Colonisation

Why it happened, and why it caused such lasting harm

A note before you read. This read refers to events and policies that may be distressing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Please take care as you read, and stop or take a break whenever you need to. If you would like to yarn with someone, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, Lifeline on 13 11 14, and your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

Two questions worth asking

Colonisation in Australia produced deep and long-lasting impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, socially, culturally, economically and psychologically. To understand this history honestly, it helps to ask two questions. Why did colonisation happen, and why did it cause such lasting harm?

Colonisation was not inevitable or accidental. It was driven by a combination of imperial ambition, economic interest, and a worldview that did not recognise the rights of the peoples already here. Understanding these drivers helps move the conversation beyond blame and toward genuine understanding.

Why colonisation happened

In the eighteenth century, European empires were expanding across the globe, competing for territory, resources and strategic advantage. Britain established a colony at Sydney in 1788, initially as a penal settlement, but the wider project was one of imperial expansion and the search for land and economic opportunity.

This expansion rested on a worldview that ranked peoples and cultures, and that did not recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as owners of their lands. That worldview was expressed in law as terra nullius, the fiction that the land belonged to no one. Because the land was treated as empty, no treaty was made, no consent was sought and no payment was offered. The fiction of terra nullius stood for more than two hundred years.

Why it caused lasting harm

The harms of colonisation were not isolated events. They were connected, and they reached into every part of life.

Land dispossession	Country is the foundation of identity, law, economy and spirituality. Losing access to land severed all of these at once.
Cultural suppression	Bans on languages, ceremony and Lore disrupted the passing of knowledge between generations.
Violence and population decline	Frontier violence and introduced diseases caused devastating loss of life, grief and trauma.
Control and assimilation	Protection and assimilation laws removed self-determination and, through child removal, broke families.

Why the harms were connected and intergenerational

The reason colonisation caused such lasting harm is that its effects reinforced one another and were carried forward across generations. Dispossession removed the economic base and the foundation of law and spirituality. Cultural suppression cut the transmission of knowledge. Violence and disease caused grief and loss. Control and child removal broke families and self-determination. Each harm made the others harder to recover from.

Because these harms were passed down through families and communities, their effects are still felt today. This is why present day disadvantage is best understood as a consequence of history and policy, not of culture or capability.

Survival, strength and the way forward

The fiction of terra nullius was finally overturned in 1992 by the Mabo decision, which led to the recognition of native title. Despite everything, First Nations peoples have maintained the oldest continuous cultures on earth.

Recognising why colonisation happened, and why it caused lasting harm, is a foundation for respect, healing and reconciliation. Supporting self-determination and building culturally safe relationships is how organisations can be part of the way forward, centring survival, strength and walking alongside communities in practice.

Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding the drivers of colonisation change the conversation from blame to understanding?
- Why is it important to see the harms of colonisation as connected rather than separate?
- What does walking alongside communities look like in your own work?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Colonisation was driven by imperial ambition, economic interest and a worldview that denied First Nations rights.
- ✓ The fiction of terra nullius meant no treaty, consent or payment, and it stood for more than two hundred years.
- ✓ The harms of colonisation were connected and intergenerational, which is why they still matter today.
- ✓ Terra nullius was overturned in 1992, and First Nations peoples maintain the oldest continuous cultures on earth.

Reference material

- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**
  aiatsis.gov.au
- **Australians Together, history and education resources**
  australianstogether.org.au
- **National Museum of Australia, Defining Moments**
  nma.gov.au
- **Reconciliation Australia**
  reconciliation.org.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

Mitch Amidy · mitch@emustalking.com.au · 0404 232 621 · sales@emustalking.com.au

Emus Talking Pty Ltd does not provide financial advice. This information is general in nature and should not be relied upon as a substitute for professional advice tailored to your circumstances.