

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, 5 October 1939, National Archives of Australia, N382/1/1

At a time like the present, major matters, as the war, may so overshadow what is in the white man's mind is a very minor matter that I am therefore making an appeal, not merely as an aboriginal but as a war pensioner of the last war who gave a son for the Empire, one of many colored men whose blood mingled with that of their white comrades as they died in the cause of Liberty.

Australia is linked with the Empire in a fight for the rights of minorities and, if there should be an expeditionary force sent overseas, I have no doubt that our native boys will leap to the cause of the oppressed as they did in their hundreds at the last war. Yet we are a minority with just as real oppression, in the way of *being refused the status of the child of an alien, of no matter what nationality and even being denied the legal rights of the half-caste of the camp, who does not know his rights and is incapable of enjoying them*. In proof of this we have just been refused a pension for one of cultured women whose only crime is that she is a quadroon black. You may know of the case as it has been brought before your notice from other sources. Miss Ada Austin, a gentle, cultured, christian woman of 62, who must return to the ashes of the aboriginal camp to get sustenance as a native but who will not do this, preferring rather to starve. We have members of our race who are called upon to pay income tax and other privileges(?) of the white man but who are refused entry to a polling booth and must revert to the status of the stone age to get an allowance to keep body and soul together while Chinese, Japanese or Afghans can get the pension.

We are not unreasonable and do not ask that community services be given to all natives for we know that many are not able to understand these matters and as little able to benefit from them. In respect of that number who are civilised on the average standard of their equivalent status in society, and often much more highly, we protest that is not consonant with British justice that we should continue to be treated as Stone Age folk. Taxation without representation has long since gone by the board but still applies in respect of aboriginals. Discrimination against cultured aboriginals is revolting Public Opinion and we are sure that an expression of opinion in the Houses of Parliament would show that most men of all parties would say, "give the native justice".

To all our correspondence in the past there has been either merely an acknowledgement or regrets that our requests could not be met but there has always been inordinate delay in even giving a reply of any nature. I am going to request you, in the name of our people of Australia, to do what we feel sure you are willing to do and which would pass Parliament very quickly. Immediately introduce legislation creating all community services, as Old Age and Invalid pensions, or any other pension not now available to the natives, Maternity bonus, franchise, etc. to approved natives. If this were passed the machinery could be brought into operation to define the approved status. Give us the right and let us then qualify for the benefits until there are no people of aboriginal blood who are not qualified by culture and education for full citizenship. Such an act will bring thousands of colored people into enthusiastic willingness to sacrifice for the common good, for there is not any element of the population more loyal to the person of the King, the Throne and the Empire

than that despised race which were good enough in their thousands to fight in the cause of liberty and to die in hundreds for that cause.

We ask that you personally deal with this matter for we feel fortified in our hopes when you express a sentiment that it would be disastrous if, in the fight for liberty, we lost what we were fighting for though we won the war. It will be worse than that if, after the Empire has fought for the liberty of European minorities, Australia should continue to refuse freedom and liberty to her sadly treated minority.

We look for a word from you that our aspirations will be so readily met as were the aspirations of the suffragettes in Britain when the last war broke out.

On behalf of the Native race.