

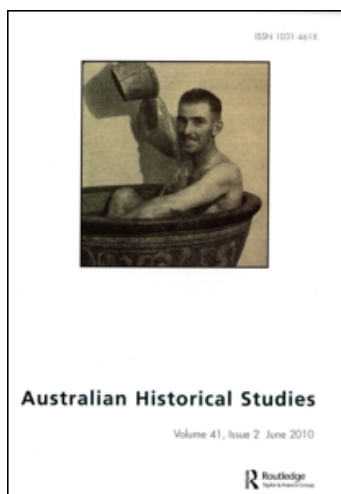
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The Limits of 'Elimination' in the Politics of Population¹

TIM ROWSE & LEN SMITH

Has Australian colonisation tended to 'eliminate' the Indigenous presence? The Australian government did not enact the logic of elimination—by ceasing to enumerate people as Indigenous Australians—when the referendum in 1967 showed popular support for the 'inclusion' of 'Aborigines'. No longer distinguishing 'Aborigines' in the results of the census, thus ending the 'Aboriginal population', was a possible road to inclusion, but it was not taken. Rather, census policy 1961–1971 effectively enlarged the 'Aboriginal population'. We argue that 'the logic of elimination' was resisted by a combination of Indigenous demand (for recognition), technical considerations (the unreliability of self-reported 'caste'), and social scientists' and bureaucrats' demand for better knowledge of Indigenous Australians.

PATRICK WOLFE has argued that in Australia, as in other settler colonial societies, the colonists' ascendancy over Indigenous people enacts the 'logic of elimination'. Assimilation policy obeyed the 'logic of elimination': '... a range of measures were introduced that were designed to detach individuals from Aboriginal communities, stripping them of their Aboriginal identities and incorporating them into white society'.² In particular, miscegenation had produced a hybrid population that governments removed to institutions; and 'the system' promoted further hybridization, according to a racial schema in which the child with an 'octoroon' parent and a non-Indigenous parent was understood to have achieved the status 'white'—'a three-generational lap count to elimination'.³ Citing Wolfe, Katherine Ellinghaus has depicted the exemption of selected Aborigines from controlling legislation in the 1940s and 1950s as 'statistical extermination—the use of legal definitions of indigenous identity to reduce the numbers of indigenous people.' Such 'cynical strategies of elimination' are characteristic of Australia and the USA as settler colonial societies, she writes.⁴ Does the 'logic of elimination' thesis apply to Australian history since the 1967 referendum? Examining the 1967 referendum and the changing terms of the 'race question' in the Australian census, we will show that although the Australian government had an opportunity to consummate the logic of elimination, it declined to do so.

¹ The research for this paper was funded by ARC DP 0665866.

² P. Wolfe, 'Land, labour, and difference: elementary structures of race' *The American Historical Review* vol. 106(3), June 2001, par 15.

³ *Ibid*, par 17.

⁴ K. Ellinghaus, 'Strategies of elimination: "Exempted" Aborigines, "Competent" Indians, and Twentieth Century Assimilation policies in Australia and the United States' *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* vol. 18(2), 2007, pp. 202–225, 205, 225.

'Counting' in the Australian Constitution

On May 27 1967, 91 per cent of Australian voters removed from the Constitution Section 127, which stated: 'In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, Aboriginal natives shall not be counted'. This section was widely considered to be offensively discriminatory; after its repeal, the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics (henceforth 'the Bureau') no longer excluded 'aboriginal natives' from Australian population tables. The Bureau did not begin to enumerate Aborigines as a consequence of the 1967 referendum. People classified as 'Aborigines' had been counted in all Commonwealth censuses since the first in 1911 (and before that in colonial censuses.). Annual reporting on the remaining numbers of Aborigines began in the third Year Book Australia (1910). Yearbooks in 1924, 1929 and 1930 included special articles about the Aboriginal population, commenting on—among other matters—the Commonwealth's increasing administrative ability to enumerate.⁵ By the 1966 census the authorities claimed exhaustive administrative coverage of the Aboriginal population. Up to 1967, the Bureau included 'half castes' but not 'full bloods' in the tables presented for the entire Australian population, acting on Attorney-General Alfred Deakin's advice in 1901 that 'half castes' were not 'aboriginal natives'.⁶ With the repeal of section 127 the Bureau also included those who had been enumerated as 'full bloods' in the population tables for the total Australian population.

The Ambiguity of 'Inclusion'

After the repeal of s.127, the Bureau could have deleted from the census any Aboriginal identifier. Beyond the Bureau, many administrative data sets did not distinguish Aborigines from other Australians, for example, state governments' records of births and deaths. Inclusion without an Aboriginal identifier was arguably also consistent with the prevailing policy of 'assimilation'. The official definition of 'assimilation' stressed the ideal of 'sameness', stating that 'all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single

⁵ 'The Aborigines of Australia' *Year Book Australia* no. 3, 1910, pp. 158–176; 'The Aboriginal population' *Year Book Australia* 1924 (*Book* 17), pp. 951–961; *Year Book Australia* 1929, pp. 914–916; A. R. Radcliffe Brown, 'Former numbers and distribution of the Australian Aborigines' *Year Book Australia* 1930 pp. 687–696 (All Yearbooks now available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSTSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts>).

⁶ In P. Brazil and B. Mitchell (eds), *Opinions of Attorneys-General of the Commonwealth of Australia: With opinions of Solicitors-General and the Attorney-General's Department*. Volume 1: 1901–1914 Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service 1981, p. 24. For a history of Australians classifications of who was a 'citizen' see T. Clarke and B. Galligan 'Protecting the citizen body: the Commonwealth's role in shaping and defending an "Australian" population' *Australian Journal of Political Science* (1995) vol. 30, pp. 452–468.

