

# Information for the 'stolen generation'

A significant event for Northern Territory Aboriginal people, particularly those affected by past government separation and removal policies, took place on 5 March 1997 in the Australian Archives Northern Territory Office.

A *Memorandum of understanding for access to Commonwealth records by Aboriginal people* was signed between the Australian Archives, the Northern Territory Stolen Generations Combined Reference Groups, KARU Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency and the Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

About one-hundred people witnessed the signing ceremony, including many 'stolen generations' people. Other guests included the director of the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, the ATSIC chairperson of the Darwin Regional Council, and representatives of the Stolen Generations Reference Groups, the Northern and Central Land Councils, the churches and Northern Territory cultural institutions.

At the signing the acting director of the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, John Paterson, said that the Archives 'deserves the praise of our community' for providing Aboriginal people with access to records. Commissioner Josie Crawshaw has also paid tribute to the work of the Australian Archives saying it had 'accepted that it had a responsibility to play its part in the healing by doing things differently.'

## The Memorandum

The Memorandum is a consequence of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which found that separation from families was a common thread in almost half the deaths it investigated.

In its 1991 report, the Commission made two recommendations about improving accessibility to information. While recommendation 57 dealt with access and custody arrangements for

the records of the Commission, recommendation 53 required all governments to provide access to records pertaining to the family and community histories of Aboriginal people.

Recommendation 53 has largely shaped the access arrangements that are given effect in the Memorandum.

Following the appointment of an Aboriginal project officer in the Archives Northern Territory Office in December 1995, the process of developing the Memorandum began in earnest. Ms Phyllis Williams, the current Aboriginal project officer, has undertaken extensive consultation with Aboriginal people and organisations in the Northern Territory.

Through this process the Northern Territory Stolen Generations Combined Reference Groups, KARU Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency, Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Australian Archives have reached agreement about arrangements for access to open-period Commonwealth records held by the Darwin Office of the Archives.

The Memorandum assists Aboriginal people who have been affected by removal and separation policies, to gain unrestricted access to open-period records to assist them to re-establish links with families and communities. Many records of relevance to Aboriginal people separated from their families contain sensitive personal information — information which would normally be restricted from public access under the *Archives Act*.

Aboriginal people seeking access to records under the Memorandum are welcome to visit the Archives to undertake their own research or may nominate an agent to undertake research on their behalf. Researchers and agents working under the Memorandum are required to complete an application form which includes an undertaking not to reveal sensitive information about another person.

The Memorandum provides for the establishment of an Aboriginal Advisory Group comprising representatives of the Stolen Generation Combined Reference Groups, KARU Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency, Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Australian Archives. The group will advise the Archives on the implementation, management and review of the Memorandum and will work with the Archives on issues, practices, policies and services of the Archives affecting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

Further information about the *Memorandum of understanding* is available from Phyllis Williams at the Australian Archives Northern Territory Office on (08) 8948 4577. ■



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