

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to Sir John Harris, Secretary, Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, 10 January 1937, Papers of the Anti-Slavery Society Papers, Weston Library, Oxford University, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 22, G378

Enclosed please find my comments, representing the opinion of our league in the matters referred to in yours of 25th Nov.

Your proposals are splendid and I trust you will be able to help us to secure what is our aim, viz:— the right to a share in our fatherland.

We do not give the Administration much rest and I must say that we feel that we are very definitely sympathised with. Our impression is that there is the will to do all we ask but the matter of finance is the trouble. We feel that this can be made to be a financial success and, indeed, cannot see how the present administrative costs cannot be reduced as the aboriginal is brought to an independent status.

With sincere appreciation

Yours sincerely

Comment on Statement drawn up by the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society dated 25th November '36

We are thoroughly in agreement with the statement in respect of the Land Trust for Natives. Aboriginal administration and control is still dominated by the psychology of 100 to 150 years ago. It was then presumed that the aboriginal was little removed from the native fauna and legislated for accordingly. May I traverse some aspects of the matter.

As might have been expected, 100 to 150 years of contact with white civilisation has made a tremendous impact on native culture. Whole tribes have succumbed in the contact and in other cases only a meagre residue survived. This residue imbibed the culture of the white and has proved itself capable of doing anything the white can do. We have, as a result, native tradesmen (carpenters, etc) and natives trained in every phase of agricultural and pastoral industry. We have native clergy, teachers and even lady typists. In every field the native has proven himself most adaptable and we contend that "the native can do anything the white can do, if he is shown how". One of our half caste women is an A.L.C.M. (Associate of the London College of Music) and a daughter of this lady is one of the finest elocutionists I have heard. Still we are "aboriginals within the meaning of the act" which means we have no status in law. Certainly we enjoy some measure of liberty in certain parts but as a matter of Grace and not of Law. In some cases the possession of more than 50% of white blood gives us certain privileges; in other cases any aboriginal blood at all loses us the rights of the whites.

Maternity bonus. Aboriginal women are exempted by specific legislative determination from the bonus no matter how cultured. If a half caste woman is not receiving assistance from the Government she may get the bonus. If she is living in a

Government reserve she is debarred. The white woman, the wife of a sustenance worker (on the dole as it is termed) gets the bonus, of course.

Sustenance – Dole. Excepting in Victoria, aboriginal men do not receive the dole. They may get rations but generally the able bodied men do not. They must get out and seek work which white men cannot get. Distress is rife as a result and T.B., resultant from under nourishment is all too common.

Old age and Invalid pensions. These are not available to any with more than half aboriginal blood. Others are supposed to get rations from the Government. I know of one case where a woman was refused a pension because she was more than half dark. When relief as an aboriginal was sought she was refused as she was more than half white. Such a contradictory position arises from the fact that pensions are disbursed by the Federal Authorities and aboriginal relief by the State.

Political Rights. These vary in the different States but most aboriginals have no rights.

All the above are available to Maoris or to aliens who have become naturalised.

Right to own land and to will it away on death. The aboriginal may not own anything as a right. If he acquires anything by his industry he has no right to will it and cases have occurred where the Crown has taken over the property and sent the widow to a settlement as a pauper. Against all this we are in protest and it does appear that our outlook is definitely improving. Agitation will certainly bring us to our goal. Now to refer to the proposals in your statement:—

Reserves. This is a sore point. We have reserves set apart for natives. These are mainly on paper and if wanted by the white, as recently at Tennants Creek, in the Northern Territory, the aboriginal is turned off and kept out. We contend that reserves should be inalienable and white entry should be only by authority. There should be a definite policy of development of such reserves by the natives for the natives with the end in view of their full uplift. We have reserves in some parts where the possibilities are limitless but the natives are idle and ill nourished because wonderful lands are just under grass. (See the reference to Cumeroojunga in our Annual report for this year)

Our men, trained in various pursuits connected with the land are clamouring for the right to a little of their fathers' lands that they may be able to earn an independency. We feel that this could be made a practicability by the advance of loans to approved trained natives. (See our programme as outlined in our Constitution sent you under separate cover)

We note you[r] proposals in detail and these seem to be generally in accordance with our views. We do trust that you will, by your advocacy, be able to help us to full emancipation.

In passing we would emphasise the outstanding need, viz:— the Federalising of aboriginal control. The position is that those states with the largest aboriginal population has the smallest white population. Victoria can be generous for it has but a handful of natives to an enormous white population. Western Australia has a small white population but has 25% of Australia's aboriginals. It seems to be a matter of

finance. The will to do better is present but the ability to do so is not. If the states with the largest population contributed on a per capita basis with the other States, the burden would be spread and a better deal be done by our race.

We feel, too, that we must get parliamentary representation. We want our advocate in parliament, seeking our rights and looking after our interests.