Australian community'.⁷ That is, in accordance with established practice and with policy principle, the Bureau could have interpreted the referendum as saying that to tabulate an 'Aboriginal population' was an affront to the inclusive assimilation sentiment that had repealed s.127. Indeed some feared this might happen. Dr C. E. Cook, the former 'Chief Protector of Aborigines' in the Northern Territory from 1927 to 1939, in May 1971 scorned those 'obsessed with the suspicion of racial prejudice' who 'insist, on the grounds that the practice is discriminatory, that statistical data, hospital sickness records and the like shall not include any racial identification or reference'.⁸ Like Cook, Australia's leading demographer W. Borrie defended retaining an 'Aboriginal population', while acknowledging that 'some officials have argued that it would be offensive or discriminatory to ask people if they were Aborigines, or even to ask their race'.⁹

Many people wanted Aborigines to be distinguished as a population. In the debates about the practical implications of the government policy of assimilation, in the 1950s and 1960s, reformers associated with the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA, established in 1958) had rejected 'assimilation' as a policy philosophy and embraced 'integration'. While 'assimilation' meant 'to be made like'—entailing the loss of a distinct Aboriginal identity—'integration' implied 'the ability of the smaller group to retain its identity while living within and in harmony with the National community'.¹⁰ 'Identity' could be underpinned by being distinguished in official population figures. Indeed, Aboriginal activist Chicka Dixon, a few days before the 1967 referendum, argued that a 'yes' vote would

end a long-standing insult to the Aboriginal people in the census. Dogs, horses, cattle and sheep get counted in the census. So do TV sets and motor cars. But not Aborigines. We don't even rate as high as the goggle box [colloquial term for TV set] We *don't exist* officially—yet we pay taxes. We *don't exist*—yet we are subject to a net of restrictive laws. We *don't exist*—yet we have to serve in the Army and accept the other responsibilities of citizenship. We don't mind accepting our responsibilities, but in return we want White Australia to *recognize officially that we exist*. We want to be human like everyone else.¹¹

Dixon was well aware that Australian governments had long quantified the existence of Aborigines. His words imply that the terms of official enumeration did not capture his idea of the 'Aboriginal population'. Dixon did not spell out

⁷ Australia. Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers, vol. iii, 1962–3 'Aboriginal welfare, conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers, Darwin, July 1963', p. 651.

⁸ C. E. Cook, 'Racism and Aborigines—spontaneous or induced?' in D. Tugby (ed) *Aboriginal identity in contemporary Australian society* Brisbane: The Jacaranda Press, 1973, pp. 46–53, 52.

⁹ W. Borrie, *Population and Australia: A Demographic Analysis and Projection (volume 2)* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service 1975, pp. 460–1.

¹⁰ As stated in the FCAA's publication *Smoke Signals* October 1959, reprinted in B. Attwood and A. Markus (eds) *The struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A documentary History* St. Leonards (NSW): Allen and Unwin, 1999, p. 178.

¹¹ Reprinted in B. Attwood and A. Markus *The 1967 referendum, or when Aborigines didn't get the vote* Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1997, p. 116.

the enumeration policy that he hoped would be enabled by repealing s.127, but there is no doubt that he wanted the Aboriginal population—as he understood it—to be 'visible' statistically.

It can be inferred from official population data from the 1950s and 1960s that many people of Aboriginal descent, like Dixon, were defying official classification by asserting that they should be counted as 'Aborigines'.¹² That is, although in census terms they may have been 'half caste' or less and not 'Aboriginal native' in Deakin's sense, they presented themselves in the census as 'Aboriginal', a category officially restricted to those 'more than fifty per cent Aboriginal'. Ethnic pride was prevailing over what the Bureau considered to be accurate reporting. Thus in a May 1966 seminar the Indigenous activist Kath Walker pointed to the 'deficiencies of the census'.

Regarding the identification of an Aborigine: surely the white man makes it very hard for himself in getting the census information by bringing in this caste business, quarter-caste and three-quarter-caste, etc. I notice he does not do this in the European world. Surely we can identify the Aborigine as one who identifies himself as an Aborigine—and we can well do without caste.¹³

Clearly, some prominent Aborigines who supported the removal of s.127 understood the change as a step towards a new practice of enumeration in which to 'include' Aborigines was to render them 'visible' as a distinct people.

Government Reasons to Repeal s.127

The Australian government had practical reasons to support the repeal of section 127. There had been four Sections of the Constitution to which section 127 was relevant: 24 (regulating the proportion of House of Representative seats to which each State is entitled); 89 and 93 (regulating the proportion of Commonwealth customs duties to which each State was entitled); and 105 (a superseded provision dealing with intergovernmental debt liabilities). By the early 1960s, only the interaction of sections 24 and 127 continued to be of operational significance. Section 24 said that 'the number of members [of the House of Representatives] chosen in the several States shall be in proportion to the respective numbers of their people'. Because of Deakin's interpretation of s.127, the 'numbers of their people' excluded people of more than fifty per cent Aboriginal descent as 'aboriginal natives'. When these Aboriginal people had not been enfranchised, it had been defensible to exclude them when apportioning national electorates to the States. However, in 1962, the Commonwealth had enfranchised in federal elections all Australians classed as 'aboriginal natives', so

¹² L. Smith, *The Aboriginal population of Australia* Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980, p. 264.

¹³ Kath Walker in I. G. Sharp and C. M. Tatz (eds), *Aborigines in the Economy* Brisbane: Jacaranda 1966, p. 13.

the Commonwealth Electoral Office should now include them in the population of each State. Otherwise, as Labor MP Kim Beazley (sr) pointed out, the 'current proposed redistribution' of House of Representative seats would discriminate against 'the States which have the largest Aboriginal populations': Western Australia and Queensland might well be entitled to have one more seat each in the House of Representatives, were all Aborigines counted in their populations.¹⁴ For the Menzies government to agree to a referendum on s.127, no goal beyond a fair distribution of federal electorates among the States need be imputed.

