

ISSN 0159-3730

ISBN 642 51421 6

COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND THE ABORIGINALS

by

The Honourable A.J. Grassby
Commissioner for Community Relations

Community Relations Paper No. 2

1975

© Commonwealth of Australia

First Produced 1975

Revised and Printed 1980

COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND THE ABORIGINALS

by

*The Honourable A.J. Grassby
Commissioner for Community Relations*

The Racial Discrimination Act became law in Australia on October 31, 1975, and this enabled Australia to ratify the United Nations Convention against All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Australia had signed this Convention ten years earlier but had been unable to ratify it because there was no law in Australia prohibiting racial discrimination nor any machinery to combat it.

The Racial Discrimination Act makes illegal acts of discrimination on the grounds of race, colour or ethnic background, and establishes machinery through the Commissioner for Community Relations to receive complaints, investigate them, attempt conciliation and, if all fails issue a certificate to enable the aggrieved party to take court action either to secure an injunction, a restraining order, or to seek damages for personal hurt and insult.

The Act also pledges Australia to carry out programs of education, information, research and cultural development, in order to combat racial prejudice and discrimination.

Since the Office of Community Relations came into being in September 1974 we have come to grips with the greatest task of combating discrimination. It has clearly emerged from our work over these years that Aboriginal Australians form the largest single group of cases both of individual discrimination and of institutional discrimination. In short they remain the group most seriously wronged in the Australian community.

The historical perspective and the main problems

During the 192 years of European settlement in Australia, we see a guerilla war that lasted more than 100 years, followed by a period of deadly paternalism during which the policy was to 'smooth the pillow for the dying race' and then an awakening that the Aboriginal race would not die and that there was need to make peace.

Clear priorities in coming to grips with a daunting task need to be established by the small group of people given the brief to implementing the revolution implicit in Australia's pledge to the United Nations.

The greatest problems in the sphere of Aboriginal relations are not related to the Aborigines themselves but to the non-Aboriginal population of Australia and its attitudes.

While cases of individual discrimination can be tackled and will be vigorously pursued within the limits of our tiny resources without fear or favour,

the main task is not to change Aboriginals but to change the attitudes and practices of the rest of the community.

How could it be that white Australians' vision of the founding people is so distorted? How did this come about?

Most Australians have never met an Aboriginal man, woman or child; they only comprise a little more than 1% of the population, approximately 160,000. There is, however, an easy assumption by the non-Aboriginal Australian that he knows all about them. The dominant part of this so-called knowledge is contempt and an attitude which offers insult. This builds a deep and abiding resentment, particularly among young urban Aborigines, but spreading to the traditional people and the country fringe dwellers.

How could all this have happened?

To understand this it is necessary to go back to the first clash between two peoples and two cultures. The first Europeans to come to Australia arrived in ships of war and were men of arms, whether Spanish, Dutch or English.

They represented 19th century imperialism which was racist and/or exploitative. The dictum of the century was the survival of the fittest; success was achieved at the point of a gun and consolidation by the use of a whip.

The highly war-orientated invaders encountered a civilisation which, although they did not know it, was the oldest in the world. It was also the gentlest in the world. It was the civilisation of a people who had totally come to terms with their environment and who lived at one with nature.

They had already had more than 40,000 years of history behind them, they were the forerunners in so many ways of mankind, the first seagoing immigrants, the first conservationists, the first artists. There were 600 separate nations, but they were not organised on the basis of material wealth or large-scale war operations.

Perhaps the great contrast between the two cultures emerged most prominently as the result of an action taken by the Anglo-German governor of the first British colonies in Australia, Arthur Phillip.

He was genuinely concerned to establish good relationships with Aboriginal Australians; in the pursuit of this he arrested an Englishman who had stolen from the Aboriginals. To demonstrate how British justice worked he had him strung up and given 100 lashes. He invited the Aboriginal people to the flogging. They cried out in horror — they had never seen such treatment by one human being of another. They pleaded with him to stop the flogging -- a kind of ritual torture.

