



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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The Government's Aboriginal Secondary Grants and Aboriginal Study Grants schemes were also assisting Aboriginal students to make the most of educational opportunities.

Senator Carrick said he welcomed the statement by the Chairman of the National Aboriginal Education Committee, Mr Stephen Albert.

He said the establishment of the NAEC had opened lines of communication which would allow Aboriginal people to convey to the Government their views on Aboriginal education.

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# ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB BY THE MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS, THE HON IAN VINER

Tomorrow, July 8th, is National Aborigines Day, inaugurated more than 20 years ago by one of Australia's outstanding citizens, Sir Douglas Nicholls. This year also marks the 10th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum in which over 90% of Australians voted in favour of changing the Constitution as it affected Aborigines. One change enabled them to be counted in the Census. The other change gave the Commonwealth Government concurrent powers with the States to make special laws for Aborigines.

It is then an appropriate time to talk about the state of Aboriginal affairs in Australia today.

While it would be unfair and wrong not to acknowledge that we have come a long way in the past 10 years, it is nonetheless accepted by everyone interested in Aboriginal affairs - not least Aborigines themselves - that we have not come nearly far enough.

It is indeed heartening, however, that in this area of human affairs there is a shared concern by all political parties and a strong body of members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, ready to rise and speak with real authority and understanding.

But, what is it like to be an Aboriginal Australian today? I can tell you: It's pretty tough.

For instance, the national average life expectancy for Aboriginal men is 50, for women 47. The death rate for Aboriginal women in certain age groups is still 10 times greater than the national average; for men, it is five times higher than average.

Aboriginal children commonly reach school age severely handicapped - their hearing and eyesight affected, often permanently, from untreated or chronic infections. Infancy is marked by gastro-enteritis, pneumonia, constantly recurring nose and throat infections. Sickness and malnutrition for many Aboriginal communities, is, tragically, too often a continuing fact of life.

Statistics show that Aboriginals are also more likely to get into trouble with the police than other groups in the community and more often go to jail. Just a few years back, prison statistics in Western Australia - my own state - showed that over 33% of prisoners were Aboriginal even though Aboriginals comprised only 1% of the population.

Aboriginals are up against it, too, when they try to find work: for example over 50% of the Aboriginal workforce is unemployed - 10 times the national figure.

Today's statistical Aboriginal, if he lives, say, as a "fringe-dweller" in New South Wales, may share his house with as many as 20 other people - relatives, friends, those in need.

Is it any wonder that many Aboriginals have a drinking problem as well?

Put all this together and it is easy for some people to start blaming the victim.

It is not a pretty picture. And it is one for which the whole Australian community needs to be indicted and former Governments need to be indicted, for having made the kind of decisions in years past which inflicted upon Aboriginal Australians the squalid and degrading conditions under which they have lived, and continue to suffer - out of town, out of sight, and out of mind.

Any sense of human decency, of man's responsibility to his fellow man, requires something to be done. And it is being done now in ways which I believe promise a greater chance of success than even before.

People have been saying for a long time that the Aboriginal situation will take a long time to change. That is a comforting position which enables people to delay their responsibility. For myself, I see the next year or two as critical if we are to make the breakthrough and achieve social justice for Aboriginals in Australia.

To date, the major achievement has been the Land Rights Act, proclaimed in January this year. This Act provides for Aborigines to gain title to existing reserves and traditional land in the Northern Territory. But its wider significance, in my opinion, is the recognition this law gives to the special cultural identity of the Aboriginal people within the life and the laws of Australian society.

Unfortunately, the suggestion of Land Rights, to some, arouses intense opposition and even charges of "Apartheid".

Still other detractors of our land rights policy are in a state of shock that a Liberal Government would be so radical - as if social reform were an exclusive prerogative of the Left. I usually give these people, when I meet them, a copy of the present Government's policy statement on Aboriginal affairs which I am quite happy to admit is radical - and indeed, why shouldn't it be, when it shows the human side of Liberalism?

Land Rights for Aborigines will, I believe, make them freer than they have ever been before. As I understand the meaning of the word, Apartheid is a deliberate Government policy separating a race of people from the rest of the community and denying them basic human rights.

No such policy is practised in any place in which the Commonwealth has responsibility for Aboriginal Affairs policy. *We* do not practise Apartheid. It is a concept which is alien to a Liberal philosophy. It is a policy our Government has condemned officially, to the world.

Legislation conferring Land Rights in the Northern Territory is a belated, though partial satisfaction, of our debt to the Aboriginal people of Australia for the injustices of the past. It is formal proof of our acceptance of Aboriginal culture as a living force in our society today despite past insensitive and unthinking policies which almost wiped it out.

Aborigines will be able to decide for themselves what they want to do with their own land. There is nothing in the Land Rights Act which prevents this.