However, fair distribution of House seats among the States 'is not the deepest reason why section 127 should be removed', Beazley said. 'Any form of discrimination is a more urgent question than is redistribution'.¹⁵ In the subsequent campaign to amend the Constitution, ending discrimination was a prominent theme. 'Everything which reasonably can be construed as discrimination should be eliminated from the Constitution of the Commonwealth'.¹⁶

How did s.127 discriminate? Misleadingly, Gordon Bryant MP told the House: 'This Government counts pigs, sheep and horses—it has tremendous statistical resources at its disposal—but it refuses to acknowledge and count the aboriginal people'.¹⁷ He repeated this idea in *Smoke Signals*, the magazine of the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League: 'No aborigine can feel absolutely free and equal to other Australians whilst the Commonwealth Constitution contains the two clauses which exclude him from the census ... and from Commonwealth laws ...'.¹⁸ Labor MP James Cope said that s.127 'proclaims to the world that we do not count aborigines as human beings ... How absurd for this Government to give votes to aborigines but not to count them in the census'.¹⁹ Cope repeated—as many others were to do—the line about Australia counting cattle and sheep but not Aborigines.²⁰ Two Morgan Gallup Polls conducted in May and December 1965 illustrate the currency of this misperception of s.127. The poll question told respondents (incorrectly) that 'under the constitution, aboriginals were excluded from the census'. People were then asked whether they would probably vote 'Yes' or 'No' at a referendum to include aboriginals in the census.' In May 1965, 88 per cent of them said 'Yes', and in December 1965, 87 per cent.²¹

While inclusion in the census became a powerful idea, its implications for census policy remained unclear: Were 'Yes' voters seeking the improved

¹⁴ At least, that is how at least one member of the House did the sums: 'Western Australia needed an increase in population of only 2604 persons to retain its ninth seat. Queensland needed an increase of only 5208 persons to retain its eighteenth seat', James Cope, CPD 30 August 1962, vol. 36 new series, p. 885.

¹⁵ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (House of Representatives) 30 August 1962, vol. 36 new series, p. 877.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 878.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 882.

¹⁸ G. Bryant, 'A referendum' *Smoke Signals* 2(1), 1962, pp. 2–3 reprinted in Attwood and Markus 1997 op cit, p. 89.

¹⁹ CPD HoR, op. cit., p. 885.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 886.

²¹ Morgan Gallup no.1883, December 1965 (National Library of Australia).

recognition of a distinct Aboriginal population or the end of 'Aborigines' as an officially distinguished minority within the Australian population? The referendum campaign literature did not discuss whether there should continue to be a 'race' question or how to word it.²²

Aborigines in the Australian Census

How then can we explain the changes in the 'race' question in the 1966 and 1971 censuses? In Australian censuses from 1911–1961 the question on 'Race' had been:

For persons of European Race, wherever born, write "European." For non-Europeans state the race to which they belong for example, "Aboriginal," "Chinese," "Negro," "Afghan," Xc. If the person is half-caste with one parent of European race write also "H.C.," for example "H.C.Abandinal," "H.C.Chinese," &c.

In the 1966 census, the Bureau asked for a finer grading of fractional descent:

13. Race: State each person's race. For persons of European race wherever born, write "European". Otherwise state whether Aboriginal, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, etc., as the case may be. If of more than one race, give particulars, for example, $\frac{1}{2}$ European– $\frac{1}{2}$ Aboriginal, $\frac{3}{4}$ Aboriginal– $\frac{1}{4}$ Chinese, $\frac{1}{2}$ European– $\frac{1}{2}$ Chinese.

In 1971, the 'race' question substituted 'racial origin' for 'race' and allowed only singular 'racial origin', without fractions:

5. What is this person's racial origin? (If of mixed origin indicate the one to which he considers himself to belong) (Tick one box only or give one origin only): 1. European origin, 2. Aboriginal origin, 3. Torres Strait Islander origin, 4. Other origin (give one only) . . .

To understand these changes, we need to review the three challenges facing the Bureau in measuring the Aboriginal population: administrative coverage; intergovernmental consistency; and the disputed application of the notion of 'caste'.

The Bureau claimed complete administrative coverage of remote parts of Australia by 1966. Even nomads could now be counted as 'residents', somewhere. At the 1966 census,

Information was obtained from missions and settlements concerning Aborigines normally resident in such locations but absent at the time of the census, and of Aborigines

²² However, Shirley Andrews' 1962 pamphlet for the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement 'Petition for a referendum to remove discrimination against Aborigines from the Federal Constitution' said that the Commonwealth would require 'accurate information . . . as to how many Aborigines are living in each locality.'. The pamphlet can be read at <http://indigenoustrights.net.au> – an online exhibition of the National Museum of Australia.

resident at such locations but who normally reside elsewhere. The two sets of information were then reconciled and, together with the normal enumeration in other areas, resulted in what is considered to be a fairly complete and accurate coverage of Aborigines in the Territory.²³

However, effective administrative coverage depended also on the Bureau and the statisticians in each State government sharing information. The States' enumeration schedules had long reflected their own laws and administrative practices. Seeking uniformity in population data required the Bureau to conduct a dialogue with each State from the 1940s to the 1960s. Here are some examples. In 1949, the Victorian government disputed the Commonwealth's 1947 census enumeration. The Commonwealth had found 108 'full bloods', but the Victorian government insisted that there was none. The Commonwealth found 1069 'half-castes', but the Victorian government acknowledged only 763 'mixed bloods'.²⁴ The Victorian authorities insisted that by closing reserves and by inducing people of Aboriginal descent to adapt to the ways of the wider community they had almost resolved that State's 'Aboriginal problem'. The Commonwealth and the States cooperated in collecting data about Pastoral and Agricultural industries. If Aborigines who worked in those industries were 'full-blood' should they not be excluded from the statistics on employment? The Commonwealth and Western Australia's view in 1956 was that they should be excluded, thus keeping the Pastoral and Agricultural census consistent with the tables derived from the Australian census. However, Queensland officials disagreed: It was misleading to exclude such workers from an account of these industries, and it was difficult to decide which of the many Aboriginal employees were 'full blood'.²⁵

