

## The blackbirded labourer and the missionary: great-grandsons meet

Soon after 1901, Joe Natuman's great-great grandfather was sent back to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) from Queensland under the White Australia policy. He had first come as "blackbirded" slave labour, and then came back a second time, hoping to stay. Being deported against his will left him embittered. Back home on the island of Tanna he met the son of pioneer missionary Rev Dr John G Paton, and, overcoming his bitterness, became a leading figure in the church. Joe Natuman is now the Prime Minister of Vanuatu. Eleven days before Cyclone Pam devastated his nation he related this story to David Bunton, great-grandson of John Paton. David contributes this account of the historic bridge-building between two peoples, two nations:

Vanuatu Prime Minister, the Hon Joe Natuman, opened our *Australian Reflections on Blackbirding* exhibition at the National Library and Archives Gallery, Port Vila, on 2 March in the presence of the Australian High Commissioner, Jeremy Bruer, Minister for Lands Ralph Regenvanu and Paramount Chief Richard David Fandanumata.

The exhibition of 11 artworks and many historical documents tracing the story of blackbirding was a gift to the people of Vanuatu from my wife, South Australian artist, Helen Stacey, and myself.

"This exhibition shows the struggle of our forefathers taken away as slaves to work on the cotton fields and sugarcane plantations (of Australia)," said the Prime Minister, "as well as the opposition of John G and Margaret Paton, whom we all know as great missionaries to Vanuatu in the 1800s. They and others came to spread the gospel and to strongly oppose the slave trade." He went on to tell the

story of his great-grandfather, Tavo, refusing to shake the hand of a visitor from Queensland, but later meeting my grandfather, Rev Frank Paton, on Tanna and becoming a Christian.

### Difficult truths

The Australian High Commissioner, Jeremy Bruer, said it is "sometimes quite difficult to see the truth in history. This exhibition is part of a process that enables us to look at, confront and understand much better some of those truths. It's a process that is well under way now (in Australia). We've seen motions before the Queensland and NSW parliaments (as well as) the Federal parliament, recording and recognising the experience of the Australian South Sea Islander community and recognising them now as an individual community within Australia with their own interests and their own needs."

Later in conversation the High Commissioner expressed appreciation for Faith Bandler, who was awarded the Order of Australia for tirelessly campaigning for Aboriginal rights in Australia and for recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders. Her father had been blackbirded from Ambrym.

Welcoming the 50 guests, Eileen Boe, Chairperson of the Vanuatu Cultural Council, thanked the artists for responding to "the significant inner call for handing over this art work to the right people".

My wife, Helen, explained that we had come to say "sorry" for the suffering faced by so many families in Vanuatu because their forebears were blackbirded, and to express "thank you" for the contribution that these Islanders had made, including that of some 40,000 descendants in Australia today. She commented: "The artworks have now come home." One visitor

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Prime Minister Joe Natuman (centre left) and Dr David Bunton look at portraits of John and Margaret Paton in the exhibition, watched by Minister Ralph Regenvanu (left) and Chief Richard David Fandanumata. Credit: Lesley Bryant.

later patted the words “sorry” and “thank you” on the final artwork in the series and said, “When I came in I knew this was for me”.

Introducing my song *Australian Islander Tribute*, I pointed out that blackbirding began nearly 60 years after Britain abolished the slave trade from Africa to the Americas and continued another 40 years until ended with the White Australia Policy. My song, describing the beauty of the islands and the story of blackbirding, was performed with singers and instrumentalists from the youth agency, Wan Smol Bag, and staff of the Cultural Centre and National Library. It was later recorded at the Cultural Centre and will be released after post-production work in Sydney.

The exhibition also displayed three messages of support from members of the New South Wales and Federal Australian Parliaments, including the NSW speaker and the former Federal speaker, Anna Burke. The MPs were from Liberal, Labor and Greens parties, and their messages expressed the need for recognition of the South Sea Islander community in Australia and deep regret for their marginalisation. A message also came from Rev Prof Andrew Dutney, President of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Also contributing to the exhibition was Lesley Bryant who helped initiate the 150-year commemorations in Queensland and Fiji. Lesley has been involved in processing documents that provide information about Islanders taken to work in Queensland. Examples of these documents were part of the exhibition, along with photographs of many island labourers. These documents may help Vanuatu people to trace their own family members by searching such documents on the internet and with the help of the National Library and Archives or Australian High Commission.

