



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS OF ABORIGINES AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS AND THE PRESERVATION
OF THEIR SACRED SITES

Report by
Senate Select Committee
August 1976

The following extracts have been taken from the report by the Senate Select Committee on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, released in August, 1976.*

THE ABORIGINES - TWO STATEMENTS:

"We see them not as exotic primitives, strange survivals with a stone-age culture, but as contemporaries, modern men and women, motivated by the same basic urges as ourselves, but with a different way of life, a different outlook, different values - one of the many variations on the theme of human beings."

Ronald M. & Catherine H. Berndt, *The First Australians*, (2nd edn), Ure Smith, Sydney, 1967, p. 24.

"... we still must express our conviction that if we are ever able to make atonement to the remnant of this people, it will require no slight attention, and no ordinary sacrifices on our part to compensate the evil association which we have inflicted; but even hopelessness of making reparation for what is past would not in any way lessen our obligation to stop, as far as in us lies, the continuance of iniquity."

House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements), 1837.

.....
* *Members of the Committee:* Senators N.T. Bonner (Qld) *Chairman*, P.E. Baume (NSW), J.B. Keefe (Qld), J.I. Melzer (Vic.), J.A. Mulvihill (NSW), P.E. Rae (Tas.) *Appointed 7 April 1976.*
Former member of the Committee: Senator G.S. Davidson (SA) *(Chairman - to 7 April 1976).*

Secretary: R.G. Thomson, The Senate, Parliament House, Canberra.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ABORIGINES AND THE LAW

1. That the Senate establish, as a matter of urgency, a select committee with terms of reference sufficiently wide to enable it to examine all aspects of relations between Aborigines and police.

DEPARTMENTAL SERVICES TO TASMANIAN ABORIGINES

2. That the staffing of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Tasmania be examined urgently for the purpose of enabling the Department to give more efficient service and more direct access to Tasmania's considerable Aboriginal population.

WELFARE AGENCIES

3. That the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, in consultation with all organisations involved in Aboriginal affairs, be responsible for the preparation of a register of all agencies and services participating in Aboriginal welfare, and that copies of the register be circulated to all participating organisations and to Commonwealth, State and local government instrumentalities.

CULTURAL FACTORS

4. That more emphasis be placed on programs to promote better understanding by all parties of cultural factors so that the understanding gap may be bridged.

STATISTICS

5. That Aborigines and Islanders be appointed among census collectors in areas where there are significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
6. That comprehensive statistical records of Aborigines be collected by all agencies to supplement those obtained at the census.
7. That all such statistics be forwarded to a central statistical registry.

8. That professional personnel in constant contact with Aborigines collect data on a regular basis.
9. That comprehensive demographic statistics be compiled and analysed by qualified personnel provided for this purpose.
10. That all departments and authorities providing services and facilities for Aborigines and Islanders be required to develop urgently, in association with the Australian Bureau of Statistics, appropriate criteria and programs for the collection of general and specific statistical data.
11. That the political or administrative decisions precedent to the implementation of programs for the collection of data then be made without delay.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDS

12. That electric generators and refrigerators be provided on all the inhabited islands as a matter of urgency.
13. That the inter-island surface transport network be upgraded to provide better direct movement of passengers and of adequate amounts of cargo between islands.
14. That existing airstrips be improved to all-weather standard.
15. That, in full consultation with the local communities, airstrips be provided on all outlying islands where the terrain allows.
16. That until adequate air services are available for the carriage of mail, and of medical cases - at any time, in emergencies - a hovercraft be provided.
17. That in the meantime the merits of helicopters as opposed to fixed-wing aircraft be investigated to determine whether they would be of advantage in this region.
18. That the Australian Postal Commission and the Australian Telecommunications Commission examine the matter urgently with a view to providing acceptable postal, telegraph and telephone services in the region without delay.
19. That the Australian Broadcasting Commission radio transmitting station approved for Thursday Island be brought into operation without delay.

20. That appropriate action be taken immediately to give the island councils real authority in matters relating to the government of domestic affairs of island communities, in order to permit freedom of movement to any island and between islands.

HEALTH

21. That the indications given by Aboriginal communities that they desire preventive rather than merely corrective programs should form the basis of a major part of governmental response.
22. That the Commonwealth's continuous morbidity reporting system on trial at Borroloola be closely observed and evaluated.
23. That greater involvement of Aborigines in both planning and delivery of health services should be a high priority for governments.
24. That governments should accept as a principle the importance of environmental factors when developing health policy for Aborigines.
25. That assistance to Aboriginal mothers to enable them to cope better with problems of child care and infant feeding should assume a high priority.
26. That governments should publicly announce goals for Aboriginal health improvement, and dates by which these goals should be achieved, and that all government activity in the health field should clearly relate to the achievement of one or more of these goals.
27. That a national meeting be convened, as a matter of urgency, with appropriate professional and Aboriginal participation to draw up *action* proposals which will be acceptable to Aboriginal communities and which might modify some of the serious health problems so far identified.
28. That the conclusions on immunological deficiency and the effects of immunisation on Aboriginal children postulated by Dr Kalokerinos be tested scientifically with a view to producing, as a matter of urgency, a definitive policy on the immunisation of Aboriginal children against infectious diseases.

