PRESS STATEMENT

VOTING RIGHTS FOR ABORIGINES

June 25th, 1961

Last session the Minister for Territories made a statement in the Parliament regarding the aim of all Australian Governments, both State and Federal, as it affected the aboriginal population of Australia. The statement was made setting forth the resolutions of a Conference that had been held between the Authorities of the different Governments. The debate was noteworthy, coming as it did after the arguments in the Commonwealth and in the world over South Africa and her racial policies. It was important because it showed quite clearly in what direction Australia is heading, and it showed quite clearly that Australian objectives are ones that would have the support of all progressive people throughout the world.

Our aim is one of assimilation as full partners, and the paper tabled by the Minister for Territories re-emphasised that all Governments, both State and Federal, were doing what they could to achieve this aim.

I have occasionally heard people say: "Why can't all aborigines be given full citizen rights at the present time?" "Why can't they take their place in the Australian community as full partners now?" The answer to this is, of course, that about 30,000 aborigines or part aborigines already have these rights throughout all the States and throughout the territories of the Commonwealth. But, at the same time, there are about 70,000 aborigines or part aborigines who would not be able to take their full and proper place in society and, without proper training, would not be able to do so.

The Conference between the States and the Commonwealth recognised that in different States different programs might have to be followed out in pursuit of assimilation. Something that is applicable to Victoria with very few aborigines might not be applicable to Queensland or Western Australia with large numbers. But, quite clearly, over the northern areas of Australia, there will have to be a greater assimilation of tribes and people who are still living in a nomadic or semi-nomadic state. More health and education services will have to be made available and child welfare services should be extended. There are already special schools for aborigines which is an important step. However, it must be emphasised that these special schools are not a permanent institution. The ultimate aim is to have aboriginal and white children learning in the same schools as they do already in some schools in Australia. But aborigines who are living in a nomadic or semi-nomadic state and who know little or no English cannot take their place in a white school. Language and environment difficulties make a special education necessary. It should be emphasised that these aboriginal children are handicapped only by these things, but they are not handicapped by a lack of natural intelligence which, on the average, is as keen as that of white children.
Vocational training is going to be increasingly important for the aborigines. Up to the present time, most aborigines who are taking their part in the white community earn their livelihood as stockmen in the pastoral industry of the three northern States. The pastoral industry may not be able to find jobs for all the aborigines in the future, and it will be important that they are trained in other jobs and trades so that a greater field of employment will be open to them.

The Minister for Territories is to be congratulated on the work he has done. It should be recalled that it was the present Commonwealth Government that created the Department of Territories in 1951, and Paul Hasluck has been the Minister for Territories since that time. The moves towards assimilation which have been made have nearly all been put in train by the present Minister.

In another measure that was before the House, the Opposition moved an amendment that would have given all aborigines at the present time a vote for the Commonwealth Parliament, the argument being that if they don't all have a vote for the Parliament it creates unfavourable propaganda abroad.

The Government had previously appointed a Select Committee composed of Members of both Parties to examine the question of voting rights for the aborigines. I have said that 30,000 full bloods or part aborigines already have full voting rights, so it is clear that these aborigines who do not have voting rights are not excluded on grounds of colour or race. They are excluded simply because, at present, they have no awareness of what democracy means. They are, for the most part, illiterate. Some are still nomads and some have only shortly ceased being nomads. They would have no concept of what a political election meant and no idea of what a ballot paper meant. Democracy is not strengthened by giving rights to people who cannot understand these rights, and that is why the Government would not accept the Opposition amendment.

Over the past 10 years many more people of aboriginal or part aboriginal blood have been given or have obtained full citizenship rights, and this progress will continue. The Commonwealth, however, was not happy with the speed of this progress and thus the Select Committee was appointed to examine this position to see what more can be done.

There is one small point that illustrates the difficulty and, to some extent, the lack of sense involved in trying to give all aborigines full voting rights straight away. It is well known that if white people don't vote, unless they have a good reason, they can be fined £2. It is almost certain that unless the aborigines whom we are discussing were led to the polls by a white person they would not vote because they would not know what it was about. They would not have seen a newspaper or read the arguments on one side or the other. Would it be reasonable to fine them all £2?
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