

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Lois (Lowitja) O'Donoghue**  
1932 -  
Indigenous Leader

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 3 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Lois (Lowitja) O'Donoghue**

**Director/Producer** Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

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Study guide prepared by Darren Smith © NFSA

Also in Series 3: Flo Bjelke-Petersen, Veronica Brady, Smoky Dawson, Malcolm Fraser, Hayes Gordon, Albert Tucker

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## SYNOPSIS

Lois O'Donoghue was born at Indulkana in the remote north-west of South Australia in 1932, a time when the situation for Aboriginal people could not have been more desperate. Lois never knew her white father. At the age of two she was taken away from her mother, who she was not to see for another 33 years. Her quest to be reunited with her mother is central to her story.

After a long struggle to win admission to a training hospital, Lois became the first black nurse in South Australia. Later, she became more involved in Aboriginal rights and worked tirelessly for her people. In 1976, Lois was the first Aboriginal woman to be awarded an Order of Australia. In 1983 she was honoured with a CBE and in 1984 she was made Australian of the Year. In March 1990 Lois became the founding chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Since this **Australian Biography** interview she has changed her name back to the one originally given her—Lowitja—and this name has been used throughout the study guide.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels.

Curriculum links include Studies of Society and Environment, English, Legal/Justice Studies, Indigenous Studies, Modern History Business Studies and Civics and Citizenship.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Stolen generations

Lowitja O'Donoghue was forcibly removed from her mother's care when she was two years old. She was taken by the missionaries to Granite Downs, and later moved to another two missions. It was years before she and her mother were reunited.

O'Donoghue was one of many Indigenous children separated from their families—a practice endorsed by government policies and laws for a significant period of Australia's post-colonial history.

The first removals took place during the early period of settlement. Indigenous children were separated from their families for use as cheap labour on farms and inland stations. Some were also used as domestics.

In 1869, the first Aborigines Protection Act was passed in Victoria, with other Australian colonies soon following. This was the first formal government policy authorising the separations. The laws sought to protect Indigenous people from the effects of colonisation and settlement, and did so through two main strategies: segregation (by creating reserves and relocating Indigenous communities to them) and education of the young.

'Protectors' were appointed and given significant control over the lives of Indigenous people. This was especially the case with their children, all of whom were placed under the protector's legal guardianship. This sweeping change of guardianship took place without consultation with Indigenous parents or communities.

By the early 1900s, although the full-descent Indigenous population was in decline, the mixed-descent population was increasing. Policies soon focused more on merging (assimilating) this mixed-descent population into the non-Indigenous community.

Indigenous young people were sent to schools that would prepare them for absorption into non-Indigenous society as adults. Younger children usually were sent to missions. Conditions in these institutions could be harsh and the occupants often lacked adequate food, basic facilities and medical treatment. Many schools also prohibited customary Indigenous practices and languages.

In the 1940s, a uniform set of child welfare laws was introduced and applied to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children alike. Children could only be removed if they were found to be 'neglected', 'destitute' or 'uncontrollable'. Despite their equal application, the laws did little to reduce the number of Indigenous children removed. Non-Indigenous standards of 'neglect' were applied, so that 'poverty' was considered neglect. Also, neglect and destitution were features of many Indigenous peoples' lives precisely because of a history of dispossession and dislocation.

In 1967, Indigenous people 18 years and over were granted the right to vote in national elections. Indigenous protest and lobbying developed a stronger and more politically potent agenda. Amongst other things, they called for land rights, cultural heritage rights and recognition of the disadvantage experienced from colonisation (including the separation of children from their families). From the 1970s, governments gradually moved away from promoting assimilation and towards policies of self-determination and participation.

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission conducted a formal independent inquiry—the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families.

### Discussion questions

- How does O'Donoghue describe her experience on the missions?
- What effect do you think the separations may have had on her and her mother?
- How does she explain the rationale behind the government policies? What other reasons might there have been for the policies?
- In what ways do you think the separations affected Indigenous communities?
- O'Donoghue emphasises the need to move forward. How do you think this can be achieved?

### Colonisation

As Lowitja says, Indigenous Australians were not the only people to have been colonised and dispossessed. As a nurse in India, she acquired an insight into experiences of colonisation in other countries. Just as the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are an important part of Australia's history they also constitute part of the history of European colonisation and British Empire.

At its height in the early 1900s, the British Empire included over 20 per cent of the world's land area and more than 400 million people. European colonisation is usually traced back to the 15th century when Spain and Portugal expanded their territory overseas to achieve political and economic strength in Europe.

