

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to the Minister for the Interior, John McEwen, Canberra, 17 December 1938, National Archives of Australia, A659, 1940/1/858

There have been copious extracts in the press which indicate that the long promised policy for aborigines has been issued. If this be so will you kindly let me have a complete copy so that I may fully examine it.

If these extracts are correct it would seem that there are, from our point of view, some blemishes which I trust you will be able to satisfy our aspirations on. One of these is discrimination between those of more than half aboriginal blood from those of half white or whiter color. This is our chief bone of contention over the years and is indicative of the white outlook on a problem in respect of which the dark people have quite a different opinion. I would like you to meet us in this respect, "Do not suppose that the colored folk have, generally, aspirations to be white or possess any regret as being colored". Do not therefore suppose that we feel any different toward any member of our race who is full blood as against one with some white blood. It may shock you to know that, very generally, even octaroons look with more sympathy on the aboriginal side of their ancestry than on the white side. There are exceptions, of course, but these prove the rule. The white man cannot "think black" but I submit that our chieftain, which is your particular position, and the Government, which is our guardian, should set themselves to learn to "think black". We speak thus to you only because we know in our hearts that you personally, and the Government of which you are a member, do want to do the right thing by us. We respect you, personally, and the Government, and repeat what we have told you before, and made no secret of publicly, that no Government previously has shown the same interest as the present Lyons Government in the natives. It is possible for us to ask of you what we want instead of being in the position of being suppliants for mercy from unsympathetic over lords.

What we ask is that fullbloods and near blacks be accorded the same opportunity to rise as half castes and near whites. Let the determination be, not color, but capacity. There are octaroons and quadroons unable to exercise the privileges of civilisation but there are full bloods who are fully able. Though you do not mean it, the discrimination shown by whites for those of partly white parentage is offensive and hurtful to colored people. Remove all barriers from the race to full progress and make our condition at least comparable to the person of alien blood who is born in the land. At present it is a stigma to be full blood or near black and yet the white man holds the land of our fathers without penny of compensation. This should not be and I know it will not be ultimately but I should like to feel that the Magna Carta you are granting us does not retain the blemish I have referred to. You can, in one sweep, put us all on the same footing as the whites and super add the temporary conditions that will give the necessary help to the uncultured, near black or near white. Won't you do this? It will not cost a penny but if it did surely the debt of the white man to the dark one is not to be repudiated on the score of cost.

Mr M'Ewan, the white man has not yet shown any capacity for "thinking black". This is the whole position in a nutshell. Will you learn to do it?

We deeply appreciate your service to our race and cordially wish you, as you wish ourselves, the best of good wishes for the New Year.