HOUSING.

It is apparent that any substantial general improvement in the housing conditions of the aborigines cannot be attained, unaided, by themselves. For various reasons they are unfavourably regarded as tenants by owners of property and their agents, and, under existing circumstances, their economic position precludes any possibility of ownership. Improvement of home environment being fundamental in any plan for their absorption into the community, I recommend that, for those aborigines who are genuinely prepared to make an effort towards self-help in that direction, a special scheme of State financial assistance in the matter of housing be instituted and administered through the Board. It will be recognized that the problem is, in essence, one of slum abolition, a project on which Governments are already incurring considerable expenditure, and there is ample precedent in Victoria in the operations of the Housing Commission. In other States, the importance of this aspect of the assimilation problem has been recognized, and, as a basis for consideration of this recommendation, I outline shortly the system being operated by the Aborigines Welfare Board of New South Wales. There, the Board buys building blocks in towns, and, as funds permit, has homes erected on them for sale on extended terms to district aborigines whom observation and inquiries have shown to be steady types, with prospects of continuance in regular employment, and preferably, though not invariably, able to pay a deposit of £50 or more. Alternatively, it will finance the erection of a house on a block owned by an approved aborigine, or advance money on mortgage to one who has bought a house. All homes are built on the Board's instructions through the Housing Commission, which is then paid in full by the Board from its own allocation of loan funds. Thereafter the transaction is one solely between the Board and the aboriginal buyer. The weekly instalments are usually at Housing Commission rates, but sometimes are based on completion over a longer period. For the first two years the prospective buyer is regarded as being on a weekly tenancy basis only. If the Board, at the end of the trial period, is satisfied with his ability to make good, and if he desires to continue with the purchase, he then completes payment of the deposit, if he has not already done so, and his position as buyer is confirmed. Though the system has been in operation for only a few years, the New South Wales Board regards the results to date as very satisfactory, and it is some such system that I recommend should be instituted in this State.

The policy should be, as in New South Wales, to erect two, or at most three, houses for aborigines either adjoining or in close proximity, in town areas where work is available. This is designed to satisfy the human necessity for membership of some group, while it does not lead to the formation of an isolated community, without white contacts. The children will be attending school with a majority of white children, and without the handicap of a sub-standard environment. Consideration might also be given, in some cases, to the construction of these homes on a somewhat cheaper design than those which the Housing Commission ordinarily constructs. In the files of the Commission, I inspected plans of a house specially designed and being built in Western Australia under a scheme for the housing of aborigines. It consists of a central living room surrounded by a wide veranda, the latter being divided into sleep-outs, bathroom, laundry, etc. Without being sub-standard, it appeared to me to adequately meet the special needs of aboriginal families, where expense is such a major factor.

Whether the scheme I have outlined should be financed from Housing Commission funds, or whether there should be a special allocation of loan funds to the Board, as in New South Wales, is a matter for Government decision. In view of the responsibilities of the Housing Commission in other directions, it is doubtful whether any adequate progress could be made in the housing of aborigines in country towns entirely from its resources. Possibly, when the Olympic Village at Heidelberg becomes available, a few of the homes there could be allocated to selected aboriginal families. In any event, there would be necessity for a closer personal assessment of the outlook and prospects of applicants for homes, and for more frequent supervision, particularly in the early stages of the tenancies, than is ordinarily called for, and than could probably be exercised by the present staff of the Commission. The Commission has at times made allocations of houses to aborigines, but, lacking those requirements in some degree, its experience in doing so has been discouraging in many cases. On the other hand, some instances were brought under my notice of families who, provided with houses on the property of their employers in the country, and with the benefit of a friendly interest on the part of the latter, are well on the way to establishing themselves in the community. The
experience of Sergeant Feldtmann and the local committee at Swan Hill also indicates that
the provision of a good standard of housing, if accompanied by the stimulus of
courage and assistance, can induce a more hopeful outlook, and evoke a responsive
effort to improve their own conditions. It is clear, however, that some form of friendly
supervision and interest has been the keynote of success in such cases. The custom, to
which I have already referred, of sharing houses with less worthy occupants, would be
fatal to the scheme, and would require to be sternly repressed. Notwithstanding any
rules which might be made, and undertakings given, only very close supervision would
curb this practice. In other directions, such as encouragement to maintain the homes in
good order, and to make payments regularly, and in the matter of relating those
payments, on occasions, to fluctuating earnings, some “on-the-spot” helpful oversight
and friendly interest would in many cases be desirable, at all events in the early stages.
This could only be accomplished by the Board’s officers, with the assistance of some local
co-operation.

