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'A SOMEWHAT STARTLED REALISATION'
Report on a visit to Tasmanian Aboriginal Areas

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GOVERNMENT POLICY AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES

Acknowledgment of the very existence of Aborigines in Tasmania has come about so rapidly, and in such recent years, that the community in general is still experiencing what a Senate committee has termed 'a somewhat startled realisation' that Tasmanian Aborigines do actually exist and are living in their midst in sizeable number.

In 1964 the Tasmanian Department of Social Welfare estimated that there were 200 Aborigines living in Tasmania, while the 1971 Census enumerated 671 Aborigines and Islanders. Yet the Tasmanian Government in 1972 was still maintaining that the total Aboriginal population consisted of 55 people resident on Cape Barren Island. The National Population Inquiry¹ estimated a minimum of 1000 in 1975, but the only

¹ *Report from the Senate Select Committee on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, A.G.P.S., Canberra 1976, p.54.

² National Population Inquiry, *Population and Australia — A Demographic Analysis and Projection*, First Report, A.G.P.S. Canberra 1976, p.465

researcher who has delved deeply into local Aboriginal genealogies has concluded that there are between 4000 and 5000 Tasmanians of Aboriginal descent.'

In 1973, the first Aboriginal education grants were allocated to Tasmanians and in 1974 the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs opened an Area Office in Hobart. Yet, despite this official recognition, public opinion both in Tasmania and in other parts of Australia has been slow to become aware of the substantial number of people who identify as Aboriginal in that State. The myth dies hard that the last *Aborigine* (as distinct from 'Aborigine of the full descent') disappeared from the scene in 1876 with the death of Truganini. Aboriginal descendants who appear on television to champion the cause of their people are angry and feel themselves to be severely discriminated against when ensuing letters to the press deny their Aboriginality.

Children in the schools, including Aboriginal children, are still being taught that there are no Aborigines in Tasmania, a blow to self-esteem which affects them deeply.

COMPOSITION OF ABORIGINAL POPULATION

The original Tasmanians are thought to have been near relatives of the Australians of the mainland though, having been cut off from them for a considerable period, their appearance was different. Like the Australians, their lips were broad and nostril wide; unlike the Australians, their hair formed tight coils.

From the information given in G.A. Robinson's journals", there were at the time of the first white settlements in 1803-4 at least sixty-two *bands* (units who together occupied a territory with fixed boundaries) grouped into about thirteen tribes. The total number has been estimated at about 4000⁵, though this can be no more than a guess.

By 1834 only 250 Aborigines of the full descent remained, the rest having succumbed to disease and unequal warfare. These were persuaded by George Augustus Robinson to leave their homeland for a settlement at Flinders Island, one of the Furneaux group in Bass Strait. By 1847 only 34 were still alive and they were returned to an old convict barrack 22 miles from Hobart. Here the neglect was even greater than at the Flinders settlement and degradation and despair led to the last Aborigine of the full descent, William Lanne, dying in 1869 and the last woman, Truganini, in 1876.

The present-day Aboriginal population is all of mixed descent: Tasmanian, Australian Aboriginal, European and Maori. Though they are scattered over the State, the 5 main groups are in Hobart (roughly 500 so far identified), Launceston (probably 1000), the north-west, Flinders Island (300-350) and Cape Barren Island (58).

PRESENT-DAY ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Requests had been made from Aboriginal individuals and from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre that discrimination cases be investigated by the Community Relations Office. Accordingly, the Director for Community Relations, Victoria, visited three of the communities in February 1978: Hobart, Launceston and Flinders Island. Wild weather prevented a projected visit to Cape Barren Island, but data was gathered, nevertheless, concerning this community. There were a variety of opinions among Aborigines as to the nature and extent of discrimination. Most agreed that it was

³ B.C. Mollison, ed., *A Synopsis of Data on Tasmanian Aboriginal People*, 2nd Edition, University of Tasmania, Hobart 1974, para 2.4

⁴ *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834*, ed. N.J.B. Plomley, T.H.R.A. Supplement, Hobart, 1971

