



PROOF OF BIRTH

Published in *Proof of Birth* in 2015 by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

CHAPTER 6

The Minimbah Project: facilitating birth registration and birth certificates in rural and regional communities

Will Winter

My identity is my being; it is my spirit, it connects me to my family and it empowers my culture. Not knowing who I am, where I come from and where I have been; I don't know where I am going. My identity is the light that illuminates the path I choose to take in my life.

Gina Milgate, Australian Citizen, Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri Daughter, Sister, Aunty, Educator and Researcher

The Minimbah Project

The Minimbah Project is a community-led response designed to ensure that all Australian-born citizens have access to a full legal identity.¹ The Project assists

thousands of Australians who struggle to fully participate in Australian life because their birth was not registered, or they can't access a birth certificate.

Lack of a birth certificate makes it difficult for people to enjoy all the benefits of citizenship and has been linked with increased engagement with the criminal justice system and incarceration.² When children or adults fail to have their births registered, or for whatever reason cannot obtain a birth certificate, the foundation of their identity is compromised. This makes it difficult to participate in all aspects of mainstream society, and in this sense, a lack of access to birth certificates can lead to perpetuation of poverty cycles from one generation to the next.

Since 2011, the Minimbah Project has raised more than \$200,000 to help provide birth certificates for nearly 4,000 young people and their family members from low socio-economic backgrounds in regional communities. This has been achieved by running approximately 40 'Signup Days' in carefully selected, culturally 'safe' community spaces (for example, school halls) across northern New South Wales. On Signup Days, children and families are invited via community networks to attend and apply for 'free' birth certificates, and they are widely advertised through community, social and traditional media networks, although 'word of mouth' seems to have the greatest effect. On Signup Days, individuals are guided through an organised, yet apparently informal application process, and are encouraged to attend in

family groups where possible. They are assisted by teams of volunteers who are briefed beforehand about how to fill out forms, how to look for social cues when people need help, and how to copy/check an individual's identification documents. Justices of the Peace donate their time to sight and verify identity documents. Completed applications are vetted by experienced team members before being sent via registered post to the Registries of Births Deaths and Marriages (BDM) in relevant states. In 2014, the Minimbah Project began offering dual 'Signup' days for Queensland- and New South Wales-born people living in NSW Border communities, requiring parallel processes and the presence of JPs with relevant jurisdictional authority from each state.

Whenever possible, Signup Days are delivered around celebratory and fun themes. For example, activities have included a pantomime with 'Mr Piggy' and other local actors to demonstrate aspects of financial literacy to primary school aged children, treasure hunts (again with financial literacy themes), football coaching by members of the Parramatta Eels RFL club, local musicians and concerts, and even trick dogs. Sausage sizzles and healthy food for lunch have helped to draw people to the event and sustain them while paperwork is filled out. In this respect, local service clubs have often been willing to provide equipment, volunteers, and sometimes food at minimal cost. Keynote speakers (for example, the local state or federal Member of Parliament) have also attended and appreciated the opportunity to

mix with families and take photos for their own publicity purposes. The presence of a keynote speaker and other drawcards assists in publicising Signup Days. It also helps to inform public and civic leaders about the issues surrounding lack of identity in Australian society.

Signup Days draw people from a wide cross-section of the community, presenting opportunities for social contact, sharing of ideas, connections with local services, and celebrating positive aspects of community life. Smaller country schools have used Signup Days to showcase their students' work and school offerings as part of an enrolment drive. Signup Days also serve as 'ice-breakers' for the commencement of new service providers in towns; and can help set new parents at ease at the beginning of a new school year, when there is high demand for proof of age as a prerequisite to enrolling children in school. In this sense, while birth certificates remain a focal point, they can also act as a wonderful catalyst for community capacity-building outcomes, in which the wellbeing of young people and 'our future' become overarching themes of mutual concern.

An overview of the Project can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUCo_TgMIWE and further details of 'Signup' events can be found at <http://vimeo.com/42957906> and <http://vimeo.com/41475275>.

Minimbah: where to from here?

Plans are currently in place to extend the program in 2015, with a view to assisting up to 17,000 birth certificate applications per annum in New South Wales,

Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. It is anticipated that these additional Signup Days will be funded through corporate sponsorship, donations from philanthropic organisations and individuals, and federal and state government support. The Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet has been a significant financial contributor in recent years, and we hope this will continue into the future.

The Minimbah Project's success has been enabled through funding and in-kind support from a large and growing network of stakeholders, both within Australia and overseas, including schools, service clubs, businesses, health centres, churches, universities, TAFES, family service providers, politicians, job agencies, youth services, government agencies, and sporting and community clubs.

Another ingredient for success has been the skills and dedication of many volunteers who help run the Signup Days, publicise the events, and process paperwork. These volunteers have collectively donated more than 16,000 hours of time to the Project over the past three years. Much of this time has been given by amazing Enactus students³ from the University of New England, who have helped to initiate and run the Project in its current form since 2011. Volunteers and other supporters are motivated by the immediate and positive impact that birth certificates make for each person. They also enjoy the community spirit that seems to pervade Signup Days, and as the quote below illustrates, the opportunity to strengthen social cohesion, social resilience and economic prosperity for all Australians.