Sadly he failed to understand and put their protests down to their being primitive people in contrast to the highly civilised men who tortured their own kind in the name of justice.

The greatest contributors to racism against Aborigines have been Australian schools and Australian teaching about the Aborigines. The schools long taught an image of the original people which was a caricature at once cruel and

inaccurate. Such teaching sprang from the experience of continuous warfare waged against the 600 original nations.

It is paradoxical that in the first half of the 19th century Aboriginal life and people was more accurately depicted in illustrations and in other ways than in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Although the killing was on a massive scale there were men in the early days who wrote perceptively about Aboriginal life and culture. Yet in later years when defeat was complete and the old ways had been destroyed there was a tendency to rewrite history to excuse the bloodshed.

As a young schoolboy I recall that it was usual to describe the original population of Australia as 150,000. This was a convenient figure because it saved explaining what had happened to them all when the numbers dropped dramatically to 50,000. Later this figure became hardly tenable in the light of further knowledge and had to be increased. The next figure settled upon was 200,000 and, in more recent times, estimates have ranged from 300,000 to half a million and more.

Teaching discrimination

- *It is important to recognise that the greatest discrimination practised in Australia against the Aboriginal people today is institutional discrimination.*

The problem was summed up particularly well by Charlotte Meacham, who visited Australia in 1972 after working with minority groups and disadvantaged people in the United States, United Kingdom and in India. She put it in this way: 'Racism is programmed into us through our families, our education and the very customs and institutions around us which we take for granted'.

Barrie Pittock of the Religious Society of Friends summed it up in a Quaker report on Aboriginal Affairs in 1973: 'Many Australians still see the "problem" as an "Aboriginal problem" when in fact it is more a white problem'.

The following are some examples of racism as we learned it at school:

From a N.S.W. primary school social studies textbook:

'The Aborigines have many strange ways. We call them customs because they have been doing them for a long time. Each year more and more Aborigines are learning to live the way we do and they find it easier to live that way. They are being helped by the white people to find good jobs and live in clean homes'.

From a secondary school geography text book:

'The natives in fact seem as destructive as the baboons but it is very difficult to get them to change their habits'.

In *The World and Its People*, a series of geography readers published by Nelson, the following passages occur:

'The blackfellows form one of the *lowest races* of mankind in existence . . .

'They are fast disappearing before the *onward march of the white man* . . .

'Their food is very varied, and they will eat *almost any living things, even lizards and snakes*. . .

Australian history was presented only from 1788, in terms of Australia being 'discovered' and 'first settled', as if the continent was previously uninhabited. The Aboriginal occupants were introduced as being merely a 'problem' to the white settlers.

In the *Australian Quarterly* of June 1974 Alan Doobov dealt with racism in school books and identified ethnocentrism as one of the reasons for the continual denigration of Aboriginal people. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture and society are the sole repository of wisdom and cultural normality and that any culture that differs is debased and worthless.

Mr Doobov points out that an Australian student after completing primary school social studies courses could be forgiven for not recognising the existence of the Aboriginal people. He might have seen statements such as 'When Sturt crossed the river he saw some Aborigines, emus and kangaroos'.

He quotes the Hunt & Marshall textbook widely used in N.S.W. schools: 'They were lazy individuals, apparently devoid of morals, and always prepared to lie, cheat or steal'.

Having denigrated the original peoples the textbooks then propagated such myths as that Aborigines migrated peacefully from the coast inland, or that they spontaneously died out.

Doobov summed up 'what a child is taught in school has an important influence on the development of his racial attitudes but a large number of other factors are also involved including television, newspaper, literature and even nursery rhymes'.

The existence of racism is to be little wondered at against this outpouring of primitive prejudice disguised as education.

To help combat racism in school textbooks my Office has published a handbook for teachers and others interested, entitled *Let's End the Slander*. It examines racism in children's literature and indicates ways and means of dealing with it.