Underlying such interchanges was the fact that enumeration had more than one purpose. The Bureau's A. C. Mackinnon concluded after surveying State definitions in 1960 that they did not strictly apply genetic criteria ('blood') but took into consideration the functional capabilities of persons of Aboriginal descent: some of lesser caste (that is, less than half Aboriginal) were 'Aboriginal' if a magistrate declared them so or if they requested that they themselves be so regarded; and some people of more than 50% Aboriginal descent were exempt from the State laws governing Aborigines, if they had served in the armed forces or had acquired the style of life considered normal for Australians.²⁶

Up to and including the 1961 census the Bureau's attempt to apply genetic classification had produced what was in effect a three-part division of Australians of Aboriginal descent. First 'full-blood Aborigines' (people of more than 50 per cent Aboriginal 'blood'); second 'half-caste Aborigines' (people of 50

²³ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 30 June 1966 The Aboriginal population of Australia: Summary of Characteristics* 16 April 1969 (Catalogue 2.23), p. 3 emphasis added.

²⁴ Chief Secretary (Vic) to Commonwealth Statistician 8 November 1949, NAA A1871/7 1955/419 part 4.

²⁵ S. R. Carver to Government Statistician 21 November 1956, NAA A1871/7 1955/419 part 4; I. E. Solomon to Commonwealth Statistician 14 December 1956, NAA A1871/7 1955/419 part 4.

²⁶ A. C. McKinnon File note 30 December 1960, NAA A1871/7 1955/419 part 4.

per cent Aboriginal 'blood') and third people of less than 50 per cent Aboriginal 'blood' (not 'Aboriginal'). The Bureau did not claim to know how many people there were in the third group, and this did not present a problem, as such people were included in the general population tables; they were not politically or legally significant. 'Full bloods' (the Constitution's 'aboriginal natives') were excluded from general population tables, and from tables of 'race' up to August 1967, but they were included in special tabulations of 'full-blooded aborigines' and—occasionally—of the total Aboriginal population. 'Half-castes' deemed by Deakin not to be 'aboriginal natives' for the purposes of s.127 were included in general population tables. However, they were also shown separately, both in the 'race' tables, and, when the Bureau wished to quantify 'the Aboriginal population', in tables of 'full-bloods and half-castes'. Thus, in different contexts, the Bureau included 'half-castes' as part of the 'Australian population', the 'non-European population', and the 'Aboriginal population'.²⁷

The multiple significance of 'half castes' made it important for the Bureau to count them accurately. If there were difficulties in doing so, the resulting imprecision in the Australian population count might not be worrying, as such people were only a tiny proportion of the Australian population. However, the possibility of quantifying the 'Aboriginal population' was fatally imperiled if people of half Aboriginal descent were miscounted, for they had become, over the course of the twentieth century, the majority of what the Bureau published as the 'Aboriginal population'. The problem for the Bureau was that it was difficult to standardize the accuracy of field reports that claimed to classify people in terms of 'degrees of blood'. It was not always easy for an official to determine whether a person was a 'full-blood' or a 'half-caste'; and nor were Aborigines reliable in reporting of that distinction.

The Bureau's instructions for distinguishing 'half castes' and 'full bloods' required fine judgements.

- (a) Persons of mixed blood living with aboriginals should be classed as 'half-caste aboriginals' whatever the degree of white strain.
- (b) Persons of mixed blood not living with aboriginals should be included as 'half-caste' if the strains are approximately equal, as 'full-blood' if the predominant strain is aboriginal, and not included at all if the predominant strain is white.
- (c) Any person of mixed race in whom there is no white strain shall be classed as non-European of the same race as his father. If the father is aboriginal, he becomes one; otherwise he is not included in the aboriginal census.²⁸

²⁷ That is, the 'half castes', along with the less than 'half-castes', were included, *unidentified*, in general population tables, deemed by Attorney General Deakin not to be 'aboriginal natives' in the constitutional context. However, when the Bureau wished to quantify 'the Aboriginal population' it presented tables on 'full bloods' and on 'half castes' (but not on less than half castes). In short, the Bureau thought that 'half castes' should be included *unidentified* in a proper account of the 'Australian population' and included *identified* in a proper account of the 'Aboriginal population'.

²⁸ CBCS form 'Misc.14' 'Aboriginals', not dated but seems to be 1940s NAA A1871/7 1955/419 part 4.

Two aspects of an enumerated person had to be interpreted: With whom they mostly lived and their 'strain' (or descent). However, a person might live with both 'aboriginals' and non-'aboriginals', depending on the time of year or on their employment. To judge 'strain', an official would need to know a person's ancestry—information not necessarily available. Officials believed—or acted as if they believed—that they knew a person's ancestry and associations well enough to apply the instructions. As well—and we have touched on this point already—officials in state institutions and missions were effectively at liberty to mediate between Canberra's classificatory schema of 'descent'/'strain'/'blood' and their own functional classifications of people. That is, they could give more weight to a person's observed associations and circumstances of living than to their less precisely known 'strain' or ancestry. To a state official, a person of mixed descent who required supervision was not significantly different from a 'full blood' who required such supervision. A person known to be of 'mixed descent' could thus be reported as a 'full blood', a half-caste or as not being 'Aboriginal'—depending on their circumstances and usual relationship with authorities. Queensland's Chief Protector J. W. Bleakley explained to the Acting Commonwealth Statistician in April 1941 that although the census was supposed to distinguish 'full breed and half breed', officials reporting native populations did not necessarily understand this and tended to classify people in terms of their legal status.²⁹ This way of thinking seems to have persisted in Queensland. Twenty years later, a Bureau officer was assured by Bleakley's successor, Cornelius O'Leary, that it would be correct (according to Queensland government practice) to classify as 'Europeans' 'half caste aboriginals living away from settlements in their own homes and in normal employment.'³⁰ After the 1954 census, the weight of these problems of classification persuaded the Commonwealth Statistician not to publish an Aboriginal population table that distinguished 'full blood' and 'half caste', in *Commonwealth Yearbook* no. 43 (1957).

