

## 2. The Origins of the ‘New Violence’

A person whose dependence on officials is so permanent and complete that he cannot even stage a public appeal may be driven to assault members of his family, and try to make them at least share his burden ... He repeatedly attempts to commit suicide, as a desperate means to regain the support of members of his family.

—Emanuel Marx<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Deaths in custody

My interest in Aboriginal suicide began when I was examining the relationship between Aboriginal juvenile delinquency and the availability of sport to youth. That research project, funded by the Criminology Research Council, was reported early in 1994.<sup>2</sup> During the delinquency–sport project, from 1989 to 1994, the major issue in Aboriginal life, and a political issue of magnitude in Australian public life, was an epidemic of young males suicides in custody.

John Pat’s life had ended in custody in Roebourne, WA in 1983. Aged 16, he died of a fractured skull, haemorrhage, swelling and bruising to the brain, broken ribs and a torn aorta after his arrest outside a Roebourne hotel. A year after the acquittal of police charged over his death, Helen Corbett of Perth organised the Committee to Defend Black Rights (CDBR). In 1986, members of CDBR toured Australia, presenting talks by relatives of those who had died in custody. In 1987, it launched the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee (DCWC), incorporating Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and civil rights groups concerned about the deaths. Both organisations lobbied strongly for a royal commission into deaths in custody. Lloyd Boney’s death at Brewarrina, NSW, on 6 August 1987, the sixteenth during the first seven months of that year, was the catalyst. Five days later, Prime Minister Bob Hawke announced the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC), supported by the federal and all state governments. (Despite the findings of the Royal Commission, DCWC, still has reason to exist: in 1998, 16 per cent of all deaths in custody were Aboriginal.<sup>3</sup>)

My fieldwork crossed paths with RCIADIC staff as they investigated the deaths of 99 Aboriginal men and women who died in Australian police, prison and juvenile detention custody between 1 January 1980 and 31 May 1989. The Commission reported in April 1991.<sup>4</sup> The most widely-reported cases were those of Lloyd Boney, David Gundy and Eddie Murray in New South Wales; Kingsley Dixon in South Australia; John Pat and Robert Walker in Western Australia; and Muriel Binks in Queensland. As the Commission progressed, it published its findings on individual cases, and then presented its final five-volume report. Before these publications, many had believed that there was either an element of ‘assistance’ in some of these deaths and/or that the suicides were a result of factors inherent in the small spaces of incarceration rather than in the broad canvas of Aboriginal response to the dominant Australian social and

political environment.

In New Zealand, 47 Maori prison inmates committed suicide between 1971 and 1995. The Maori rate of suicide in prison was higher than the non-Maori.<sup>5</sup> There was no royal commission, but the Department of Corrective Services joined with the Maori organisation, Te Puni Kokiri, to report on ways of reducing suicide in custody. As in Australia, deaths in custody appeared to be the most pressing issue. American Indian suicide in detention is described as ‘dramatic, shocking, frustrating—and embarrassing to corrective services’.<sup>6</sup> Although 0.6 per cent of the population, Indian suicides are 5 per cent of all jail suicides.