Birth Certificates are essential for everyday life and without them, an individual is placed at a distinct disadvantage. Marginalisation in the social, economic and political processes, coupled with deficiencies in literacy skills, inhibits that individual from advancement within the community.

... Since becoming aware of the Minimbah Project's work some years ago, I have observed noticeable improvements in engagement, recognition, a sense of belonging, and positive practical outcomes for the communities in which the project has operated.

Michael N. Holmes, Local Magistrate (2014)

Approximately 14% of all birth certificate applicants through the Minimbah Project have not previously registered their birth. In these circumstances, individuals are helped by BDMs to complete late birth registration (defined as more than 60 days after the birth), as a necessary first step to obtaining their birth certificate. In this and other respects, Minimbah Project is making positive efforts (along with many others) to achieve universal birth registration (UBR) for all Australians.

Identifying possible causes for non-birth registration and certification in Australia

In Australia, more than 300,000 children are born annually (about 100,000 of these in New South Wales). Approximately 35,000 children (12% of Australian babies born each year) fail to have their births registered by parents or guardians in their first year of life. By the time

the child reaches age three, the number of unregistered births drops to around 8,700 (or around 3%).⁴ Due to a lack of conclusive research in this area, what happens after age three remains unknown. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that tens of thousands of Australian citizens across all age groups remain unregistered throughout their lives.

While the reasons behind lower levels of birth registration in Indigenous communities is also under-researched, it is hoped that forthcoming findings from the ARC Linkage project, 'Closing the Gap on Indigenous Birth Registration', being undertaken by Gerber et al. may provide further insights.⁵

UNICEF Australia⁶ has speculated that factors such as poor literacy levels, lack of understanding of procedures, lack of support from authorities, complex forms and the cost of birth certificates all contribute to non-registration of births and difficulties obtaining a birth certificate, particularly within some Aboriginal communities.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has reported that there are longer registration intervals (measured in months between birth and registration) for Indigenous children than in the general population. In 2009, this was an average of 11.2 months compared with 2.5 months for the general population. Significantly, in 2009, registration intervals for Indigenous children had nearly doubled since 2006, when the average was 6.4 months.⁷ ABS data indicates that factors such as young motherhood, indigeneity, ex-nuptial births, and births

where ex-nuptial paternity is not acknowledged, may all contribute toward extended birth registration intervals.⁸

While assisting people to access birth certificates is extremely worthwhile, the Minimabah Project recognises that these efforts only partially address the underlying structural and administrative issues which, in addition to the cultural and economic impediments mentioned above, contribute to the problem. As Alainnah Calabro points out in Chapter 2, the procurement of birth certificates is a complicated, two-part process, and parents are often unaware of its importance as a stepping stone into mainstream society. She also notes that administrative processes can be further complicated by the sometimes poor literacy skills of applicants, and other cultural biases latent within state-based administrations.

Proposed solutions: Automatic birth registration, and ‘free’ birth certificates for all Australians

Signup Days have provided the Minimabah Project team with extensive first-hand experiences and stories, revealing both the extent and nature of impediments to universal birth registration and birth certification in Australia. These experiences and stories are being used to engage state and federal politicians, media, academics and policy-makers, to bring these issues, their causes and possible solutions into the public domain. We have been encouraged by the responsiveness of Ministers and their advisors to take up this issue, particularly in Canberra where the Department of Human Services is currently reviewing ways in which state-based data gathered

through hospitals at the time of birth can be better connected digitally with Commonwealth-based family welfare payments and other processes.

The Minimbah Project will continue to press for a number of reforms at both state and federal levels, aimed at streamlining the birth registration and certification process across all jurisdictions. The goal of these suggested reforms is for every child in Australia to be automatically registered at birth, and for birth certificates to be issued at no charge to every newborn child as an automatic right of Australian citizenship. It would also be useful for all such legal identity papers (in the form of birth certificates, and/or proof of birth registration) to be digitised and embedded into a Medicare or similarly ubiquitous card.

It is estimated that in addition to the 300,000 birth certificates issued to newborns each year, a further 300,000 to 400,000 are reissued owing to their loss, misplacement, or 'wearing out'. The total cost of certificates for Australian consumers is approximately \$32 million per annum, of which more than half relates to re-issuing duplicate certificates. The additional cost is largely borne by people of low socio-economic means in each state. Meanwhile, state governments justify the sale of birth certificates as a means of 'balancing budgets', and use proceeds of these sales to fund the operations of births, deaths and marriages registries. Income from these sales also helps to defray costs of state government obligations to collect data for national statistics, health,

education and other policy frameworks. It is worth noting that in this context, that the Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC), in its 2013 review, did *not* recommend that people be provided with their first birth certificate for ‘free’, noting that ‘In government fiscal rectitude and prudence are important considerations. Rightly so’⁹ (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the VLRC review and recommendations).

