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REPORT ON A VISIT TO SELECTED AREAS
OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

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Racial Discrimination Act 1975

Office of the Commissioner for Community Relations

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THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, APRIL 1978**

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The visit was made in response to various complaints of discrimination under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* lodged with the Commissioner for Community Relations by members of Aboriginal communities.

I. HOUSING

The two Reserves visited showed a very poor overall standard of housing. Some of the older people do not want European-type housing, preferring to camp out and move at will, but many families pointed to the adequacy of housing for white staff on their reserve, which contrasted sharply with their own sub-standard conditions. Council members informed us that finance was not available to the community from the Northern Territory Housing Commission, nor from home building societies, since they are unable to use land as security. They are therefore totally dependent on Department of Aboriginal Affairs funding, for which there is a long waiting list.

Additionally, local Aboriginal Housing Associations are often floundering. Aborigines with no technical training and little knowledge or experience of how the general society operates confessed their dependence on white technical advisers. Although they are keenly desirous of running their own economic enterprises, Aborigines pointed out that to gain business or technical expertise involved their leaving the Territory altogether for considerable periods to obtain the necessary skills.

2. EDUCATION

(a) Vocational Training

Aboriginal informants frequently voiced their approval of the Government policy of self-management, but were acutely aware that this was not working out in practice. We observed constantly a large amount of enforced idleness, where young -people in particular have nothing to do, with no prospect of either personal fulfilment or contributing to their community. It was pointed out by Aboriginal officials that, though the number of white officers in the communities has dropped substantially in recent years, the key jobs have still, perforce, to be carried out by whites. The various communities should be encouraged to identify their training needs in the requisite skills and could then be assisted to acquire these skills, according to their own aspirations. From our observations, such a policy would receive the willing support of the communities and would give them definite social and economic goals towards which to aim. As it is, we were struck by the aimlessness and half-heartedness of much of the life of the communities, which only becomes purposeful when it centres on the traditional: hunting and ceremonial. At present, we could not help but notice how whites employed in the communities are well trained, have adequate incomes and housing, and control of most of the vehicles. Even the alcohol restrictions imposed by the Village Council do not apply to them. They still form, sometimes unwittingly, a power elite. There is considerable frustration on the part of Aborigines over this inability to take effective control over their own situation. Many told of their desire to build, to manage a shop, to be in charge of other enterprises, rather than (often ineffectually) assisting with them. They also informed us that, apart from teacher education and training as Health Assistant, no vocational training was open to them in Northern Territory; in some areas, even education for literacy is lacking, or else is available only in inappropriate forms at the hands of teachers unversed in the Aboriginal background.

It seems clear that without opportunities for vocational training of a formal or on kind, self management as a concept cannot be realised. It should be possible to devise programs whereby almost all the white officials have worked themselves out of a job in the communities in three years' time. Those who come into Darwin are similarly disadvantaged. Again we observed numbers of Aborigines congregated in the parks and hotels, with literally nothing to do.

(b) Schools

White teachers in the schools visited were unclear as to the aims and expectations of Aboriginal schools and felt they needed more opportunities for discussion among themselves and with representatives of the communities who have a particular interest in their children's schooling. As it is, they frequently feel professionally isolated. They too are discouraged by the absence of jobs and opportunities for vocational training for school leavers and ask, Education for what? These doubts were re-echoed to us by Aboriginal parents, who see children as deriving no observable benefit from their schooling, only alienation from their own communities.

Though they want literacy, numeracy and English for their children, they seem to have reached the regretful conclusion that schooling is not helping very much, even when it is pursued to secondary level, since it does not achieve the advancement of community goals. This dissatisfaction is reflected in school attendance, which is often

very low, indicating the irrelevance of much of the curriculum to Aboriginal needs and aspirations and the lack of concomitant adult education to make it more relevant.

We visited a school approximately 60 kilometres from Darwin, a third of whose pupils are Aboriginal. Recently there had been racial tensions within the school, resulting in two white families withdrawing their children. A senior officer of the Department of Education had paid several visits to the school to discuss difficulties with staff, students and parents. We accompanied him on one of these visits and noted that he was able to ease the situation considerably by his constructive approach. It is regrettable, however, that such a school should have no signs of Aboriginality on its walls or visible among its teaching materials. The Principal stated that Aboriginal Studies were not included in social studies teaching, nor was he aware of the availability of such units.

It was obvious that white parents had had little contact with Aboriginal parents and found it hard to appreciate the difficulties of camp-dwellers who have no lease on 'their' land and who are therefore unable to have basic amenities installed; where six dwellings, lacking reticulated water, may house up to 120 people.

We were assured by officers of the Department of Education of the availability of both pre-service and in-service courses for teachers in Aboriginal areas, but the turnover of such teachers is considerable, and it is obvious that current measures are not adequate to make teachers aware of the many bridging devices available to a school in bringing black and white communities together.

3. ALCOHOL

Aboriginal Councils are trying to come to grips with the very real problems which over-use of alcohol brings, by limiting the individual intake in their communities. However, they are legally powerless to prevent alcohol being brought in against their express wish by aircraft, boat or mail. Councillors stated that, until the law is changed, they are unable to prevent smuggling and once again are frustrated by their own powerlessness.

4. LEGAL

(a) Courts

Officers of the Aboriginal Legal Service drew our attention to the court lists in Darwin, which tell their own sorry story as far as Aborigines are concerned. For example, the list for 31 January 1978 showed that 66 Aborigines were charged on that day, 36 of the charges relating to illegal use of a car, 3 to driving unlicensed and 34 to bringing liquor on to a Reserve. (Multiple charges against the same person account for the high total.