## 2. Suicide in Aboriginal societies

Why this widespread belief that deaths in custody were the most serious issue, a belief I shared? Briefly, because suicide was an alien concept in Aboriginal life. In my long involvement in Aboriginal affairs—especially in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria—suicide had not been an issue. It was never mentioned by Aborigines, anthropologists, linguists, government officials, missionaries, magistrates, pastoralists or police. In 1968, Kidson and Jones found an absence of ‘classical neuroses, psychosomatic illness and suicide’ among Western Desert people.<sup>7</sup> John Cawte’s medico-sociological expedition to Arnhem Land in 1968 found ‘nothing alarming’ about Aboriginal suicide rates.<sup>8</sup> In 1973, Ivor Jones, in his study of psychiatric disorders among Kimberley and desert people, reported that there was ‘no incidence of suicide or homosexuality among full blood tribal Aborigines’.<sup>9</sup> In 1975, Burvill reported higher Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal rates of parasuicide in Perth, but he had strong reservations about the ‘validity of Aboriginal rates’.<sup>10</sup> As late as 1988, Harry Eastwell confirmed the ‘low risk of suicide among the Yolgnu of the Northern Territory’.<sup>11</sup> Hunter-Reser *et al* state that ‘some three decades ago the suicide of an Indigenous Australian was a rare occurrence’.<sup>12</sup> Richard Kimber told the RCIADIC that, in Central Australia, ‘there is no hard evidence that in traditional society Aborigines committed suicide’. He recalled one report of a captured man who broke his chains and threw himself off a Murray River cliff in the 1840s.<sup>13</sup> Associate Professor Colin Yallop of Macquarie University tells me that no Aboriginal language or dialect has a noun corresponding to suicide, though he concedes that the grammars may well have a reflexive concept that accords or corresponds with killing oneself. According to Dr Les Hiatt, former reader in anthropology at Sydney University, the local Burrara language at Maningrida—in the Liverpool River region of Arnhem Land—uses the same word for *hit* as for *kill*, and that it is possible that someone who says he hit himself may well mean that he attempted to kill himself. Hiatt, who has worked in that region for close on 40 years, cannot recall a single case of or reference to suicide—before mid-1998, when the first such event occurred. Associate Professor Vivien Johnson of Macquarie University confirms that she has never seen any representation of suicide, or self-destruction, in Aboriginal art.<sup>14</sup> [Recently such representation has emerged strongly in north Queensland and in Nowra, NSW: a graphic example from the latter is reproduced on the cover of this report.]

Many ‘indigenous’ societies have suicide mythology. For example, in the Bimin-Kuskumsin culture in Papua New Guinea, the ancestral goddess divided her staff into three, planting each as a tree: one of life, one of death, and one a ‘hanging tree’. Those who travel to that tree are always forlorn, slovenly, depressed adult men, stumbling along the rocky, twisting path. In my research domain, we encountered one example of suicide embedded in culture. We were told of the myth of the Three Brothers, as represented in the three hills between Port Macquarie and Taree: South Brother, Middle Brother and North Brother. The Biripi legend is that an evil spirit killed two of the brothers and then the third brother killed the spirit, whereupon he committed suicide. The souls of the brothers reside in these hills. However, very few of our informants were aware of this story or saw it as in any way related to the present episodes of parasuicide or threatened suicides by youth in the region. By contrast, *whakamomori* (suicide) is a known concept and phenomenon in Maori culture. At one level, families seek to hush up a suicide, and show the same sense of stigma as found in Western societies. At another level, there is no shame: in Maori tradition, suicide is an honourable way out of shame or disgrace, frustrated love, an exit with dignity.

I watched the unfolding of the circumstances of the death of Eddie Murray in the cells at Wee Waa, NSW on 12 June 1981. Christine Stafford [then McIlvanie] was interested in Murray’s death as a topic for her BA Honours dissertation at the University of New England.<sup>15</sup> She had lived in Wee Waa, where her then husband had been the ambulance man and she a primary school teacher. She examined, in the broad socio-political sense, *what* rather than *who* had killed Eddie Murray. Sergeant ‘K’ of the Scientific Investigation Section of the Police Force in Sydney informed her that in the period 1971 to 1981 there had been one Aboriginal death in custody and five parasuicides (attempted suicides) in New South Wales. Police figures for Queensland in this period appear to have been nine suicides and eight parasuicides; for the Northern Territory, it is likely that there were five completed Aboriginal suicides in custody in that decade. In short, while these figures were relatively high in a population whose culture seemed not to encompass suicide, in whose languages there were no obvious words for it, and in whose art there were no depictions of self-destruction, 1981 was not a crisis year—except for the Murray case, still fraught with suspicion of foul play.<sup>16</sup> In 1981, neither McIlvanie nor I had any reason to suspect that there was a prevalence of suicidal behaviour in, let alone outside of, custody. In short, while we were all aware of a growing violence in Aboriginal communities, its forms appeared not to include suicide.

