

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, 31 March 1938, National Archives of Australia, A659, 1940/1/858

I am sending you the enclosed which I have compiled to give the aboriginal mind on the problem of the Native race. I will be glad if you will consider this because I feel very disappointed from time to time with the public statements by White men, made with all good intention, no doubt, but which, written from the point of view of the white man, does not reflect the opinions of natives ...

From an Educated Black

Believing that there is a spark of human kindness in nearly every heart and knowing that the vast majority of men are opposed to oppression, I think that the majority of Australians, and British people in general, need only KNOW what my people have suffered and are suffering, to bring the relief long sought and now much overdue. Hence this letter.

My earnest ambition always has been to publish abroad the truth about my people, the Australian Aborigines, in order that the white people might know something of the facts concerning the treatment of my race.

I have addressed numerous letters to the editors of the various newspapers and find that my pleas for better conditions are, in nine cases out of ten, "pigeon-holed".

In spite of this fact we live in the hope that some day the newspapers will begin to publish the truth concerning Aboriginal affairs so that the public, being informed, will see that the great evils from which we are suffering are remedied.

Failure to publish letters which seek to lay before the public the truth concerning aboriginal conditions is as unfair to the public as it is to the aborigines. Additionally it is very inconvenient to the Aborigines who are forced to seek other channels to get information through to sympathetic white friends. The whites are starved for want of the facts on the subject. The blacks suffer through this starvation. Thus the newspapers contribute to the plight of both parties.

We Aborigines are a "protected" people. I understand that the correct meaning of the word "Protector" is:— "One who protects from injury—one who protects from oppression; a guardian; a regent; one who rules for a sovereign".

It would please us greatly to have a protector over our people who would live up to that standard but how do our protectorates work? Sometimes there is a measure of kindness shown to us, more often there is not. Take for instance the policeman who was appointed as a protector of the Aborigines in Central Australia. He went out one day to arrest a native who was reputed to have killed a white man.

He stated in his evidence that he shot 17 natives, and later shot another 14, and a so called "Justice of the Peace" officially without a trial justified the constable for shooting these 31 people. Now, I ask you, do you think that this Justice of Peace could justify the Constable before God?

Do you think that he could justify his own judgement before the King? No! The whole thing is contrary to British Justice and cannot be justified even before a much lower tribunal, the white people, (if they knew the facts) and of these, you are one!

History records that in the year 1771 white men first landed on the shores of what is now called Botany Bay. They claimed that they had “found” a “new” country—Australia. This country was not new, it was already in possession of, and inhabited by, millions of blacks, who, while unarmed, excepting spears and boomerangs, nevertheless owned the country as their God given heritage.

From the standpoint of an educated black who can read the Bible upon which British constitution and custom is founded, I marvel at the fact that while the text book of present civilization, the Bible, states that God gave the earth to man, the “Christian” interferes with God’s arrangement and stops not even at murder to take that which does not belong to them but belongs to others by right of prior possession and by right of gift from God.

In our primitive state we Aborigines were gentlemen. Many of our present vices and defects have been imported. In our primitive state blacks were never known to take their own lives. No full blooded aboriginal ever went insane. We never had any sexual pervers in our midst, and we can proudly say that our moral standard was second to none and can take pride of place with the white people of our day.

While it is true that many of the whites who were sent here after the colony had been opened up were unjustly convicted and over-severely punished, it is also true that there were many criminals of the worst type let loose in our land and without doubt it was very unfortunate for us Aborigines to come into contact with the worst side of civilisation. This contamination has been detrimental to us.

Every shape and form of murder, yes, mass murder, was used against us and laws were passed and still exist, which no human creature can endure. Our food stuffs have been destroyed, poison and guns have done their work, and now white men’s homes have been built on our hunting and camping grounds. Our lives have been wrecked and our happiness ended. Oh! ye whites!

The animals at the Zoo are looked after. They have servants to care for them. Food is supplied for them. Their homes are sure. Not so the blacks. We still feel unsafe in the hands of those who are controlling and “protecting” us. We still meet people who, with their sense of British superiority, look down upon us with disdain as unworthy of consideration—as “Abos”, a race of another color—whereas the two races should be on the best of terms and give to each other full credit for the good qualities of which they are possessed.

Although usually treated with marked indifference, when we are not being ill-treated, there are times when we are considered useful. For instance, at least a thousand Aborigines were among the first to enlist in the defence of the British Empires in the 1914-18 war and for which Empire they gave their lives.

