

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 rust 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.