By the end of 1986–87, it became obvious that something was seriously amiss in custody. The prevailing belief was in foul play, violence by police and warders or, at ‘best’, inadequate care and supervision. To my knowledge, suicide outside of custody aroused no comment before the mid-1980s. Aboriginal suicide is a specific topic in the bibliography of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). About 83 per cent of the items published or reported between 1968 and 1997 were for the cluster years of 1987 to 1995, the period in which deaths in custody were the focus of attention.

### 3. Suicidal behaviour outside custody

On 23 October 1989, I gave a public lecture to a largely Aboriginal (Nunga) audience at Flinders University. During the previous week, the (then) Department of Aboriginal Affairs became aware of eight non-custodial suicide attempts by Aborigines in Adelaide between 16 and 22 October. Audience members raised the youth suicide question, in the context of widespread diffidence and despair. More aware, I visited the Mildura Aboriginal legal aid office soon after and asked if suicide was occurring in the town. ‘No, absolutely not’, replied the male administrator. Whereupon a female staff member called out, ‘What about my two daughters?’ The girls had swallowed liquid paper and thumb tacks. The administrator explained that all this was ‘playing silly buggers’, ‘girls looking for attention’. Stories of this kind emerged in subsequent communities I visited and in several I revisited: generally, a concern by women about young girls and a dismissive or deflective attitude by older men.

At the end of the sport–delinquency study, I published a paper on Aboriginal violence.<sup>17</sup> The 1980–90 decade, I wrote, had seen a marked increase in ‘internal breakdown’ within communities. There was, I explained, abundant evidence of the following:

- much personal violence within Aboriginal groups, even within families;
- much child neglect, as in hunger and lack of general care;
- much violence and damage committed while sober;
- a marked increase in Aboriginal deaths from non-natural causes;
- much destruction of property, both white-supplied and own-acquired;
- increasing numbers of attacks, often violent, on white staff working with the groups;
- an alarming incidence of suicide and parasuicide among the youth;
- large consumption of alcohol, commonly and generally (but not always correctly) offered as the *sole and total explanation* of the violence; and
- the constancy with which Aborigines externalised cause, blame and responsibility for all the above.

### 4. A matter of history

To understand the onset of this ‘disorder’, it is essential to look, however briefly, at the history that gave rise to it.

Legislation to protect Aborigines began in an elementary way in the 1840s: by 1843, five of the colonies had appointed Protectors. Protection, in earnest and in great legislative detail, began in Victoria in 1869 and 1886, in Western Australia in 1886, in New South Wales in 1909, in South Australia in 1911, in the Northern Territory in

1910 and 1911, in Tasmania in 1912. Most of these laws were predicated on the philosophy of ‘soothing the dying pillow’ of a race near extinction. Given that there was a widespread assumption that Aborigines were dying out, settlers fulfilled the prophecy by acting to ensure that such was indeed the outcome. The Myall Creek massacres of 1838, on the Gwydir River (in northern New South Wales), testified to settler attitudes.

There were to be two protective fences against genocide in most of Australia: the legal one, which was soon found to be insufficient, followed by the geographic one of sometimes extreme isolation, the additional barrier against white predators. Law would keep whites *out* and Aborigines *in* protective custodianship. Geographic location would see to it that no one could get in, or out. Government-run settlements and Christian-run missions were established in inaccessible places to protect the people from their predators; to encourage, sometime to coerce, Aborigines away from the ‘centres of evil’; to allow for the Christianising and civilising process in private and away from temptations; to enable better ministrations to a doomed, remnant people. Catherine deMayo has explained why ‘mission’ Aborigines came to be where many still are.<sup>18</sup> One missionary concluded that ‘the Christian Church and the Government can but play the part of physicians and nurses in a hospital for incurables’. These ‘children of darkness’ needed places like Yarrabah, near Cairns, described as ‘splendidly secluded’. In New South Wales, the mission places were not as geographically isolated, but were nevertheless institutions designed to separate and ‘protect’: Bomaderry, Bowraville, Erambie, Lake Macquarie, Maloga School, Parramatta, Warangesda, Wellington Valley, as well as the ‘assimilation’ homes at Kinchela and Cootamundra.

