

F. Engel, Turning Land Into Hope: Towards a New Aboriginal Policy for Australia Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, The Australian, June 19th 1968, Sydney.

Committee said: "It should be noted that we are firmly of the opinion that in due course all Aboriginal reserves should disappear."

A Time For Change

We are, in other words, at a moment of historic change when established policies must give way to new emergent facts and forces just as in the late 1930s it was necessary to move from the old policy of protection to one of assimilation. That was a great and important change which made possible substantial advances, especially in the Northern Territory. But the subtle problem has been to interpret accurately, in practice, what assimilation is. Again, and again, it has meant absorption. For example, the Standing Committee on Integration, of the Northern Territory, in its Third Report wrote of the policy of assimilation as one "which of necessity includes the absorption of the one racial community into the other." Or again, we have the strange fact that our Federal Government has one emphasis in its policy of assimilation for European migrants which is missing from its definition of the policy of assimilation for Aborigines.

For the Aborigines, it reads: "The policy of assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community - enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities and influenced by the same hopes and loyalties as other Australians."

But in the case of European migrants it is stated: "No migrant is expected to disown his former cultural identity, the heritage of customs and traditions that are the links of the centuries. Indeed these living links with the cultures of the older lands are welcomed in our evolving Australian way of life."

Why, then, so we insist that the Aborigines must move into the town and disappear by becoming a European? What makes us think that this policy will succeed when the Aboriginal population is growing in numbers at a faster rate than that at which it is moving into the white population? Why do we shut our eyes to the fact that there is a growth of "Aboriginality", of the desire to identify as Aborigines and find one's identity in such identification? The persistence of the American Indian in spite of war, assimilation, forceful removal, separation of families, disinheritance, the Acts of Congress is surely sufficient evidence that not all people wish to become European or be absorbed into a European cultural and social background. This is due, in part, to natural pride of race, something not confined to white men, and in part to generations of suspicion and mistrust caused by the white man making use of the red, or black, man for his own advantage or gain without respect for him or his culture. And then the white man wonders why the Indian or Aborigine is "disorganized, dependent and inferior". "As Mr. Stehlow has stated 'a healthy community needs its past, the sense of identity with its forbears and traditions just as much as it needs the experience of the of the present and the aspirations of the future'." As someone, has said, the Aborigine, having been deprived of his past and of his hope in the future, can only live in the present. This can never be a happy or creative existence for anyone for any length of time.

A Time for Re-evaluation

As Dr. K. Le Page has suggested, the European still assumes that his culture is the better one; but we have to face the reality that it is becoming increasingly materialistic. Advanced technologically, it has a high rate of mental disease, and a

growing number of people “searching for the solution to achieve healthy human relationships” and “Sustaining spiritual and human values.” On the other hand, the strength of Aboriginal culture is its stress on spiritual and human values and its discounting of material ones, together with its strong emphasis on human relationships and responsibility to the group. The time has come for a re-evaluation of the two cultures and a facing of the fact that while Christianity has been closely associated with European culture, that culture today is non-Christian, even anti-Christian, and that in certain aspects Aboriginal culture is nearer to the spirit of Christ. Obvious examples are the gentleness of Aborigines contrasted with the aggressiveness of the European, and Aboriginal insistence on finding the common mind of the groups as against the self-assertion of individualistic European Leadership.

Aborigines on Pastoral Properties

There is one other situation which must be looked at briefly before going further. It is that of the Aborigines on pastoral leases in northern Australia. These people have come into prominence since the Cattle Station Industry (N.T.) Award case before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, and since the Gurundji tribe went on strike and walked off Wave Hill Station because of wage and living conditions. In the past, Aborigines on cattle stations have provided stockmen and domestic servants and have had to accept what remuneration and living conditions they might be given. The stations were far from the sight of towns, authorities, or the restraints of humanitarian organizations. But the fact of low wages, poor food and miserable living quarters have become known. The stockmen are to be more adequately paid, but what of their dependents? What of the total community that has long lived in that area? Are they to be forced off that land, as some pastoralists threatened to do during the Arbitration Commission's hearings? In the past, some of these people have been regarded simply as chattels to be passed on as part and parcel of the property when it changed hands. Are they now to be thrown away or driven away as useless? Are they to be removed, by government action, to some government settlement in another area? These questions remain unanswered. It is time we had a clear policy.

The Governments concerned should take steps to ensure that these Aborigines are not forced from their traditional or habitual habitat. Such steps would mean the setting up of land reserves by excising areas from pastoral leases, or purchasing land in other cases. The 180-years process of dispossession could, at least, be stopped at these points in these ways. But even more constructive action could be taken in assisting those tribes which desire it, to set up as pastoralists, farmers or miners in their own right on their own land. This kind of proposal can no longer be pushed aside as Southern nonsense, or communist agitation. It is in line with the U.N. Charter of Human Rights and the International Labour Office Convention 107. It is part of the process of establishing justice.

A Policy of Recognition and Acceptance

All these situations and factors, then, make it plain that today we need a new policy. It must be a policy of recognition and acceptance:- recognition of the Aborigines as a people entitled to their own land, identity, culture and customs, and acceptance of them as a people with whom we share a common homeland and destiny.