29. That special treatment centres modelled on the Swaziland system be established where appropriate and that staff be trained and allowed to apply appropriate forms of basic therapy for rapid rehydration of infants with gastroenteritis.
30. That preventive measures be taken by improving substandard conditions of Aboriginal health and hygiene.
31. That an immediate survey be made throughout northern Australia to determine the incidence of hookworm.
32. That, in the making of the survey, hookworm be particularly excluded as the cause in all cases in which anaemia is demonstrated in Aborigines.
33. That appropriate remedial and preventive measures for the eradication of hookworm be then planned and implemented.
34. That local Aboriginal groups be allowed to exercise a local option about whether there should be an outlet nearby for sale of liquor, and receive governmental support in their efforts to suppress illegal trafficking in liquor within their communities.
35. That Aboriginal medical services be expanded and given greater government recognition and support.

EDUCATION

36. That the Commonwealth Government appoint an Aboriginal as a commissioner to serve on the Schools Commission, with special responsibility for working in the interests of Aborigines.
37. That, after due consultation following the establishment of the new National Committee on Aboriginal Education, Commonwealth project funding in the area of Aboriginal education be transferred to the Department of Education.
38. That Commonwealth and State Governments take steps to facilitate Aboriginal representation on all State and Commonwealth bodies responsible for the education of Aborigines.
39. That, if no suitably qualified Aborigines are available, provision for training be made immediately, as was done in Papua New Guinea.

40. That suitably qualified Aborigines be appointed to assist, in a professional capacity, the directors of education in the States and Territories.
41. That funds be set aside to provide training to enable Aborigines to become qualified to fill senior administrative positions.
42. That the Commission on Advanced Education investigate the feasibility of designing suitable courses for training Aborigines in administrative science.
43. That Government bodies lend due support to the Bernard Van Leer projects where necessary.
44. That school principals and parent-teacher organisations take all possible steps to invite and encourage Aboriginal parents in their communities to take part in school functions and activities.
45. That the proposed National Committee on Aboriginal Education be given the task of initiating and co-ordinating the establishment of learning centres in communities where housing conditions inhibit satisfactory home study.
46. That the National Committee on Aboriginal Education and the Commission on Advanced Education examine the feasibility of instituting special matriculation courses for mature age Aborigines who wish to become teacher education students.
47. That adequate supportive services and career counselling be given to those Aboriginal senior secondary students who show an inclination toward the teaching profession.
48. That, in the first instance the Schools Commission, and secondly State and Northern Territory education administrators, take appropriate measures not only to assist Aboriginal teacher aides to improve their qualifications as aides, but also to assist those who so desire to become fully qualified teachers.
49. That qualified and experienced teacher aides be given appropriate academic credit for experience should they undertake formal teacher training.

50. That State education departments establish, with guidance and funds from the Schools Commission if necessary, a program employing trained Aboriginal liaison officers to advise and assist all Aboriginal students enrolled at primary and secondary schools.
51. That the Queensland Department of Education seek, and act on, the advice of the Inspector of Schools (Indigenous) concerning the possibility of training and employing teacher aides in Torres Strait Island schools.
52. That the Queensland authorities establish a high school immediately at junior level and as soon as possible at senior level, with boarding facilities, on one of the central Islands.
53. That an investigation be undertaken to ascertain the best means of providing Islanders with access to technical and further education.
54. That the Commonwealth Government set goals in the field of pre-school education, and target dates for their achievement.
55. That the desirability and feasibility of conducting pre-school in the vernacular (whether it be an Aboriginal language or non-standard English) be determined by the proposed National Committee on Aboriginal Education.
56. That the Schools Commission be provided with funds to initiate and co-ordinate action-research projects in the States and Northern Territory designed to discover the reasons why English reading and mathematics seem to offer exceptional difficulties for cognitive mastery by Aboriginal children, and to devise teaching methods to overcome those difficulties.
57. That classes in the vernacular be conducted by Aborigines whenever possible.
58. That bilingual education be introduced only after full discussion with members of the local community and after they have given their approval.
59. That, where possible, in communities of mixed tribal composition, the wishes of minority groups speaking particular languages of their own be taken into account.