Towards a Social Science of Aborigines

To resolve these problems, the Bureau at first tried to make the 'race' question more precise. The 1966 census changed the question so that it reflected the distinctions made in the instructions we have quoted above: recall the three possibilities: 'predominant aboriginal', 'predominant white' and 'approximately equal'. The new census question introduced quarter fractions, giving as an example a person who was '³/₄ Aboriginal—¹/₄ Chinese'. However, the Bureau was not satisfied that respondents had applied these fractions conscientiously. As the Commonwealth Statistician acknowledged in November 1967, 'reporting by persons with Aboriginal blood in the 1966 census was insufficiently precise to

²⁹ J. W. Bleakley to Acting Commonwealth Statistician 21 April 1941, NAA A1871/7 1955/419 part 4.

³⁰ A. C. McKinnon to Commonwealth Statistician 24 April 1961, A1871/7 1955/419 part 4.

enable a reliable dissection of full-blood and half-blood Aborigines to be made.' Particularly in New South Wales and Victoria, the census produced more 'full bloods' than the Bureau judged plausible, 'owing to some half-blood Aborigines answering "Aboriginal" and therefore being classed as "full-blood"'. Such responses vitiated the count of 'full bloods'. The category 'half-blood' had also been badly reported in the 1954 and 1961 censuses, the Commonwealth Statistician now admitted publicly: 'a number of persons of less than 50 per cent Aboriginal blood described themselves as "half-blood" as there was no instruction to state degree of blood'.³¹ His words implied that Aborigines should have seen the point of a more precise race question in 1966, and classified themselves with due attention to halves and quarters. That they would respect such genealogical niceties had been the assumption behind the 1966 innovations in the 'race' question.

Now that the responses to the 1966 census showed that people were not as precise in racial self-classification as the Bureau wished, the tripartite schema 'full', 'half' and 'less than half' was in doubt. The 1966 census thus appears to have been both a high point and a low point in the Bureau's technical capacity. On the one hand, it boasted a complete administrative coverage of the continent, and a corresponding conviction that every former nomad now had a 'normal' place of residence; on the other hand, it deployed a 'race' question whose terminology was either not understood or not accepted by a significant proportion of census respondents of Aboriginal descent.

The crisis of the 'race' question was highlighted by a concurrent shift in Australian social science. A symposium 'Aborigines in the economy' was convened by Monash University's Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs in May 1966, attended by officials and social scientists who used administrative data sets to show that Aborigines were a 'problem population'. They complained about the quality of the available data. Frank Stevens of the Australian National University remarked that 'we dare not introduce any form of social accounting. It would be too embarrassing'.³² The Commonwealth public servant Jeremy Long declared that better data would be 'the basis of any realistic planning for the future of Aborigines in Australia'. He expressed the hope that the referendum campaign's focus on the census would 'ensure that the necessary time and money is provided for accurate counts of Aborigines as long as information about "race" is still collected'.³³ However, their misgivings about the data did not prevent them from depicting Aborigines as a distinct and socio-economically deprived segment of the Australian population. Speakers at the Monash seminar assumed that 'Aborigines and part-Aborigines' were (in the

³¹ CBCS Press Release 'Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 30 June 1966: the Aboriginal population: revised statement States and Territories of Australia' 27 November 1967 (typescript, 2pp, AIATSIS Library), p. 1.

³² F. Stevens, 'The role of coloured labour in North Australia', I. G. Sharp and C. M. Tatz (eds) *Aborigines in the Economy* Brisbane: Jacaranda 1966, pp. 279–303, 299.

³³ J. Long, 'Numbers and distribution of Aborigines in Australia' in Sharp and Tatz *ibid.*, pp. 1–13, 9.

words of Charles Rowley) 'rejected and depressed groups', that they were people of 'poverty, ill-health, ignorance and petty delinquency' and 'apathy'.³⁴

Researchers recruited by Charles Rowley to the Social Science Research Council's 'Aborigines and Australian Society' Project (1963–76) called for more and better official data. Leonard Broom and Frank Jones remarked of Aboriginal affairs administration that 'the management of a rubbish tip is more carefully monitored'.³⁵ They reported that there were no reliable statistics on Aboriginal mortality other than about 15 years of records for the Northern Territory.³⁶ For W. E. H. Stanner, 'the very absence of more precise information is itself the best evidence of past indifference'.³⁷ Peter Moodie, in his study of Aboriginal health, complained about official 'caginess' about quantifying 'the Aboriginal problem'.³⁸

The Bureau's release of *The Aboriginal Population of Australia: Summary of Characteristics* in April 1969 was an attempt to answer the demands of these academics and of the wider public, notwithstanding its misgivings about the technical adequacy of the 1966 census data. The monograph's innovation was to tabulate these data comparatively: The 'Aboriginal' against the total Australian population. This stimulated debate among officials and academics about the adequacy of the Bureau's definition of 'Aboriginal'. The Bureau defined the 'Aboriginal population' as 'those persons who described themselves in the 1966 census as being 50 per cent or more Aboriginal or simply as "Aboriginal"'.³⁹ Sociologist Leonard Broom warned that by comparing this 'Aboriginal population' with the Australian population, the 'degree of Aboriginal differentiation may be somewhat overemphasised and the sharpness of the discontinuity between Aborigines and non-Aborigines may be exaggerated'.⁴⁰ A fair-minded account of Aborigines' relative deprivation required, in his view, the inclusion of people of less than half Aboriginal descent in the 'Aboriginal population.' This sector of the population had never previously been included as 'Aboriginal' by the Bureau, but the terms of the 1966 census had provided, at least in principle, for their enumeration: The people of 'less than fifty per cent'. When Geoffrey Sawer, the Acting Director of the ANU's Research School of Social Sciences, asked the Commonwealth Statistician to release data on those who had reported themselves in the 1966 census as of less than 50 per cent Aboriginal descent, he suggested that the resulting more inclusive Aboriginal population figure would

³⁴ C. D. Rowley, 'Some questions of causation in relation to Aboriginal affairs' in Sharp and Tatz, pp. 345–359, 346, 350–1.