Before leaving the subject of housing, I mention a proposal recently made to the
Government for the acquisition of an area of forest land at Mooroopna, and the building
thereon of a number of sub-standard houses to accommodate the families now resident on
the river-banks. While there, I inspected this property with local municipal representatives
and others. If it were destined to provide a solution of the problem, the expense might
be justified, though the cost of clearing the land, building, and installing light, water, and
other amenities would be very great. For the protection of the property, and to maintain
some semblance of order, a resident manager would also be essential. It could not be
claimed that the proposal would contribute in any way to assimilation. At best, it would
be merely palliative, and would perpetuate, in somewhat better conditions, the segregation
of the residents from the rest of the community. More probably, with the influx of so
many others during the fruit season, slum conditions would again develop. In the course
of its administration, the Board will find it necessary to give some attention to the
improvement of conditions in existing aboriginal communities, but action in that direction
should be subservient to the goal of ultimate assimilation. I do not, therefore, consider
the proposal is to be recommended at this stage.

EDUCATION AND YOUTH TRAINING.

In a long-range plan for assimilation, it is in the rising generation that most hope
lies, and any other steps must go hand-in-hand with the education and training of youth.
While assisting and encouraging parents in their own endeavours to bridge the economic
and social gap between them and the rest of the community, efforts must be made to
instil into their minds a consciousness of the value of education to their children. I have
already referred to the importance of taking action to combat irregularity in attendance at
school. When this action fails, or in other circumstances where it is in the interest of
children for him to do so, the Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare should, after due
warning, and under the direction of the Board, take action under the wide powers of the
Children’s Welfare Act. When aboriginal children are made wards of that Department,
he should, in co-operation with the Officers of the Department, maintain a close interest
in their subsequent welfare and training.

While the individual details of the Board’s administration are not matters which
call for my specific recommendations, I suggest that some or all of the following, in the
constructive field of education and youth training, may well be within the practicable
scope of its activities—vocational guidance, and employment or further training of
children leaving school, including domestic science for girls; special bursaries for
aboriginal children, to enable those who show sufficient promise to attend secondary
schools; hostel or other accommodation in cities and towns for young aboriginal people
receiving secondary education, or at employment; annual seaside camps; participation
by aboriginal children in boy scout and girl guide activities; and a survey by the trained
psychologists of the Education Department, with a view to the admission of suitable
aboriginal children to the Department’s “opportunity classes” and “remedial centres.”

I mention one further aspect in regard to education as a matter for consideration.
Education authorities whom I consulted are in agreement that it is preferable for
aboriginal children to attend mixed, rather than all-aboriginal, schools. Apart from
their contribution to assimilation, it is found that in mixed schools the dark children acquire a
degree of confidence in their own ability, and an incentive to progress alongside white children, which does not exist when they are segregated, and which counters the retarding influence of their home environment. Some support for this may lie in the fact that almost the only expressions of opinion that aboriginal children had a much lesser capacity to absorb education came to me from the two all-aboriginal schools. In my view, serious consideration should be given to the closing of the schools at Lake Tyers and Framlingham. This would, of course, necessitate the provision of transport to and from other schools at which there would be a preponderance of white children. This has become the established policy in New South Wales, where several all-aboriginal schools have already been closed, and the children absorbed into other schools. In that State, also, a careful selection is made of teachers for schools in which there is a fair sprinkling of aboriginal children.

CONSTITUTION OF THE BOARD.

It is desirable that special consideration should now be given to the constitution of the Board, in the light of my recommendations as to the sphere of activities with which it should be empowered to concern itself. Since housing and education are so fundamental in those activities, I recommend that the Board should include representatives of the Housing Commission and the Education Department. The Chairman of the Board should be the Under-Secretary, as the head of the Department administering the Act, and I suggest that the Departmental representatives should be high-ranking, with authority within their Departments. Matters of health and sanitation being also of much importance, I recommend the inclusion, in addition, of a representative of the Health Department. I suggest that the Board should consist of nine members (or more if thought desirable), and that of the remaining members one should be the Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare, one an aborigine, and one an expert in sociology and/or anthropology, if available.

