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# The ones who came with chains

Brian McCoy | 14 December 2021

I don't write to State Premiers very often. However, a month ago I did. It was to the Western Australian Premier, Mark McGowan. It was not about Test cricket, the Juukan Gorge or opening the state's borders. It was in relation to a photo on the front page of *The Australian* on the weekend of the 6/7 November showing an Aboriginal man in Western Australia boarding a plane under arrest. He was barefooted and with both a wrist and ankle chain.

The abduction of young Cleo Smith attracted the attention of many within Australia and overseas. There was palpable joy when she was found safe and, apparently, unharmed. The person in the photo and who had been taken into custody in relation to her abduction was Terence Darrell Kelly. He had been arrested and was being flown to the maximum-security Casuarina prison in Perth. Since then has appeared in court facing charges.

The reason why I wrote to the Premier was not about the particulars of the alleged crime but that image of an Aboriginal man being taken away barefoot and in chains. It was an image that evoked past images of Western Australian Aboriginal men being taken away in leg and neck chains. And it seemed, particularly in this case and context, so disrespectful of his dignity and unnecessary. And, it needs be added, disrespectful of the dignity of those who accompanied him.

Some years ago, I knew a highly respected Aboriginal elder who, decades earlier, had been arrested for killing sheep. He and two other senior and respected men were arrested by the police and taken away in chains and forced to walk to the prison in Wyndham, hundreds of kilometres away. The story goes that this man managed to free himself of his neck chain and, over some weeks, walk all the way back home. From then he was referred to as *Tjaintjanu*. The name literally meant 'chain-from'. In English we might have called him the 'chainman'. But he was more than another Aboriginal man who had been chained. He was one who had escaped the chain.

The linguist William McGregor has explored the [various terms for 'policeman'](#) found in Australian First Nations languages.<sup>[1]</sup> Many such words exist and there is great variation across Australia as to how the police were originally perceived and named. As McGregor points out, these were significant white men at the forefront of colonisation and who came with much power, often associated with aggression and force. They were seen as the protectors of the property of the colonisers and often with little regard for the legal rights of the Aboriginal people they arrested. It is not surprising that they were given names to describe some key aspect of their behaviour.

McGregor explored more than one hundred First Nations languages. He found some words that suggested the policeman as an animal, such as a shark; a bird, such as an eaglehawk; or an insect, such as a 'biting fly'. Others referred to their distinctive clothing, such the stripe on their uniform or the badge on their hat. Some suggested qualities such as sour or bitter, aggressive or fierce, angry or 'on for fights'. Others referred to them as stone or money, perhaps referring to one of their roles as 'protectors' and in control of peoples' finances.

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He found one that came with a very distinctive memory, black cockatoo. It seems that the police in those early days wore dark uniforms with a red stripe down the side of the trousers, a reminder of a black cockatoo. However, they were also seen coming as packs or flocks making a lot of noise as only cockatoos can.

But, amidst these many and varied names, he came across a particular group of words that referred to the manner by which people were arrested. In many parts of Australia, but particularly in Western Australia, it was the custom of police to patrol with chains and use them to 'bind' Aboriginal prisoners. This practice of binding included the arrest of murderers but also witnesses to alleged crimes and the sick, eg. those believed to be carrying leprosy.

McGregor discovered that a number of languages in the Western Australia have used words that refer to rope, string or chain in naming police. They include words such as 'the chaining horseman' or 'the one with the chain'. He discovered more than twenty different languages used words that either described 'tying up' or 'artefacts of bondage'.

These words hold a very particular Western Australian memory of first contact where the police came to 'bind' and remove people. Such words remember and repeat images of a painful past. Arrest came with shame, punishment, the presumption of guilt and with little dignity.

This was the letter I wrote:

*Dear Premier,*

*I am assuming you saw the front page of The Australian on the weekend of 6/7 November where it showed a photo of Terence Darrell Kelly boarding a plane in the custody of the WA Special Operations Group. He was in barefoot and in a wrist and ankle chain.*

*The finding of baby Cleo Smith by the Western Australian police brought much joy to many, and not just in Australia. After days of fruitless searching, she was found safe and physically well. It is unfortunate that this one image of her abductor's arrest has damaged what was, until then, an united national celebration.*

*I have spent a number of years in the Kimberley and was a Senior Research Officer with Pat Dodson (now Senator Pat Dodson) in the underlying issues component of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. As you may know, that Commission examined in much detail the racist and often violent history of behaviour by police and the resulting imprisonment of many First Nations people.*

*I have visited many prisons in Australia and been a chaplain in some. I have welcomed prisoners home to remote communities for funerals. In nearly fifty years I have never witnessed a prisoner in a wrist and ankle chain.*

*It would seem reasonable to ask. Who authorised this and did they realise how First Nations people and many others in Australia would have perceived such an image?*

*What was the reason why he was chained? Was there a concern he might be violent and escape? Was there a previous history of violence? We have not been provided any evidence that there was a justifiable reason for him to be chained in this way. In fact, the more we hear and learn about Terence Darrell Kelly the more we are concerned about his own mental and vulnerable state at that time.*

*Some of us are very familiar with many stories of past violent and even criminal police responses to First Nations people. We have heard many stories of violent treatment as they were taken into custody even before they came to court.*

*Some of us are even old enough to have heard first-hand stories of those men in the Kimberley who were taken away in chains, some never to return to home and to their families. Many of these men were not violent offenders but were simply arrested for crimes against property, such as the killing of sheep.*

*It may be worth adding that, in the language of the Kukatja people of Western Australia, the word that they have come to use for police is wayirnuwatji, literally 'chain possessing'. The police are remembered as the ones who came with chains and it is most unfortunate that the Special Operations Group, a service agency within the Department of Justice, would remind many of this past practice.*

*While there are, undoubtedly, good and trustworthy men and women in the Western Australia Department of Justice, this one recent and public image has done enormous damage. It will prove even more difficult for the police of Western Australia to be ones that First Nations people will trust when their association with 'the chaining of their people' continues to be reinforced.*

A month later, I have yet to hear back from the Premier.

[1] Cockatoos, Chaining-Horsemen, and Mud-Eaters, *Anthropos* 95, 2000 (3-22).



Brian F. McCoy SJ is the former Provincial Superior for the Australian Province of the Society of Jesus (2014-2020). He was the Director of the Australian Jesuit Tertiarity program from 2013-14. He completed a doctorate in Aboriginal men's health at the University of Melbourne, later published as *Holding Men: Kanyirninpa and the health of Aboriginal men*.

Main image: Iconic Aboriginal mural at Aboriginal Advancement League on St Georges Road Thornbury, Victoria.  
(Kazadams / Wikimedia Commons)