

***Australian Worker*, 10 July 1929, p. 2, Save the Aborigines! An Appealing Dignified Letter from One of Them**

*The Worker* has received the following letter from Shadrach Livingstone James, of Barmah Township, via Picola, Victoria, in which he appeals to the people of Australia on behalf of the aborigines, of whom the writer is one. In asking for the publication of his letter Mr James says:

Having seen some striking articles written by the Rev. Livett and others, on the treatment of aborigines in your paper I shall deem it a great favor if you will publish the letter submitted herewith for me.

I wish to state that I have been a member of the A.W.U. for years, and only last year I acted in the capacity as rep. for the shearers at Cheviot Hills, Penshurst, and also at Brie Brie station, Western District. I have been receiving your paper, and have noticed that you are in sympathy with the aborigines, of which I am one. Not long ago I attended a conference in Melbourne, convened by Mr. Abbott, Minister for Home Affairs, to deal with aborigines in the Central Australia and Northern Territory. The conference only dealt with the aborigines in that territory, and my idea is to bring before the public the needs of my people generally.

The letter is as follows.

It is a tragic fact that the amelioration of my people still remains a problem for which all the wise heads of the Governments of this land, for a hundred years have failed to find a satisfactory solution. The hearts of those of us who have been watching the trend of events in the history of our people have been gladdened, from time to time, when there have come, from the voice and pen of some benevolent statesman, intimations of laudable schemes for our betterment, buoying us with the hope of a better day—which never came. So far there has never been a vigorous, resolute, decisive and intensive effort to lift us up socially, Intellectually, morally and spiritually. Whenever and wherever such an effort has been put forth we credit the missionaries for the experiment, and my people have responded well.

The Governments of Australia have had the aborigines for over a century in their hands, and have not yet taken them out of the experimental stage. What have they done to educate, train and fit them to take their places worthily in the community? The Australian whites, with justifiable joy and pride, boast of their marvellous achievements in countless phases of life amongst their own people. What have they accomplished in the history of aboriginal life? What have they done and what are they doing, for the uplift of my people? Do they consider the weekly ration, the annual supply of clothing and blankets, an adequate compensation for the inestimable benefits they are daily deriving from this land which, by divine right, belongs to us? The white man's answer to this is that the civilisation he has introduced has brought to us many compensating advantages. We grant that, and also gratefully acknowledge the debt we owe to the whites for the knowledge of the true God and his worship. But, alas, they have brought also vice, disease, and the curse of liquor, and have demoralised us. When will the Australians, especially those in authority and power, wake up to their national duty, their responsibility and obligation to us? They complain of our ingratitude. We ask, When will they pay the debt of gratitude they

owe to us for the untold gain that has come to them through our great and irremediable loss; for the stupendous fortunes that have been and are being made every day and every hour from the resources of our land by the white men; for the joy and pleasure of living in this wonderful country — our natural inheritance? When will they open their hearts and their hands and re-pay us by an adequate reimbursement that will atone for the shocking injustice we have suffered, and are still suffering, at the hands of our so-called, protectors? To quote the words of one of your statesmen, Dr Basedow: The aborigine has not had a dog's chance. We wonder if we ever will, under present conditions, get a chance to lift up our heads. Although much dispirited by reason of an indefinable influence that seems to check us at every turn conspiring to compass our downfall and ruin, we have not lost heart; we still possess a residue of courage, ambition, and determination to strike out and secure a worthy place in the community if our protectors would, we ask in the name of justice and humanity, give us the opportunity and our claim the impartial consideration it deserves.

There are many disabilities under which we suffer, and under the present administration there is no prospect of their being removed. There is a great deal of unemployment amongst my people, which accounts for their poverty and distress. With the exception of shearing arid harvesting seasons, which, absorb five months, we are practically out of employment for the rest of the year. During these months we do some fishing and trapping, which yield but a precarious living, and the consequence is that nearly seventy-five per cent are living in a semi-starved condition.