Trade interests were the main motivation for early colonisation. New colonies supplied both raw materials and new markets for European goods. Companies—such as the British East India Company,

established in 1600—were granted monopolies to exploit overseas commercial and trade interests. Fur, sugar, tobacco and slaves were also lucrative trading items for the British in America.

Trade was not the only motivation for colonisation. In the 17th century many pilgrims fled religious intolerance and persecution in Europe, settling in the 'New World', particularly in North America. Missionaries also established posts in colonies with the aim of promoting Christianity and converting Indigenous peoples to the faith.

Whatever the rationale behind settling colonies, almost all required some form of colonial government or administration to protect settler or trade interests. While questions did arise about how legitimate it was to establish a government in a new colony these were settled according to principles agreed upon by the European nations. For example, there were three main grounds for acquiring new territories:

- by conquest;
- by treaty or agreement with the indigenous occupants; or
- by settling uninhabited land (the doctrine of terra nullius).

It was according to this last doctrine that Britain gained sovereign rights over Australia and set up a colonial administration. In 1992, the High Court of Australia rejected the application of terra nullius in the well-known Mabo case. The Court held that applying this doctrine was inconsistent with historical evidence to show pre-existing occupation and sovereignty by Indigenous peoples.

#### Discussion questions

- How did Lowitja O'Donoghue's experience in India change her perspective on experiences of Indigenous Australians?
- What other countries were part of the British Empire? Do they have indigenous populations?
- What do you think colonisation might mean for indigenous peoples at the time?
- How might post-colonial Australian history have been different if a treaty was made with Indigenous people upon settlement? In what ways does this basis for settlement differ from terra nullius?

## INDIGENOUS SOCIAL JUSTICE

### Self-Determination

Lowitja O'Donoghue is well-known for advising and lobbying government on Indigenous affairs. She was a member of the Aboriginal Advancement League, the first chairperson of the National Aboriginal Conference and a Foundation Commissioner of the Aboriginal Development Commission. Each of these organisations has played a vital role in encouraging policy reform and advancing the interests of Indigenous peoples.

'We will become our own people as Australians and understand who we are.' The right to self-determination underpins many social justice concerns of Indigenous Australians. Self-determination is the right of all peoples to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. It recognises that a person's or group's identity is in some way determined by their political, economic and cultural status. The more freedom people have in these areas, the greater will be their capacity to determine their own identity.

This principle is a fundamental human right under international law, and is included in the United Nations Charter of 1945. It is also mentioned in a number of other important international treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 1).

Under international law, self-determination contained no reference to indigenous populations until 1990, with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. To date, this remains the sole human rights provision that specifically refers to indigenous peoples.

However, in recent years, a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was prepared and is under consideration. Article 31 describes indigenous self-determination:

'Indigenous peoples, as a specific form of exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, including culture, religion, education, information, media, health, housing, employment, social welfare, economic activities, land and resources management, environment and entry by non-members, as well as ways and means for financing these autonomous functions.'

Over the past 10 to 20 years, governments have gradually responded to indigenous calls for self-determination. An area of great importance for this principle is child welfare. As O'Donoghue suggests, when Indigenous Australian children were separated from their families, the impact was felt across the entire community. Children represent a community's ability to perpetuate itself. The right of Indigenous Australians to determine the welfare of their children is fundamental to their communities' ability to realise their own future.

In this area, self-determination has been incorporated into Indigenous child welfare in a number of ways. An important reform was the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. First introduced in 1986 (Northern Territory), it requires that where an Indigenous child is to be placed in substitute care, they should be placed within their own culture and community where possible.

Other measures include the recruitment of Indigenous welfare workers, formal involvement of Indigenous representatives in child welfare agencies and the establishment of Indigenous-specific childcare organizations.

#### Discussion questions

- What issues of Indigenous social justice are raised in the interview? Can you think of any others?
- How are these issues relevant to the right to self-determination?
- In what ways is your identity shaped or influenced by political, economic and cultural life? How might Indigenous identity be shaped by these factors?
- Discuss the right to self-determination in the context of Australia's independence from the United Kingdom and the debate around a republic.

## Reconciliation

Speaking about possible feelings of resentment over past treatment by non-Indigenous Australia, Lowitja says, 'I don't think it's a very healthy feeling to have because...[it] stands in the way of moving forward.' Lowitja O'Donoghue has played a pivotal role in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation involves acknowledging past treatment of Indigenous Australians, the contributions such treatment has made to current conditions for Indigenous Australians and 'moving forward' to address these conditions.

