

Aborigines Advancement League (Vic)

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### Aborigines Take the Lead

The Aborigines Advancement League does not exist to do things on behalf of Aboriginal people, but rather to provide opportunities for them to take more effective control of their own affairs.

That fact was made clear by the Management Committee of the League when, in December of 1968, it examined its aims and priorities in future work. In the report of its examination, the committee says:

“our aim is to provide whatever technical assistance might be required by Aboriginal people in forming their ideas and carrying out their affairs.”

The committee sees two main methods to carry out that aim. One is to transfer more responsibility to the Aborigines' branch of the League so that decision-making, negotiating and spokespersonship will be done more and more by Aboriginal people. The other will be to employ one or more liaison officers to assist Aboriginal people to set up their own community organisations and to let the League know what help they might need to do so.

At the same time, the League will continue to remind the community generally of its responsibility, through government, in such fields as welfare and educational services, according to the wishes of the Aboriginal people.

Some new leadership responsibilities and organising initiatives which Aboriginal people are taking are reported in this newsletter.

### NEW PRESIDENT AND VICE-PRESIDENT

Bob Maza and Danny Atkinson have both accepted new roles in the League for this year.

Bob is now President, following Bruce Silverwood's resignation from this position in order to take up his duties as Director, and Danny fills the vacancy of Vice-President.

Bob, who has been in Melbourne about a year, has both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal ancestry and is now a clerk with the Commonwealth Department of Works. He says “My appointment to presidency shows that this organisation of forever aware of its obligation to the Aborigines and once again it leads the way by its practise of true democracy. We Koories must unite and it is with the help of organisation like the League that we will succeed in asserting ourselves.”

Danny has been living in Melbourne for six months and is descended from the Yoti Yoti tribe of the Murray region. He is married, with three children and works for the Country roads Board. He said his is “delighted with the opportunity to serve in the capacity of vice-president and would like to see more Aborigines taking up leadership positions.”

### KOORIE CLUB OPENS

Since the last Newsletter in which proposals for the establishment of an all-Aboriginal club were reported, action has been fast, furious and productive. The club is now a reality with Bruce McGuiness as manager and financial support for the first six months provided by S.S.A.A.F. (Secondary Schools Aboriginal Affairs Fund). Situated at 41 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, it provides a meeting place for Aborigines living in and visiting Melbourne and is the first centre of this kind in the Metropolitan area.

Many people have worked tirelessly to see an idea become a reality and it is now over to the ALL-ABORIGINAL COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT to develop the club in the way desired by the Koories, Members of this committee are Mar. Tucker, Eric Onus, Steward Murray, Victor Lovett, James Berg and Bob Maza.

Membership of the club is open to all Koories and the fee is \$10.00 a year which may be paid in weekly instalments. Koories are required to form table-eating teams and volunteers are asked to contact Bruce McGuinness at the club.

#### DISEASES AMONGST ABORIGINES IN THE NORTHWEST

Leprosy, Trachoma, dysentery and high infant mortality rate rampant - today - in Australia!

Evidence available shows that 10% of the Aborigines in the Kimberly division of W.A. have, or have had, active leprosy (cases amongst non-Aborigines in the area number less than three yearly except for one year when the total was six). The infection is so widespread and the contacts of the patients so difficult to trace that almost the whole Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal population must be regarded as contacts. Trachoma in this area affects about 80% of the Aborigines, dysentery is so prevalent the doctors have not time to make out reports and infant mortality figures represent about 10% of all Australian infant deaths. The commonest causes of death in the under-five year-old group are preventable pneumonia, gastro-enteritis and neonatal diseases. There are apparently tly many exotic diseases afflicting the Aborigines which specialists have not been able to identify and which obviously require further research.

Take leprosy as an example. One would think that, with such serious allegations begin made about the alarming threat of what is recognised as one of the most dreadful of diseases, Members of the Commonwealth Parliament would want to know what is happening in one of the States of the Commonwealth.

Apparently not. Questions were asked in the house about leprosy in both Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The Minister for Health's answers gave some information about Northern Territory services, but to the questions about W.A. the Minister replied "My Department does not have the particulars....in regard to Western Australia." My Department does not have the figures for Western Australia". "No knowledge is held by me Department of the procedure followed by the Western Australian Government in regard to Aborigines discharged from the Derby Leprosarium."

