

Australian Indigenous senator demands reparations from King Charles



Charles and Camilla on a visit to New Zealand in 2015. They are wearing Maori capes and watching a traditional Maori welcome.

Charles visited New Zealand many times as Prince of Wales [File: David Rowland/Pool via AP Photo]

Melbourne, May 5 (RHC)-- On the eve of King Charles's coronation, Indigenous leaders from around the globe have called on the British monarch to apologize and make amends for genocide. Australian Indigenous Senator Lidia Thorpe said the harmful effect of colonization was still being felt by Indigenous people today. She noted that in 1935, Indigenous Australian leader and activist William Cooper wrote to King George V and included a petition signed by 1,814 Indigenous people, requesting "that His Majesty would intervene through medium of Majesty's Government in the Commonwealth of Australia ... to prevent the extinction of the Aboriginal race."

In 1977, Indigenous Australian activist and leader Michael Mansfield personally handed Queen Elizabeth II a letter demanding land rights.

The latest letter was also signed by Australian Indigenous Senator Lidia Thorpe, who heads up the Blak Sovereign Movement, and former Indigenous Senator and sportswoman Nova Peris, who also represents the Australian Republic Movement.

In a separate statement, Thorpe said that "the British monarchy oversaw the oppression of First Nations peoples in British colonies all over the world. The horrific impacts of British colonisation, including the genocide of our people, theft of our land and denigration of our culture, are still felt today."

Thorpe also demanded the Australian government implement a treaty and truth-telling process, as well as cut ties with the crown and become a republic. While Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has said he is "not a monarchist" and has even installed an Assistant Minister for the Republic, he has also stated that he will swear the oath of allegiance to the new king at Saturday's coronation.

Along with letters and petitions to successive monarchs, Indigenous peoples in Australia have also long sought the formal recognition of genocide on the continent. Widespread massacres occurred across Australia after British colonisation — the last took place in 1927 — with about half of them led by police forces.

The devastation of colonization was so great in the Australian state of Victoria that by 1929, official records placed the number of remaining so-called 'full-blood' Indigenous people at 53 and the number of 'half castes' at 607.

About 30,000 Indigenous people were thought to have lived in the region before the arrival of the British, with some estimates as high as 60,000. A 1997 report, *Bringing Them Home*, also concluded that the removal of up to 100,000 Indigenous children from their families between 1900 and 1970 for the purposes of assimilation amounted to genocide.

The finding was vehemently rejected by Australia's then-conservative Prime Minister John Howard, who as recently as 2014 reiterated that "I didn't believe genocide had taken place, and I still don't."

Co-signatory, Chief Terry Teegee from the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations in Canada, stressed that the May 6 coronation represented "an opportunity to reset the relationship between the crown and Indigenous peoples".

"We urge the crown to take our concerns seriously and to work with us on concrete actions to address a history and a present reality which continues to impact the lives of countless people," he said.

A joint study between the Australian National University and the British Museum conducted between 2016 and 2019 found about 38,400 Indigenous Australian objects in institutions across the UK and about 600 in Ireland.

Last year, the Australian federal government announced a new cultural precinct in the nation's capital Canberra, called Ngurra — meaning 'home' in Indigenous languages, including Ngaanyatjarra and

Pitjantjatjara.

The precinct will also include a National Resting Place for the remains of Indigenous ancestors brought home from global museums and institutions.

Along with the demands of cultural and bodily repatriation, the joint letter also calls for financial reparations to reflect the stolen wealth of Indigenous and enslaved peoples. Like other European empires and their respective monarchs, British wealth increased significantly from the exploitation of land, labour and resources in the colonies.

While Indigenous peoples in former colonies grapple with poverty — the legacy of colonisation, according to Waititi — Forbes magazine estimated recently that King Charles's personal wealth amounted to "at least \$500 million in personal assets with another \$46 billion held in trust as the sovereign".

Whether or not the king will respond to the groups' demands is not clear, but this is not the first time Indigenous peoples have petitioned a British monarch directly.

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