In 1992 federal parliament established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). The official aims of CAR included:

- building a united Australia, which respects the land;
- valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and
- providing justice and equity for all Australians.

It was formed with a two-year brief to advance the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The goals of the reconciliation process are best set out in the vision statement of Reconciliation Australia, an independent organisation established by CAR. The vision statement includes the following important goals:

- achieving social and economic equity for Indigenous Australians;
- acknowledging the past and building a framework for a shared future.

In the late 1990s, community activity around reconciliation reached a climax. The Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTR) group organised the 'Sea of Hands' installation across the country. Some 250,000 Australians signed their names on plastic hands to signal their commitment to reconciliation. Marches were also held around the nation to indicate popular support for the process.

### Discussion questions

- How is Lowitja O'Donoghue an example of the commitment to reconciliation? What is her attitude to non-Indigenous Australia?
- Why do you think it would be important to acknowledge the past treatment of Indigenous Australians? How is acknowledgement important for people generally?
- What other community events were held in support of reconciliation?
- How can some of the goals or aims above be achieved in local communities?

## DISCRIMINATION

A major issue underlying the interview is discrimination, both at personal and social levels. O'Donoghue mentions some personal experiences of discrimination, and discusses them in the context of discrimination against indigenous peoples generally.

We commonly think about discrimination as treating people unfairly or differently, often on the basis of some aspect of their identity or character. This is the crux of the legal definition of discrimination.

Under Australian law, discrimination occurs when a person or a group of people are treated less equally than another person or group because of their:

- race, colour, national or ethnic origin;
- gender or marital status;
- disability;
- religion or political belief;
- sexual preference; or
- some other central characteristic.

It can also occur when a person is denied the opportunity to participate freely and fully in normal day-to-day activities. This might include harassment in the workplace, being denied a job or promotion, or being denied goods or services.

The Race Discrimination Act, Sex Discrimination Act and Disability Discrimination Act are the main laws that address discrimination at a federal level. Each state and territory has also introduced laws that seek to prevent discrimination.

### Discussion questions

- Give examples of Lowitja O'Donoghue's encounters with discrimination, both personal and as a member of a group.
- Think of some examples of discrimination based on the definition and categories above, with reference to individual and group treatment.
- In what cases might treating someone differently not be discrimination?
- How is the separation of Indigenous children from their families an example of discrimination?
- What methods are available for addressing discrimination in our own areas of life?

## ACTIVITIES

- **Research.** Investigate the history of colonisation in a country listed below. Write a précis looking at how colonisation took place, reasons for colonisation, what resistance the colonisers met, the impact of colonisation upon indigenous populations, ongoing conflict and achievement of independence.

Canada, United States of America, East Timor, India, South Africa, Vietnam, New Zealand, Mexico

- **Role play.** Working in small groups, role play a scenario that reflects a discriminatory practice. After presenting to the class, discuss:
  - how it constituted discrimination;
  - what rights and interests were involved; and
  - how it might be resolved.
- **Community awareness.** Working in groups or as a class, develop a strategy for raising awareness of reconciliation in your school and local community

## REFERENCES

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission—FAQs for Students  
<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice>

'The British Empire' and 'Colonialism and Colonies', ,  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Empire)

## FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

### Lois (Lowitja) O'Donoghue

Stewart Cockburn, 'Elder of Our Nation' in **Notable Lives: Profiles of 21 South Australians**, Ferguson Publications, Adelaide, 1997

Elizabeth Kwan, **Living in South Australia: A Social History**, South Australian Government Printer, Netley, 1987

Stolen Generation - 7:30 Report <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/stories/s268644.htm>

National Foundation for Australian Women—Biographical entry: Lois O'Donoghue  
[www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/IMP0079b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/IMP0079b.htm)

### Indigenous Social Justice

David Horton (ed), **The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History, Society and Culture**, Aboriginal Studies Press for AIATSIS, Canberra, 1994

Bringing Them Home, Report from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

- Student guide:  
<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997>
- Teaching module (with lesson plans): <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/publications/rightsed-bringing-them-home>

Indigenous Portal—A site for and about Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders  
[www.indigenous.gov.au](http://www.indigenous.gov.au)

Indigenous Social Justice—Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission  
[www.humanrights.gov.au/social\\_justice/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/index.html)

Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara), **Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence**, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996

- Teaching notes:  
<http://www1.curriculum.edu.au/rel/history/book.php?catrelid=1860>

Reconciliation Australia  
<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

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