

removed, and the grandmother of the fourth apparently consented to his removal to a foster home six months after his mother died in childbirth. In short, none of the four provided any evidence they were removed 'simply on the basis of race', as Premier Lennon claimed. If these were the best cases Lennon could find to nominate for media interviews, there was a void at the centre of his rationale.

In fact, the reasons given on the welfare files raise a very different possibility. If ending the Tasmanian Aboriginal or half-caste 'race' really had been the policy of the governments and the courts of the time, why would the officials involved in these four quite different child removal cases go to so much trouble to cover their actions with bogus file entries? Why didn't they simply record the underlying reasons on which they allegedly acted and the policies that sanctioned them? Why, in subsequent years when this issue gained so much publicity, have none of them regretted their actions and publicly come clean? It doesn't make sense. In Debra Hocking's case, her four siblings were returned to their mother yet, according to the theory of the Stolen Generations, the whole idea was that the children would never return. As Lennon said, they were meant to endure 'a lifetime of cultural isolation'. So that doesn't make sense either. Indeed, the only rational conclusion is that the reasons given on the files probably told the truth. The children really were neglected; the grandmother really did request the baby be placed in foster care.

THE DEFAMATION OF HAROLD BLAIR

Probably the most loathsome example of all the cases of child removal described in the Human Rights Commission's inquiry into the Stolen Generations was said to have occurred in Victoria in the 1960s. Welfare authorities offered Aboriginal parents in outback Queensland the opportunity to send their children to free holidays by the sea in Victoria. The offer, however, had a hidden agenda. When the children got to the holiday homes, they were adopted out to white families and never saw their parents again. The Human Rights Commission's principal source for this claim was Professor Colin Tatz, who gave the following testimony:

The 'Harold Blair Holiday Schemes', which was basically run by Mr Killoan in Brisbane through the Queensland Aboriginal Affairs Department, would organize holiday homes over the Christmas holidays in Melbourne [for Queensland children]. After three weeks ... the couple would say, 'I'd love to keep little Mary for a little longer'. 'Sure you can keep Mary for a little longer.' No reference to the parents. Within a few months the next question, 'Could I adopt Mary?' 'Yeah, you can adopt Mary.' This was not an AWB [Aborigines Welfare Board] Victorian adoption. It was

done through the Queensland Native Affairs Department, direct adoption kind of by mail order and by phone call.³⁸

Harold Blair died in 1976 and so was unable to publicly defend himself against Tatz's accusations about his holiday program. Let me do so now. It is beyond rational belief that Blair, one of the most impressive figures ever in Aboriginal affairs, would have approved a scheme that had objectives of this kind.

Blair was perhaps the best-known Aboriginal person of the 1940s and 1950s. He was a singer whose lyric tenor voice made him famous as a recording artist and concert performer. His life story of a rise from obscurity to celebrity also had strong appeal to many Australian newspaper and magazine readers of the day who followed his career assiduously. He was born to an unmarried teenage mother on Cherbourg Mission in western Queensland and from the age of two grew up on Purga Mission near Ipswich. He became suddenly famous in 1945 when he scored a record vote in the national radio talent quest *Australia's Amateur Hour*. He then had to overcome several formal barriers that educational authorities put in the way of him gaining further musical training. Eventually, however, he made an international career for himself as a concert singer in the United States and Europe. When he returned to Australia he lived in Melbourne and, while continuing his singing career, became an Aboriginal activist, joining the Aborigines Advancement League and the Federal Council of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. In 1957, when the Victorian government established its Aboriginal Welfare Board, it appointed Blair one of two Aboriginal representatives. He served as a director for the next three years. In the 1964 Victorian state elections, he stood for the Australian Labor Party in a campaign he ran partly on Aboriginal issues: the poor state of their welfare, housing, health and education. He came first in the poll but was defeated when the preferences of the Democratic Labor Party went to the Liberals. He nonetheless put Aboriginal people onto the political agenda at a time when their plight otherwise attracted little public attention. Four months before his death in May 1976 he was awarded the Order of Australia for services to music and the welfare of Aboriginal people.³⁹

³⁸ Professor Colin Tatz, evidence 260, quoted in *Bringing Them Home*, p 10 (ellipsis and content in square brackets in original). 'Mr Killoran' was Patrick Killoran, Director of the Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs.

