

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD.)

SESSION 1946-47.

FIRST SESSION OF THE EIGHTEENTH PARLIAMENT.

(SECOND PERIOD.)

(From the 19th February, 1947, to the 6th June, 1947.)

11 GEO. VI.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

GUIDED WEAPONS.

Mrs. BLACKBURN (Bourke) [3.57].—

I move—

That in the opinion of this House—

- (1) the proposal to establish a rocket bomb testing range in Central Australia is an act of injustice to a weaker people who have no voice in the ordering of their own lives; is a betrayal of our responsibility to guard the human rights of those who cannot defend themselves; and a violation of the various Charters that have sought to bring about world peace, and
- (2) such action is against the interests of the whole of the people in this Commonwealth.

In submitting this motion, I wish it to be quite clear that I am concerned on behalf of the Australian aborigines and also because I believe that the whole of the people of Australia must suffer because of a departure from standards of justice of which we have become accustomed to boast, the betrayal of our responsibilities, and the denial of certain principles of peace for which we have declared ourselves before the whole world.

A proposal to establish a guided weapons range has been made in that part of Central Australia which has at one of its extremes Mt. Eba and, as its terminal at the other end the Ninety Mile Beach in Western Australia. The proposal for the construction of the range has been announced as a joint venture with the United Kingdom Government. On the 22nd November last the proposal was presented in some detail to this House by the Minister for Defence (Mr. Dedman). I do not propose to go over that ground again. I do not need to remind honorable members of the high initial cost of this venture and of the increasing annual cost as

the work is expanded. I certainly question the wisdom of great expenditure on armaments at a time when the world is struggling for peace, and when the peoples of many countries in the world are starving. I wish to remind honorable members of some of the utterances made by the Minister during the course of his speech on the proposal. In outlining its details on the 22nd November, the honorable gentleman said—

Except for a few pastoral leases at the fringe point and in South Australia, the central aboriginal reserves and a few more pastoral leases adjacent to the Ninety Mile Beach in Western Australia, the area of the range and that which it is proposed to reserve for eventual extension, is largely uninhabited.

I emphasize that, except for the spot here, the central aboriginal reserves, and another spot there, the area was said to be largely uninhabited. The Minister was very conscious of the need to do everything to safeguard the aborigines from contact with whites in areas of special significance to them. He said that a report was to be made on the measures necessary to ensure their safety and welfare. I wish to examine these points. Dealing with the area, the honorable gentleman is reported to have said on another occasion that the guided weapons range would not interfere with the few aborigines resident there. There are in the area concerned from 1,000 to 2,000 natives. We may assume as a fair estimate that there are about 1,500 natives there. That may be regarded as but a few natives; but it is worth bearing in mind that that number, although it seems small, represents nearly 5 per cent. of the total number of Australian aborigines alive to-day after 150 years of contact with the white race. The absolute impracticability of keeping aborigines away from centres of civilization is admitted in none other than an official brochure issued by the Commonwealth Railways Department immediately before the war for the information of travellers on the Trans-Australia Railway. In the brochure the Commonwealth Railways Department had this to say—

A vast area of the western interior has never been trodden by the feet of the white man. The nomadic tribes of aborigines who gain their livelihood from these vast tracts of otherwise unused country are seldom seen from the train. Generally the only indication

of habitation is an occasional smoke signal curling skywards in the system of bush telegraphy developed to a remarkable perfection by these stone-age people.

It would not be fair to the aboriginal race to regard the semi-civilized type sometimes seen in the vicinity of railway stations as typical. Their newly acquired habits of life and the white man's food and clothing have caused their degeneration as compared with others of their race who are living on the resources of the country under the primitive conditions to which the race has been accustomed throughout the ages. It is unfortunate that efforts to induce these unhappy people to leave the vicinity of the railway line have not so far been successful.

This is a picture of a portion of the Trans-Australia railway route which is already inhabited by whites and blacks. It was reported in the press last Wednesday that the Minister had said that the people may rest assured that the rights and privileges of all aborigines in the area would be protected. Since December last hundreds of letters have been sent to Ministers and other members of this House in connexion with this proposal. This afternoon I received three telegrams, one containing the text of a resolution carried by the Methodist Conference in Melbourne, a copy of which was also sent to the Minister, objecting to the construction of the guided projectile range. I have also received to-day two other telegrams, one from Tasmania and one from Melbourne, both in the same terms. Since I raised the matter in the House in November last I have received many hundreds of letters and telegrams relating to this proposal. The range is intended to be 2,000 miles long and 200 miles wide. Presumably the white people living within the limits of the range will be removed from their homes, but we must remember that the area is recognized principally as an aboriginal reserve, as the last home of the nomadic tribes who wander about in the reserve and at times go away from it only to return to it again as their natural home. We cannot but question the usefulness of a report relative to measures proposed to be taken to ensure the safety and welfare of these tribes. The range is to go through the reserve, and accordingly there can be no measure of protection for the tribes who regard the land as their own, for