The missionaries did not simply supply a nursing service for ‘incurables’, or a burial service: they became active agents of various governmental policies, such as protection-segregation, assimilation, so-called integration and some of the latter-day notions like self-determination and self-management. They were additionally delegated an astonishing array of unchallengeable powers. Uniquely—in terms of modern missionary activity in colonised societies—mission boards became the *sole* civil authority in their domains. They ran schools, infirmaries, farms and gardens, provided water, sewerage and similar public utility services, established dormitories, built jails, prosecuted ‘wrongdoers’, jailed them, counselled them, controlled their income, forbade their customs and acted as sole legal guardians of every adult and every child. They also tried to Christianise the inmates according to their varying dogmas and doctrines, with little success. The eighteenth-century English radical philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, has bequeathed us succinct phrasing for such ‘penitentiary-homes’—ones in which the objectives are ‘*safe custody, confinement, solitude, forced labour and instructions*’.<sup>19</sup>

The special laws show that the ‘protections’ which parliaments had in mind were as much from outside intruders as from the Aborigines themselves. In Queensland, protection in theory became discrimination in practice. Stopping predators from coming in resulted in Aborigines being incarcerated for life, even for generations, on the remotest of places, like Yarrabah, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Doomadgee, Bamaga, Edward

River, Weipa, Bloomfield River and Woorabinda. Protection of Aboriginal morality came to mean control of their movement, labour, marriages, private lives, reading matter, leisure and sports activities, even cultural and religious rituals. Protection of their income came to mean police constables—as official Protectors of Aborigines—controlling wages, withdrawals from compulsory savings bank accounts, rights to enter contracts of labour, and of purchase and sale.

In the Northern Territory, from 1911 to 1957 and again from 1957 to 1964, when all ‘full-blood’ Aborigines were declared ‘wards’, protection included permits to leave reserves and the Territory, prohibition on alcohol, prohibition on inter-racial sex, prohibition on inter-racial marriage unless with official permission, inability to vote or to receive social service benefits, employment at specified, statutory Aboriginal rates of pay (well below the famous basic wage, which Australia invented in 1907), exclusion from industrial awards, and so on.

In New South Wales, Governor Macquarie’s Proclamation of 1816 declared that Aborigines were subject to the protection of white law, and in 1835 a Vagrancy Act made it punishable for anyone to be found lodging or ‘wandering in company with any of the black natives of this Colony’. In 1838, Aborigines were prohibited from having access to alcohol. In 1839, a bill to preclude Aborigines as competent witnesses in criminal cases, on the grounds that they did not have ‘any distinct idea of religion or fixed belief in a future state of rewards and punishments’, was denied. The very introduction of legislation of this kind is indicative of the way in which Aborigines were perceived, and regarded.

The *Aborigines Protection Act of 1909* became the primary statute that governed their lives until 1969. The Aborigines Protection Board was given a number of general duties, including the distribution of blankets and clothing; the ‘custody, maintenance and children of Aborigines’; management and regulation of premises; the exercise of ‘a general supervision and care over all matters affecting the interests and welfare of Aborigines, to protect them against injustice, imposition and fraud’. Board officers had power to ‘maintain discipline and good order on any reserve’; apportionment ‘among Aborigines, of the earnings of any Aborigines living upon a reserve’; and ‘the control of Aborigines residing upon a reserve’.

In 1915, the Act was amended to allow any youth, who refused to go to the person to whom he was apprenticed, to be removed to an institution, and if under 18, to be dealt with as ‘a neglected child’. The Board also had power to control the child of any Aborigine, if it was satisfied that this was ‘in the interest of the moral or physical welfare of such child’. In 1940, the Act was again amended to further enable Aborigines ‘to become assimilated into the general life of the community’, but in the same breath it empowered the Board to establish homes for ‘the maintenance, education and training of wards’, defined as anyone under 18 admitted to the control of the Board or committed to an institution. All wages of such wards were made payable to the Board.