The real picture

In the interests of truth and sane race relations, it is essential to ensure above all that the facts about the Aboriginal nations are understood by all concerned. This is a challenge for Aborigines as well as for all other Australians. It is made more complex by the fact that the Aboriginal people today can be divided into five major categories:

Tribal people following the traditional life, mainly in the north and in central Australia.

People living on pastoral properties 'outback', engaged in rural industry.

The most numerous of all, called the 'fringe dwellers', leading a marginal existence in river bank camps or on the outskirts of small towns, with little or no knowledge of traditional culture and facing a continuing struggle for recognition and acceptance.

The city dwellers who have left the river bank situation to improve their material lot.

The 'mainstreamers' who have been absorbed into white Australian society and are assimilated.

The arrival in this continent of the Aborigine, crossing from the Indonesian islands to the north-west shelf of Australia nearly 40,000 years ago, represents the first evidence of oceanic migration in the history of mankind.

Mr Justice Woodward, in reporting on Aboriginal land rights, states: 'Aborigines came here from the north and came to uninhabited land. The origins of these people who found their way here are obscure. But they must have come, over a period of time, by way of what are now Indonesia and New Guinea. In doing so, they must have covered at least forty miles of water in what can only have been bark canoes . . .

'What is clear is that the Aborigines are genetically a unique people and that they have been here for a very long time . . .

'The social organisation of the Aboriginal people is highly complex.'

Mr Justice Woodward bases the affinity of Aborigines with the land on membership of a clan, being part of a nation which he defines as a group with a common language, a commonly used name for their land, and occupying an identifiable tract of country.

He states: 'Members of a clan retain that membership throughout their lives and indeed, thereafter. The link between an Aborigine's spirit and his land is regarded as being timeless. The land-owning clan is merely a group of people who share the same links with the same land.

'Thus these clans have close spiritual associations with particular tracts of land. Their religion or mythology teaches them that particular areas were given to them, or claimed on their behalf, by their spirit ancestors in the Dreamtime. For this reason there are specific stories, songs and ceremonies linking these spirit ancestors with particular places. The more important the place is to the legend, the more sacred it is.

'The spiritual connection between a clan and its land involves both rights and duties. The rights are to the unrestricted use of its natural products; the duties are of a ceremonial kind — to tend the land by the performance of ritual dances, songs and ceremonies at the proper times and places.'

Mr Justice Woodward recommended in favour of Aboriginal land rights.

The summation of latter day scholars is that the Aboriginal people had achieved perhaps the most gentle civilisation on earth, banishing war from their 600 nations that shared the continent, and bringing about a balance between the people, the land, and the environment which is unrivalled in the annals of mankind.

What happened to obscure all this?

War, defeat, dispossession, countless expropriations — in short ignorance of Aboriginal law and society by newcomers who were totally uncomprehending.

Ian Spalding, writing in 1973 in the teachers' journal, *The Aboriginal Child at School* put it this way: 'The law in Australia was turned into an instrument of tyranny as far as Aboriginal people were concerned. Men have seen their religious and lodge centres desecrated and the land upon which they all depended usurped. For two centuries, Aboriginal mothers watched their children die, not just from illness, but for want of food. Children have seen their kinsmen die violently; many have been dragged screaming from their families. Adults have gazed despairingly into the fire while they contemplated the extinction of their clans. Mature and wise men have wept as they resolved not to hand on to their sons the secrets of life and manhood which had passed previously in a tradition which may have stretched unbroken over 20,000 years.

'Some insight into the terrible intensity of Aboriginal suffering is gained by noting the plea voiced by a small all-Aboriginal association which published a pamphlet on January 26, 1938, the occasion when the majority group of some seven millions set out to celebrate the 150th anniversary of modern Australia.

'Part of the document reads: "We ask you to be proud of the Australian Aborigines, and not to be led any longer by the superstition that we are a naturally backward and low race. This is a scientific lie, which has helped push our people down and down into the mire":

How is the situation of the Aborigines today seen by overseas observer Charlotte Meacham?

