

**FEDERAL COUNCIL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF ABORIGINES  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS**

**PRESIDENTIAL REPORT - EASTER 1968**

Prior to the Second World War, Government and Church mission reserves for Aboriginal people were accepted by many white Australians as belonging to the Aboriginal people. This was and still is the thought of many Aboriginal residents of the various Government settlements and Mission reserves throughout the Australian continent. But, unfortunately, this is not the case.

The post-war growth of mining, military, and pastoral activity has highlighted the real position, and the demand from these developments has resulted in confiscation of Aboriginal reserve lands of millions of acres and excisions are threatened.

Only in South Australia, has any real attempt been made to preserve Aboriginal land. I understand the Land Act, which was finally adopted by the Parliament in 1966, was far from what was first intended.

In the Northern Territory, the Federal Government introduced a somewhat dishonest Lands Act, allowing individual Aborigines, Companies of Co-operatives to lease land for 7 years. This was strongly opposed by our Federal Council. We see this as a method of breaking up large Aboriginal reserves in a very short time. Most leases would not have capital enough to develop leases and would be doomed to failure. The leases are transferable non-Aboriginals after the end of seven years. The Federal Government's real attitude towards Aboriginal land rights was demonstrated last year when it rejected the Gurindji people's application for ownership of a tiny portion of the tribal land on Wave Hill Cattle Station. This was also the Government's attitude towards a similar request made by the Yirrkala people on Gove peninsula in 1963.

However, the newly appointed Minister in charge of Aboriginal Affairs Mr. W. C. Wentworth, has made some very good statements, before and after his appointment, such as: [Quote]

"The first requisite of a successful policy for Aborigines is to restore their self-confidence and sense of importance; to recreate, at least in part, the system of authority which we destroyed; to involve them as soon as possible and to the greatest possible extent in the decisions about their own welfare and their own way of living."

"Obviously the scope for action along these lines is very restricted in the South and around the Cities, where the group structure has virtually disappeared; but in the North and more remote areas some substantial opportunities may still exist. In the North too, there are valuable Aboriginal reserves capable of providing a rich life for a whole number of Aborigines." [end of quote]

By these statements, we could perhaps look forward to a more enlightened policy from the Federal Government, not only around the land ownership question.

In addition to the Federal Government's action, during the last two years, some State Governments have set up new administrative frameworks claiming that their intentions are to draw Aborigines into

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consultation and participation in building up greatly improved social-economic conditions for us. Much more determined work lies ahead of all advancement and supporting bodies to see that these claims are made real and that heed is taken of our basic needs and desires. Improvements in education, housing, employment, and wages, financial grants, trained personnel and the consultations in the overall picture are as yet feeble gestures.

In Queensland, Church missions, because of lack of finance, have proved incapable of providing the necessary means of advancing the people. This has been admitted by the Church of England, which has already handed back to the Queensland Government areas which they previously administered on Cape York Peninsula. This lead should be followed by other denominations because, as well as not having adequate finance to cope with the Aborigine problems, they are violating the people's freedom of choice of religion. When a particular Church moves into an area, the people have no option but to worship in accordance with whatever denomination carries out mission work in the area.

I feel that the State Government take-over of Missions in Queensland is not the real answer to the Aborigine problems, as there are places like Palm Island, Cherbourg, and Woorabinda, where penal settlement conditions still exist. The State Government is also in the habit of running short of funds whenever development is needed. This applies not only to Aboriginal communities. In the last ten years, Mission reserves have been taken over by mining companies, and others all over the North of Australia — places like Mapoon, Weipa, Mona Mona, have been excised; and quite recently a member of the Mulgrave Shire Council was advocating the excision of portions of the Yarrabah reserve for lease to Shire residents. By these actions Aborigines all over Australia are in danger of losing even the rights to use reserve land as they do now. This question is extremely urgent and requires the attention of Federal Council immediately so that plans can be laid to make land rights for Aborigines a reality.