New South Wales Aborigines experienced an especial brand of discrimination

that has haunted people to this day: the policy of ‘exclusion on demand’ in the public school system. The *Public Instruction Act 1880* laid down the framework for primary and secondary schooling. What happened thereafter is a landmark in the history of racism in this country. At the turn of the century, white parents began making complaints to schools about their children having to sit next to ‘niggers’. Some teachers agreed to accept Aborigines, provided they were ‘clean, clad and courteous’. Others would not have any Aborigines. In 1900, John Perry, the Minister for Education, endorsed one teacher’s stance not to accept Aboriginal children: this action became officially justified as ‘the will of the people with the Minister’s sanction’.<sup>20</sup> This practice of ‘exclusion on demand’ could be initiated by teachers or white parents. In 1902, Perry ordered teachers in all 2,800 government schools to exclude Aboriginal children the moment white parents voiced an objection. ‘Exclusion on demand’ became standard practice throughout the State. When Aboriginal parents sought relief or objected, they were told to send their children to the special Aboriginal schools on reserves (the last of which disappeared in the 1980s), schools not staffed by the Education Department and commonly not run by qualified teachers. On arrival there, they were told that these special schools were for ‘full-bloods’ only—since those of ‘admixture’ were to be assimilated. This policy was still active, for example in the Northern Tablelands, in the mid-1970s. From the very rough statistics we have of these periods, it is likely that at least 50,000 Aborigines were denied access to either the white or the special Aboriginal schools for the first 70 years of this century. Here, then, is assimilation practised either by way of total segregation or total exclusion from State systems. Here, too, is a legacy of bitterness and hostility towards government agencies.

In 1983, historian Peter Read published a short monograph on the ‘stolen generations’ in New South Wales.<sup>21</sup> The annual reports of the Aborigines Protection [later Welfare] Board were always explicit: ‘this policy of dissociating the children from [native] camp life must eventually solve the Aboriginal problem’. By placing children in ‘first-class private homes’, the superior standard of life would ‘pave the way for the absorption of these people into the general population’. Further, ‘to allow these children to remain on the reserve to grow up in comparative idleness in the midst of more or less vicious surroundings would be, to say the least, an injustice to the children themselves, and a positive menace to the State’. The committal notices prescribed by law required a column to be completed under the heading ‘Reason for Board taking control of the child’. The great majority of responses were penned in one standard phrase: ‘For being Aboriginal’!

Read’s estimate of the number of children removed in New South Wales between 1883 and 1969 is 5,625, allowing (as he notes) that there is a distinct ‘lack of records’. My assessment is a much higher figure. I have not examined such Board or child welfare records as remain, but base my higher figure on an extrapolation of the numbers of forced removals and institutionalisation among the 1,200 Aboriginal sports people recorded in my recent book on the history of the Aboriginal experience as seen through the metaphor of sport.<sup>22</sup> (One example: of the 129 men and women in the Aboriginal and Islander Sports Hall of Fame, twelve were removed, another six, possibly seven

were adopted by white families, while another 22 grew up in institutions.) Read's figure of perhaps 100,000 across Australia over a century rings truer. The National Inquiry into the 'separation' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, published in 1997, summarises the situation: 'we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970'.<sup>23</sup>

Of the 208 Aboriginal people interviewed in this study, every one had a connection, often a close one, with removal. Most often, those interviewed were children of removed parents and, most often, the youth engaged in aggressive, or reckless, or near-suicidal behaviour were, in turn, their children.

The era of protection–segregation did not end with the formal adoption of assimilation policies by the national conferences of officials in 1937, and again in 1951 and 1961. Despite proclamations of equality in those two latter decades, the old policies and practices persisted. The lay and clerical bureaucrats who remained as guardians could not or would not accept the 'elevation' of 'their' wards to the status (of power, goodness, correctness, civility) they enjoyed. The settlements and missions continued as before, with total power vested in officials who maintained a regimen of work, instruction, discipline, good order and hygiene. These bogey men were real enough. Draconian laws, wardship status, exclusion from schools, forcible removal of children became the indelible scars and memories of this century's Aboriginal population in this State: 'the welfare', to use the Aboriginal idiom, remains indelible in the contemporary Aboriginal psyche.