I base these recommendations as to the constitution of the Board, to some extent, on that of the New South Wales Board, and in the light of my discussions with the Chairman of that Board. In that State, there is provision for two aboriginal members, one of whom shall be a full-blood, to be nominated and elected by persons of aboriginal blood. There has, however, been no nomination of a full-blood member for several years, and in other respects the elective system has proved unsatisfactory. I recommend that all members, with the exception of the Chairman, be appointed by the Governor in Council. The name of the Board should, in my opinion, be changed. The present name, "Board for the Protection of the Aborigines" is unsuitable, and is regarded with distaste by many of the aborigines. My recommendation is that it be termed the "Aborigines Welfare Board".

LEGISLATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROVISIONS.

In considering what legislative provisions should be made to implement an effective system of assimilation, it is, in my opinion, important to bear in mind that, since the basic aim is to bring about a status of equality, and also because many of the existing obstacles have a psychological origin, legislative discrimination between the two races should be avoided as far as possible. For this reason, which is made more cogent by the high percentage of white blood in the majority of aborigines in Victoria, I do not consider it desirable to recommend some of the detailed provisions involving control which are in force in other States. Among others, I do not recommend any special provisions by which aboriginal children may be removed from the custody of their parents and made wards of the Board, or of the State. The provisions of the Children's Welfare Act, which are of general application, are, in my view, adequate in that respect.

On this subject, it seems desirable to remove some misapprehension which exists as to the citizen-rights of aborigines. In Victoria, aborigines, including full-bloods, have the same right and obligation in law to enrol as electors, and to vote at Commonwealth and State elections, as other citizens. All Commonwealth Social Service benefits, including unemployment relief, are equally available to them, except that while they are being maintained by the State (i.e., resident on Lake Tyers station), they are not regarded
as eligible for pensions or child endowment. Some uncertainty also exists as to the scope of the prohibition of the supply of intoxicating liquor to aborigines. The provisions as to this are contained in Section 12 of the Aborigines Act and Section 177 of the Licensing Act. Under existing conditions, they apply only to proved full-bloods, though, if the system of "licences" to reside at Lake Tyers is reintroduced, the former section would also apply to half-castes so licensed, but the latter probably would not. In my opinion, this semblance of prohibition might well be abolished. It causes resentment, leading to an attitude of defiance towards what is regarded as a "white man's law", and it tends to foster surreptitious drinking of the more harmful cheap wines and methylated spirits. Further, its enforcement is almost impossible, owing to the difficulty of legal proof. The psychological aspect which I have mentioned prompts me to refer also to the out-dated provision of Section 69 (1) of the Police Offences Act, under which any person "not being an aboriginal native or the child of an aboriginal native, who is found lodging or wandering in company with any of the aboriginal natives of Victoria" is prima facie deemed an idle and disorderly person, and liable to be imprisoned for twelve months. This might well, in view of present-day conditions, be also repealed. In this case also, the difficulty of proving that any person is an aboriginal (full-blood) native of Victoria appears almost insuperable. The same comments are applicable to Section 12 (ii) (harboring an aborigine) and Section 12 (iii) (removing an aborigine from Victoria without the Minister's consent) of the present Aborigines Act.

As to the scope of the Board's administration, since its main function will be to assist those of aboriginal blood who live in sub-standard conditions to lift themselves to the living standards of the general community, I recommend that its operations should not be limited by any degree of white blood among those in need of that assistance, and that it be empowered, in its discretion, to include in its administration any person having an admixture of aboriginal blood.

As a means of bringing my recommendations and suggestions into effect, I finally recommend that an Aborigines Welfare Act be introduced, in substitution for the present Act, and that it include the following provisions:

1. The term "aborigine" to be defined as including any person having an admixture of Australian aboriginal blood.
2. An "Aborigines Welfare Board" to be constituted, on the basis of my earlier recommendations.
3. The Board to be a body corporate, with the usual provisions applicable thereto, including the capacity to purchase, hold, dispose of, or otherwise deal with real and personal property, for the purposes of the Act.
4. All land now or in the future reserved for aboriginal purposes to be vested in the Board.
5. The Governor in Council to be empowered to appoint, subject to the Public Service Act, a Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare, and such other officers as may be necessary.
6. The duties and powers of the Board to be defined in wide terms, as follows:

   (a) To, with the consent of the Minister, apportion, distribute, and apply as may seem most fitting, any moneys voted by Parliament, and any other funds or property in its possession or control, for the relief or benefit of aborigines, or for the purpose of assisting aborigines to become assimilated into the general life of the community.