We also met members of Vanuatu-Australia Connections and the Vanuatu Indigenous Descendants Association, the latter organisation being for descendants of Australian Aboriginals brought back to Vanuatu as children or wives of blackbirded labourers. Chief Richard David Fandanumata and his brother, former MP Abel David, came to Port Vila airport at 5am, just before we left, bringing three ladies whose Aboriginal grandmother had been smuggled back to Vanuatu as the wife of a labourer. They have suffered great discrimination on the island of Santo and long to trace their grandmother’s family in the Melbourne area.

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## Briefing in Australian Parliament

**Just before Question Time, on 25 March, Greens MP Adam Bandt announced in the House of Representatives that “today many members of Australia’s South Sudanese communities, together with Rev Tim Costello, have travelled to parliament in Canberra to brief all of us on the humanitarian crisis and conflicts in South Sudan.”**

Later that afternoon, the briefing was co-chaired by Bandt and two other Federal MPs, Anna Burke (Labor) and Kelly O’Dwyer (Liberal).

It was organised by the South Sudan Australia Peace Initiative (SSAPI), a community initiative supported by IofC. Twenty South Sudanese from five States travelled to Canberra at their own cost to support the Briefing, after weeks of careful preparation together.

Such teamwork is not a given. The current conflict back home has caused divisions here in Australia.

Co-founder of the SSAPI, Nyok Gor, came to Australia as one of the 30,000 South Sudanese refugees, after years as a child soldier and then in a refugee camp. A video showed how he and another refugee, from an opposing ethnic group, started SSAPI after both had lost relatives in fighting. “Finding forgiveness is a tough road but we must walk it together so that no child will be fighting in the bush instead of living with their family and going to school,” said Nyok.

The first of four recommendations to the Australia Parliament was to support NGOs within Australia “to facilitate healing and trust-building dialogue among the diaspora”. Kelly O’Dwyer gave the example of peace-building meetings she had attended at the IofC centre, Armagh, which is “an important part of my electorate”. Adam Bandt, in his statement in the House, reinforced this aspect: “Using Australia as a crucible to nurture... the values of peace and non-violence across the world is

exactly what Parliament should be encouraging all of our communities to do.”

Tim Costello, head of World Vision Australia, spoke in support of increasing humanitarian aid. As a hand-out at the Parliamentary Briefing noted, remittances from South Sudanese in Australia far exceeded the \$18 million given by the Australia government last year. The Rev Costello went further: “The humanitarian need in South Sudan is now enormous, and while agencies like World Vision are responding, we urgently need the international community to act in order to find a lasting, peaceful solution.”

He vigorously supported a third recommendation: to appoint an Australian Special Envoy to assist the peace process.

Formation of a “Parliamentary Friendship Group” was also recommended – which Adam Bandt and Anna Burke agreed to chair. Mike Bowers, who photographed the occasion for the *Guardian*, commented on their website: “So much constructive engagement happens through these parliamentary associations. It’s important to remember this when we feel like screaming about the state of contemporary politics.”



Adam Bandt speaks at the briefing



# The deadly cost of wrong choices

The cause of two Australians on death row in Indonesia has provoked reactions in many. Barbara Lawler was able to express some of her thoughts with friends in Indonesia:

We can say these are only two lives, compared with the massive number of deaths from drug abuse around the world. Yet this issue goes deep, at least with me.

The purpose of Indonesia's toughness is to save lives by eliminating illegal drugs. I agree with toughness on this issue. One of my brothers was a heroin addict – who only stopped after reconciliation with my father came through Initiatives of Change. A teenage nephew of mine was murdered because of his involvement with illegal drugs. For me, this goes from the personal to the global.