## 5. The 'new violence'

### (i) *Decolonisation*

In another context, I have tried to explain the contemporary violence.<sup>24</sup> Briefly, my contention is that it is *decolonisation*, rather than colonisation, which is a root cause. It was only after the Labor Party won federal office at the end of 1972 that these institutions began to be dismantled: the 'inmates' stayed and became citizens (in legal theory), but the 'inspectors' of the harsh rules 'for the good order and discipline of the settlements'—the guards and the gatekeepers—disappeared, at least in the flesh. Their spectres lingered. What has also endured is the myth, and the euphemism, that all of this treatment—lasting nearly three-quarters of a century—was simply and mundanely nothing more than 'the era of handouts'.

In an ironic sense, it was the removal of these often draconian structures that created the present climate of violence and disorder. Almost all commentators, analysts and scholars attribute the present breakdowns, including the propensity for suicide, to past and continuing colonialism, racism, oppression, landlessness, population relocations, and the destruction of cultures and environments. The RCIADIC contains

an excellent summary of these factors, elucidating the underlying causes of the disproportionate numbers of Aborigines in custody.<sup>25</sup> This is all true, in the broad sense and sweep. But we can pinpoint actions which have been largely responsible for the present turmoil. These ‘asylums’ or ‘total institutions’<sup>26</sup> had become ‘communities’ in name, regardless of whether or not there was an actual *communitas*. In the eras of protection–segregation and wardship, settlements and missions were designed as *institutions*, and the residents termed *inmates*. There were legal and administrative locks and keys, as well as the physical kind. With the changes which came shortly before and after 1972, these nineteenth and early twentieth-century institutions were euphemistically re-named ‘communities’, and the superintendents and managers transformed by administrative pen into ‘community development officers’. No-one tried to understand or define the characteristics of a community, no-one trained the officers in ‘development’, and no-one ever consulted the black populations about their notions of a civil order, an organised society, a polity. Born out of sheer political expedience, and out of a laziness about doing any homework concerning these groupings and their common or uncommon characteristics, bureaucrats eventually gave these prison-like institutions ‘freedom’, a budget and autonomy of a limited kind. Nobody gave thought as to how to de-institutionalised institutions and remove their penitentiary flavour. No-one provided training in autonomy. Nobody remembered, or wanted to remember, that the inmates-turned-citizens were often people who had been moved or exiled to these places, people who had had to be disciplined or punished, or people who had been rounded up by desert patrols and simply placed there for the ‘social engineering’ experiment of assimilation in the deserts and monsoon lands. Most places were *not* peopled by a *communitas*. These people were not a voluntary association, with common tribal or linguistic membership and fellowship, or with common historical, political, or cultural heritages. They were not communitarian in their membership, and neither cohesive nor socially coherent.

The infrastructure in these institutions was artificial. The omnipresence of the ‘inspector’ (usually the director of the relevant Aboriginal Affairs department), the authoritarian laws and regulations under special legislation, and the associated powers, together with mission evangelism, gave these institutions ‘viability’ of a kind. The struts and pillars propping up these institutions began to be removed only in the 1970s and, in Queensland, even later. Thus there is, in effect, a structural vacuum in many places, an absence of an overarching or binding philosophy (however bad, or misguided), a lack of system, without goals beyond mere survival. The rallying call for land rights, especially since 1969, and the protracted legal hearings which resulted, have filled only a small part of that vacuum. Lacking structure, many ‘communities’ lacked order, and have become *disordered*. These much respected Aboriginal values of affection, reverence for family and kin, reciprocity, care of the young and aged, veneration for law, lore and religion, are floundering or have been displaced. What began as protection from physical genocide in the last century has resulted, at present, in *a widespread legacy of acute distress*.