⁵ *The Tasmanian Aborigines*, N.J.B. Plomley, Adult Education Division, Tasmania, Launceston 1977, p.26

widespread, insidious and long-standing. Considering their low socio-economic position in general, and their history, this is hardly surprising. But the rate of intermarriage and assimilation has been high and there are a few who identify as 'descendants' who maintain with great vigour that prejudice has never touched them. In the light of evidence collected this appears to be more an aspiration than an achievement, though undoubtedly there are those with white spouses and middle-class life-styles to whom prejudice is not a significant factor. The feeling of group integration is growing steadily and more and more people are identifying who would have been fearful of doing so only a few years ago. This pride in Aboriginality has been fostered by the Aboriginal organisation, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, which administers a legal aid service financed by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and has offices in both Hobart and Launceston. It has also been encouraged by participation in Aboriginal conferences on the mainland, by visits to Tasmania by leading Aboriginal personalities (such as those of the National Aboriginal Education Committee) and by partaking in sporting events.

In addition, there is a sharing of common area of origin, since many were born on, or their parents originated from Cape Barren or Flinders Islands. The island lifestyle has included use of local animals and plants as foodstuffs, and taking part in the five-week mutton-birding season, which is an event of social as well as economic significance in the calendar of many Aboriginal families. Aborigines have been known to give up well-paid jobs or to forego Social Security payments, and children are sometimes taken away from school to take part in 'the birding'. Despite the long hours of hard work involved, it is akin to a State-wide festival, not unlike the get-togethers which used to take place in Victoria during the pea- and bean-picking season.

Even among Tasmanian city dwellers, the sub-culture⁶ which urban Aborigines form is everywhere apparent. Whatever disabilities they may have to endure, loneliness is not one of them. There is frequent interaction among extended kin and it is very rare to find an Aboriginal house containing during the day-time only a bored and lonely housewife (as is frequently the case with whites): there is more likely to be a constant coming and going and an exchange of news.

HOUSING

There is considerable prejudice against Aboriginal families as tenants on the part of private landlords. A common stereotype is that 'they make poor tenants; they often damage property'. Many Aboriginal families are large and the standard-sized house is inadequate. The resultant 4 or 5 children to a bedroom is a health hazard. On Cape Barren Island, despite the building of 4 houses by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (one of which is as yet incomplete), the majority live in small, old weatherboard cottages.

Until recent years the State Housing Department had a policy of buying up sub-standard houses for Aboriginal families which, in some instances, were subsequently condemned. Though this practice has now ceased, the bitterness it evoked still remains, as do the houses. Housing is a continual source of anxiety to many Aboriginal families: 'The standard of present housing is usually much lower than that of the rest of the population, even where Aborigines have lived alongside, and have been employed by their white neighbours for generations.' In at least two cases petitions have been made by white residents to have an Aboriginal family evicted from their street. Officers of the

⁶ This is used in its sociological sense to indicate certain distinctions from the general culture and does not in any way imply inferiority.

⁷ B.C. Mollison, ed., *op.cit.*, para 3.3

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre report that there is a constant fear on the part of white house owners that Aborigines in the vicinity will lower the value of their property.

On the positive side, the Tasmanian Social Welfare Department operates a Homemaker Service, the Aboriginal section of which is funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and employs Aborigines, four in Hobart and three in Launceston. These are people with no special educational qualifications, but who have experienced problems themselves and who are able to relate warmly to others. They take on the role of social workers, and enable people to assist themselves. The Homemakers participate in a three-week training course each year and also in fortnightly case discussions. Aborigines questioned appreciated the service but felt it would be more effective if it were under the control of an Aboriginal organisation, acting on behalf of the whole Aboriginal community.

Decisions on allocation of State Housing Department homes are made by a joint Aboriginal-Housing Department committee. Problems concerning Aboriginal tenants are brought to the attention of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre and, since this system has been operating, there have been no evictions.

HEALTH

As late as 1973 the Director of Public Health 'was of the opinion that there were no Aborigines in Tasmania'⁸ (despite the fact that his Department was receiving an annual grant from the Commonwealth Government on behalf of these non-existent Aborigines!) Even today separate statistics are not available. However, the genealogies so far collected indicate a marked drop-out from the workforce for those over the age of forty, many retiring on an invalid pension as a result of diabetes, alcoholism and a range of disabilities usually associated with low socio-economic position, with resultant malnutrition; and prejudice which in turn causes low self-esteem.

