

William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines' League, to the Minister for the Interior, Thomas Paterson, 18 February 1937, National Archives of Australia, A659, 1940/1/858

I am addressing you more personally than may be proper in departmental correspondence because I know that the concerns of my people are regarded by you as a personal responsibility as well as an official one. Because I know your heart is so genuinely in the matter I am writing again when perhaps it may be thought that I am over anxious and importunate.

I am sure you will understand that the Aboriginal problems have a different reaction to we civilised aboriginals than even to the most kindly disposed white persons, unless it be to the very small number who have learned to "think black". Generally the average kindly disposed white person is willing to wait the outworking of an ameliorative scheme but we continue to suffer meanwhile.

I am chiefly concerned about two aspects both of which are under the consideration of your department and both of which I know will be handled by you in a Statesmanlike and Humanitarian way. Of this I am convinced and thoroughly appreciative but—and you will not consider my importunity unreasonable—we continue to suffer while the remedy is not applied. Naturally we want our suffering minimised first and ended as soon as possible though we realise that the implementing of your policy is going to be difficult, because white Australia, however kindly disposed, does not, cannot, "think black". We are merely something inferior, biological specimens, anthropological exhibits, rather than weaker brothers. This I say without passion for the psychology of the native is not retributive or vengeful. We do feel that if we had manifested these attributes, while we may have suffered more at the time, our militancy would have won a standing for us comparable with the Maoris. We merely plead as an inconsequential minority for kindness of heart on the part of our white brothers that will lead them to plan our uplift and culture to the full European standard. The fact that some of us have been civilised, not by any plan but despite its absence, is proof of what can come with a plan carefully considered and patiently applied. Do you know that I feel that a definite plan of uplift, which we could apply ourselves if we had the financial capacity would raise the present generation so far from the present primitive conditions that they would scarcely be recognized as the same people but our hope is the rising generation. We desire to help the present generation as much as possible but the child now and to be should be the chief concern. These, coming into civilised conditions would be quite civilised by the time they reached adult age. We further believe that their civilisation will not provoke any new problem but will lead to the removal of the present ones in due course. In the aboriginal you have all the man power required for the development of Australia's unsettled parts if they are given due training, direction and leadership and, might I add, inspiration, and its peopling by a population not merely European in culture but British in sentiment and loyalty would be a bulwark of defence. You are yet to find that the aboriginal race of Australia will be as worthy as any other colored race in the empire, units making for the stability of Australia and the defence of our heritage. All this is in the power of the white community and its administrative arm, but neglect of this cannot be otherwise than serious.

My reason in writing is, firstly, to say that I am disappointed in not hearing anything further as to the implementing of the announced policy now some months old. This did not concern us so greatly when we understood that a conference of aboriginal administrators was to be held this month (February) but its postponement perturbed us. If we even knew that further consideration of your policy was pending the conference we would have been contented but we do not know if there is any relation of the one to the other. Would you kindly make a pronouncement as to the implementing of the announced policy.

The second reason for writing, of far less general import than the one mentioned because it springs from the conditions obligating that policy, is yet of the more pressing import at the moment. It is the matter of the sale of the lubras to the Japanese. It is easy to think and to say that “the men are only too willing to sell the girls” and to write psychology this seems to be correct. It is fundamentally incorrect. In the clash of culture the white person is apt to get the wrong perspective on the aboriginal mind. We are opposed to wrongdoing and, under our laws, our fathers killed any base characters on the principle that if they were dead they could not propagate their kind. The clash of cultures made practices, not unwholesome in the aboriginal setting, extremely unwholesome by distortion and exploitation. Economic causes are the root of the trouble on Bathurst Island and elsewhere. Shortage of food is the basic cause of the sale of the women.

Mr Paterson, my distress is that my people are suffering and the remedy is wholly in your hands. Our girls are taken on to vessels there to be the vehicles of Asiatic lust. These girls are used as long as they can be and are then thrown overboard. Any who get back to their people only do so to corrupt them the more with acquired disease and to live a life of misery themselves. Generally they will not get ashore and it were better so.

The law is there—it is broken—and we suffer, and while suffering is the portion of the aboriginal, the cry of the people goes up to a God of deliverance. You are the only Moses who can lead the sufferers into the Promised Land.

That these are my people gives me the right to ask for adequate patrol of the coast but, more than that even, for the assured sustenance for the natives, including meat (goat flesh is most suitable) to be made available through the Mission on the Island.

Thanking you for all you have done.