It was a thankless task for them, no thanks being given for the valuable services rendered. We get no encouragement, and the result of this neglect appears to be that we are looked upon as a useless race and greatly misrepresented thereby. This condition is to my mind due to State control, and so long as it exists the Aborigines will never be a valuable asset to their country.

I fear that these conditions will remain as they are until the Christian organisations, and other sympathetic friends, come forward with a definite determination to help to uplift these much down-trodden and broken people. We have never had the opportunity to prove that we can make good citizens and be useful to the country under white men's rule. We were good "citizens" when we owned the country.

All of us had plenty of food; no one starved while others had more than they could use. We had no depressions. Cancer, syphilis, and consumption were all unknown to us. They belong to the white civilisation. Our wives were OUR wives, and our morals without reproach. We WERE good citizens. We can adapt ourselves to the present arrangement and make good citizens NOW if we only get the chance.

If we are a burden on the country it is not our fault, but it is due to the fact that the various governments have not adopted the various practical suggestions which have been offered from time to time by men who know, including myself. Any lack of good citizenship on our part is due to the ill-considered and impracticable methods adopted when dealing with us.

It appears to me that because the governments have, to date, failed to view the life of the aborigines as the Aborigines see it themselves, we still find them crying for "protection", although what is really needed is "understanding" [...] Our millions have vanished [...] there are seventy thousand of us left [...] we are a dying race [...] Will you let us die?

Those of our people who are educated are becoming greatly concerned about the disabilities of the others and are putting up a stiff fight to try and get our people their rights. We still continue to try to persuade the Governments to do the right thing and appeal to all Christian people to view the matter with compassion and do their utmost, as opportunity arises, to try and help the Aborigines throughout the continent to get their rights, to get TRUE PROTECTION, and thus enable the race to continue and not become extinct.

Up to the present, petitions, deputations, requests, and other means and movements on our behalf have failed, so far as the Commonwealth Government is concerned.

Scientists, anthropologists and other distinguished gentlemen have also failed to bring relief, and we don't like being kept merely as material for scientific investigation, research, etc. etc. That is all valueless so far as the blackfellows' present needs and comforts are concerned.

Sending anthropologists into isolated parts of the continent amongst wild people with the object of doing the blacks good may have its scientific value, but after all, there are very few scientists in our midst to appreciate the scientists' point of view, whereas from our point of view it is a failure. It does not help the black fellow one little bit.

We suggest that the proper method of dealing with the primitive people would be to send educated and cultured Aborigines to their own uncivilized people. These men, of the same blood, would understand their people and would be able to suggest to the government means whereby the hardships and sufferings of these people could be alleviated or removed.

Up to the present we have not been given an opportunity to help our less fortunate brethren in their hard struggle, because we have been left homeless and penniless.

Many of us have not been given the right to vote. We have no right to vote. We are not even counted. We are not recognised as British subjects and have therefore no rights, and are unable to defend ourselves.

The Maoris of New Zealand have had parliamentary representation since 1867 and can place their grievances before the authorities through their representatives. Parliamentary representation for us has been refused. The inane reason advanced for the refusal being "it is unconstitutional".

In the early days the land was forcibly taken from the Maoris in some instances. In other instances it was "traded". A few axeheads for instance, were traded for thousands of acres of the best land in the Bay of Plenty district. Today, through legislation and negotiation, the descendants of those from whom the land was first taken or obtained have been and are being financially compensated for their loss, and rightly so. How much compensation have we had? How much of our land has been paid for? Not one iota! Again we state that we are the original owners of the country. In spite of force, prestige, or anything else you like, morally the land is ours. We have been ejected and despoiled of our God-given right and our inheritance has been forcibly taken from us.

As for ourselves we are a fast diminishing and dying race.

The time is long overdue when the Aborigines should be considered as much and as fully under the protection of the law as any other citizen of the Empire, and equally entitled to the privileges of British citizenship.

This more particularly in view of the fact that history records that in the commission originally given to those who came from overseas the strict injunction was given that the Aborigines and their descendants had to be adequately cared for.

This benevolent intention of his most gracious Majesty towards his primitive people was not carried out. We, therefore, now plead for moderation and forbearance to be exercised by all people in their dealings with the native people, and hope that the Government will seize every opportunity to carry out His Majesty's original intention to facilitate our approach toward civilization.

When we learn of these instructions given, and know the history of the manner in which we have been treated these last 150 years, our confidence in the professed Christian nation—standing for good government justice, and freedom—is sadly shaken. Nevertheless, we pledge ourselves to be loyal citizens of the Commonwealth

of Australia, and believe that, as a people, we should be dealt with by the Commonwealth Government and NOT by the States. The States cannot return us a reasonable compensation without Commonwealth aid, so why not deal with us direct? Surely the Commonwealth, which controls all that originally belonged to us, could make what would be a comparatively meagre allowance for us, by way of recompense.