I had read Professor Ernest Hunter’s published papers on suicides in the

Kimberleys.<sup>27</sup> His concern about the rapidly increasing rates of youth suicide, self-mutilation and other violent behaviours impressed me. He had described self-mutilation, particularly among young males, that includes self-tattooing, often of their own name. Hunter says this is usually done by alienated adolescents whose social networks are fragile and who need to claim and proclaim their very identity. Dr Joseph Reser in Townsville was reporting alarming suicide rates, at very young ages, in North Queensland.

*(ii) RCIADIC findings*

The RCIADIC findings were: 37 per cent of deaths from natural causes; 34 per cent self-inflicted; 15 per cent from injuries (fights or falls occasioned by other than custody officers); 9 per cent related to ‘substance abuse’; and 5 per cent from custodians’ actions.<sup>28</sup> Of interest in the context of my report is that 27 deaths were of people aged between 14 and 24, 43 of the deceased were in custody for alcohol-related matters, and 12 were in custody for ‘non-offences’. There was general relief that the shadow of murder had been removed by this scrupulous and Aboriginal-sympathetic inquiry. There were some who sought to show that the suicide figure was consonant with the Australian ‘norm’ for deaths in custody; others saw the suicide figure of 30 out of 99 as inconsistent with the (believed) Aboriginal propensity *not* to self-destruct.

By 1991, however, I was aware that there was much more suicide in freedom than in custody.

*(iii) Suicide as a social indicator*

Suicide is not the sole indicator of societal ills, but it is generally accepted as a strong signal that something is seriously awry. Teenage suicide, especially teenage male suicide, has reached dramatic proportions in most Western societies in the past twenty years. But the leap in Aboriginal rates of suicide and attempted suicide is staggering—both statistically and as unspoken commentary about the value young Aborigines now place on life. There is a need to understand why so many young Aboriginal people prefer death to life, and this gives impetus to my research. By contrast with the approach taken by the noted scholar David Lester, who has published books on *Suicide from a Psychological Perspective* and *Suicide from a Sociological Perspective*<sup>29</sup>, my approach is anthropological and political, trying to discover if this form of violent behaviour has all or some of its origins in the social and political contexts in which it occurs.

## Endnotes 2. The Origins of the ‘New Violence’

1. Marx, 5–6.
2. Tatz 1994, 1995.
3. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 June 1999; also 6 July 1999.
4. RCIADIC.
5. Maori Suicide Review Group, 1.
6. Duclos, Le Beau and Elias in *Calling from the Rim*, 189–214.
7. Kidson and Jones.
8. Cawte *et al.*
9. Jones.
10. Burvill.
11. Eastwell.
12. Hunter *et al*, 91.
13. Personal communication.
14. Personal communications from these three colleagues.
15. McIlvanie.
16. In November 1997, after years of agitation by Eddie’s father, Arthur, the NSW State Coroner granted an order for an exhumation and further post-mortem. The forensic finding was that the deceased had a fractured sternum, possibly occasioned a day or two before his alleged self-hanging. The family’s barrister, Robert Cavanagh, has maintained, on an SBS documentary shown in February 1998, that with such an injury he would have been incapable of carrying out the physical actions involved in his death. As at this time, no further action has taken place in the matter. An important document on the matter is *Too Much Wrong: Report on the Death of Edward James Murray*.
17. Tatz 1990, 245–60; Tatz 1995, chapter 13, 297–340.
18. See Tatz, 1995, 36.
19. Tatz, 1999, 22.
20. Tatz 1995, 189–90.
21. Read.
22. Tatz, 1995.
23. HREOC.
24. Tatz 1999.
25. RCIADIC, vol. 2, chapter 10, ‘The Legacy of History’, 3–47.
26. The Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman coined these terms for North American mental institutions (*Asylums*, Penguin, London, 1968). He called them ‘places of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’. Prisons, he wrote, serve as a clear example, providing we ‘appreciate that what is prison-like about prisons is found in institutions whose members have broken no laws’.
27. Hunter 1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1990, 1993.
28. RCIADIC, vol. 1, 4–7.
29. Lester, 1989.