

## *'Born Free' in the Lucky Country*

*Jeff McMullen*

***Born Free***, we all should be, but to be young and black you will need a powerful set of values to overcome the racism, disadvantage and cynicism you may have to contend with in most parts of the world.

All young Australians and especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can get a better sense of the road ahead for your generation by looking at what is happening in South Africa after the passing of the greatest freedom fighter of our age, Nelson Mandela.

In South Africa, the controversial tag, "*Born Frees*" has been applied to young blacks born in or after 1994, a so-called 'post-Apartheid' generation. Before the recent election in South Africa this youthful group of some 625,000 eligible voters, 2.5% of the nation's 25 million voters, was portrayed in numerous media stories as a key political factor likely to contribute to a poorer result for the ruling ANC party.

Nothing like this happened because one third of the young people did not register to vote. While 90% of people over 30 registered, the young in droves did not participate.

Clearly the young have little faith in the right wing or left wing of politics. The re-election of President Azuma and the ANC Government with only a slightly reduced majority of 62.2% of the vote indicates that many young people do not anticipate hopeful political change but rather a long period of the status quo.

Was it apathy, a complacent disregard for hard-won democratic rights or a deeper cynicism towards a political process that largely ignores young people that has turned-off so many of the *Born Frees*?

If we analyse South African life in the post-Apartheid period, we see numerous factors that may at least contribute to this political disinterest among the young. A smug political leadership, corruption and cronyism, high youth unemployment while politicians enjoy perks...we could be talking about Australia couldn't we?

Young Australians have watched their political leaders lie and brazenly break even the most solemn election promises, suck up unethical political donations from mining lobbyists and property developers, all the while abusing tax-payer funding to support their over-privileged yet under performing lifestyle.

Both the Coalition and the ALP have failed wretchedly to tackle Australia's share of the carbon creation fuelling the global warming that is without question the greatest threat to the future wellbeing of hundreds of millions of young people around the world. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was right to call the impact of climate change the greatest moral challenge of our time. Yet he and other politicians of the left and right squandered a good opportunity to direct the extraordinary profits of the mineral boom to the development of more sustainable technologies.

It is equally disappointing that the great wealth extracted from Aboriginal lands has not been equitably invested in ending the poverty and offering a brighter future for people who have been oppressed by this political system for over two centuries.

In South Africa the *Born Frees* see their President, Jacob Zuma, enjoying a luxurious private estate embellished with a swimming pool and amphitheatre paid for with more than 250 million Rand (over \$25 million Aust.) of tax-payer's funds. The swimming pool was listed as "fire-fighting equipment" in an attempt to justify the cost. Not surprisingly South Africa's Public Protector slammed this behaviour as improper, an abuse of presidential office that allegedly involves the diversion of money intended for regenerating the overcrowded slums.

Across the rolling hills from Zuma's presidential compound, so many people live without adequate shelter, electricity or food. About one third of South Africa's 51 million are impoverished, with millions still living in wooden shacks and many freezing on the streets. An estimated 7.5 million people lack access to decent housing, most of them still living in wooden shacks and some now freezing on the streets.

But look at our own backyard as we continue the comparison of how the *Born Free* generation live here at home. From the day they are born most Indigenous Australians face extraordinary disadvantage in health, housing, nutrition, education, employment and opportunity.

I still see so many homeless Aboriginal people, young and old, families huddling in humpies, under plastic tarpaulins and sleeping in rusted out, abandoned cars. In Perth recently an Aboriginal family with six children camped in the bush near a highway for three months as they searched for a home and decent schooling.

You know all the grim numbers! I am not going to insult you with an endless repetition of the same statistical tirade our governments use in a warped attempt to justify their savage cuts in support for the young and unemployed, the old and sick, the depressed and disabled.

The Abbott Government's first budget, delivered with bloated ideological rhetoric by a cigar-chomping, multi-millionaire Treasurer, Joe Hockey, spits in the eye of young black Australians.

From infancy when you need pre-schooling, through the years when you need all of the tools of first-rate primary, secondary and tertiary education to build a better life, when you need support to learn your own language and write your story, when you need to visit a doctor or find a home for your young family, you should not count on support from this era of neo-liberal Government.

In Australia or South Africa, why would young black people feel hopeful about a political system they cannot trust?

It is misleading, however, to cast this *Born Free* generation in either country as blessedly liberated from the curse of racism, discrimination and deep disadvantage. Apartheid, or in Australia's case, relentless assimilation and denial of fundamental

human rights, has done extraordinary damage to successive generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Ask the young champion, Adam Goodes, if racism burns any less today than in yesteryear? What should Adam and other young Aboriginal people conclude when the Attorney General, George Brandis, says defiantly that Australians should have the right to be bigots?

To this government and all others who are so intent on allowing deep, painful hurt and humiliation I ask them to think carefully about why an unprecedented number of young Indigenous Australians are taking their own lives. Why do these hundreds and hundreds of young people feel there is no point being *Born Free in the Lucky Country*?

In both nations the consequences of oppressive policy towards black people shows out in the deep divisions of power and opportunity. The political system has not changed the poverty of the young. Inequity in their eyes often seems permanent and alienation can be crushing.

In such hard circumstances there is only one effective course for the *Born Frees*.

In South Africa and here in Australia the young can aspire to make their own way with a mindset and values that will triumph over futile politics.

***You have to know who you are, where you've come from and where you want to go.***

I meet countless young Aboriginal people who inspire me to believe that you are the answer. You have the power and potential.

When Jack Manning Bancroft kicked off AIME he was still an undergraduate at Sydney University. But today the movement he leads, Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience, has 3,500 Indigenous students powering towards completion of a high school education. Many will graduate from university and use education as a life-long weapon against injustice and disadvantage, just as the great *Madiba* did.

I can still this giant of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century striding in front of a huge crowd at Sharpeville as he campaigned to liberate South Africans and inspire all of us around the world to believe in a human family and to be the change.

Mandela is a hero to us all at AIME but I am equally heartened by the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students I see rising up to overcome victimhood.

One of the young I met in the early years of the AIME program, Alicia Johnson, became the first Aboriginal captain of Dulwich High School of Visual Arts & Design. Her younger sister, Emily, followed suit.

After finishing her own degree at Sydney University and helping mentor other young Aboriginal high-school students, Alicia Johnson is now contributing to AIME as a national presenter.

Last year AIME students were elected to several hundred leadership positions in their schools including school captains, sports captains, vice captains and reps on the school councils.

In this way the young are their own inspiration. They draw on the strengths of Aboriginal Culture with a clear grasp of identity and a realistic understanding of the obstacles they face. They value all of the Ancestors who have gone before them in the Struggle.

It is not only the young Aboriginal people in the cities who are taking the future into their own hands. From the remote communities I listen to rousing speeches by 21-year-old Batchelor Institute student, Amelia Kunoth-Monks, granddaughter of Utopia's inspiring elder stateswoman, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks. I often see the pain in Amelia's eyes knowing so many young people who have ended their lives in the Northern Territory but there is also a fire, a strong conviction that her generation must seize the day.

Jack Manning Bancroft, Alicia and Emily Johnson, and Amelia Kunoth-Monks would never have flown to such heights without the love and encouragement of their families. This is the Aboriginal way. It is the way ahead.

So don't be disillusioned by the corruption of our democracy and the grand political farce of government.

Fight the political system to try to change it like the Mandela did.

If the system doesn't change, set yourself free and fly above it.

Jeff McMullen has been a TRACKER columnist from the newspaper's beginnings, honorary CEO of Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth and also a director of AIME.