

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to the Minister for the Interior, Thomas Paterson, 31 October 1936, National Archives of Australia, A659, 1940/1/858

I have been instructed by the Executive of the Australian Aborigines' League to write to you thanking you for your earnest and valuable interest and the suggestions made by you, as appearing in the Press, on behalf of the aboriginal people of Australia.

For some years now, in fact from the time of the apprehension trial and acquittal of Tuckiar on the charge of murder, it has been daily evident that the sun of the Aborigines' Cause is rising. We have been encouraged as we saw the steadily improving outlook and I have been personally heartened at the thought that, though now somewhat aged, I will see the emancipation of my people an assured thing.

I hope, and indeed, believe that the administration of which you are a member will go down to Aboriginal posterity as the emancipators of our race. May God guide you in the days ahead.

We feel it but right that our people should be the responsibility of the Federal Administration and we learn with delight from public statements that at least some of the States, South Australia and Western Australia as cases in point, are prepared to hand over their responsibilities to the Commonwealth. We know that the Commonwealth can discharge its responsibilities and we appreciate that the States cannot for the reason that where the white population is relatively smallest the dark population is largest while in the States with a large and wealthy white population the number of aborigines is comparatively small: thus the bigger the need, the smaller the capacity to meet it.

For now over 100 years we have had experience of the waste of energy and loss of aboriginal lives through neglect. Our cause will not be neglected further if the Commonwealth assumes the responsibility. This is our hope and pleading.

At this time, so fraught with import to us, we feel that we must raise our voice in constructive appeal and we do request that the most careful attention be given to our requests. The forthcoming meeting of Chief Protectors and experts is well aware of the substance of our claims but we take the opportunity of again outlining our opinions:

1. *Full bloods and half-castes.*

We would emphasise the fact that the full bloods are the descendants of the original owners of Australia. They are the lineal descendants of their fathers. The change in ownership by conquest should not invalidate their title to reasonable part of those lands and these rights should be admitted without cavil. I am sure that they are and only emphasise the point because it seems to be current opinion that half-castes have special rights as against the full blood and there is official discrimination against which we are ever in protest.

The half-caste is the descendant of the aboriginal and therefore joint heirs with the full blood. They are also descendants of the white man and thus heirs with the white race of all the rights of British nationhood.

Disregarding the matter of the murgence of the half-caste with either race, we disclaim acquiescence with current opinion and feel that, at any rate for a long time, the half-caste problem will continue to be present. We stress the real humanity of each section and our claims are based on that fact. To the extent that there has been discrimination in the past or the advantage of one section without regard to the other, we are in protest. We claim for each section the full rights of British nationality.

2. *Capabilities of aboriginals*

The question of the uplift of the whole aboriginal population to full European culture depends on the capabilities of the race to assimilate that culture. We claim that it has been fully demonstrated that aboriginals of both full blood and mixed blood can do anything a white man is able to do. We further believe that the aboriginal must be a partner in this own uplift. Certainly expert guidance will be necessary, but, apart from that, he must "work out his own salvation". This is in the interests of the aboriginal himself and he is not seeking anything else than the right to obtain what he proves himself to be entitled to by his capacity to use it. Emancipation must come by the way of full manhood.

We have not produced doctors, lawyers and other professional leaders merely from the lack of the opportunity given to other colored races. We have produced practical men of varied experience as seamen, including masters, shearers with both gun and hand shears, wool classers, agriculturalists with expert knowledge of all farming operations, orchardists, millhands, motor and machinery experts, horse breakers. We have among our ranks those who have made good as squatters. We have public speakers, preachers, teachers and we claim that what has been done in the past can be again done by those yet uncultured. We are not insensible of the task but we would urge that civilisation has been acquired in the past merely by picking it up and the process took about three generations. We feel sure that an ordered plan of uplift, carefully and sympathetically applied must be more successful than the haphazard method or want of method.

3. *Settlements*

We feel that the comparative smallness of the numbers of aboriginals in the Southern portion of the Commonwealth and the considerable number in the Northern and Central areas constitutes two definite problems with quite different solutions.

Southern Aboriginals

The small number of aboriginals associated with the large white population introduces the economic disadvantage of color. In the years of depression it was found that preference to whites brought the dark race to extreme poverty. The usual avenue of employment for colored people is generally seasonal work. With the closing of the normal avenues of the White, the normal avenue of colored opportunity was taken. While this condition is now adjusting itself, the possibility of recurrence must always

be borne in mind. Coupled with the fact that, in most cases, the sustenance for white unemployed was not available for dark persons, a continuance of the practice of having settlements for dark persons must continue. Men should be encouraged to compete in the general labor market and thus to live outside these settlements but in times of adversity or unemployment, the asylum in the settlement should be kept open. When illness or increasing age renders a person incapable of labor, the privilege of return to the settlement should be open. We claim that this should be voluntary and not compulsory and to make this possible we urge full citizenship rights as dole, Old Age or Invalid pensions, etc. should be available to dark and fair alike. This should apply also in settlements and from these allowances the dark folk should purchase their necessities instead of being given an issue of rations.

We feel that the policy of small settlements is not the best and the value of the community services, shopping facilities, garage etc. being given by aboriginals for aboriginals will be no small factor in uplift. At present community services are generally in the hands of white people, in cases tending to exploitation of the dark people and developing an inferiority complex.

The closed smaller settlements should not be expropriated but should be cut up for closer settlement farms, etc. for colored people.

Northern and Central Aboriginals

We submit that a practical ideal should be "the development of the North and Centre by Colored Australians instead of the proposed immigration of Nordic peoples and Southern Europeans. The policy of settlements is essential for training purposes and, to the extent that the aboriginal is a worker for wages, to be a base of operations. All settlements should be worked under expert supervision and on a commercial basis.

The aboriginal is most loyal to the person of the King and His administration. It will be seen that, to the extent that the aboriginal is used in the peopling of the somewhat empty areas it will be the exploitation of the country by those with the British sentiment. Above all this is the justice of the matter. All settlements set apart for colored people in a primitive condition of life, should have permanent water and all reservations should be unalienable under any circumstances.

4. Christian Missions

It is our considered opinion that emancipation and uplift can best be secured in co-operation with Christian Missions. This service is generally unselfish and certainly is most economical. We pay tribute to the work of all denominations among the aboriginal population.

5. Finance

We believe that all we ask for is financially possible in that we are sure that the work can be made self-supporting and any loans necessary would be self-liquidating. We affirm that justice supports our requests and the well being of the dark race demands that any scheme of uplift must be contributed to by the Dark race itself.

In presenting our wishes for your information we do genuinely appreciate your anxiety to do the best in the discharge of your trust and we extend to you our grateful thanks,

On behalf of the League.