

Australian Abo Call, 1 April 1938, p. 2, Our Historic Day of Mourning & Protest

Aborigines Conference

Held at Australian Hall, Sydney, 26th January, 1938

Report of Proceedings

About 100 persons of Aboriginal blood attended the conference.

Proceedings were delayed at the start owing to the Official Sesqui-Centenary Procession.

TELEGRAMS

Telegrams were received from West Australia, Queensland, North Australia, and also a very large number of letters from Aborigines all over Australia, expressing support of the Conference.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

1.30 p.m.

Mr J. T. Patten, President, said: On this day the white people are rejoicing, but we, as Aborigines, have no reason to rejoice on Australia's 150th birthday. Our purpose in meeting today is to bring home to the white people of Australia the frightful conditions in which the native Aborigines of this continent live. This land belonged to our forefathers 150 years ago, but today we are pushed further and further into the background. The Aborigines Progressive Association has been formed to put before the white people the fact that Aborigines throughout Australia are literally being starved to death. We refuse to be pushed into the background. We have decided to make ourselves heard. White men pretend that the Australian Aboriginal is a low type, who cannot be bettered. Our reply to that is, "Give us the chance!" We do not wish to be left behind in Australia's march to progress. We ask for full citizen rights, including old-age pensions, maternity bonus, relief work when unemployed, and the right to a full Australian education for our children. We do not wish to be herded like cattle, and treated as a special class. As regards the Aborigines Protection Board of New South Wales, white people in the cities do not realise the terrible conditions of slavery under which our people live in the outback districts. I have unanswerable evidence that women of our race are forced to work in return for rations, without other payment. Is this not slavery? Do white Australians realise that there is actual slavery in this fair progressive Commonwealth? Yet such is the case. We are looking in vain to white people to help us by charity. We must do something ourselves to draw public attention to our plight. That is why this Conference is held, to discuss ways and means of arousing the conscience of White Australians, who have us in their power, but have hitherto refused to help us. Our children on the Government Stations are badly fed and poorly educated. The result is that, when they go out into life, they feel inferior to white people. This is not a matter of race, it is a matter of education and opportunity. That is why we ask for a better education and better opportunity for our people. We say that it is a disgrace to Australia's name that our people should be handicapped by undernourishment and poor education, and then blamed for being backward. We do not trust the present Aborigines Protection Board,

and that is why we ask for its abolition. (Applause). Incompetent teachers are provided on the Aboriginal Stations. That is the greatest handicap put on us. We have had 150 years of the white men look after us, and the result is, our people are being exterminated. The reason why this conference is called today is so that the Aborigines themselves may discuss their problems and try to bring before the notice of the public and of parliament what our grievance is, and how it may be remedied. We ask for ordinary citizen rights, and full equality with other Australians. (Moved resolution.)

2.0 p.m.

Mr W. Ferguson, (Dubbo): In seconding the resolution moved by the President, I want to say that all men and women of Aboriginal blood are concerned in our discussions today. Though some are dark and some are fair, we are all classed as Aborigines under present legislation. The Aborigines Protection Act applies to any persons having "apparently an admixture of Aboriginal blood." We have been waiting and waiting all our lives for the white people of Australia to better our conditions, but we have waited in vain. We have been living in a fool's paradise. I have travelled outback and I have seen myself the dreadful sufferings of our people on the Aborigines Reserves. The most terrible thing is that the dreaded disease of T.B. has made its appearance among our people, and is wiping them out, right here in New South Wales. Surely the time has come at last for us to do some thing for ourselves, and make ourselves heard. This is why the Aborigines Progressive Association has been formed. I held a meeting in Dubbo originally, and the way the people responded made me feel that much could be done. I held meetings in other western towns, and finally came to Sydney, where the press helped to draw national attention to our grievance. We now have a Committee who are bringing before the public injustices which our people have suffered. Our revelations have astounded many white people, who did not realise that such conditions as we describe could possibly exist in a free country. Now let me explain that our object is to abolish the Aborigines Protection Board. (Applause.) We are going to abolish that Board, no matter how long it may take. Everything points to the fact that, within a short while, many people will support us among the white citizens of Australia. Our first objective is to organise the whole of the Aborigines of New South Wales into our Association. For days at the Parliamentary Select Committee we have had to listen to slanders against our people, especially against our women. Can anyone wonder why we revolt against persons who suppress our people and then accuse us of being "backward"? If our young boys and girls were given proper education, they would be able to take their place with other Australians in the community. Unless we get proper education and opportunity, our people in a very few years will be extinct. Mr Cooper of Melbourne will tell you that he has had no reply to a petition addressed to the King. I say definitely that we do not want an Aboriginal Member of the Parliament. We want ordinary citizen rights, not any special rights such as that. It is because we ourselves have begun to organise that public opinion at last is being awakened. We ask for the right to own land that our fathers and mothers owned from time immemorial. I think the Government could at least make land grants to Aborigines. Why give preference to immigrants when our people have no land, and no right to own land? We ask that the Government should give us some encouragement to make progress. It is progress we want, not to be pushed back further and further under the present Aborigines Laws. I say that most of our people in New South Wales have a good practical knowledge of farming, and could make a living as farmers. If not, then the Government should teach our people