From our own observation we could well understand how young people who have acquired sufficient skill to drive a vehicle and who have nothing whatever to do are likely to gain some gratification and status from joy-riding. A similar defiance of authority and lack of other occupation would account for charges relating to liquor. These latter, though justified in a strictly legal sense, are discriminatory since the same charges are not laid against whites.

(b) Aboriginal-Police Relationships

A large number of complaints reach the Community Relations Office from Aborigines in respect of the police. Both today and historically, relationships between police and Aborigines have been poor and are capable of considerable improvement. At his request, we have recently tendered advice to the Commissioner of Police for the Northern Territory, as follows:

(i) Police education

Police who are to be sent to communities need special training for the task so that, apart from having some knowledge of Aboriginal culture and value systems, they also have an appreciation of the social organisation of a particular community. In this way they can work in harmony with the authority structure of the community and will gain personal reassurance from being able to do so.

(ii) Drunkenness

Aborigines see the power the police have under the Police Offences Ordinance as being used in discriminatory fashion. Darwin has no Aboriginal-controlled pick-up service, but is in urgent need of one to prevent the alternative, of being locked up in police cells for up to six hours to dry out, and then being released to the streets again.

(iii) Complaints

Complaints against police have been investigated by police, who have usually exonerated the accused. An independent procedure, such as one operated by an Ombudsman, is needed.

(iv) Police-Aboriginal Liaison

Given the frequency with which Aborigines and police continue to interact, a special Aboriginal liaison unit is called for, along lines found to be successful in South Australia, and which has also been established in a somewhat different form in Western Australia.

(v) Training of Aborigines as Police

Problems pertaining to this area could partly be overcome if Aborigines, especially the present police trackers, were given special training as police liaison officers in each area. This training could be geared to:

- low level of formal education;
- liaison officers living in their own community;
- utilisation of the specialised knowledge; and
- understandings which they would bring to the task and which would be invaluable to police.

Additionally, the Community Relations Office has been able to advise the Department of the Chief Secretary on the mounting of sensitisation courses with regard to Aborigines, which need to be included in the training of all police.

5. LAND

It was reported to us by various informants that applications made to the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission for transfer of leases on pastoral properties from pastoralists (who had been making no use of the land) to Aboriginal groups had been refused, despite the fact that there is legal provision for such transfer. Aborigines also regard as discriminatory the fact that no land has ever been forfeited by a white lessee for non-fulfilment of leasehold conditions (such as provision of fencing or other improvements).

6. FRINGE CAMPS

Five camps on the fringes of Darwin were originally the hunting grounds of various clan groups. For something like thirty years past they have formed gathering places for old people formerly living on station properties but now no longer able to work. These groups formed focal points for visits at different times from younger members of their clan. The feeling of belonging to such an area is strong and is evidenced by the fact that people from these areas told us they wanted to be buried near the campsite, rather than in Darwin.

Some hundreds of Aborigines come into the camps for varying periods each year, to visit or to attend hospital. Most of them cannot afford solid houses, nor does the idea of hostels (with their restrictions) appeal. But we were constantly told of the desire for security of land tenure, and with it the ability to instal basic amenities such as showers, toilets and street lights. Many are on pensions and are dependent on relatives. Their meagre total income, therefore, is not likely to stretch to payment for water and home electricity supplies.

An Aboriginal organisation, the Aboriginal Development Foundation funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, has been assisting the people in applying for leases, but so far these have not been granted. Fringe dwellers visited expressed to us their frustration at having to live in such wretched conditions, unable to effect improvements on land to which they have no title, with a resultant lowering of health standards and of self-esteem. They voiced particular indignation at having to apply to white authority for land which they have always regarded as theirs.

It is most unlikely that groups of whites in such number would be permitted to live in such deplorable conditions over so long a period without strenuous efforts being made towards improvement. The whole situation, therefore, is a discriminatory one.

7. ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABORIGINES

It has for many years been a curious feature of Darwin that the stranger from 'down south' has been buttonholed by a series of white residents and told of the lack of racial prejudice in their city. Certainly attitudes compare favourably with other areas of the Territory. Australian-born Chinese, and Asians who have migrated to Darwin in comparatively recent years, appear to be integrated and accepted. (The current wave of Vietnamese 'boat-people' is, however, an exception to this statement.)

The Department of Education is very aware of its responsibilities towards Aborigines and employs a sizeable number of officers in its Aboriginal section (though training of Aborigines in educational administration still lags behind). The Northern Territory section of the Health Department trains Aboriginal health aides and publicises the poor state of Aboriginal health. It would be rare in Darwin to hear such highly offensive terms as 'coons' and 'gins', terms which are not uncommon in outback areas. And yet . . . The idealised picture which most white Darwinians have of their d. city as a place which does not discriminate against urban Aborigines ('Coloureds'), but accepts them wholeheartedly is not borne out by our many conversations with Aborigines themselves. Though the urban Aborigines to whom we spoke espoused a lifestyle almost indistinguishable from the white, they nevertheless recounted innumerable discriminatory acts experienced throughout their lives, especially in employment and housing. They also told us of another more subtle form of prejudice which graciously accepts Aborigines in a lower-rung capacity, but which objects if they attempt to climb higher on the socio-economic ladder.

8. CONCLUSION

Our visit to various areas of the Northern Territory led to the conclusion that, in order to avoid the grosser forms of discrimination against Aboriginal communities and individuals, certain steps need urgently to be taken:

- (a) provision of adequate funds to remedy a desperate housing situation;
- (b) vocational training arrangements, without which 'self-management' cannot become a reality;
- (c) leases on land occupied by traditional camp-dwellers on the fringes of Darwin;
- (d) more adequate education in race relations for police and others who interact frequently with Aborigines.