³⁵ L. Broom and F. L. Jones, *A Blanket a Year*, Canberra: Australian National University Press 1973, p. 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁷ W. E. H. Stanner, 'Foreword' in H. P. Schapper *Aboriginal Advancement to Integration*, Canberra: Australian National University Press 1970, p. viii.

³⁸ P. M. Moodie, *Aboriginal health*, Canberra: Australian National University Press 1973, p. 275.

³⁹ *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 30 June 1966, The Aboriginal population of Australia: Summary of characteristics* 16 April 1969 (Catalogue 2.23), p. 3.

⁴⁰ L. Broom, 'Educational status of Aborigines' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* v.6, 1970, pp. 150–1. And see Broom and Jones 1973 op cit p. 24.

avoid understating the 'average accomplishment of the total Aboriginal population'.⁴¹ The Bureau complied with Sawyer's request. It also met a similar request from Dr H. C. Coombs, chair of the Commonwealth Government's new advisory body, Council for Aboriginal Affairs.⁴² The Council commissioned another ANU social scientist, Frank Lancaster Jones, to analyse these total population data. In April 1970, the Bureau granted Jones permission to publish his 'The Aboriginal population of Australia: Present distribution and probable future growth'.⁴³

Before describing what Jones made of this redefined 'Aboriginal population', it is useful to know what Jones had previously said about census data on Aborigines. In the first monograph to issue from Charles Rowley's 'Aborigines and Australian Society' project, Jones had used the 1961 census (because the results of the 1966 census were not yet available) to project the growth of the Aboriginal population.⁴⁴ In doing so, he had analysed separately the fertility and mortality of the 'half-castes' and the 'full bloods' and then added them, to get a total analysis of the Aboriginal population's dynamics. However, Jones admitted doubts about the validity of this procedure because he knew that neither the 'half caste'/'full blood' boundary nor the 'half caste'/'European boundary was clearly drawn by the 1961 census. Thus he had not been sure, using 1961 census data, about the difference between the fertility of 'half caste' and of 'full blood' mothers. While it was no small problem that the enumeration of 'half castes' and the measurement of their fertility was so unreliable, Jones had been sure of his conclusion that the Aboriginal population was growing rapidly. He preferred to exercise scientific caution in another way—by limiting severely the length of his projection. He had gone no further than 1981, twenty years beyond the moment of data collection and only eleven years beyond the moment of publication of the projection itself. 'By 1981 Australia's total Aboriginal population will almost certainly number 150,000 persons, and possibly more'.⁴⁵

Although Jones judged the category 'half caste' to be technically problematic, when writing in anticipation of the 1966 census, he did not criticise the persistence of the language of 'caste' in the 'race' question. Rather he seems to have shared the Bureau's hope, when preparing the 1966 census, that the revised 'race' question, by expanding the 'caste' options to include one quarter

⁴¹ G. Sawyer to K. M. Archer 31 October 1969 NAA A1871 item 1966/3813 part 2 '1966 Census – Aboriginal population – requests'.

⁴² One of the Council's earliest Cabinet submissions, in July 1968, provided a figure of 44,350 persons 'part-Aboriginal less than 50 per cent' – more than one third of the estimated total (December 1966) of 130,300. Appendix A of Cabinet submission no. 92, http://www.naa.gov.au/COLLECT/cabpaper/Cabinet68/images_Decision_252_ We thank Bob Boughton for this reference.

⁴³ Len Smith, then a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of New South Wales, also was given the 'less than 50 per cent' data in August 1970.

⁴⁴ F. Jones, *The structure and growth of Australia's Aboriginal population* Canberra: Australian National University Press 1970.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

or three-quarter caste, would induce the respondent of mixed race to make a more accurate self-categorisation.⁴⁶ When the 1966 census data were released, Jones found evidence that mixed race respondents had indeed observed the niceties of the 'race' question. That is, the 1966 census showed that the Aboriginal population had increased by only 367 persons, a 0.1 per cent annual rate of increase. How could this be, if other evidence pointed to an annual rate of increase that was about 30 times that tiny figure (that is, three per cent)? Jones agreed with the Bureau's inference that many people who had categorised themselves as 'half castes' in 1954 and 1961 had taken advantage of the expanded 1966 options by classing themselves as 'one-quarter' Aboriginal, and such people were not defined as part of the 'Aboriginal population' when the 1966 census was first reported. While Jones applauded the 'reliability' of this finer grained account of people's racial proportions, he complained that because of the continuing application of the established definition of 'Aboriginal population' the Bureau's more finely grained race question had effectively removed thousands of people from the 'Aboriginal population'. As a consequence, Jones' twenty-year (1961–81) projection, after only five years, was proving to be excessive. Rather than withdraw his earlier argument that the Aboriginal population was growing, Jones urged that the Bureau cease to exclude the 'less than half' people from the 'Aboriginal population'. One way to do so would be to modify the 'race' question: To 'attempt an enumeration, not of Aborigines genetically defined as *predominantly* of Aboriginal descent, but of Aborigines as genetically *and* socially defined—persons of Aboriginal descent who define themselves as Aboriginal'.⁴⁷