After 9/11 I resolved to open my heart to Muslim neighbours. Then after my nephew's death, I wanted to work more with young people. My brother Ron studied Bahasa and had been in Indonesia. Through him, I was invited to help with an IofC program and went to Indonesia on the first of 11 visits. What a wonderful blessing it has been to be part of the friendship and teamwork exchanges that have developed through IofC.

This issue makes me feel a great sense of sorrow for what my generation in the West unleashed in the 1960s, with our rebellion against goodness. It was also a rebellion against wrongs which we saw in the generation coming out of World War II. Yet if we had been more discerning, we could have been less destructive of ourselves and many others impacted by the lifestyle choices we made under the guise of "freedom", some of which were disastrous. We are blessed in Australia with so much individual freedom, but we have yet to learn what that means. We seriously need to find purpose and direction within that freedom.

When I consider the cost of those wrong choices here,

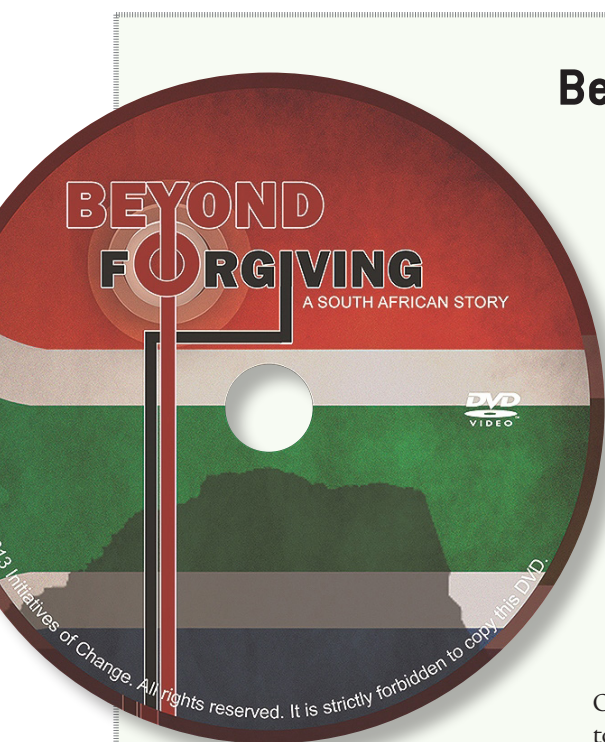
and in Indonesia, I feel deeply sorry. An Indonesian Islamic cleric expressed the hope that Indonesia could be a bridge between Islam and the West. Maybe we in the West need to do better starting to build some spans from our own side?

As an example I was moved by the visit of the Australian Islamic clerics to Jakarta, reported on the ABC on 11 March. Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, the Grand Mufti of Australia, met with Indonesia's religious affairs minister, Lukman Saifuddin, to urge the Indonesian government to show mercy. He was accompanied in Jakarta by two Indonesian-born Australian clerics. Dr Mohammad said mercy and forgiveness were at the heart of Islam.

Independent Senator Nick Xenophon, who supported the mission, said, "The Grand Mufti gave a dignified, impassioned statement to the Indonesian media which I hope will cause those Indonesians in favour of executing these two young Australians pause for thought, a chance to reconsider. This really is an unprecedented intervention by the Grand Mufti and is a tremendous initiative of the Islamic community of Australia."

Whatever happens, my only response can be more bridge-building.

**Editor's note:** Jim Beggs, former national president of the Waterside Workers' Union of Australia, wrote to President Joko Widodo, recounting how that union had supported Indonesians' struggle for independence 70 years ago by refusing to load arms shipments onto Dutch ships bound to be used in that conflict. Beggs goes on to say that for 30 years he has worked voluntarily in prisons, helping to rehabilitate prisoners and, remarking on the "gift" when reformed prisoners stay on in prison to help others; and makes a plea for revisiting "the situation of our two young Australians".



## Benefits of forgiveness

At this time of the year forgiveness is a topic that comes to the fore. A lively discussion after a recent showing of the documentary – *Beyond Forgiving* – highlighted the fact that it is the person who is offering forgiveness who is the main benefactor. And that each of us at some point in our lives needs to forgive!