³⁹ Kenneth Harrison, *Dark Man, White World: A Portrait of Tenor Harold Blair*, Novalis, Melbourne, 1975; Alan Duncan, 'Harold Blair (1924–1976)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 13*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, pp 193–4. For an earlier critique of *Bringing Them Home's*

It was no secret that as a young man Blair was a radical left-winger. While working as a cane cutter, he was discovered by the Queensland trade union activist and Communist, Harry Green, who acted as promoter and manager of his early singing career. When Blair moved to Melbourne in the late 1940s, other Communists, especially the arts patrons John Lloyd and his wife Gwenda, fulfilled a similar role. They tried to make him an Australian version of the American Negro concert singer, Paul Robeson, a supporter of the Soviet Union who helped radicalize black politics during the Cold War. By the late 1950s, however, Blair was taken up by the Moral Rearmament movement under its program to convert well-known Aborigines to the anti-communist cause. This was virtually a replica of the conversion by Moral Rearmament of the former Communist author Margaret Tucker, described in Chapter Six.⁴⁰

Blair conceived the idea for his holiday scheme after a team of marching girls from Cherbourg Mission performed at Melbourne's Moomba Festival in 1962. They were a great favourite with festival crowds and the girls enjoyed their visit to Melbourne so much that Blair decided to capitalize on the goodwill by expanding the program. Blair's drive and enthusiasm won government support in Queensland and Victoria and found many prospective Melbourne families willing to billet children from the outback. The white families chosen to participate had to have children of their own of the same age and sex as their Aboriginal guests. The demand was so great from Queensland Aboriginal parents and children that organizers had to charter planes to transport them all from Brisbane to Melbourne. The project expanded to New South Wales and one of its offshoots, the Miss Junior Victoria quest, raised money for many Aboriginal projects of the day, including the Institute for Aboriginal Development at Alice Springs. It eventually arranged holidays for no fewer than 3000 Aboriginal children.⁴¹

The notion that Blair would have devoted his talent and energy to this scheme in order for Aboriginal children to be stolen from their parents is so inherently implausible that the allegation should never have been made without some very convincing evidence. *Bringing Them Home* failed to provide any. It reproduced Tatz's uncorrobo-

defamation of Harold Blair, see Douglas Meagher, 'Not Guilty', *Quadrant*, November, 2000

⁴⁰ Harrison, *Dark Man, White World*, pp 54–89, 188–206. Harrison was another Moral Rearmament member who fulfilled a similar political role in writing Blair's biography as Jean Hughes did in rewriting Margaret Tucker's 'autobiography'.

⁴¹ Harrison, *Dark Man, White World*, pp 227–45; Duncan, 'Harold Blair', p 194

rated assertion prominently — on page 10 of the 689 report — without any scepticism about his ability to give an objective account, even though Tatz had a track record among the most fixated of all the Australian academics in genocide studies.⁴² The only other support the report offered for its case⁴³ was one confidential submission from one unnamed woman who claimed she became a stolen child through the program. She said her mother died while she was spending the holiday with a Victorian family and they retained her, despite the fact her father was still alive. I will quote in full the sole empirical evidence *Bringing Them Home* used to demonize a once popular project that lasted for the best part of a decade, and involved 3000 Aboriginal children and almost as many white families.

