so routinely with knives, stones and sticks. [19] Women would be on the ground being kicked in the belly but no-one would help her: “You just didn’t do that. You could watch, but weren’t allowed to butt into people’s fights,” one woman told a 1999 inquiry. [20]

These reports include a case where wife of an elder was repeatedly bashed and stabbed over the years at Alice Springs, refusing police protection out of fear. Eventually she was beaten to death, tied up and left on an ant’s nest for a week. [21]

In May 2005 at Araru outstation on the Coburg Peninsular, NT, Trenton Cunningham 27, beat to death Jodi Palipuaminni, his pregnant wife and mother-of-four, because she didn’t bring him a cup of water while he was burying his dog. Her screams for help the night before she died were ignored, and she was dead by morning. The husband was on parole for assaulting his wife with a steel bar and pouring boiling water over her, resulting in skin grafts to 20% of her body. She had become his promised wife soon after her birth. She had complained 29 times to health workers about him. He had whipped her with wire, kicked her in the stomach while pregnant, stabbed her with scissors and scalded her. Cunningham was sentenced to a non-parole period of 6.5 years after his charge was reduced from murder to manslaughter. [22]

- *At Maningrida it was common for men, drunk or sober, to bash their wives when the women returned from a holiday or trip, just in case they had done anything wrong while away.* [23]
- *Merrilee Mulligan in Derby, described as “a respected worker for her people”, in 2000 threatened to expose her brother in law Jeffrey Qualla for molesting a seven year old girl. That night while she was asleep he bashed her head and dragged her into a vacant block and attacked her with a file. She died. He was charged with willful murder but the prosecutor Robert Cock QC accepted a plea of manslaughter. Qualla was to serve less than two years in prison. Cock commented that the juries view alcohol-fuelled violence in Aboriginal communities as so everyday that it was difficult to prove intent to kill.* [24]

The SA Government’s Commission of Inquiry into child sexual abuse on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands found in 2008 that sexual abuse there was normalized, with adult men holding an attitude of ‘she’s big enough’ towards young girls, and the view that ‘if you’ve got the body you do the thing’. Aboriginal girls came to accept that they would be sexually assaulted and abused, as the inquiry noted: “It is expected of them. They simply believe their resistance is futile.” [25]

The sufferings of many young girls will go forever unrecorded – particularly if they face the ‘double-silencing’ of cultural fear plus English language inabilities. For example, one concerned teacher on APY lands noted a young Aboriginal girl who had otherwise been a bright, happy child. One day the girl came to school and ‘just laid her head on my lap and sobbed. Like, heartbreaking, wrenching sobs. There was

snot and tears dripping down my legs and she sobbed probably for about 20 minutes.’ The girl’s siblings’ behavior soon changed for the worse as well, but the teacher left the school not knowing whether her report to the department had achieved anything.[\[26\]](#)

These are instances of violence from the past six months.

- In November, a Darwin court was told that riots at Wadeye – a particularly violent community – over a gang leader’s death were the worst in 50 years.[\[27\]](#)
- After a 13-year-old boy from a remote community was found dead [presumably suicide] at a Darwin boarding school last March, a former staff member and whistleblower told the press that “violence is the norm where they come from”.[\[28\]](#)
- A Daly River school had to be shut until further notice in February after two female staff were punched in the face. One of them, 56, lost a tooth and another, 66, was hit on the side of her face. The principal and eight unhurt staff were rushed from the community because of fears for their safety. The alleged assailant was an Indigenous woman.[\[29\]](#)
- At the Milingimbi NT school in March, a student threatened teachers with a tomahawk and had to be restrained by six staff and given three doses of sedatives.
- In May, Angurugu School on Groote Eylandt was closed after a teacher was hit on the neck from behind with a baseball bat, following smashing of the principal’s window with an axe, and a teacher suffering a broken hand after a student threw a chair and table at her. Another teacher was left bleeding after a bite, and a staff member was stabbed in the leg with sharpened pencils.[\[30\]](#) Earlier a woman teacher at the school had to be flown out after a student threatened to rape her. Another student there tried to choke a 66 year old male teacher. The teachers’ union says violent assaults happen daily and weekly in remote NT schools. The union claims the Education Department is covering up the violence because they wanted to maximize attendance statistics.[\[31\]](#)
- An emergency safety summit called in February to discuss violence, feuding and alcohol abuse in the 18 housing associations in Alice Springs, collapsed after walkouts by NT Indigenous Advancement Minister Alison Anderson and NT Police Commissioner John McRoberts. The summit followed two murders in the previous ten days. One involved a group bashing a man to death over a prolonged period.[\[32\]](#) Pre-summit, the Tangentyere Council chief executive Walter Shaw said people were under siege and living in fear from alcohol related violence. Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin was in Alice Springs but did not attend the summit. The town camps have been the recent recipient of \$150m in federal money, but many of the 240 homes involved have been trashed or degraded. (One estimate of the life of a house in such places is seven years).[\[33\]](#) About concurrently with the aid funding, the break-in rate against Alice Springs housing has more than doubled, commercial break-ins are up 30%, and the Indigenous female victims of assault are up nearly 80%.[\[34\]](#) [\[35\]](#)
- In NSW, the town of Bourke (pop 3000) is more dangerous per capita for assaults and crime than any country in the world, despite having 40 police in the town. Moree Plains and Cobar are not far behind. Dr Don Weatherburn, of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics, said that 25 years ago, “bashing someone for their wallet was something you just did not do in country towns”. Bourke police said they had difficulty returning youths to their homes at night and during school holidays, because the homes themselves were unsafe for the youths.[\[36\]](#)