I venture to say, without the least fear of refutation, that twenty-five per cent of our men are quite capable of entering many fields of labor, and, standing alongside of the white Australians, work equally as well as they? We have splendid axemen who could undertake forest thinning, sleeper hewing, road making, etc., but they are denied their licenses and employment on these fields. Some of us are intellectually fit to fill some positions in the Government services, railways, tramways, forest and postal departments, etc., but we are debarred from taking these positions. I presume the White Australia policy is the cause of this. I have nothing to say against that policy. Hold it and extol it as much as they like, but let me emphasise this fact — that it is the Commonwealth's responsibility to educate, train and lift the aborigine to the dignity of citizenship.

Reserves for the use of the aborigines have been set apart in many places throughout the Commonwealth, and they are vested in the Aborigines' Protection Board, but the aborigines are denied the right of using the land, and in some cases these reserves are leased to white men. Many of the reserves have river frontages, and could be cut up into irrigation blocks and allotted to the capable aborigines, where they could settle permanently and make homes of their own without the fear of being disturbed.

I know of several aborigines who were granted some 30 to 40 acres of land some years ago, and were promised larger grants if they proved their capability of clearing and working the land. These men worked hard, their wives helping, on scanty supplies of ration, and fenced and cleared about 900 acres of densely timbered land, and just when they were expecting fair returns from their land the blocks were taken away from them, with no prospect of compensation for their labor. I think it is a fair, just and reasonable claim that the most ambitious, able bodied and capable natives should be given grants of land in perpetuity of sufficient area in irrigated districts under a

scheme that would enable them to have one portion of the block producing while the other is being cleared and prepared for cropping. In addition to the grants they should have monetary assistance to enable them to build their homes and carry on for at least three years. We are only asking for a portion of our own back.

Our girls, at the age of 14 years, are forcibly taken from their homes and sent out to service. We do not object to their being trained to work as domestic servants, but we should be allowed to use our own discretion about this, and we strongly object to their being sent at the age of 14 and 15 years, when they need a mother's protection.

I wish to correct the general belief that our days are numbered. I say most emphatically that my people are not doomed to extinction. They may yet be saved. Let the authorities secure the needed legislation for their protection, betterment and preservation, and undertake the work of caring for them, not as here-tofore, with the conviction they are a dying race, but with the confidence that the remnants can be saved. Here I wish to offer some constructive ideas and make some practical suggestions with reference to the care of my people.

I strongly advise the placing of all native aboriginals throughout the Commonwealth under the Federal Government. At present the care of the aborigines is entrusted to an institution known as the Aborigines' Protection Board, which works through the Police Department. This Board, we understand, is a trustee to disburse to the best advantage the money appropriated by the State for our maintenance, education and general welfare. There are other responsibilities devolving upon the Board besides feeding, clothing and educating us. By the term Protection Board we understand an institution which stands for promoting, encouraging and, if need be, creating such influences that will make for our moral, social and intellectual development, and for intercepting those that are inimical to our advancement. In these things we must say the Board has not lived up to its responsibility. We have not made any real progress under their administration.

I think, as the original owners of this country, we should have a share in the administration of our own race. For this reason we desire the appointment of a native administrator for the Commonwealth, because he would be in sympathy with us and grasp more readily our needs, and for the same reason we ask for a native representative in the House to voice our needs and disabilities, and a native protector in each State to see that our people were well cared for. For the moral and spiritual care of my people, I advise the appointment of itinerant white and aboriginal evangelists who shall visit the aborigines who are not connected with mission stations. In conclusion, I wish to say that I feel sure we are in the dawn of a new day for our people. I feel that the malicious influences and atrocious prejudices that have been operating against us for a century, keeping us in a servile condition, and withholding from us our natural rights, is now giving place to genuine sympathy for my people and a willingness on the part of our rulers to yield some substantial good to them. The real value of a community depends on the character of its people. The value of this country is not measured by its material resources, but by the character of the people, and I say to you Australians: Let not the history of the shocking treatment of the aborigines, as it stands today, mar forever your character, but awake, arise, shake off the reproach and shame, and be not recreant to your highest duty to protect the people you have so grievously wronged.