Malnutrition is probably at its most severe on Cape Barren Island, where there is almost complete dependence on outside supplies. The single store can only carry limited stock, because of the lack of capital of its (Aboriginal) storekeeper. Though meat is supplied by regular weekly airfreight, most other foodstuffs come by an irregular boat-service, so that whole categories of food are sometimes unobtainable.

EMPLOYMENT

The Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre has estimated the current Aboriginal unemployment rate for adult males is at 50 per cent. This is not altogether surprising in a time of comparatively high unemployment for the general population (over 7 per cent), among a group whose educational attainments are generally low. A hazard which Aborigines, as distinct from the rest of the population, frequently encounter in their search for employment is discrimination. The Commonwealth Employment Service has reported at least two such recent cases which will serve as examples.

An experienced and well-recommended Aboriginal girl was sent by C.E.S. to work in a cake-shop. When she gave her name, the manageress said, 'You must be Aboriginal'. (Five or six surnames in Tasmania are distinctively Aboriginal.) 'We can't have someone coloured handling food.'

Another Aboriginal girl who had been working in a florist's shop was visited at work one day by her mother, who looked Aboriginal whereas the daughter did not. After the visit, the girl was sacked, Aboriginality being given as the reason. (Such an action is of

⁸ B.C. Mollison, *op.cit.*, para 3.5

course, illegal under the Racial Discrimination Act.) Many more well-authenticated cases came to light.

The employment situation on Flinders Island is poor for its 300-odd Aboriginal residents. Of the limited number of public contact jobs available only one, in a bank at Whitemark, is held by an Aboriginal girl. In the job shortage that prevails generally on the island, Aborigines are likely to be put at the end of the queue. The position has been slightly alleviated by the opening of a fish factory in November 1977, funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (\$110 000) and the Tasmanian Government (\$100 000) but in which a private firm has a share (\$30 000). This provides employment at most times for from ten to seventeen people, male and female. It is administered by an Aboriginal Association, which hopes to buy boats eventually from its share of the profits and to make of it a steady, all-year-round employer. The commercial firm at present supplies the manager, but it is anticipated that his place will be taken by an Aboriginal in due course.

The population of Cape Barren Island consists of 58 Aborigines and a handful of whites with the Aboriginal residents in a state of economic stagnation at present. Previously the Department of Aboriginal Affairs had provided funds for a dam and reticulated water to the school and houses and also for the building of four new houses. Roads were built and boxthorn cleared, thus providing temporary employment. Many of the residents are pensioners, though two or three young men have returned to the island. It appears to have as yet undeveloped economic potential. Two white farmers run sheep and cattle and there is scope for a fishing industry, including crayfish. Grapes and citrus are also possibilities, there is limestone on the island, and it has been estimated that 16 000 wallabies per annum could be culled. For any of this development (with its concomitant employment opportunities) to take place, a community development officer would need to be employed, capital invested and more fit adult males attracted back to the island. Previous governments adopted a policy of persuading Aborigines to leave the island, using town housing as lure. There is now at least some possibility that this may change (see p.166)

EDUCATION

One of the main areas of complaint regarding discrimination against Aboriginal people concerns the schools. A number of parents stated that they did not object to their children leaving school at the minimum legal age, because they realised that the whole experience had been largely an ordeal for them. Numerous episodes were recounted of children coming home in tears after reference had been made to 'darkies' and 'all your nigger relations'. In order to avoid such humiliation, there are parents who deny Aboriginality (where this is cosmetically possible) and who encourage their children to do likewise, 'so they won't suffer at school like I did.' This last was a sentiment frequently expressed.

Some teachers also lack sensitivity. After a project on Aborigines, a Launceston teacher asked a class to name any Aborigines they knew. One girl replied 'Me'. Because she did not look Aboriginal and did not have one of the clearly identifiable Aboriginal surnames, the teacher derided the answer. The child was deeply distressed, since she had been taught pride in Aboriginality by her parents and sensed that, to the teacher, to be Aboriginal was to be inferior. One of the gravest causes of concern is the use of racist text and classroom books, especially those which maintain that there have been no Aborigines in Tasmania since Truganini's death. Such denial is surely the worst form of ignominy.