But it would be misleading to suggest that Aboriginal ownership will be at variance with the overall development policy of the Territory. This applies equally to agriculture, pastoral development and mining.

I can't see why Aborigines, if properly equipped, and given equal social and economic opportunities without discrimination cannot in time operate pastoral or agricultural pursuits to fit in with the rest of the citizens of the Territory.

A natural corollary of Land Rights is the recognition of customary law. Together they may well be the most significant social advance in contemporary Australian history. Together they would be the final and unequivocal acknowledgement of the validity of traditional Aboriginal culture in our society.

The Law Reform Commission's reference on Customary Law is expected to take a considerable time to complete. The evidence the Commissioner is gathering is receiving wide publicity and indicates the complexity of the problems involved.

The Fox Commission Second Report on Uranium mining is of major significance in this context as it focusses attention upon the social and cultural implications of mining for traditional Aborigines.

The Minister for the Northern Territory and the Deputy Prime Minister have pointed to the great benefits Australia would derive from the mining and export of uranium. My responsibility as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs is to ensure that Aboriginal interests are seen as an essential element of the national interest.

We must not fool ourselves. Mining of the magnitude proposed will fundamentally change the social environment of Arnhem Land in particular and the Northern Territory in general. The least of difficulties, if mining goes ahead, will be economic planning. That can be done by technical and professional experts. What will be more difficult is the mammoth task of social planning to avoid social disruption, particularly to the Aboriginal communities involved. This will be a sensitive and delicate task. If we fail to provide opportunities for the Aboriginal people to participate in any uranium developments, the whole Australian community will be diminished.

And now I turn to the bread and butter issues - health, housing, education and employment.

It is not possible to decide which one of these four crucial factors of everyday life is the most single pressing need.

The belief that urban-style housing was the first priority everywhere was a mistake made in the past. We are still reaping the sad consequences of that misjudgment today.

That is not to say that in some places, in some circumstances, the provision of adequate housing may be the key to break the poverty cycle. But in others it could be health, in others education, and, somewhere else, employment opportunities may be the greatest need.

What we have learned, however, is that it is not relevant to talk in terms of "housing". I believe in many areas the need is to upgrade "basic shelter" rather than to impose general community standards of housing on all Aboriginal communities. In saying this, I do not advocate perpetuating the sins of the past - the sort of "transitional" houses of the assimilation era in which Aboriginals were "put" to learn to adapt to our society, and which through Government inaction became their permanent homes without running water or toilets. To fall back into that form of thinking would indeed be a dereliction of duty.

Given the appalling housing situation of so many Aboriginal families it is small wonder that we have such serious health problems on our hands today.

The health of Aboriginal Australians has been called a "national disgrace" - I would not disagree. But I am now firmly convinced that we have a better idea of where we are going.

For a start we will make no headway in this field until the Aboriginal people themselves are involved in solutions to the basic health needs of their life at the grass-roots level.

This means that knowledge and skills of those at risk must be developed to ensure *safe water supplies, adequate nutrition and basic hygiene*.

A hunter-gatherer society, as traditional Aboriginals were, did not permanently contaminate the environment. As European settlement spread and Aboriginals began to adopt a more settled life style they found themselves, by experience, ill-equipped to survive. They lived in their own rubbish bins, if you like, and became ill and died because of the squalor they did not recognise as lethal.

A health and medical system based solely on a sophisticated technology and which we have been largely following since we first became concerned about Aboriginal health, has proved to be inappropriate. This is borne out by the recent report of the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty and the continuing high levels of morbidity and mortality and general ill-health indicated by statistics.

I believe what must be done - and done urgently - is to enlist and train more Aboriginals as field health workers who can make initial contact with those in need to provide low-level health care while at the same time, act as educators and agents of change by assisting communities to develop attitudes and behavioural patterns that will render them less liable to constant illness. Aboriginals must believe that health is *their* responsibility. It must find a place in the cultural and social system of communities. This means that health care must be taken to them.

One of the lessons which has come out of the trachoma campaign is the need to take health care to the people together with modern technology which is available.

But for long-term and lasting improvements in Aboriginal health status we should aim at services and programs which *promote* health and *prevent* illness.

I will be making a special allocation of funds to institute a program in the coming year to establish an Aboriginal community health service using the community itself, and traditional healers, to provide the service.

The key to good health may yet turn out to be good communications, for communication is fundamental to knowledge and knowledge is the key to success.

Which brings me to *education*. Wherever I travel in outback Australia I am struck by the concern of the elders that the children in their communities must learn to read and write. They know that they must deal with the white man and they see their children as the link. A continuing dilemma for Aboriginals is how to decide how much of their own culture and how much of the other to retain. As education spreads throughout the Aboriginal community it will in some ways increase this dilemma but at the same time provide tools for resolving it.

We must find ways of establishing a bridge between the two that Aboriginals and other Australians can walk on with dignity and confidence.