'Aborigines have probably the highest infant mortality rate in the world . . . since the coming of Captain Cook in 1770 there have only been about a dozen Aboriginal University graduates, all of them in the last 15 years.'

Charlotte Meacham wrote of Sydney : 'I was taken to dilapidated housing comparable to some of the worst slums I have visited in U.S. urban ghettos. . . Housing discrimination in Sydney seems to be as prevalent as in the big U.S. cities and works the same hardships on those who are poor and from a minority group'.

Charlotte Meacham in her report called for an attack on all the attitudes, social habits and formal structures which institutionalised racism

Priorities for action

The basic priority for action by the Office of Community Relations must be to achieve recognition that the greatest problem in Aboriginal relations with the rest of the community is not the Aboriginals but the rest of the community. It is vital to rewrite the textbooks to expose through every medium the achievements of the Aboriginal people in their 40,000 years' history in Australia. It is important that Australian history should recognise the founding peoples and their cultures.

Here is an idealised version of an Aboriginal hero of the last century: In January 1855 the last public hanging took place in Brisbane's Queen Street on the site of the General Post Office. The man hanged was the Aboriginal guerilla leader known as Dundalli, who for ten years was regarded by Aborigines as an inspired crusader and an instrument of vengeance for the dispossession of his people and the desecration of their sacred places. He became the black general of the Pine River, Wide Bay, Ningy-Ningy (whose territory was on the north coast of Moreton Bay) and Bribe Island peoples. He achieved the impossible and welded the once peaceful nations into a powerful guerilla force.

In 1854 he crossed the Brisbane River and came into the Valley, where I was born, and it was there that he was finally captured, perhaps at the height of his achievements. Yet Dundalli has no place in Queensland history and, whenever he is mentioned casually, it is simply as a scoundrel and a ruthless murderer.

There is room to re-examine such leaders as Dundalli and Yagan of Western Australia in the context of their people's struggle for survival and not just as being hostile to the settlers. Certainly a start has been made in gathering the data and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, founded in 1961, has been amassing a great deal of factual material. It is important that this material should be translated into a new approach to the education of Australian children.

One of the greatest reforms carried out in relation to Aboriginal Australia is the initiation in 1973 of bilingual education programs in Aboriginal community schools in the Northern Territory. The extension of the program can greatly contribute to the regeneration of Aboriginal pride, self-reliance and progress in the future.

But the sands of time have been running out for the whole of this century in relation to Aboriginal languages. Dr P.J. Ucko, Director of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, states that recent research has established that there are only 202 languages surviving today.

Mr Peter Sutton of that Institute makes the point: 'While most of the languages originally spoken in south-east Australia have become extinct, many others are now spoken by groups of people whose numbers range between fifty and two or three thousand. These belong to the centre, north-west and far north of Australia. They are in no immediate danger of extinction'.

There are many initiatives which the Office of Community Relations seeks to encourage. Of them all, the prime objective must be to build in all Australians a pride in the culture and heritage of the Aboriginal people. This is the battle cry of Community Relations as we set the priorities for our work in relation to the Aborigines.

It was put more effectively by Kath Walker in her poem 'Assimilation — No!' which challenges us all to look again at the old attitudes:

ASSIMILATION — NO.'

*Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river
And where is your wine? There is only the river.
Must the genius of an old race die
That the race must live?*

*We would be one with you, one people,
We must surrender now much that we love,
The old freedoms for new musts,
Your world for ours,
But a core is left that we must keep always.
Change and compel, slash us into shape,
But not our roots deep in the soil of old.
We are different hearts and minds
In a different body. Do not ask of us
To be deserters, to disown our mother,
To change the unchangeable.
The gum cannot be trained into an oak.
Something is gone, something surrendered, still
We will go forward and learn.
Not swamped and lost, watered away, but keeping
Our own identity, our pride of race.
Pour your pitcher of wine into the wide river
And where is your wine? There is only the river.*

Kath Walker

June 1980.