60. That sufficient funds be made available to employ the linguists and to print the texts required by the programs.
61. That the Department of Education and the Northern Territory Administration continue to provide such assistance and funds as may be necessary for the School of Australian Linguistics to carry on and, where necessary, expand its functions.
62. That all possible co-operation be extended to the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Australia) by Federal and State authorities.
63. That Aboriginal studies courses, embracing contemporary and traditional culture and, if possible, language, be instituted in all Australian colleges of teacher education.
64. That the Curriculum Development Centre continue the work it has begun on investigating the best means of introducing Aboriginal studies into the schools.
65. That Federal and State authorities immediately take steps to ensure the substitution of textbooks which present an erroneous and derogatory picture of traditional Aboriginal society by accurate textbooks.
66. That the Tasmanian educational authorities revise the textbooks used in their schools to acknowledge the continuing existence of a sizeable Aboriginal community in that State.
67. That the Curriculum Development Centre seriously investigate the feasibility of introducing the study of Aboriginal languages in secondary schools.
68. That the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme be continued.
69. That the feasibility and desirability of extending support to Aboriginal children attending primary school be examined.
70. That Northern Territory and State education authorities give serious consideration to the question of assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to establish their own schools.
71. That State and Northern Territory authorities consider instituting special incentives for teachers to stay in schools in less attractive areas, and that teachers who wish to stay

in a particular Aboriginal community for more than a normal posting period be allowed to do so.

72. That the report on Aborigines and technical and further education prepared for the Aboriginal Consultative Group of the Schools Commission be given serious attention when it becomes available.
73. That a major effort be made to eliminate illiteracy among adult Aborigines.
74. That technical and further education institutions provide programs relevant to local Aboriginal needs.
75. That appropriate measures be taken to enable Aborigines to take advantage of TAFE programs.
76. That the Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations ensure that the Aboriginal Employment Section of his Department is provided with sufficient funds and staff to carry out its responsibilities effectively by maintaining the required type and scale of services to assist Aborigines, especially in remote areas.
77. That the proposed National Committee on Aboriginal Education instigate a program of sex education.
78. That the Government continue to recognise the importance of, and to provide the funds necessary for, the successful achievement of the stated aims of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council.

HOUSING

79. That the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and government housing authorities give priority to compiling a detailed and accurate assessment of Aboriginal housing needs throughout Australia, region by region.
80. That Commonwealth funding for homemaker services be increased to enable such services to be extended to all States and the Northern Territory.
81. That the Aboriginal Loans Commission receive an adequate allocation of money to avoid early exhaustion of funds, and

to enable it to expand its program to meet the needs of the large numbers of Aboriginal people eligible for assistance under the scheme.

82. That close attention be given by all public housing authorities to the organisation and operations of the Aboriginal Housing Board of South Australia, with a view to discovering from the example of the Board any possible advantageous modifications that might be made to their own Aboriginal housing programs.
83. That the Aboriginal Housing Co. Ltd continue to receive sufficient Commonwealth Government support to complete the Redfern project.
84. That the Commonwealth continue to provide full support for Aboriginal housing societies.
85. That Aboriginal Hostels Ltd continue to receive Commonwealth Government support at a level adequate to enable it to attain its stated objective of meeting the need for 6,328 beds by 1982.

EMPLOYMENT

86. That the Government, by its initiatives, and the Public Service Board and departments, by their staffing policies, encourage and facilitate enlargement of the employment opportunities for Aborigines within the Public Service.
87. That similar efforts be made by statutory and other official authorities operating in all areas where the Commonwealth Government has influence or is involved.
88. That, along with efforts to raise educational attainment, more attention be paid to informing young Aborigines and Islanders of opportunities in the armed services.
89. That the special provisions for Aborigines under the national employment and training scheme remain in effect.
90. That the special work projects scheme be allocated a sufficient level of funds to permit its expansion in order to reduce Aboriginal unemployment.

(See also recommendations 73 to 76.)

LAND RIGHTS

91. That the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Bill 1976, which was introduced on 4 June 1976, be considered for early passage through the Parliament.
92. That the following matters should remain the responsibility of the Australian Parliament and Government:
 1. Protection of fauna on Aboriginal lands.
 2. Right of entry on Aboriginal lands.
 3. Protection of sacred sites.
 4. Processing of land claims in towns and other areas where traditional claims cannot be effectively established.
 5. Control of territorial seas adjoining Aboriginal land, within two kilometres of the boundary of the Aboriginal land.
 6. Rights of Aborigines to enter on pastoral leases.
 7. The right to mining on Aboriginal lands.
93. That funds be provided to enable Aborigines to sustain themselves on any land which they are given.
94. That the Government accept cash compensation as an alternative to grants of land to Aboriginal people.

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

95. That, without delay and on a basis acceptable to all parties, the Government resolve the confusion about the role of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee.
96. That the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee be restructured, and its goals clearly defined, to ensure that general Aboriginal opinion is heard.
97. That the Government effectively support the restructured body by providing funds, staff, communication facilities and other resources to enable the objective of better representation of Aboriginal opinion to be achieved.

.....