This new policy should do at least five things:

1. Secure to the Aborigines legal corporate title to all remaining reserves.

2. Provide them with technical services for the development of the land for farming or mining and the training of individuals as farmers or miners, or for the setting up of craft or light industries.
3. Provide them with the legal and financial advice necessary, if they should wish to lease their land to a pastoral or mining company.
4. Provide for the people on the reserves forms and powers of local self-government, together with assistance initiating and establishing them, wherever the people desire to take that step.
5. Establish, as an act of compensation for the loss of all other parts of the continent, a National Aborigines Trust Fund for the benefit and advancement of Aborigines.

If this policy is to be anew one in any vital sense, it must begin with genuine public acts by which it will be clear to the Aborigines that they are recognized and accepted as a people and no longer merely regarded as disposable or absorbable material. Such acts, to have a genuine public meaning in terms of inter-racial relations, must include the recognition of the land rights of the Aborigines, the securing of legal title to all remaining reserves, and adequate compensation for the loss of the rest of the continent.

Compensation is necessary because only a proportion of the people now live on reserves and because it was not simply a few tracts of land, but a whole continent, that was taken away from them. This was the greatest act of piracy in the history of the high seas, but it is not impossible to assess exactly how much the robbery involved. Nor do we appear to have any very specific grounds for legal action in courts of law. It, therefore, calls for an acceptance of moral responsibility and a willingness to make a significant act of compensation for the dispossession of a people who were closely related to their land and who were ruthlessly deprived of it, begin demoralized and pauperized in the process, to adapt apt words of Professor R.M. Berndt.

A National Aborigines Trust Fund

Such an act of compensation could best be made now by the establishment of a major national fund. Such a National Aborigines Trust Fund would indicate clearly to the Aborigines and the world that Australians were no longer prepared to imagine that "the comforts of civilization and the blessings of religion", or access to social welfare benefits, or maintenance on a government settlement are adequate compensation for a continent and the disruption of a total, stable way of life. Such a fund could be used to provide fund for the education of every Aboriginal child, recognizing that without adequate financial support their families cannot afford to keep them at school long enough, nor let them proceed to higher education. Such a fund could be used to promote the education and technical training of adults and to enable them to rise above the level of poverty. Such a fund could be used to promote community centres in country towns and in cities where Aboriginal women might receive training in home economics and where men, women and children could find facilities for recreation and fellowship. Such a fund could be used to establish individuals or groups in farming, industry or the professions by means of grants for capital purposes. Such a fund could be used to deal with the urgent need described by Professor J.A. Barnes: "At the present time, the most pressing single need of Aborigines is, in my view, a greater diversity and quantity of profitable economic opportunities.....".

The amount of such a fund should be, at least \$200,000,000 in order to approach the level of adequate compensation, and in order to carry out the purposes of

the fund. it might well need to be larger. It is small enough to pay for a continent when one considers that one aircraft like the F-111 cost nearly \$12,000,000; or that 100 years ago, the U.S.A. paid \$US7,200,000 for Alaska which is only one fifth the size of Australia. An equivalent sum today must surely be in the vicinity of \$A40,000,000 which if multiplied by five gives us \$200,000,000. A large sum? But the interest on that would be only \$10,000,000 p.a., or less than \$100 per head per annum.

The fund should be established by Federal Government action be administered by trustees or a grants commission, the membership of which should be Aboriginal, or in the first instance should include a major proportion of Aborigines. This in itself could be an instrument to break down the widespread paternalism of the whites and dependence of the Aborigines, and be the means for the development of Aboriginal initiative, skill and responsibility.

The National Missionary Council proposed such a fund in 1963 and the Australian Council of Churches has been advocating it since then. Support has come from many quarters and similar proposals have been Advanced by others. In September 1967, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australian endorsed the idea and asked its Board of Missions "to press, through the Division of Mission of the Australian Council of Churches, for the Federal Government to set up a National Trust Fund for Aborigines."

The Time if Ripe

The time is ripe for such action because the people of Australia have shown, through their overwhelming vote for the Aborigines in the 1967 Referendum, that they wish to make a major effort on behalf of the Aborigines; and because that referendum has placed a substantial initiative in the hand of the Federal Government. The time is ripe because the Parliament of South Australia has shown its determination to right a wrong and set right a moral obligation. The time is ripe because Aboriginal people themselves are asserting their identity and seeking their rights and adequate opportunities, whether at Wave Hill or in the cities. The time is ripe because it is not yet too late, as it may be in the United States, to establish sound relationships between the races, to remove the psychological, social and economic factors causing the demoralization and pauperization of a people, and to bring hope to both black and white.

Without the hope of dignity there can only be the degradation of hopelessness. Without the hope of progress there can only be the apathy of despair. Without the hope of decision-making and the exercise of responsibility there can only be the sand-drift of eternal futility.

The Road to Hope

The road to hope in our situation is through the restoration of land rights, securing ownership of the reserves and of certain areas on the pastoral leases, and through a National Aborigines Trust Fund, for land-ownership rights can create hope and responsibility, while the Fund can provide the means to defeat, despair, ignorance and poverty.

The heritage of yesterday for the Aborigines is anxiety, insecurity, suspicion and animosity toward the white man and his authority. These are the would of the past which are the sores of today. Healing can come only when European Australians act in a major way to show that the future in Australia does not belong exclusively to them, but to both races living together in mutual respect and acceptance each of the other, sharing together in the material and spiritual development of this people in this continent which both have invaded and both have possessed.

But without justice in regard to the injustice of forceful dispossession, there can be neither healing nor hope but only festering wounds and resort to the violence of frustration. Australia has a chance that comes rarely to a nation, to write off the liabilities of the past and create a future of hope.