The taking of our rightful belongings has not yet ceased. A large percentage of hard-earned Aboriginal wages is even now handed over to the government and placed in the bank for the Aboriginals, in the "Aboriginal Trust Account".

Those wages amount to somewhere around a quarter of a million sterling and we have no knowledge regarding how we shall receive the benefits of this money. It is a mystery to us, who own[s] it. We think that the Aborigines should be transferred to the National authorities for Federal Control. We are glad that the Lyon's government has done something and that Mr Patterson, the Minister for the Interior, has shown some interest in our people.

Until now, in Federal Quarters, and still in other State Political circles, interest in the Aboriginal has been very nominal with all Administrations, or, at least, interest was merely of a scientific nature.

The only knowledge the native had of the Administration was the Iron hand of the Law he did not understand. The recognition of the aborigine as a human being is, so far as it yet applies, but of recent date. Interest in the aboriginal generally is daily more evident and conditions for the dark race seem to be more hopeful than ever before.

The change is most noticeable but nowhere so much as in the Federal Governmental sphere. For the first time in history the will to do a fair thing is evident and we trust that this good-will will work out for our emancipation.

Mr Lyons is kindly disposed and assured me that his cabinet share the same interest, but the Minister for the Interior, Mr Patterson who is responsible for Native Affairs, manifests an anxiety to do the utmost for us.

Communications with him have not been merely courteous (this is more and more the nature of all communications from each administration) but they have been kindly and considerate, resulting partly, from our representations, and he has asked his officers to investigate the whole position.

Already announcement of a programme has been made, and, though nothing material has yet been done, we trust that the wards of the Federal Government will shortly be on the way to full uplift.

This must inspire State Administrations and it appears that we have reason to feel that the Day of Hope is already dawning. When the uplift is materially advanced our promise of being a loyal, capable people, for which the outback is no problem, will be shown to be no vain promise and in the day the open back door to invasion will begin to close. The dark folk have not failed to tell the Prime Minister and Mr Patterson

how deeply grateful they are for the good-will they are showing. But let us now get back to present realities.

The State has no useful work for us to do, and no educational move has been made to incorporate our people in national industry. It is unfair to treat us as a people of low mentality with treacherous tendencies who cannot be taught anything. We don't want to be kept living in captivity on Aboriginal settlements under the management of a retired policeman. In the sight of God we are as valuable as other men, and we feel sure that we could be taught, and we merely ask for an opportunity to prove that we can.

The treatment meted out to us has been so bad that the present generation of blacks lives in a state of fear and horror. The mass murders of the past, the prohibitions and restrictions of the present, and the dismal prospect of the future do not tend to bring out the best in us.

We suggest that we be placed under FEDERAL care, that we be dealt with via Christian Bodies, and educated blacks and half-castes, who know the view point of the blacks be used as contact men, and that by treating those now living, kindly the fear will be removed from the rising, and the next generation and that the generations following will prove that the time and money spent on their education was worth while.

Who better could deal with the great problems of the Northern Territory than an educated race of aborigines. The Aborigines have brains. These brains need cultivating.

It can be done. Will you do it? The aborigines have human affections which can respond to human treatment. Will they get it? Finally, do you intend to become as culpable as our original despoilers? Are you like the prominent Parliamentarian who, as late as 1935 said "The nigger has got to go, the sooner the better".

Will you, by your apathy tacitly admit that you don't care, and thus assume the guilt of your fathers? Are you prepared to see a race of people, without whom the centre and north of Australia can never be brought under human control, die and become extinct while you stand by and do nothing.

OR—are you prepared to admit that, since the Creator said in his Word that all men are of "one blood", we are humans with feelings like yourselves in the eyes of Almighty God, that we have joys and our sorrows, our likes and our dislikes, that we can feel pain, degradation, and humiliation just as you do? If you admit that, will you like true men do your bit to see a great injustice at least mollified by agitating for us to get a fair deal before it is too late?

I feel that the time has arrived for me to express the appreciation of my race for the increasing kind regard being shown by so many of the white race, and I take pleasure in doing so. Many of the present generation of white people are so sympathetic that I feel sure that the justice we are fighting for, and rightly desire, is coming. This is of particular value because it must be recognised that all the goodwill of the best of our

Parliamentary leaders cannot avail as it should unless there is behind them the goodwill of the people.