By the time Jones published his second analysis of the 1966 census data (co-authored with Leonard Broom), the 1971 census had been conducted (but not yet reported) using a race question from which genetic distinctions of 'half' and 'quarter' had been removed, replaced by an invitation to self-identification as of: 'European origin' or 'Aboriginal origin' or 'Torres Strait Islander origin' or 'other origin'. Broom and Jones predicted that the 1971 results would be consistent with what they called the 'total identifiable Aboriginal population' of 1966. By this phrase they meant not only 'persons of half or more than half Aboriginal descent' but also 'persons who identified themselves (or were so identified by whoever filled in the census return) as Aborigines, but who are of less than half Aboriginal origin'.⁴⁸ Broom and Jones suggested that while there was 'some instability in the way many part-Aborigines describe themselves', popular and Aboriginal opinion considered them to be 'members of the Aboriginal population'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ L. Broom and F. Jones, *A blanket a Year*, Canberra: Australian national University Press 1973, p. 45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The Triumph of Identity over Descent

The 1967 referendum had removed any legal obligation on the Bureau to maintain Deakin's classification of 'aboriginal native' as people of more than half Aboriginal descent (and thus to exclude them from the nation's population tables). However, the Bureau's conventional definition of 'Aboriginal population' as those of half or more Aboriginal descent remained attractive to many government officials. They thought that the more inclusive 'Aboriginal population' urged by social scientists such as Broom and Jones would restore 'Aboriginality' to a section of the population that—in ancestry and way of life—was not truly 'Aboriginal'. Definitional change would encourage a politicised Aboriginal identity among Aborigines in the southern capital cities. Thus Dr C. E. Cook lamented that 'in centres of dense white population' there had grown 'an ill-adapted minority, increasing rapidly in number and in hostility'.⁵⁰ Such persons were not to be seen as 'Aboriginal'.⁵¹ In consulting other Commonwealth agencies about the design of the 1971 census, the Bureau got conflicting advice from the Department of Interior and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs (OAA, the bureaucratic arm of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs) about the identity and political standing of 'part-Aboriginal' people. As one Interior officer put it, the OAA was 'encouraging part-Aborigines to associate with the Aboriginal communities rather than the normal community. This probably is an effort to increase the head count of people they claim responsibility for'.⁵² When the OAA persuaded the Bureau in 1970 to allow some 'part-Aboriginal' public servants to attend meetings to discuss the wording of the census, the Department of Interior worried that their perspective on Aboriginal identity would start to inform the Bureau's approach. Interior was particularly apprehensive of Bob Randall's attendance at the 19 November 1970 interdepartmental meeting in Darwin. Randall was known to support strongly the right of 'part-Aborigines' to be recognised by governments as 'Aborigines'. When the OAA's Barrie Dexter suggested that the 'race' question in the 1971 census might include the words: 'Are you a person of mixed race, and if so what race do you regard yourself as belonging to?', he acknowledged that this could spark (in the words of a horrified Interior official) 'a publicity campaign by the

⁵⁰ Cook *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁵¹ This was a common view among many who championed the 'Aboriginal' cause, as they saw it. Federal President of the Sheet Metal Workers Union, Tom Wright, in 1944, insisted that 'the half-castes and others of mixed blood' were not part of 'the aborigines question'. The 'Aborigines proper, the full-blooded natives' were the real 'aborigines question'. T. Wright *New Deal for the Aborigines* (2nd ed). Sydney: Current Book Distributors 1944, p. 5. Wright's distinction was made by other critics of government policy at that time, as Alison Holland has shown: A. Holland 'Saving the race: Critics of absorption look for an alternative' in T. Rowse (ed), *Contesting assimilation* Perth: Public Intellectual Network 2005, pp. 85–99.

⁵² J. Machin, 'Note for file' 19 November 1970 NAA A1734 NT 1970/1529 '1971 Census – enumeration of Aborigines'.

various down south part-Aboriginal pressure groups immediately before the census telling part-Aborigines how to complete the census form'.⁵³

In December 1970, the Acting Commonwealth Statistician, J. P. O'Neill, recommended that the Bureau should 'discard the biological, or degrees of blood, approach to the race question in favour of the sociological approach, where individuals are given the opportunity to identify with a particular race'.⁵⁴ The word 'opportunity' highlights the implicit politics of the 'race' question's rewording. Interior wanted identity opportunities to be circumscribed by their own descent-based definition of 'Aboriginal'. The Bureau wanted to leave such opportunities open. Is it possible that having acknowledged the 'hostility of some urban and semi-urban groups of aborigines',⁵⁵ the Bureau judged that Aborigines would be less hostile to filling out the census if that were their opportunity for self-identification? Far from being a source of error, respect for 'identity' might secure better coverage. For coverage, in census administration, is a matter not only of administration's spatial extension but also of administration's engagement of responding subjects. By 1970–1, the Bureau was learning that solving the problem of 'coverage' required more than the administrative penetration of remote parts where nomads lived. There remained a different 'coverage' problem in those sometimes embittered 'urban and semi urban' enclaves whose Aboriginal identity had long been at odds with the Bureau's (and the Constitution's) descent-based construction of 'Aboriginal'.

Limits to the Logic of Elimination

In 1988, Jeremy Beckett pointed out that 'welfare colonialism' solicited, rather than erased, the Indigenous presence. He anticipated Wolfe's concession that within settler colonial rule there were 'logics' contrary to 'elimination': 'Over the last twenty-five years [i.e. since c.1968–9] a new phase of Aboriginal renewal has set in'.⁵⁶ While Wolfe thought that 'Aboriginal residues exist in spite of, rather than as a result of, colonisation—they are something for which ... the colonisers cannot take credit', he also referred to 'state-conceded Aboriginalities' whose 'figurations, domains and scopes' are contested, within boundaries set by the state's discursive construction of Indigeneity. Outside that discourse there are 'specific residue(s) that provide Aborigines with bases of resistance'.⁵⁷ I understand him to mean that the state and Aborigines interact in ways that sustain certain public accounts of Aboriginality. The agency of the

⁵³ J. Machin, 'Note for file' 19 November 1970 NAA A1734 NT 1970/1529.