This meaningful DVD, depicting a dramatic story of forgiveness from South Africa, was shown at the recent Life Matters workshop in Melbourne. One of the participants felt moved to immediately go and meet an old boyfriend. They were then able to deal with the bad feelings that had

existed between them.

Howard and Maria Grace have shown this DVD in the UK to over 35 different groups in the last year. Howard writes: "At a time when many in the world are concerned about the consequences of violent action and others are deeply frustrated, *Beyond Forgiving* is a precious resource in stimulating deeper searching, both on a personal and societal level."

It is available from Grosvenor Books for \$20 plus p&xp. A Study Guide is also available.

— Cheryl Wood, Melbourne

# Walda Blow: a passion for the truth to be known

by Barbara Williams, Melbourne

**On 29 March Walda Blow, an elder of the Yorta Yorta people of Cummerajunga, died following a battle with cancer. She was an outstanding Australian and a dear friend to many of us. We will miss her very much.**



I first got to know Walda in the late 1970s when she and her late husband, Reg, lived in Dandenong with their four children.

We used to visit them in their cheerful, busy home where there always seemed to be others from the Aboriginal community. At the time

she was running a hostel for young Aboriginal men as well as many other responsibilities. She and Reg had started the Dandenong Aborigines Co-op to support those who came to Melbourne looking for work.

Walda lost her own mother when she was a few months' old and so often spoke of her grandmother, who cared for the family and fought tooth and nail to keep the children together in Cummerajunga. Their children have all gone on to take leadership in their own way.

Later in life Walda became the manager of the Margaret Tucker Hostel for girls at risk and, through 21 years of service, made it a wonderful home for many, many young women. I used to go and share a sandwich and cup of tea with her over the kitchen table and learnt so much for just listening to her stories. One day she told me she had just

heard that she would receive a sum of money that was money owed to her mother for work she had done 40 years or more previously, but withheld from payment. She was so delighted, not for the money, but for the fact that at last her mother had been justly treated.

Walda did not mince words. She told the story of the struggles of the Aboriginal people of Australia as it is. But there was no blame, just a passion that the truth should be known and we all take on to address those wrongs. Her work at the hostels, as the first Liaison Officer with the Uniting Church in Victoria, the creation of an interfaith women's group and many more initiatives were part of her longing to create a different relationship here in Australia. And her family and their commitment to that task were central to her whole being.

# Malcolm Fraser: standing firm with his conscience

by John Bond OAM, Secretary, National Sorry Day Committee, 1998-2006

**In 1999 Malcolm Fraser accepted the Sorry Day Committee's invitation to become a patron of the Journey of Healing, together with Lowitja O'Donoghue. From then on, he was heart and soul part of the campaign.**

Most years he would give a press conference a month or two before Sorry Day and, as a former Prime Minister, he knew how to catch media attention. The subsequent articles encouraged community groups to organise events, and hundreds took place every year.

His speeches on Sorry Day were a vital contribution – in the Sydney Opera House and many other venues. In 2003 he spoke in the Great Hall of Parliament. That speech played a crucial role in the Government's approval of the Stolen Generations memorial which now stands at the

heart of Canberra's Parliamentary Triangle.

On a number of occasions, when Aboriginal concerns were in the national spotlight, Fraser wrote an article – usually in *The Age*. It was always challenging, and eventually led John Howard to say, "I have decided not to respond to statements by Malcolm Fraser."

At the end of 2007 I moved to England, and celebrated Christmas with my wife's family. On Christmas morning the phone rang. It was Malcolm Fraser, asking me to write a memo for a meeting he was having in a couple of days. Mary, my wife, was not impressed by his timing, but I wrote it gladly! Kevin Rudd said in 2012 that without the widespread community involvement, he would not have been able to make a national apology. Malcolm Fraser played a crucial role in the growth of that community involvement.

Why did he do it? He once told

me of an experience he had had as a teenager. He was listening to some of his elders describing antics of their youth. After a wild all-night party, some of them had ridden to "the blacks' camp" and used their revolvers to strike terror among the residents. He was horrified, and decided then that he would work for an end to such callous bullying. He once said to a colleague, "In politics it is hard to follow your conscience on every issue, but on some issues you have to stand firm. For me the issue is race."

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