the principles of Agriculture, and help them to settle on the land, just as they teach and help immigrants from overseas. We are backward only because we have had no real opportunity to make progress. We have been denied the opportunity. In many parts of Australia the white people on the land are helped by Aborigines to such an extent that they could not carry on grazing occupation without Aboriginal aid. The Aboriginal is producing wealth, but not for himself. Yet he is not even allowed to have money with which to buy clothes, and food. If the Aboriginal can help the white man to make money outback, why not give him a chance to make a living for himself? We do not need Government protection. We have had too much protection. Now we ask, not for protection, but for education. We should have trained teachers and nurses of Aboriginal race to go out and help those who are living in darkness. If white people can be trained for this purpose, why not train our own people? The Aboriginal Protection Board system of apprenticing girls for domestic labour is nothing but slavery. All Aboriginal Legislation today is intended to drive our people into the Aboriginal Reserves, where there is no future for them, nothing but disheartenment. From many hundreds of letters I have received from Aborigines all over Australia, I am satisfied that the Aborigines are with us in this movement for progress.

2.35 p.m.

Mr Doug Nicholls (Victorian Aborigines League): On behalf of Victorian Aborigines I want to say that we support this resolution in every way. The public does not realise what our people have suffered for 150 years. Aboriginal girls have been sent to Government Reserves and have not been given any opportunity to improve themselves. Their treatment has been disgusting. The white people have done nothing for us whatever. Put on reserves, with no proper education, how can Aborigines take their place as equals with whites? Now is our chance to have things altered. We must fight our very hardest in this cause. After 150 years our people are still influenced and bossed by white people. I know that we could proudly hold our own with others if given the chance. Do not let us forget, also, those of our own people who are still in a primitive state. It is for them that we should try to do something. We should all work in cooperation for the progress of Aborigines throughout the Commonwealth.

2.55 p.m.

Mr W. Cooper (Victorian Aborigines League): After struggling for so many years, we are going to continue struggling. "Protect" should mean "protect from injury", but the Aborigines Protection Boards do not live up to this idea. They do not act in accordance with British Justice. I have written to Mr. Lyons, who still owes me a letter. We must continue our struggle until we win our objectives.

3.5 p.m.

Letters and Telegrams were read by the President and Secretary.

3.15 p.m.

The President (Mr. Patten): I will read the resolution as on the notice paper convening the Conference:

“We, representing the Aborigines of Australia, assembled in conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th Anniversary of the White man’s seizure of our country, hereby make protest against the callous treatment of our people by the whitemen during the past 150 years, and we appeal to the Australian nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, and we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizen status and equality within the community.”

I want to explain that, in advocating abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board, we understand that there must be some stepping stone. The people cannot be thrown out of the reserves and expected to live like white men, when they have not had a white standard of education. We recognise also, as regards the primitive people who are still uncivilised, that there must be some stepping stone from the jungle. Education is the key to our problem. We want education and equal opportunity for Aborigines. Our movement is practical. We do not want to be held up to ridicule, by asking something impossible. We want a policy of progress and education, in addition to abolition of the Board. We want a stepping stone to modern civilisation.

Mr. Ferguson:

Full citizen rights means the equality of our people with the white man. I think every one here has been in contact with civilisation since birth. You will find very few Aborigines in New South Wales who do not know how to count money and look after themselves. If our people had education and equal citizen rights the colleges would be full of our own people in eight or nine years time from now. I ask you to support the resolution, and not to worry too much about the stepping stone. That will take care of itself if we have full citizen rights. If the Government can build houses for white people, why not build them for our people? If we have full citizen rights to own property and to own houses in which we live, we could not be turned out as at present.

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4.20 p.m.

THE RESOLUTION WAS PUT TO THE VOTE AND CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

4.30 p.m.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS RESULTED AS FOLLOWS:

President: J. T. Patten.

Secretary: Miss Grovenor.

Organising Secretary: Mr. W. Ferguson.

Treasurer: Mr. J. Kinchela.

CONFERENCE CONCLUDED at 5 p.m.