However, the broader social and economic benefits of birth certificates and the legal identity that they afford are arguably much greater than the simple, state-based fiscal costs directly associated with the administration of the BDM registries.

These wider benefits include:

- reduced incarceration and recidivism rates;
- increased participation in sporting and other social events;
- improved access to health services;
- strengthened social, personal and cultural identities;
- improved public safety, mental health and wellbeing;
- improved accuracy of demographic, health and vital statistics;
- reduced identity fraud;
- improved school attendance and retention rates;
- increased access to education and training;
- promotion of higher rates of employment; and
- higher overall rates of economic productivity.

The Minimbah Project estimates that economic returns to the nation associated with increased levels of people

having a birth certificate could be as high as \$1.2 billion per annum, based on conservative calculations of improved education and employment levels for the significant numbers of people affected by this issue. In this regard, the Minimbah Project views the building of digital and other infrastructure for ‘free and automatic’ birth certificates as a very worthwhile investment for longer-term social and economic dividends. The amortised value of these returns at a national level is likely to far exceed capital investments required for improved data-sharing systems, and warrants the resolution of any jurisdictional difficulties we may encounter along the way. Importantly, these reforms provide great potential to see both economic and social justice ‘done’, across all social strata, for both current and future generations of Australians.

The goal of these suggested reforms is for every child in Australia to be automatically registered at birth, and for birth certificates to be issued at no charge to every newborn child, as an automatic right of Australian citizenship.

The Minimbah Project acknowledges that although these proposals may sound relatively simple, their execution is likely to be complex. At a technical level, these reforms will require the development of a tripartite digital platform that links parents, through consent-based personal information sharing at the time of birth, with the Commonwealth (Department of Human Services), state and territory BDM registries, and state-

based health administrations. It may also require strengthened linkages with other platforms such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's National Perinatal Epidemiology and Statistics Unit and the ABS.

At a political and legal level, such reforms will involve multiple jurisdictions and require the ongoing support of a number of state and federal Ministers and Departments. They will also require the sustained efforts of a number of committed stakeholders, including civil society and human rights organisations, to ensure that political momentum for reform is maintained across various government administrations. Minimbah will continue to work closely with the Office of Prime Minister and Premiers on this, while strengthening community-based support networks in the delivery of Signup Days.

Importantly, we anticipate that the proposed reforms will strengthen, rather than weaken, future state-based fiscal income derived through the sale of birth certificates. This could be achieved through increased volume of sales for newborns in the first year of life; reduced administration costs; improved staffing efficiencies; economies of scale through sharing of IT and IP platforms between states; and increased profit-margins for BDM registries. It is hoped that eventually these savings may be passed on to consumers and that Australian prices for birth certificates in future will be recognised as among the cheapest in the world, based on best practice delivery and benchmarks with comparable

jurisdictions such as Canada and the United Kingdom. Improved efficiencies may also enable BDMs to focus more on the visceral (and arguably more valuable) aspects of identity and belonging in Australian society, which birth certificates embody for most citizens who have them.

Plans are currently underway to expand the program for delivery of Signup Days across the country, in partnership with a national coalition of stakeholders. Over the next three years, the Minimbah Project is aiming to provide up to 51,000 'free' birth certificates to those who need them in socially disadvantaged communities.

The Minimbah Project is aiming to make political and legal history by working with a growing network of collaborators and partners to streamline the birth registration and certification process. These reforms will result in billions of dollars in economic and social returns to the nation over time, and help finish decades of work undertaken by social reformers to include all Australians on voting, census and other registers. Like so many others, our goal is to strengthen social inclusion and build human capital through improved access to education, health and employment. This is best achieved when impediments to participation are removed, and we argue that this can only be achieved when universal birth registration is realised and birth certificates (as legal identity) are issued freely and automatically to all citizens.

Endnotes

- 1 See Chapter 1, P Gerber and M Castan 'Achieving Universal Birth Registration in Australia'.
- 2 See Chapter 5, A Barter 'White law, red dirt: Indigenous driving issues in the Pilbara region'.
- 3 'A community of students, academic and business leaders committed to using the power of entrepreneurial action to transform lives and shape a better more sustainable world', retrieved from <http://enactusaustralia.org.au/>
- 4 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), '3301.0 – Births, Australia 2012 explanatory notes (24 October 2013)', retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3301.0Explanatory%20Notes12012?OpenDocument>
- 5 See http://www.indigenousbirthreg.org/Indigenous_Birth_Registration/Introduction.html
- 6 UNICEF Australia, 'Birth Registration' submission to the OHCHR, (November 2013), retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Children/BirthRegistration/UNICEFAustralia.pdf>
- 7 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3301.0 — Births, Australia 2009 (November 2010)
- 8 See, for example, ABS, *Births, Australia* (cat. no. 3301.0.) ABS, Canberra, 2006.
- 9 Victorian Law Reform Commission, 'Birth Registration and birth certificates', 2013, p. 82.