⁵⁴ J. P. O'Neill to Secretary Department of Interior, 21 December 1970 NAA A1734 NT 1970/1529.

⁵⁵ I. G. Jones, Acting Commonwealth Statistician to Chief Statistical Officer, Darwin and Secretary Department of Interior 12 October 1970 NAA A1734 NT 1970/152.9

⁵⁶ P. Wolfe, 'Nation and MiscegeNation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era' *Social Analysis* 36 (1994), pp. 93–152, 130.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 128.

settler colonial state and the agency of the resistant Aborigines are thus curiously entangled.

The Bureau continued to distinguish, and indeed it enlarged, the Aboriginal population—avoiding the eliminationist possibility within ‘assimilation’. To what extent was it responding sympathetically to Aborigines such as Chicka Dixon and Kath Walker, who thought that their continuing statistical visibility—whatever their degree of descent—was essential to their resistance to ‘assimilation’? Was such Aboriginal pressure enough to relieve the Aboriginal population of ‘caste’ tests? Is it plausible for Mick Dodson to say that the Australian Government’s self-identification ‘race’ question was a concession to Indigenous rights to ‘self-determination and self-identification’?⁵⁸ The Bureau was not an agency to surrender lightly to other people’s disbelief in its ‘descent’ categories. Although State officials and mission staff—used to functional and legal classifications—had found it difficult to work with the ‘blood’ differentiations, the Bureau had not ceased to apply caste distinctions in the census up to and including the 1966 census. Indeed, the Bureau had refined the terminology of ‘descent’, in the 1966 ‘race’ question. So, how do we explain the Bureau’s sudden abandonment of distinctions of ‘descent’ between 1966 and 1971?

One factor was the combination of changes in the Commonwealth franchise and the repeal of s.127: They removed legal and practical reasons for distinctions of descent to regulate public conceptions of Aboriginality. As well, by the late 1960s, the Bureau knew that it was now dealing with more people of Aboriginal descent who lived in households, rather than in institutions, so the census form had to engage the Aboriginal householder’s, not only the state officials’, sensibility. At first, in 1966, the Bureau attempted to enlist self-reporting Aborigines in making finer distinctions of descent. When many people responded by classifying themselves as one quarter (or less than half) Aboriginal, the Bureau faced a choice (formulated publicly by Frank Jones) either to continue a narrow (‘half or more’) definition of the Aboriginal population—in which case the 1966 census showed an implausibly static population—or to include the ‘less than half’ people. There were two reasons for the Bureau to prefer the second option: it yielded a count that was closer to the sum of all the State/Territory administrative data sets and more consistent with known fertility; and the more inclusive ‘Aboriginal population’ was expected to show a less worrying socio-economic disparity between the ‘Aboriginal’ population and ‘all Australians’. Once the Bureau began cautiously to use this expanded and more plausible 1966 total—issuing the ‘identified’ population figure to trusted bureaucrats and social scientists in 1968 and 1969—there were fewer reasons to continue a ‘race’ question that tried to elicit descent-based distinctions within the identified Aboriginal population. This meant that in the government’s

⁵⁸ M. Dodson, ‘The end of the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality’ In *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. M. Grossman, Carlton: Melbourne University Press 2003, pp. 32, 39–40.

internal deliberations, in the period 1969–70, the perceived wishes of Aborigines themselves could start to carry more weight in official thinking.

The second phase of the Bureau's engagement with the increasingly numerous Aboriginal householder began in 1971. In this census, people were given the opportunity to identify without distinctions of descent. It had become clear to the Bureau that, once the problem of administrative coverage had been solved, the most potent obstacle to valid enumeration of the Aboriginal population was the unwilling and unreliable engagement of Aborigines themselves. If a provocative question about 'degree of blood' were no longer useful to government, why persist with it?

Underlying these changes was the realisation that 'assimilation' was not rendering Aborigines 'the same' as other Australians. By the late 1960s, the Bureau had to produce credible data about a 'problem population' for a public that now included an alliance between reformist bureaucrats and a cohort of social scientists, led by Charles Rowley, seeking a new scientific basis for Indigenous policy. Discreetly issuing, in 1968–9, the previously undisclosed 1966 census figures about people of less than half Aboriginal descent, the Bureau created an entity without precedent in Australian government and social science: The 'identified Aboriginal population'. The subsequent change to an identity-based 'race' question in 1971 confirmed that entity's existence, while redesigning the instrument of its production.⁵⁹

In this sequence of events we see interaction between publicly expressed Indigenous wishes and the technical imperatives of population measurement. For a combination of reasons whose political and technical aspects cannot be neatly separated, the Bureau began to align its enumeration of Indigenous Australians with the pan-Aboriginal ideology that a 'population' is not a thing of blood fractions but of identity, associations and experience. Had the Bureau not made this concession to Aborigines' classificatory practices in the reformed 'race' question of 1971, it would still have been able to produce a credibly distinguished 'Aboriginal population' for the new public policy technicians to analyse and compare—the sum of 'full', 'half' and 'quarter' Aborigines. However, the Bureau would have perpetuated terms for distinguishing *within* the Aboriginal population that many Aboriginal people themselves had rejected; and it had learned since the 1954 census not to trust or publish descent-differentiation within Aboriginal population figures. A credible census presupposes a kind of social contract between technocrats and respondents. In the interactions of bureaucrats and people of Aboriginal descent in the 1960s, mediated by social scientists, we can see a new political bargain being fashioned.

⁵⁹ The official total of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the 1971 census was 115,953 – twenty per cent larger than the 1966 'identified' population of 96,632, see Broom and Jones *op. cit.*, p. 43, Table 4.1) but five per cent less than the total estimates made by States and Territories for 1966: 122,100.