

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to the Minister for the Interior, John McEwen, 21 January 1939, National Archives of Australia, A659, 1940/1/858

We are delighted to read in the papers the forecast of the new policy. We trust you and we trust Mr Lyons. We believe that the present administration is genuinely interested in we natives and anxious to do the right thing by them. We believe that this administration will go down to history as the liberators of the black race.

Notwithstanding this, I would like you to take the time to read some observations sent under separate cover. You have heard many white people on the aboriginal question but not so much of aboriginal thought. I am aboriginal, I have risen from the camp. I could live the life of an aboriginal again but I have chosen the life of white civilization. I know the black man's mind better than I know the white man's. You may be glad to have the Aboriginal point of view.

These observations were entitled 'From an Educated Aboriginal', and Shadrach James probably had a major hand in drafting it. Much of it repeats 'From an Educated Black', but the first several pages as well as the conclusion differ. These sections read as follows.

From an Educated Aboriginal

Owing to the unsatisfactory conditions under which the Aboriginal exists, I feel it is my unbounded duty to speak of the indisputable wrong inflicted on a defenceless primitive people, the most pitiful on earth. One hundred and fifty years have passed since the native first contacted the worse side of civilisation, scientific outlaws, apparently blind drunk with blood lust, and unfortunately for the natives, possessors of a superior culture, sent from overseas to people Australia.

Let loose in our beautiful continent, and without any consideration, these invaders began ruthlessly murdering the original owners of the country, without any parent reason, and causing a wreckage to a multitude of helpless people. It has been freely admitted by eminent professors, that these men are affected with "morbidness", a sickly disease, which denotes a deplorable state of body and mind, and their actions have been inconsistent with the benevolent intention of the Royal Person. These conditions are brought about by men who devote their energies to the study of Militarism, rising to the ranks of professional warrior, to finally become a menace to respectable living people. Such men without natural affection, grossly violating and willfully causing unnecessary and also untimely persecution to human creatures. Example such as these are but few of those so cruelly inflicted on the Aboriginal and should confess with guilt and shame the terrible atrocities enacted against such primitive people as the Australian Native.

We have from time to time, but with little success, reminded the government of an injunction, to which they have not adhered, viz — "That the Aboriginal and his dependents would be well cared for" in spite of His Majesty's benevolent intentions for the preservation of these primitive people.

The care of the Aboriginal should undoubtedly be a national one, and certainly not a purely state matter any longer. Let us have Federal control (which we honestly believe is our right) before it is too late. It is most unfortunate for the natives, that past governments have not bothered about putting the whole thing right, nor have they endeavoured to find a solution to the problem of preventing the extinction of my race and safeguard their interests for all times.

It appears that the object of the government was to keep the Aboriginal down and not allow them to rise to the full standard of the European culture. It is ridiculous and atrocious for representatives from different states, who are supposed to be intellectual humanitarians, leaders of a civilized nation, sitting in conferences discussing ways and means of making suitable laws for the authorities of the different states, which are valueless to the natives. The solution is in the hands of the authorities, and why is that the remedy is not applied? To prevent the existing tragedy, it can easily be overcome if the government so desired, but instead of having these people wait for strangers who may come some day and apply the remedy of their preservation, therefore we earnestly demand every assistance from the Australian people to afford them every protection and facility for their future well-being, as this is a moment of national importance.

The culture of the invading race was a great contrast to that of the native. Though different, the Aborigines had a fine standard of culture. Take for instance, his invention of the boomerang by which he could bring down many birds with one throw as the white man could do from the barrel of a gun. The invention of this weapon alone is a tribute to his inventive genius.

Then we have native music on gum leaves. Is there a race more naturally musical, or who have mastered the art of melody with such a simple instrument as this? The Aboriginal was his own doctor, knowing the properties of each plant and herb, and able to treat himself for any ailment by the simplest natural remedy.

His laws differed from the white man, but had a better moral basis and respect, for the law was the rule to a degree that did not obtain to white people for their laws.

To the Aboriginal, war was unknown, and the golden rule applied to a degree unknown to European peoples. The Aboriginal has saved many a white man who would not have lifted his finger to help the native if he had been in need. Instead, legislation has never received the Aboriginal as a human being. As a result, all Aborigines suffer no matter how cultured he may be — he is treated as a stone-age man. Some have managed to acquire a very fine education, and still, in law, he is only an Aboriginal and not quite human. The best side of the law is only of the nature of prevention of cruelty. British superiority of subject people we don't admit is really not superiority at all — looks down on people of another color.