Schools everywhere report that Aboriginal children tend to under-achieve and to drop out early. This would be an almost predictable result from a group which is poor, badly-housed, under-employed and subject to prejudice, with its resultant low

self-esteem. Remedial teachers are available at the Cape Barren Island and Flinders Island schools (and also in some of the other schools for both black and white children.) The Special Education section of the Tasmanian Education Department is about to appoint an officer to look into the difficulties of Aboriginal multi-problem families and of school-leavers.

The barriers to achievement for Cape Barren Island children are considerable, because of their isolation and limited social experience. The teacher at the Island primary school is replaced every two years and has had no special training to equip him or her to deal with culturally different pupils. Teachers of varying capacity volunteer for the task and results vary accordingly. It is doubtful whether sufficient attention is given to the (sometimes hidden) strengths of the community; there is more likely to be emphasis on its more obvious disadvantages. There is no doubt that children from Cape Barren *are* disadvantaged when they go to Launceston for secondary schooling and suffer from culture shock in an alien environment. Little special backup is available, either in education or accommodation. The Cape Barren school closes for five weeks in the mutton-bird season (March-April), instead of at Christmas but, of course, this does not apply to those in Launceston, where Aboriginal children are a minority in the schools and observe normal holidays. Many of the Island children are withdrawn during the birding season to accompany their families. Their economic contribution during this time is substantial and the sense of participation in an annual social event is also a consideration. However, this has the effect of interfering with their school work and most do not catch up during the year on the period missed, thus further discouraging school attendance.

A solution to the problem of parents who have to be itinerant because of work commitments (such as circus performers) has been found in other States with the provision of itinerant teachers for short periods. If the parents taking part in the birding do not bring their children with them, a problem of another sort arises: where to board the children in Launceston during the five-week period.

330 secondary Aboriginal scholarships are currently being awarded throughout Tasmania. Though they alleviate the worst economic difficulties and are desirable in themselves, they are by no means a solution to educational inequality, because of the factors outlined above.

How much coverage Aboriginal affairs have in the school syllabus depends on the interest of individual teachers. More emphasis on the positive aspects of Aboriginality would certainly do a great deal to boost pride in identity and therefore self-confidence. It would also assist in mitigating the prejudice of white children. But there is nothing in teacher training that specifically encourages teaching about Aborigines, nor prepares teachers to handle with confidence what can be an emotive topic. The Aboriginal community has taken a lead in this regard by obtaining a \$2000 grant from the Tasmanian Government to take 33 Aboriginal children on a culture tour to areas of especial Aboriginal interest. The first tour, in February 1978, was so successful in engendering interest and pride among the children that it is likely to be repeated.

The Commonwealth Department of Employment and Industrial Relations is organising, with the help of a technical school, a 12-week course for Aboriginal school-leavers to develop confidence, to improve literacy and numeracy and to acquire marketable skills. With the assistance of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre it is likely that here, too, classes will encompass discussion on Aboriginal affairs and race relations history.

PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

There is, overall, sufficient racial prejudice in Tasmania to make it, or the expectation of it an integral part of Aboriginal lives. There is a temptation for some to deny

Aboriginality so as to make life easier, whether it be in school, employment, housing or social contacts. Despite this, and sometimes even because of it, more people are identifying each year and the marriage pattern appears to have changed: over the last decade there is an increasing tendency for urban Aborigines to inter-marry, rather than to marry whites.

There are many complaints concerning police: Aborigines state that they are usually the first suspects if they are anywhere in the vicinity when a crime is committed (and sometimes even when they are not); that, after a street fight between black and white boys, the Aboriginal is likely to be arrested, but not the white. Aboriginal informants also mentioned that there were some individual police who went out of their way to be helpful. Even more frequent are charges against hotels. There is never complete assurance that a particular hotel will serve Aborigines. The same hotel will sometimes refuse service and sometimes not. The lack of consistency compounds the evil, since an Aboriginal person can never be sure of being treated as an equal in a public place, even though the Racial Discrimination Act requires it. When tempers rise, in any situation, pejoratives such as 'nigger' or 'blackfeller' may be used at any time.