In view of the recent actions and plans for exploitation of big business interests in vast areas of Australia, it seems to me that now, more than ever before, our most urgent need is restoration of our lands, or making available adequate and suitable land for our own use and development. This is the only real way for us Aborigines and Islanders to retain our identity as people, as many of us wish to do and to make our particular contribution to the whole National community. "YOUN CAN'T HAVE A PEOPLE WITHOUT LAND". This has been said many times in many different ways. It still has to be repeated, explained, and hammered home with all its implications.

No-one denies that the riches of our country should be exploited. The question is — by whom, and for whom? We claim that a whole lot of it should be the right and responsibility of the Aborigine and Island people. In this respect it is most gratifying and encouraging to find a large body of Christian leaders are with us. The statement made towards the latter part of last year by the Council of Churches in New South Wales concerning land needs and rights of Aborigines, I believe, should be placed before all the Organisations and individuals we can reach.

The statement agreed to by thirteen Australian Mission bodies, was issued as an eleven page printed advisory statement on the issue. It advocated such matters as Land ownership, up-grading of tribal or village councils to status of Local authorities, rights of Aborigines to autonomy as a group to choose for or against separate development, etc., etc.

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The publication by the Reverend Frank Engel, Australian Council of Churches, "The Land Rights of Australians", should be made a detailed study of, with the view of campaigning along the lines suggested in this booklet; the author deals with the question of the Aborigines' moral and legal entitlement to land. After some of the threads of history are drawn together the author concludes:

"If the Australian people and Government were to take seriously these two matters of title to land and land compensation and were to act constructively and generously in relation to them there could be a radical transformation in the relation between the two races and a birth of self-confidence in the Aborigines themselves. But to do that and so open a door into the future we must abandon forever the dream and myth of a continent peopled by one homogeneous people bound together by one colour and skin and single way of life".

If the Council of Churches' statement and the courageous activity of a number of individual churchmen indicates a wider stirring of public conscience about the Aboriginal problem, there is still another section of the population which may be won to wider involvement in our cause. I refer to the young people. Certainly a number of students are now involved, particularly through Abschol, to a lesser degree in other activity, but a large section of industrial students, and organised Christian youth could be interested. If more of the vigour and idealism of the present youth movements could be infused into the Advancement Movement it would not only inspire Aboriginal and Island youth, but would put new life into activities generally. And if more of the facts were presented to the Youth more of them would realise that their desire for human justice must include the Aboriginal and Island people who have suffered and who still suffer monstrous injustice right in their midst.

Reserve areas at present vary in size in the different localities. Industry potential in certain areas is limited and to develop some reserves it would need expert supervision, whilst other areas such as Yarrabah — an area of almost 40, 000 — has many potential industries that could be developed without much effort. The area has a large sea frontage and will have road access in the very near future. Industries that could be developed cover a wide range from marine products to Timber, Dairying, and Agriculture. A number of able-bodied males and females make up the population of the reserve who would be able to adapt themselves to any part of the production in the above industries with very little additional training. I would not hesitate to suggest that Yarrabah is the ideal place for immediate introduction of a pilot scheme, where the people who are dependent on Government handouts could become self-supporting in a very short period of time. And if the State Government is genuine in wanting to elevate the Aborigine people here would be the opportunity to prove their sincerity.

Industry in the Torres Strait depends on marine products, the mainstay over the years being pearl shelling; but with the collapse of the shell market, other avenues have had to be explored. Pearl culture has provided limited work for Torres Strait Islanders, but each year has seen ever increasing numbers evacuating to the mainland in search of employment; and while State and Federal Governments advocate "develop the North", something will have to be done to prevent the deserting of already populated areas such as the Torres Straits, by seriously planning the development of industries (with full participation of the Torres Strait Islanders). The scene at present is that the pearl culture industry is controlled and operated by foreign companies and capital. Newly formed companies in the prawning industry are already discharging Torres Strait Island seamen from their processing ships, and are going

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over to New Guinea to sign on New Guineans on a cheaper rate of pay. When these ships are manned by cheap labour crews they will be operating in the Gulf of Carpentaria and along the east coast. The Federal Government is in a position to intervene on behalf of the New Guinea seamen to prevent them being used as cheap labour in this way and future criticism of its administration of New Guinea as a Trust will also be safeguarded. Legal rights for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the past has been almost non-existent. "Protectors" have never ever gone to any length to explain the simplest of legal rights to the people fully, and often these rights are treated with complacency and it is often found where people have pleaded guilty to charges they perhaps could have been acquitted of if given legal advice beforehand.

