

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT
SCHOOLS
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INDIGENOUS CHILDREN :
FORGOTTEN IN TIME OF PLAGUE

On 27 May 2020, Cabbage Tree Island Public School has featured, for a few minutes, on the ABC. The Principal, Ms Dynonne Anderson was outraged at the treatment meted out to her indigenous children by the NSW Education Department. Like all children throughout Australia, they were expected to engage in online learning. But, like the most disadvantaged they did not have the computers...until school went back. And even then, they did not have the internet.

This is just one instance of the glaring inequalities in the Australian Education system exposed in times of plague. The coronavirus crisis, [which has until this week emptied schools](#), has highlighted the imbalance and lack of resources in the education system across the board. It exposes the continuing discrimination shown when it comes to children of indigenous heritage.

But the story also exposes the consequences of decentralisation of what was once a strong, centralised educational administration. In times of crises, resources can only be extended to outlying areas by a strong, well resourced, administration.

For the last fifty years, there has been a romancing about school based decision making, politicians aping the elite, urban, privatisation model. Yet, while the Catholic system in particular, has been centralising into strong, central lobbying bureaucracies, the public systems have been systematically run down and deprived of essential funds and inspectors. Outlying schools, like Cabbage Tree Island public school are at the end of the line of attacks on the centralised public education system.

The story of Cabbage Tree Island is a not untypical case in Australian educational history.

The Island lies in the Richmond River about 20km SSW of Ballina, NSW. It a mangrove stretch of land in the River near Wardell, surrounded by sugar cane farms. It once operated as an Aboriginal station, controlled by a white manager who was appointed by the Aborigines Welfare Board. In 1960, it introduced the Numbahging Cooperative; a co-op run by an Aboriginal board that opened a general store and farmed sugarcane and pineapple plantations.

Cabbage Tree Island is not an old tribal ground. The early aboriginal settlers were put there about 1885 by a mounted policeman of that time. The first aborigines to settle on the island

were Yuke, Jack Roach and Jack "Poppa" Cook. The next settlers to make their homes on the island were the Bolts (or Sparks), Kapeens and Roberts. This group was made up of people from as far south as Kempsey and from the Tweed and Tenterfield. They usually took their names from white settlers for whom they worked. Poppa Cook grew the first crop of sugar cane. He was a bullock driver where Lismore is now situated but in his youth there was only one home- stead. When sugar cane growing developed, the Cabbage Tree men started cane cutting, established a gang which called the "Black Gang", with an aboriginal ganger.

In the last 50 years, the Aboriginal community have acquired a new school and a thriving community. And their public school teachers, as they always have, are prepared to speak up for and fight for their children. This is their statement of objectives:

Cabbage Tree Island Public School is a unique school located at the eastern end of Cabbage Tree Island Aboriginal community. The school has a total enrolment of approximately 40 Aboriginal students, from pre-school age to Year 6. The school is isolated to services although Jali Health Services and Bunjum Co-operative are located on the island and provide community services on specific days of the week. The Transition To School program employs an early childhood teacher and an Aboriginal teacher's aide. The Kindergarten to Year 6 school employs one permanent teacher, a teaching principal, an Aboriginal education officer, a senior administration manager (4 days per week), a school administration officer (1 day per week) and a general assistant (1 day per week). The majority of educators employed are Aboriginal. These educators are important for providing a culturally relevant curriculum and link to the community. The island has a rich cultural history that has been a part of the school since it was established in 1893. Partnerships with the local community and other service providers are extremely important and quality teaching is their core business.

What Happened to the Children of Cabbage Tree Island in our Time of Plague?

According to the ABC, whose reporters over the years, have produced informative documentaries on Cabbage Tree Island,

- The principal of Cabbage Tree Island Public School says it is among the top 5 per cent most disadvantaged in NSW
- She said none of her 40 students were able to do online learning
- The Department of Education sent out nine iPads to the school last week, days before students were due to return to campus

When Cabbage Tree Island Public School went into homeschooling mode in March, only one family had a laptop. But the ageing device promptly broke when four children shared it for schoolwork. Also, not a single student had reliable internet access at home.

"We've been forgotten about," said Principal Dyonne Anderson.

Ms Anderson said the school had desktop computers in classrooms, but they were impossible to lend out.

The school also had half a dozen laptops, but without internet connections, students couldn't use them at home.

As other students across the state were taking part in zoom meetings with teachers and logging into online classes, she was printing and posting out hard copies of lessons.

In March, the Department of Education announced it would lend digital devices to thousands of students in need. Ms Anderson immediately ordered enough laptops, iPads and Wi-Fi modems for her 40 pupils. She waited almost two months.

Last week, nine iPads arrived. But, without the internet dongles, Ms Anderson said there was no point distributing them to families. Now that school's back, the devices need to be returned to the department by the end of term.

"It's hardly worth opening the boxes," she said. "It wouldn't be so bad if they had just told us about the delay so we could look into other options, but we were left in the lurch," she said.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-27/cabbage-tree-island-school-overlooked-with-homeschooling-tech/12288446>

Things may have changed in Cabbage Tree Island since the 1960s, when conditions for the indigenous people on the station with its manager were nothing short of appalling. But, when online learning was the only thing available for its indigenous children, the basic resources were just not available.

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