whom it holds certain hallowed places, sacred to them even as our churches are sacred to us, their hunting grounds, and the area in which their water-holes are situated. In what way can it be possible to safeguard from 1,500 to 2,000 nomadic people from contact with the personnel of the so-called guided weapons range? How will it be possible to prevent the encroachment of military and other personnel into areas of special significance to the aborigines? How will it be possible to protect the water-holes if a projectile, even without a warhead, falls in that particular area? This land is as sacred to the aborigines as are the war memorials and cemeteries of the white man. It has been pointed out that in the past our ignorance, indifference, and sometimes hostility, in respect of the aborigines has led to their degradation and to a decline in their numbers. Humanitarians everywhere have been appalled at the effect that European civilization has had upon native populations, not only in Australia but also in other countries. We know now that the native populations flourish only in those areas where the white man has not penetrated, and because we realize this, in an attempt to prevent further wrongs being inflicted upon them, we have made reserves available for their sole use. In October, 1935, the Government's policy on native welfare was enunciated in this House by the then Minister for the Interior, Mr. McEwen, who, in a report circulated to honorable members, stated—

As to natives who are still living in tribal state, it is felt that these people may be left alone and protected from the intrusion of whites, until we have made much further progress in the care of those who through contact with civilization are in need of training, education, medical attention and general care.

It will be the policy of the Government to, at least for the present, leave these natives in their ancient tribal life protected by the ordinances from the intrusion of whites and maintaining the policy of preventing any exploitation of the resources of the reserves.

It was decided that certain areas would be declared as sanctuaries and left inviolate. It is true that that report was not issued by the present Government, but I have yet to learn that anything appertaining to the well-being of the native peoples is a matter for party politics. The chance of natives being struck

by missiles fired from the range is perhaps remote, and the serious aspect of the proposal is the effect of permitting military and other personnel to enter the areas reserved for the aborigines, the danger of interference with the native women, the possibility of lives being ruined and the desecration of tribal lands. If the range is completed no measures can be taken to ensure the safety and welfare of the women who will come into the area if a road is constructed or observation posts built. The tribes, as was found in the establishment of the Trans-Australian railway, flock in, and immediately there is a danger to them from interference. We might just as well bomb them out of existence at once. That would be kinder than disintegration of the moral and physical lives of primitive people by white men who have the habit of forgetting they are civilized. In newspapers in this country and other countries references have been made to this matter. The *New Statesman and Nation* contains a long letter, which I do not intend to read in full; but which states that there are two alternatives, one, to leave the natives where they are and, the other, to move them from their present hunting grounds to adjacent areas. The writer says—

If the second alternative is adopted, we are going to witness a sordid repetition of Governor Arthur's notorious great "Black Drive" of 1830 when an attempt was made to herd the aborigines of Tasmania into a small area of that State.

I do not consider it possible to move or warn nomadic tribes. The letter continues—

If the same tactics are adopted, the results will be the same; but probably tobacco, treacle, tea and flour will provide sufficient inducement to draw the aborigines temporarily away from their hunting grounds. But it is just as certain that the aborigines' totemic and psychological ties with their country will bring them back into the rocket range area. Thus the unhappy sea-saw will continue—the white man's "tucker" in the balance against the native's love of country. The result will be complete disruption of tribal life and the decimation of the aboriginal communities.

I leave it there, because I have no doubt that the Minister will read it, if he has not already done so. If he has, he will agree that it is a long and interesting letter.