Already, through conventional education institutions Aboriginals are staying at school longer with assistance from Government Secondary Grants - over 13,000 last year, a year in which 2,000 others were undergoing some form of post-secondary or tertiary training.

But not all of these children who stay on at school get jobs. And that is why the Commonwealth Government has recently developed a National Employment Strategy which has amongst its other objectives the redirection of education programs to prepare Aborigines for a work environment of specific job training.

This strategy includes the introduction of a Community Development Employment Projects scheme, increased efforts to stimulate employment and training of Aboriginal people in private industry and the Commonwealth public service and the establishment of a national committee to stimulate interest at top management level in the problems of Aboriginal employment.

A Community Development Employment Projects scheme will provide employment for Aborigines living in remote or separate communities who do not form part of the open labour market and for whom job opportunities have always been scarce.

Finance for the scheme is being provided directly to individual Aboriginal councils which in turn pay for work performed by individual community members, preferably on a co-operative, part-time or contractual basis.

I have no doubt that Aborigines want to work and hold their heads high, and rid themselves of the demoralising label 'dole bludger' and the demeaning vicious circle of no work, no pride, no confidence and so, no work.

On the administrative side of Aboriginal Affairs, I am determined that the credibility of my Department should be restored and raised.

The status and role of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs should not be measured simply in terms of the money it spends. I would wish to see it accepted as a policy department of major significance in the affairs of Government. The Department must be seen as fulfilling a basic humanitarian duty and, at the same time, enhancing the stature of Australian society. This does not automatically require it to be a negative force in other areas of Government such as, for example, in the field of resource development.

But effective delivery of services to Aborigines, whether through State Governments, Aboriginal organisations or directly by my Department, is a matter of major importance. Consistent with the Government's overall economic and budgetary objectives there must be very firm restraint on *all* programs in 1977-78 - including on

high priority programs such as those in the Aboriginal Affairs area. In these circumstances some reordering of priorities will be required in 1977/78 to accommodate new calls upon limited funds arising from important recent Government decisions. Among these are the decisions on the National Employment Strategy and on the establishment of the National Aboriginal Conference and the Council for Aboriginal Development. In addition, provision will be made in the coming year for Aboriginal Hostels Limited to resume its program of hostel acquisition.

In considering allocations to State Governments and Aboriginal organisations, I have placed top priority on the maintenance and, wherever possible, the elevation of levels of effective Aboriginal employment.

Difficult though its consequences can be, the need to rigorously restrain expenditures does present a challenge which can be met with careful planning, a marked improvement in efficiency, and where appropriate a readiness of Aboriginal organisations to insist on payment, even if only in part, for services rendered to their clients.

It has become very apparent to me while I have been Minister for Aboriginal Affairs that the kind of information available has not been comprehensive enough nor well enough founded to be a sure guide to government policies. And there has not been a corporate voice to speak for Aboriginals with any real authority.

Quite possibly responses in the past have not always been to the most needy but often to the most articulate or to the most insistent. In fact, there has been a tendency to react to pressure rather than to need.

In future, we will be adopting a new concept in programming in Aboriginal affairs based on community needs. For this purpose we are compiling profiles of 850 separate and identifiable Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. I am sure that this community approach will be a much more satisfactory and successful way of coping with the very depressed state that most Aboriginals in Australia find themselves in today than the previous piecemeal band-aid treatment that marked earlier policies. The success of this approach to forward planning will be the basis of increased amounts of money in the future.

There is one essential ingredient for success, however, and it is so important I have saved it until last. This is the involvement of the Aboriginal people themselves at every level and in the planning of every project which is undertaken, for without that involvement, our hopes and theirs are doomed before they begin.

The re-constituted National Aboriginal Consultative Committee - to be known as the National Aboriginal Conference - will be elected in an Australia-wide poll in November. The Conference will be a National forum in which elected members will debate and express an Australia-wide Aboriginal view on long term goals which the Government should pursue, programs it should adopt and priorities for expenditure. The Council for Aboriginal Development will be the formal advisory body to me and I assure you that I will take its advice seriously- not only to the extent of informing the Council of the reasons if the Government does not accept its advice, but I also envisage the time when Government will transfer further responsibility to the Council in a wide range of programs affecting Aboriginal affairs.

In my opinion the most critical element missing in Aboriginal life today is self-confidence. I would hope to encourage the growth of this confidence by direct involvement of the Aboriginal people in decision-making processes, by encouraging *them* to establish the priorities of their needs and by their active participation in the co-ordination and use of Government and other resources entering their communities.

I have perceived the beginnings of a new spirit among Aborigines in Australia today, a spirit of hope and pride that comes from achievement and self-management. We must keep this spirit growing if we are to see significant advances in Aboriginal society.

I have no doubts that it will be worth the effort, patience and the understanding on the part of all Australians. The gain to Australia will be immense.

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