If the allegations of mishandling of the leprosy problem by the Western Australian Government are to be taken seriously, they require more interest and action by the Commonwealth Department of Health than those answers indicate. It is true, of course, that the Federal Health Minister has direct responsibility in the Northern Territory and that responsibility in Western Australia is with the State Health Minister. But serious allegations are made about the lapse of responsibility by the State authority. We believe that the matter should be explored more fully than is indicated in the following question and answer in the House of Representatives:"

"Mr. Collard asked the Minister for Health, upon notice:

1. Is he able to say whether the incidence of leprosy among Aborigines in the Kimberley Division of Western Australia is higher than anywhere else in the world?
2. If the incidence is not higher, in what countries, and in what parts of those countries, is the incidence of leprosy higher than in the Kimberly Division, and what is the percentage in each case?

Dr. Forbes - My Department does not have the information requested by the honourable member."

The League is now seeking answers to the following questions:

1. Is Leprosy a Commonwealth or State responsibility?
2. If control is a Commonwealth matter, what is the Federal Department doing to supervise and co-ordinate State programmes. If control is not a Commonwealth matter, why not, considering the seriousness of the disease and the free movement of people across State borders?
3. Why are complete records of leprosy in Western Australia not available?
4. Why is the Federal Department of Health so unconcerned over the matter?

#### OFFER OF COACHING FOR METROPOLITAN CHILDREN

ABSCHOL has offered its services to Aboriginal children living in the metropolitan area, including residents of the Northcote hostels. Its members are willing to hold tuition classes in any subject chosen and anyone interested is asked to contact Dan Atkinson at 57 Cunningham Street, Northcote, 'phone 489 1784.

#### S.O.S. ACCOMMODATION NEEDED

Young Aboriginal girls and boys coming to Melbourne from country areas urgently need somewhere to live. Often in the process of finding a job or employed at minimum wage rates, the need is for more than just a place to sleep and eat. Anyone able to provide accommodation, in a sympathetic and encouraging atmosphere is urged to contact the league office as soon as possible.

The League's hostels at Northcote can accommodate 16 young people which is but a small fraction of the number seeking somewhere to live.

#### SONGS ABOUT PRESENT-DAY ABORIGINES

Phyl Vinnecome, composer and singer of contemporary folk songs, can be heard on a record especially made for the League by W & G. It is one attempt to understand the position in which Aborigines find themselves and a limited number of records are still available from the League at \$1.65 ea. Songs include "Dark Eyed Daughter", "No More Boomerang" by Kath Walker, "Whose Hand" and "Will You Fight Will You Dare".

#### ABORIGINAL WOMENS' AUXILIARY PARTY

Over 250 children attended the Christmas party organised by the League's Aboriginal Womens' Auxiliary, and with their parents made one of the largest crowds yet catered for. Mrs Nicholls says the Recreation hall is invaluable for occasion like this and it is hoped to make more use of it in the future. The party provided one of the few opportunities for Aboriginal people living in Melbourne to get together.

#### KOORIE CLUB

Aboriginal people are free to call in for a cup of coffee and talk at the Koorie Clu, 41 Gertrude St., Fitzroy, says club manager, Bruce McGuinness. Anyone interested in the following activities is also welcome to call and, in request, the club can be opened in the day time. Activities planned include basket ball, athletics, sewing, hairdressing and make up classes for the women and girls with general trade, mechanics, carpentry and business management for the men. Sunday night will be "film night" and families are welcome.

#### CHRISTMAS CARD SALES

Gwen McNay, secretary of the Christmas Card Committee, says that over 64,000 cards were sold last year. Accounts are yet to be finalised.

## EDITORIAL

### ABORIGINAL ELECTIONS

At last! Victorian Aborigines can really elect their representatives to the Advisory Council. They have a chance to appoint six people to speak on their behalf on the body that made recommendations to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. They have the right to take part in their own affairs.

Why didn't they rush to enrol as voters? Only a fraction of the eligible adults filled in their forms. Now, the elections have been postponed pending further efforts to increase interest and support, and the Ministry has had to devote its energies to further educative programmes so that a meaningful election will be recorded.

Let's stop and think about it. Elections, Aborigines, success, apathy, irresponsibility - these and similar terms and criteria are tossed around in such a situation.

If you haven't been taught about elections, and have no reason to believe that your vote is important, it must be hard to get excited about one. Even an election that is especially for you might seem an impersonal thing judging by past experience. The advertisements seeking enrolment might have bewildered some. They required people to enrol for their "region" without defining these regions. The difference between this enrolment and that for State and Federal elections is really hard to understand and, as yet, the Advisory Council itself has no penetrating impact if you live in the country.

Maybe suspicion could be another attitude contributing to the so-called apathy; suspicion based on broken hopes falsely raised in former years, suspicion that will only be overcome when achievements are seen and felt by Aboriginal individuals and communities, suspicion that could change to enthusiasm but not overnight. Past experience of Aborigines would certainly contribute to a general feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, and prevent an easy acceptance of assurances that a new trend is in force.