Well, I was fostered when I was 7. I was staying with my foster parents and they rang up one day and said my mother had died and would they consider fostering me. That was over the phone. I know there was nothing signed for me and that, and I want to know why because my father was still alive, and he didn't die until I was 10. [I was with these people] through the 'Harold Blair' scheme for Christmas holidays and when I come down me and my two sisters got split up. We used to live in Coomealla on the mission, across the border from Mildura. They just rang me up and said that my father had died, that's all ...
*Confidential evidence 214, Victoria: woman removed at 7 years in the late 1960s having come to Melbourne for a holiday. She never saw her parents again.*⁴⁴

Even though this woman's version of events may have been true, it was not enough on its own to establish that such incidents were common under the Harold Blair project. One personal anecdote was hardly sufficient to condemn a whole program involving several thousand people. The Human Rights Commission should have

⁴² Colin Tatz, *Genocide in Australia*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1999; 'Genocide in Australia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1, 3, 1999; 'Confronting Aboriginal Genocide', *Aboriginal History*, 25, 2001; *With Intent to Destroy: Reflecting on Genocide*, Verso, London, 2003

⁴³ More recently, the historian Richard Broome has alleged that the Victorian Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ray Meagher, said in 1968: 'It has come to my attention that some people are getting aboriginal children through holiday schemes and not sending them back' (*Aboriginal Victorians: A History From 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, p 343). Broome said this was reported in the Melbourne *Herald* newspaper on 25 June 1968. That is untrue. The *Herald* discussed the issue of informal adoptions in that edition but none of its quotations from Ray Meagher made any mention of 'holiday schemes' or anything resembling them. Nor did the other two Melbourne newspapers which reported the issue of informal adoptions at the same, *The Age* and the *Sun*, quote Meagher saying this.

⁴⁴ *Bringing Them Home*, p 66 (content in square brackets and ellipsis in original)

investigated the relevant records of the two major agencies that funded and supervised the program, the Queensland and Victorian Departments of Aboriginal Affairs. It declined to do so. A proper case would have provided information about how many children went on the holidays but failed to return. It would have told how many Aboriginal parents complained about this. The families concerned were not unknown. All the children were recruited from Queensland and New South Wales mission stations where they were well-known to mission managers. Yet the commission failed to provide evidence of any parents reporting their children had gone missing over the holidays.⁴⁵ The complete absence of such complaints is telling.

At the very least, the authors of *Bringing Them Home* should have examined the background of their anonymous informant to see if what she said was credible. If she had grown up on the Coomealla Mission at Dareton, the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board would have kept records of her and her family. When her mother died, the board would have known whether her father and his whereabouts were known, whether she had other Aboriginal relatives who could have cared for her, or whether she was alone in the world. It could also have told the inquiry whether she was fostered out or adopted with the board's approval and if her retention by the white family was lawful. In Victoria at the time, it was illegal for foster parents to refuse a request by the natural parents for the return of any child, black or white.⁴⁶ If her father had wanted custody, under normal circumstances he should have got it.

The Human Rights Commission not only failed to make elementary inquiries of this kind, it failed to provide *any* substantial evidence for its serious accusations against the Harold Blair project. The commission was so impatient to censure Blair — how dare he try to ameliorate race relations by letting Aboriginal children enjoy a holiday in the city, which they might prefer to their 'own country' — it neglected to establish a case of improper conduct at all. Nonetheless Blair still stands publicly condemned in *Bringing Them Home* for creating a program that separated children from their parents with false promises and lies. He is one Aborigine who genuinely deserves an apology.

⁴⁵ In 1968, when he raised the issue of informal adoptions in Victorian, the Director of Aboriginal Affairs, Reginald Worthy, could only point to three cases where unofficial foster parents had initially refused parents' requests to return their children. In all three cases, the children were returned without the need for police action, 'Aboriginal Adoptions: Interstate Control Bid', *The Age*, 26 June 1968, p 3

⁴⁶ Statement by Reginald Worthy, Director of Aboriginal Affairs, *The Age*, 26 June 1968, p 3