We are not allowed freedom, nor are we given the alternative free and adequate sustenance. The Aboriginal is generally hungry and the food he is allowed would not, and could not, be acceptable to the superior white. Deprivation of everything of value, including the sympathy of friendship, is the lot of the unfortunate native.

We feel that there is often this superiority, which is humiliating. The Aboriginal is quick to learn, though it is generally only to pick up, so the Aboriginal is just as capable of doing anything as good, and as well, as any white man.

The Aboriginal has a mind in the matter, even those of the race whom the white man does not credit with the intelligence to have opinion. We Aboriginal people who are now thoroughly Europeanised, excepting in our outlook on the problem are at pains to express our opinion, and who has a better right? We have produced fine men as Unaipon, Curtis and Nobel, to mention only a few and nothing but the repression of the native has kept him from the progress made by other colored races. That the native has made so little advance is not merely due to a negative attitude on the part of the white race, but the definite will to prevent his uplift by restricting opportunity to him as instance the present policy of preventing native children in New South Wales from attaining a higher standard than 3rd grade. A first contribution to Aboriginal uplift is a change of heart on the part of the white, and we rejoice to see that it is becoming more evident every day.

The Aboriginal Problem

The Aboriginal problem is the creation of the white race. There need have been none and there need to none now if the white man only wills it so. That there are many aborigines left, and that any of them have risen above their original status, is not a tribute to the White Race, but a proof of the capacity of the native. There has never been an official policy of uplift, not a shadow of one. If a policy now be adopted, and intelligently and patiently implemented, there is yet time to stop the rot and save the race. But a policy must be evolved and my League has striven to fashion in the minds of those concerned, such a policy as is acceptable to Aboriginal thought. We say again that we know what the race wants and needs, and, given the opportunity, we could ourselves, save our race. We have a complete solution to every detail of the problem and we feel that no definite plan should be adopted without the native voice being heard and its plan being fully considered.

The Primitive Man

The whole of the arrangement at the moment revolves round the primitive man, as though he were the only one left worth saving, and the ideal is the saving of this man, in his present state, as a zoological exhibit for succeeding generations.

We are not flattered by the impracticable proposals which, so far, hold the attention. There are certainly primitive people, living the life of their fathers, but I venture to doubt if one of these is ignorant of the white man and his wonderful new world. These will not be kept in their present conditions short of compulsion so complete as to be impracticable, without an enormous policing force. Whether the white man likes it or not, every native is headed toward the culture of the white man. This compulsory retardation involves inviolate reservations, and who can guarantee in the future what has not been practicable in the past. Apart from that, who can honestly say that this backdoor, so invitingly open, will remain so and not be entered. Is there any power on earth which could hold such land in the face of an increasingly land hungry world? Permanent and inviolable reservations are not practicable in the dead heart of Australia, but in the area of potential value it is impossible, Britain's Naval Might,

notwithstanding. Cannot we look the matter squarely in the face and admit that sooner or later such reservations must go and when they go, the native must go with them. Why has it never occurred to the white minds to link the Aboriginal problem of the North and the Centre with the problem of the empty spaces. With what reason can the White Australia policy regard the original occupiers of Australia as outside the scope of its beneficence. The problem of those parts is climatic. It is unsuited to white labor, and particularly to white women. But it is all the natives have ever known and from it, for millennium, they have won their livelihood. In it they became and remained a virile race, and they would be that now but for the intrusion of the white, with the consequent devitalisation that ensued. Yet the Aboriginal has proved his worth in every sphere of primary industry. White Australia should face the problem of the Aboriginal as much in self-interest as the Aboriginal interest, and self-interest demands that one problem shall solve the other. This may be a new angle on the subject but we give it. "The Aboriginal as asset and not a liability".

The Detribalised Aboriginal

Australia's native race is roughly in three conditions, each a problem in itself. The primitive man will not be a third of the native race, and detribalized will be more than one third, while the half caste is of about the same size as the latter. No thought seems to be given to the native who outnumbers his primitive brother. This expropriated native, unwanted in his ancestral home, impressed into compulsory, unpaid service, or left half starved, and is a more real problem and challenges a plan, conceived in wisdom and worked with patience. There are enough in this class who have proved their worth, to prove that a policy of developing the country with their labor is a practicability.