If we should have another war, let us not delude ourselves that with such weapons as we may be trying out we shall be able to defend ourselves against weapons that have already been invented. We can have no defence. Again, on this point of defence, during the war, Great Britain refrained from using Irish ports, and adhered to the agreement which had been made although the war may have been shortened and many lives spared if those ports had been used by the British Navy. We have made a promise to our aborigines in respect of these reserves, and shall we deal less honorably with them than Great Britain did with the Irish? In his first public statement on his return to London from the United Nations Conference in New York, Mr. Ernest Bevin is reported to have said that the search for a formula of peace by the nations of the world was being greatly hampered by the efforts of certain nations to improve implements of war notably atomic bombs and guided projectiles. He stressed these two only. That is a curious statement from a member of the British Government, particularly at this time. We have a responsibility to guard a minority and to guard most jealously the rights of those who cannot guard themselves. What is our policy on minorities? I could give it from various sources, but I propose to give it from the latest expression I can find. The policy of Australia on minorities has been expressed on various recent occasions by the Minister for External Affairs and I think honorable members will agree that we can be satisfied that it is an interpretation of Australia's policy. I propose to read a few remarks published in a book, *Australia in World Affairs*, that has been circulated in this House. I mention that so that honorable members may read it. There we have adequate material to convince us of the intentions of Australia in regard to minorities. In a statement made in July or August, 1945, the Minister for External Affairs said of the United Nations Charter—

The Australian proposals which were accepted include

and then he gave a number of which the eleventh reads—

An amendment designed to secure that the objective of the organization will be that fundamental rights shall be not only respected, but observed.

Mrs. Blackmore.

The thirteenth of those amendments put in by Australia dealt with trusteeship. Technically it may be argued I do not know—that this matter does not come within the scope of the trusteeship proposals, but are we or are we not trustees of our Australian aboriginal minority? I take it that we are. In this Australian proposal on trusteeship we find "the obligations of the trustees including—

(a) Just treatment of the peoples concerned, (b) their protection against abuses".

That is confirmed, not only in the speech of the Minister, but also in article 73; chapter II of the United Nations Charter. In a statement at the San Francisco Conference on the 10th May, 1945, the Minister for External Affairs said—

The Atlantic Charter speaks of all the men in all the lands.

He went on

We, the United Nations, would be open to serious criticism if, having the power to lay down the principles of future world order and welfare, we forgot those who have not the power to participate, who are not here to raise their voices, but whose fate will be determined by what we do as much as our own fate will be. We would not deserve to succeed if we thought only of ourselves. The principle of trusteeship was acknowledged in the settlement after World War I, in respect of "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world".

Further on the Minister said—

I believe that there should be provision in the Charter of this United Nations Organization for the regular forwarding to an independent expert body of full information concerning the welfare and progress of the inhabitants of less advanced territories, whether they are mandated territories or not.

He went on

We are morally bound by the Atlantic Charter to endeavour to assure to "all the men in all the lands" freedom from want as well as from fear.

On the general principles of trusteeship I quote from the speech of the Minister, reprinted in *Australia in World Affairs*, pages 31-32, who said—

Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant spoke of the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples forms a sacred trust of civilization, and securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this covenant. I believe the same to be true to-day of all the peoples not yet able to stand by themselves.

In a British Broadcasting Corporation broadcast on the 10th May, 1946, the Minister for External Affairs said—

It should be recognized that war is best prevented by removing its underlying causes. We must, therefore, settle all international disputes by reference to what is just and right, and not to what is merely expedient.

Do we use this principle only in matters of international dispute or do we also use it at home? In an article, "The Framing of the Peace", in the American journal *Foreign Affairs*, in January, 1946, the Minister for External Affairs wrote—

The objective of freedom from fear can and must be pursued by the Great Assembly of the United Nations as well as the objective of freedom from want.

In another article, "The United Nations Assembly—A Great Opportunity", published in the American journal, *Post-war World*, in December, 1945, the right honorable gentleman wrote—

The immediate and urgent task of the Assembly is the organization of practical means to achieve the objectives of the Charter. These objectives are, broadly speaking, two-fold, and may be classed as the objective of freedom from want, and even more important, the object of freedom from fear. In its pursuit of the first objective, the Assembly must take action to promote—

- (c) universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to the race, sex, language or religion.

On another occasion the Minister said—

Another important organ in the sphere of international welfare is the Trusteeship Council. All members of the United Nations accept the general obligation to promote to the utmost the well-being of the inhabitants of all non-self-governing territories, and to carry out certain related obligations. In addition to this general declaration set out in Article 73, there are undertakings such as the obligation to protect native peoples against abuses, and the obligation to furnish the United Nations with statistical information relating to the economic, social, and educational conditions of the native people.

Later, on the same subject, the Minister wrote—

The principles in this first part of the trusteeship provisions of the Charter apply to our external territories, including both Papua and New Guinea. It is fitting that I should mention here the important steps which have already been taken in the legislation recently before the House providing for the provisional

administration of our territories and also setting up the Territories Research Council and the School of Civil Affairs for the training of administrative staff."

Mr. SPEAKER.—Order! Under the Standing Orders, the time allowed for the debate on this motion has expired.