The Policy of Assimilation

Understanding the era of Protection and assimilation, and the shift to self-determination

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.

Protection and control

For much of the twentieth century, Australian governments pursued a policy of assimilation. This was the expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would give up their cultures, languages and identities and live as part of a single, European style Australian society.

The foundations were laid earlier. From the late 1800s, colonies and then states passed Protection Acts that placed Aboriginal peoples under the control of officials known as Protectors and Protection Boards. In practice, Protection meant control over almost every part of life. Officials could decide where people lived and worked, who they could marry, and how their wages were managed. In many places, wages were held in trust accounts and never fully paid, a loss now recognised in the Stolen Wages campaigns and settlements.

People were often moved onto missions, reserves and government settlements, away from their Country and family. Speaking language and practising ceremony were discouraged or banned. The care of children was placed under the authority of Protectors, which opened the door to the removals now known as the Stolen Generations.

From Protection to assimilation

By the 1930s, the official goal shifted from separating Aboriginal peoples from the wider society to absorbing them into it. In 1937, a national conference of Commonwealth and state authorities formally adopted assimilation as the national approach. Native Welfare conferences in 1951 and 1961 restated and defined assimilation as the official policy.

Assimilation was enforced in ways that reached deep into daily life. Exemption certificates, sometimes called by communities a licence or by other names, allowed a person to access some rights of citizenship, but only if they agreed to live apart from their community and give up cultural connection. Cultural suppression, child removal and control of movement and work were all tools of the same policy.

A timeline of change

Assimilation was official policy for decades before governments moved toward self-determination.

Late 1800s to 1930s	Protection Acts and Boards control the lives of Aboriginal peoples across the colonies and states.
1937	The Commonwealth and state conference formally adopts assimilation as the national policy.
1951 and 1961	Native Welfare conferences restate and define assimilation as the official goal.
1967	A national referendum, supported by more than 90 per cent of voters, allows Aboriginal peoples to be counted in the census and the Commonwealth to make laws for them.
1972 onward	Governments begin to replace assimilation with a policy of self-determination.

The turn toward self-determination

The 1967 referendum was a turning point in public attitudes. More than ninety per cent of Australians voted to allow Aboriginal peoples to be counted in the census and to allow the Commonwealth to make laws for them. It did not grant citizenship or voting rights, which had come through other reforms, but it signalled a national desire for change.

From 1972, governments began to replace assimilation with self-determination, recognising the right of First Nations peoples to make decisions about their own lives, communities and futures. This principle now sits at the heart of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The lasting impact, and the enduring strength

The assimilation era caused profound and lasting harm. It disrupted families, languages and cultural knowledge, and its effects are still felt across generations. Understanding this history honestly is essential to understanding the present and to working respectfully with First Nations peoples today.

Alongside the harm is an equally important truth. First Nations cultures were never extinguished. Languages are being revived, cultural knowledge is being passed on, and communities are leading their own organisations, enterprises and futures. Recognising this history, and centring self-determination and strength-based language in everyday practice, is how organisations can walk alongside communities today.

Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding the Protection and assimilation eras change the way you read present day statistics?
- Where might the legacy of these policies still show up in the way systems and services operate?
- What does centring self-determination look like in your own area of work?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Protection Acts placed Aboriginal peoples under close government control from the late 1800s.
- ✓ Assimilation was formally adopted in 1937 and remained official policy into the 1960s.
- ✓ The 1967 referendum marked a shift in public attitudes toward change.
- ✓ From 1972, self-determination began to replace assimilation, and now sits at the heart of Closing the Gap.

Reference material

- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**
  aiatsis.gov.au
- **Australians Together, history and education resources**
  australianstogether.org.au
- **Reconciliation Australia**
  reconciliation.org.au
- **National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Priority Reforms**
  closingthegap.gov.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.

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