The Half Caste

It must not be thought that these divisions are arbitrary in the sense that no half castes are to be found in the first two classes. There are in both, and there are full bloods in the half-caste class, with people of every shade from dark to white. Still, for the purpose of our discussion, the grading is sound. If the two first problems are solved there remains the greatest yet to be tackled, that of the half caste, already one-third of the Aboriginal population and growing more quickly than the previous classes are dieing [sic] out. Those who are half white, heirs to all that British ancestry means, are in such a plight that it may be said that they are the most pitiable of all. Civilised as much as poor whites in their condition, they are suffering the economic disability of color along with the discrimination in law. Neither white nor dark, they have the advantages of neither and the disadvantages of both. Here is the ultimate problem and that which calls for the most patient thought. It must be settled or it will settle Australia.

Some of the half-castes are in a condition so deplorable that if any white people at all are in like condition the aboriginal is sorry for them. These people have the will to work, the capacity to work and given the opportunity to work they will be a real asset to Australia.

This class has produced outstanding men against obstacles that would be insuperable to many whites. They only get the work the white man does not want, wholly seasonal

and irregular but in every phrase of primary industry the half caste holds his own against all comers.

The right to uplift

Whether tribalized, detribalized or half caste, the native has the right to uplift and it is with gratitude that we note an increasing will to do the right thing by the native. At heart the Briton is sound and both in the general public and the Governments there is a will to do better. Only reasons of finance stand in our way but we protest that when other classes of the community get their millions the thousands involved in Aboriginal uplift should not be grudged. When it is born[e] in mind that the money so spent is investment in gilt edge security, bringing relief to the suffering and salvation to Australia, no consideration should stand in the way of humanitarian desire.

The plan of uplift

We have a complete solution to the whole problem and could do the jobs ourselves if we had the financial resources. We are willing to cooperate in the evolving of the policy and the implementing of it but we do say that the basis of any plan must regard the full humanity of the native. It is our considered opinion that the only way to successfully implement the policy is to hand the work over to the missions, which should be subsidised by the Government for the medical, educational and industrial aspects of relief. To be very frank, we have never had anything worthwhile from the administration as such but we owe everything of value to the missions. We have found, generally, that missionaries are imbued with the sense of duty to the native and beside that, missionary uplift is cheaper, better and the effects more lasting than the best service by Government servants. To fully safeguard the native, missions should, for the work they are subsidised in, be subject to Government Control and direction. We take off our hat[s] to the missionaries, who, for a cause and an ideal have left the comforts of home and the joy of friendships for the dust, flies and heat of the outback without the prospect of reward and with a living as meagre as those they serve.

Education

Medical service, & education, both academic and vocational, are essential to Uplift. We aborigines say, you went to Fiji at the same time as you came here. How you have doctors, nurses, teachers, and lawyers who have been educated in Universities, even in Australia. The same thing is seen in India and other places where even those of the outcastes, and even women of them, have attained the highest education. We want this and claim that a policy of uplift, without the opportunity for full education cannot be successful. Even in the primitive parts we claim that education shall be provided, even at the risk of losing for the future zoological specimens that are contemplated. For a long time aborigines have been claiming education and they feel it is the "open sesame" to the best things of life.

Segregation

We don't like this word, and while we know that reservations are essential as a medium in uplift, they must only be a bridge to uplift. But reservations should be Aboriginal property not what they are today, reservations in name only from which

the Aborigines will be expelled if there is anything of value found therein. America respected the property rights of the Indians and because, in some of the reservations, oil was found, the natives are rolling in wealth. There is persistent rumour among dark folk that there is a prospect of a transfer of natives from Lake Tyers, and the cause is alleged to be that there is the prospect of oil being discovered at the station. If oil is secured there, the property rights of the natives will be urged to the full by my organisation. To say definitely, that the discovery of gold, coal, oil, or anything else must be worked for and on behalf of the natives, and we feel that the public opinion is behind us.

...

The remaining content of these observations comprised From an Educated Black after which followed:

CONCLUSION

We have covered a big field, and in the space of an article it could not be expected that we should cover any one adequately. But we can expand on any aspect of our policy and challenge the white man to try it out.