Each of us is reluctant to expose himself to a situation where it is pretty certain he'll be at a disadvantage, either socially or educationally. Aborigines on the Council could well be alongside persons of higher social and educational levels.

Do we understand what a people deprived of social responsibility and control of their own affairs think of pleas to become "responsible"? In fact, is the so-called "apathy": really passive resistance to other people's ideas and demands?

Those are some of the possible reasons for the low number of enrolments. To blame Aborigines for "apathy" does them a dis-service. Reluctance based on years of disappointment will not change to enthusiastic support without a careful process of consultation and education.

ERIC ONUS is one of the Aborigines elected by the Tribal Council to tour the country areas and help explain these elections to the people. He has these comments to make:

"I found at Pernom which is in the Western District, a lack of leadership, not through the fault of our people but caused by lack of contact with either the Tribal Council, the Ministry or the League. However, from my short stay I feel that many things can be done at Pernom, farming, etc.

The meeting of the Aboriginal people regarding the elections was held in the hall at Wangoon outside the Pernom and was very successful. The people responded to the need to enrol and supported the idea of the elections after hearing from Mr. M. R.

Worthy, Director of Aboriginal Affairs, Mrs. G. Briggs and myself on why they should vote. The meeting was followed by a dance and social and I would like, on behalf of the Tribal Council, to thank Mr. Worthy for having me accompany him on these tours”.

Eric has seen at first hand the difference between a group that has a realistic contact with an unfamiliar scheme, and one that is just told to join in.

Other similar visits are in progress, and the measure of success will not only be in the numbers who eventually vote. Lest measurable points will be of equal importance, such as the creation of confidence, the willingness for inclusion in future programmes, steps forward in self-esteem, and the effects of membership in the Council.

It is of no use to rush “responsibility” for Aborigines, or anyone else, if they are not allowed to use it. They must be listened to on the Council. The Ministry must endeavour to weave Council ideas into its policies. If this happens the next elections could present a very different picture.

#### REPORT FROM THE MINISTRY OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

As I write, it is just a year ago today since I was appointed to the position of Director of Aboriginal Affairs, and I thought it might be appropriate to briefly review this period.

I am bound to say that the greatest pleasure that I personally have obtained in this time with regard to the position has been the friendship of a number of Aboriginal people. While we have not always agreed on some point, I believe that our ability to disagree and remain friendly is a real demonstration of what we are all aiming at.

Another forward move has been the employment of a number of Aboriginal people in the Ministry, and the many occasions on which Aboriginal people have been consulted by myself and officers of the Ministry before decision have been taken on matters affecting Aboriginal people.

While there is reason for satisfaction with what has been done, I am hopeful that during the next year we will see even greater advancement, and all I ask is that Aboriginal people take every opportunity to speak for themselves, knowing full well that they will not be criticised for doing so.

In addition, a further request for patience is made.

A.A.L. Newletter No. 20 May, 1969.

#### EDITORIAL

#### F.C.A.A.T.S.I ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The 12th Annual Conference of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders has been held.

From a small meeting in a room to a large assembly in an auditorium, the annual conference has grown yearly in size and in scope of work.

It would not be correct to say that it has grown in significance: who would under-rate the significance of those first conferences which brought together for the first time the key activists in Aboriginal advancement?

But it is certainly true to say that it has grown in value as a means of building solidarity within the movement, as a form for expressing a wide range of ideas, and as a launching pad for united action.

This 12th conference brought together a larger number of Aborigines than ever before. The platform - both chairman and speakers - was occupied by a large proportion of Aborigines than ever before. Speakers put their cases bluntly, with a

commendable absence of the cautious beating about the bush that might have been expected when people want to criticise themselves, each other or outside bodies.

There were still sessions which were heavily dominated by non-Aborigines, notably the mechanics of deciding where and when the 13th annual conference will be held. May of the functional committees are still headed by non-Aborigines, and no Aboriginal or Islander nominated for the position of General Secretary of the Council.

Not that we agree that the Federal Council or its annual conference should be Aborigines only; the movement needs the joint efforts of people of goodwill, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Nevertheless, the policy of promoting Aboriginal leadership and spokespersonship is sound and ought to be applied in every possible way.

We believe that the initiative taken by the League in acceding Aboriginal representatives to the conference and encouraging non-Aboriginal members to attend as observers is one step in that direction. The next steps are clear: strengthen the Victorian branch of F.C.A.A.T.S.I., and prepare the way for Victoria to make a greater contribution to the whole movement in general and to the 1970 conference in particular.