   (b) Specifically, with the consent of the Minister, to acquire land, erect buildings, and sell or lease land, with any buildings thereon, to aborigines on such terms as it may determine.

   (c) To manage and regulate the use of reserves.

   (d) To exercise a general supervision and care over all aborigines, and over all matters affecting the interests and welfare of aborigines.
7. The Board to submit an annual report to the Minister, to be laid before Parliament.

8. The Board to have authority, subject to the consent of the Minister, to delegate powers to the Superintendent or other officers.

9. Re-enactment of Sections 11 and 12 (1) of the present Act, with the substitution in the latter sub-section of the words "the Board" for "a local guardian".

10. Averment in any legal proceedings by or on behalf of the Board that a person is an aborigine, to be sufficient evidence of the truth of such averment unless the contrary is shown.

11. The Governor in Council to be empowered to make regulations for the carrying into effect of the purposes of the Act, and in particular—
   (a) prescribing the mode of transacting the business and the duties generally of the Board and its officers.
   (b) prescribing the mode of distribution and expenditure of moneys granted by Parliament, and any other funds in the possession or control of the Board, for the relief or benefit of aborigines.
   (c) prescribing conditions of employment, other than payment, of aborigines.
   (d) providing for the control of reserves, including the maintenance of discipline and good order thereon, and the issue of licences to reside thereon.
   (e) imposing penalties not exceeding £20 for the breach of any regulation.

CONCLUSION.

In the foregoing report, I have, under the various terms of reference, endeavoured to present a picture of the "aboriginal problem" as it exists in Victoria, and have recommended that the Government should establish and maintain a system of administration much wider in its scope than hitherto. I have recommended that its concern should no longer be restricted to the welfare of those of aboriginal blood who have chosen to live in the sheltered environment of the station at Lake Tyers, and that, through a specially constituted Board, it should set in train an active and constructive policy directed to the social and economic uplift of the aborigines throughout the State, to the end that they may take their place in the ordinary life of the community. The implementing of those recommendations will involve some additional annual expenditure, but, if progress towards that ultimate goal is to take the place of retrogression, that is necessary. I emphasize again that, by its very nature, no early or spectacular termination of the problem can be expected, but I believe that a steady unremitting attack in the directions I have indicated will achieve definite results. It is inevitable that for many years to come there will be some aborigines who present no prospect of attaining to the general living standards of the community. It is perhaps also well to remember that, after many generations of civilization, there are white citizens in the community who present similar problems for society. It will be an important phase of the Board's activities to exercise supervision over the living conditions of those aborigines and their children, and for that purpose to establish close co-operation with civic authorities, health officers, and police, and, at the same time, to encourage and if necessary subsidize, local efforts directed towards improving the outlook of the rising generation.

I am convinced, however, that among the married couples of mixed aboriginal blood now living in sub-standard conditions, or on the station at Lake Tyers, there is at least a fair sprinkling who, given encouragement and assistance, would be prepared to make a real effort to establish themselves, with their children, in the community. As others marry, they will provide a field for the Board's special interest. The necessary encouragement to help themselves, and to persevere, can be imparted only by close personal contact, and that is an essential factor in my recommendations. Sympathetic treatment must be allied with firmness, their morale must be strengthened, and their readiness to accept the general concept of their inferiority removed.
If my recommendations are adopted, much will depend on the degree of active personal interest with which individual members of the Board, as well as the Superintendent, approach their task. This applies in many directions, but perhaps more especially in such matters as the training of youth, combating prejudice, and securing local co-operation in fostering social relationships, which are all of vital importance to the success of any scheme for assimilation.

In concluding my report, I express my thanks to the many who, as I mentioned earlier, so willingly came to my assistance with information, views, and suggestions on the subject-matter of the inquiry; to the Chief Commissioner of Police, who provided motor car transport on my visits to country districts; to the officers of the Health Department who did likewise, and accompanied me on some of these visits; to the Under-Secretary, Mr. A. James, for his continuous co-operation; and, finally to Mr. N. Garnet, Secretary of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, who, in addition to contributing materially to the information on which my report is based, very competently performed the secretarial duties appertaining to the inquiry.

I have the honour to submit the foregoing report for Your Excellency's consideration.

Given under my hand this 18th day of January, 1957.

CHARLES McLEAN.
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