The Queensland Aboriginal Affairs Act gives Aborigines the right to appeal against a conviction imposed by an Aboriginal Court before a visiting Magistrate, but how to lodge an appeal has not been explained to the people fully.

Four Aboriginal stockmen were committed for trial before the last Circuit Court held here in Cairns. The accused were on bail awaiting trial and were working some 100 miles from town. They were advised, being all "assisted persons", and subject to the Aborigine Welfare legislation, by a police officer who presumably was a district officer, to be in Cairns the day before the trial. They were advised to see a barrister who managed to familiarise himself with their case all within an hour, which hardly would be sufficient time as the charge was of the most serious nature, involving all four men, and the evidence could not be sifted to get the best possible results in this time. On arrival in the Court-room, a few minutes before the commencement of their trial, each of the accused was subject to a search by a police officer in the middle of the court-room. I do not know whether this is normal procedure, but it certainly was undignified to my way of thinking. If this procedure was necessary it should have been done in the confines of a room with some privacy. What is really needed is to establish legal advisory departments where Aborigines could get necessary legal advice when they require it. And all Aborigines should be informed that such a service exists.

"Aborigines of Australia are the most over-administered section of the community; in Queensland. This also applies to Torres Strait Islanders", says a prominent Anthropologist and University lecturer. To this statement we must agree.

A new Welfare Act was introduced in Queensland in 1966 to replace the old "Aboriginal Protection" Act of 1897. The Act administered by the Department of Aborigine and Island Affairs to all Aboriginal residents on the Government settlements, Church missions, and Torres Strait Islands, has brought very little change to living conditions of our people. By the use of certain terminology and legal trickery a section of the public has been duped into thinking that the new legislation promises unlimited reforms for the Aboriginal and Island people, but unfortunately this is not so.

The new legislation, regulations, and by-laws, still contain vicious penal clauses as in the past. The Superintendent of the Government settlement or Church Mission as he was known in the old legislation, now is to be known as Manager; "Protectors" of old now become "District Officers".

Aboriginal administration in certain towns was carried out by police officers. Now this business is done by the Clerk of Petty Sessions. In outback towns, Police officers act as the C. P.S. Naturally the

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business carried out by the C. P.S. on behalf of Aborigines previously is still done by the same person in these outback areas.

All the contributing factors that go towards creating the Aboriginal problem still prevail as previously. The inequality of basic human rights force hardship upon our people in employment, wages, education, housing, etc.

In conclusion, the Advancement of the past twelve months should be noted. The referendum of May 1967, with its resounding "Yes" result giving Aborigines and Islanders the legal status of other Australians was the conclusion of a campaign waged by our Federal Council over many years and the highlight of the Advancement programme of 1967. The Federal Government has been slow in accepting full responsibility for the welfare of the Aborigine population of Australia and the people of the Torres Strait Islands. Many factors have caused this delay, but, as I have mentioned earlier, we will be looking forward to many improvements through the newly established Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The struggle of the Gurindji people on land rights and wages in the Northern Territory; South Australia's new legislation on Aboriginal Welfare, the Townsville Seminar of December 1967 organised by citizens, some Church leaders, and Trade Unions of that City — these have all assisted in creating a general awareness amongst the rest of the population that problems do exist in the Aborigine community, and that it is the duty of every Australian to work towards a better understanding of race relations in order to overcome these problems. A special "Thank you" will be recorded to all organisations and individuals for the part they have played in supporting our advancement programme whether it be through general activity, finance or otherwise; without this support we certainly would never have registered these successes for 1967.

For those who have never given much thought to the democratic rights of a National Minority, the United Nations has set aside 1968 as "Human Rights" year.

Twenty years ago the great nations declared that "all human beings are born free and equal in rights and dignity", and detailed the particular rights that would make this declaration a reality. The world of today moves in blood and agony towards the declaration's shining goal, but it does move, and in our struggle for human dignity, for our National Minority, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, we can make a contribution to the advance of all.

JOE McGINNESS

President