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Olympic Gold-Medal Winner Carries the Aboriginal Flag

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When Australia's Cathy Freeman won a gold medal at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Canada, she celebrated by taking a victory lap while carrying the Aboriginal flag. The flag has become a rallying symbol for the Aboriginal people and a symbol of their race and identity. Its colors black, red, and yellow, represent, respectively, the Aboriginal people, the earth and their spiritual relationship to the land, and the sun, giver of life. The image of Cathy Freeman waving the Aboriginal flag after her victory served to focus international attention on the history and plight of her native Aboriginal people.

From 1910 until the 1970s, 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken from their parents. Light-skinned Aboriginal children were seized and put up for adoption to white families. Dark-skinned children were put in orphanages. The action was taken partly in the belief that this would be the best way to help and save these children. Today, the controversy surrounding these "stolen generations" and the question of whether the Australian government should apologize and provide reparations remains a nation-defining issue that is yet to be resolved.

According to a 1999 report from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 50% of men and about 40% of women of Aboriginal descent die before reaching the age of 50. Babies born to Aboriginal mothers are twice as likely to die at birth than babies born to non-Aboriginal mothers. Aboriginal children and families also suffer disproportionately from poor access to health care services compared with others in Australian society. Slowly, more attention and resources are being directed to improving the social and economic status of Aboriginal people, but many argue that more must be done. (The United States has a similar national disgrace of its own. Many states have recently returned about \$1.4 billion in unspent funds as part of the State Children's Health Insurance Program [SCHIP]. Given the growing numbers of uninsured Americans, this development is both disappointing and considered by many as a failure of public policy.)

On September 24, 2000, when Cathy Freeman stepped onto the starting line in Sydney's Olympic track and field stadium, she was again running for and carrying the aspirations of Australia's Aboriginal people. Approximately 50 seconds after the starting gun sounded, she flew across the finish line to win the gold medal in the women's 400 meters. This time she carried both the Aboriginal and Australian flags to the cheers of those gathered inside and outside Stadium Australia, as well to

those of millions across her country and around the world. And this time around, Cathy Freeman's personal expression of pride in her victory was taken by many as the sign of an important step towards eventual reconciliation between black and white Australians.

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