NT politician Bess Price told the Parliament that gaol was safer for young people because there was no alcohol, three meals a day, the company of family members and language groups, and a healthier environment.[\[37\]](#) The same point was made by a Bourke, NSW magistrate, Roger Clisdell, who set some Aboriginal children were deliberately seeking gaol to escape “constant and brutal domestic violence.” He said endemic violence against women and children, often unreported, drove children out on the streets late at night. [\[38\]](#)

The following incidents all occurred within a few days in northern Queensland in March. A Cape York Mayor was charged after allegedly using a spear to incite a brawl and assaulting police.[\[39\]](#) At Doomadgee, a riot squad was flown in after a local allegedly hit a female police officer in the face with a torch and broke

her nose. When a 52-year-old was arrested, a large crowd stormed the police station and smashed doors. [40]

At Yuendumu, 300km northwest of Alice, about 50 women threatened a group of 15 families inside a store last July. A bus used in an inter-clan attack was burnt out. Police went to one camp and were met by 80 people armed with axes, nulla nullas, steel pipes, spears, star pickets, wheel braces, axles and rocks. Police were strengthened to 13, in a town of 800. [41]

At Mutitjulu, (pop 300), police answered a distress call last December and found 30 to 40 people fighting. That group threw rocks, bottles, and sticks at the police vehicle, and police reinforcements were also targeted. A female nurse who was treating an assaulted woman, was allegedly punched to the head and threatened with an iron bar. Both nurse and victim were taken to the clinic for treatment. [42]

At Aurukun, the town went into lockdown as police hunted a gunman who fired a volley of shotgun shots during a 200-strong street fight. The hospital, school and shops were barricaded as armed men roamed the streets making death threats against rival clans. [43]

Professor Peter Sutton wrote in 2010:

"In the early 1970s Aurukun, when I first went there, there were occasional large-scale battles, and many minor squabbles, but mostly there was relative peace. Alcohol still found its illicit way in, but only every now and then, and was drunk in secret. Homicide, a common feature of the region from earliest records to the 1950s, had been eradicated. Suicide was unknown. People who survived the rigors of infancy and early childhood had a good chance of living to their seventies. Child abuse, if it occurred, found the records only on the rarest of occasions. Local men mustered cattle and ran the local butcher shop, logged and sawed the timber for house-building, built the housing and other constructions, welded and fixed vehicles in the workshop, and worked in the vegetable gardens, under a minimal set of mission supervisors. Women not wholly engaged in child-rearing worked in the general store, clothing store, school, hospital and post office. It wasn't heaven, but it certainly wasn't hell. That was to come later." [44]

Sutton mentions sardonically that after Aurukun got a regular grog supply in 1985, people from nearby Coen, which itself was a disaster zone, began referring to Aurukun as "Beirut". [45]

None of the above fits the federal Labor government narrative of buoyant progress, as outlined by Prime Minister Gillard in her annual "Closing the Gap" reports. As she put it last year:

"The transformation of Alice Springs, the advances in community safety and food security in the wider Northern Territory, the new or refurbished housing on the ground in remote Australia, the Australian Government's Education Revolution, the acceleration of private-sector support for Indigenous employment and the roll out of the Indigenous Chronic Disease Package are all building towards achievement of the ambitious Closing the Gap targets. ...Above all, Indigenous people are rising to the challenge and taking responsibility for making these changes with governments." [46]

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