Most Aborigines are becoming less inclined to submit to such derogation and are becoming more aware of their right to equality. A few, however, as a matter of understandable pride, deny that prejudice exists. Unfortunately, the facts speak otherwise. On Flinders Island, where Aborigines form about a third of the total population, there might at first sight appear to be a minimum of prejudice. Yet even here, where there has been considerable intermarriage and frequent social contact, underlying antipathies still surface. Until 1974, Aborigines were not permitted to be members of the golf-club; and they still come a bad second in the few white-collar jobs offering. Similarly, there is a contrast in the housing situation on the Island: all white families are adequately housed but 7 or 8 of the Aboriginal families live in houses with no bathroom, an inadequate supply of tank-water and no power. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs has built one house and plans to build two more, but this will hardly make up the leeway.

When the Aboriginal fish factory was opened in 1977, some of the white families, who have been on the island for three or four generations and who regard it as 'their' province, objected to Aborigines starting up their own economic enterprise and so raising their socio-economic position. Similarly, at first, some of the fishermen were dubious about selling to an Aboriginal concern. The insecurity which all of this engenders encourages many people of Aboriginal descent to refer to themselves as 'descendants' rather than as 'Aborigines' — a more oblique form of identification.

ABORIGINAL ASPIRATIONS

The majority of Aborigines encountered were anxious for economic and educational betterment for their people as a whole and regarded the prevailing prejudice and discrimination as one of the deterrents to equality. They have recently petitioned the Tasmanian Parliament to obtain leasehold on various of the mutton-bird islands. To date, they have provided all the labour for the industry, nearly all on a wage basis, without sharing in the profits or having the security of ownership. The government is establishing a Task Force to examine the possibility of collective ownership by Aborigines of some of the Bass Strait islands and the setting up, with government assistance, of a co-operative mutton-bird industry. It has also been recommended 'that the question of Cape Barren Island be thoroughly investigated and examined'⁹.

⁹ *Notes on the Petition of the Aboriginal Electors to the Parliament of Tasmania*, P.W. White, 8 February 1978, Mimeographed

CONCLUSION

To reach anything like equality with the general population, Tasmanian Aborigines principally need a range of economic enterprises and more opportunities generally for self-determination. These areas, however, are outside the range of the Office for Community Relations. But this Office is hopeful of being able to assist in fields within our province, those of prejudice and discrimination, for which we have a particular mandate under the Racial Discrimination Act.

At present there are many white officers in such areas, for example, as social welfare, education, police, probation and parole who deal with Aboriginal people on a daily basis and who yet deny the very existence of Aboriginality in Tasmania. Whatever government policy may be, the belief and practice of such people are in assimilation. They see the root cause of Aboriginal problems as being identification with their own group, rather than the problems having been caused largely by white inability to encompass cultural difference. The fact that Aborigines tend to have low educational levels, poor housing and high unemployment only lends fuel to the assimilationist view: these disadvantages are seen as causes rather than as consequences of unequal treatment.

There are also many whites who are aware of their own total ignorance of Aboriginal affairs, whose education did not encompass mention of race relations and who, having recovered from the 'shock' of discovering that there are many Aborigines in their midst, would now like to learn something of their history and present situation. Regular classes for adults, for students in schools and tertiary institutes and for pre-service and in-service training of teachers do not exist in anything like adequate numbers.

A beginning was made in the sponsorship by this Office of a multi-cultural education conference in June 1977: and also in the setting up of a Consultative Committee on Community Relations, to investigate discrimination complaints (which may be lodged with the Good Neighbour Council, Hobart) and report to the Commissioner for Community Relations, Canberra. Assistance has also been given in the drafting of a race relations course for police; and also courses for probation and parole officers and for magistrates. But the whole field of community education in race relations has not been adequately explored. Now that the Tasmanian Government has for the first time a Minister for Ethnic Affairs, encompassing Aboriginal Affairs, it is hoped that the pace will quicken and more resources will be allotted to broadening the understanding of all sections of the community towards the situation of Tasmanian Aborigines. Aboriginal people themselves are both competent and keen to assist in the task.



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