

***Herald* (Melbourne), 7 August 1937, p. 31, Clive Turnbull, Aborigines Petition the King**

Australia has never given her native people a fair deal. In this interview, Mr W. Cooper, spokesman of the aborigines and secretary of the Aborigines' League, pleads for opportunity, by education and general help, for the aborigines to become a citizen fit to take his place in the forefront of Australian life.

"Why should not the aborigines themselves develop the north?" he asks. And, but for the iniquitous treatment which for the last century they have received, he sees no reason why we should not already have had aboriginal doctors, lawyers and airmen.

Mr Cooper is 76 and hopes to see a change for the better before he dies. He is doing all he can to bring it about. Like many of his countrymen, he is a fluent talker.

He had but seven months' regular schooling when he was a youth. Much of his childhood he spent in the household of Sir John O'Shanassay, in Camberwell, and his young manhood he spent on pastoral properties.

More than 60 years ago he saw the remains of the Burke and Wills Expedition at Cooper's Creek.

I went to talk to him because I have long been interested in the problem of the aborigines. My own countrymen in Tasmania by a combination of cruelty and stupidity, succeeded in exterminating a whole race within 75 years.

The Victorian aborigines are going the same way. Yet, although any number of people are willing to be sentimental at any moment of the day about the minorities of other countries — the Jews in Germany, the negroes in the United States, the Basques in Spain and so on and so on (provided they be sufficiently far away) nobody of any political color, except a few religious and anthropological enthusiasts, cares tuppence, about our own minority, which is perishing before our eyes. One can make a melancholy parallel between the pious sentiments of Government pronouncements aide by side with a record of expropriation (a polite word for theft) and oppression a hundred years ago and those of today. With the exception that aborigines are no longer publicly hunted down, their treatment has for all practical purposes changed little in a century. But I did not want to talk to Mr Cooper about old woes — although they are in the back of every aborigine mind — but about new hopes.

"Education and opportunity will overcome the problems of the aborigine," he said.

Our aims are set forth in the constitution of the Australian Aborigines' League. The immediate programme of the league is the progressive education of the aboriginal race by education and training in the arts and crafts of European culture.

"For primitive aborigines, while they remain primitive, we ask [for] the unalienable possession of adequate reserves to which white men shall have access only by authority from the Chief Protector.

“We ask that offences by white men against aborigines shall be punished by similar penalties to those for similar offences against white men, and to ask for special courts recognising tribal laws. We ask for education and industrial training.

“For the semi-civilised and detribalised natives we ask for reserves of agricultural land, the right to work and provision of full rations when no work is available, full rations to aged and infirm natives, and free education in State schools or in special schools.

“For civilised natives we ask the provision of agricultural land machinery, the right to work, invalid or old-age pensions, and complete educational and political rights.

“We are human. We may be uneducated by white standards: we are fully educated by our own. I do not know whether all colored peoples are the same, but we have a very high moral code and the principles of Christianity are part of our life.

“We want to get up to the same standards as the whites. But we are coming to the end of our tether. Now we are sending a petition to the King”.

Mr Cooper took down a great roll of signatures. “If we cannot get full justice in Australia we must ask the King”, he said. “Some tell us that the King has no power now in these things, but we shall try anyway. There are 2000 signatures here, from aborigines all over Australia, not only in the towns, but at Palm Island, Bathurst Island and other distant places. Those who could not sign their own names have made their marks”.

The petition, which has been two years in preparation, reads ...

“Up till the present time the condition of the aborigines has been deplorable”, Mr Cooper said. “Their treatment was beyond human reason until the Lyons Government came in. I speak of a man as I find him, and I find Mr Lyons a gentleman. His Government is the first in the history of Australia to take up the cause of the aborigines. But it is not enough.

“Before that things were bad indeed. I am very very sorry that the white people of Australia must carry the bloodstains of the aborigines for evermore. It was the doing of uneducated white people and criminals in the first place, and the tradition of cruelty was handed down from white generation to generation to the present day.

“Fortunately the present generation of white people is becoming more sympathetic. That is very encouraging to me. I sit here working hour after hour in correspondence with my people thinking. How can we save them?

“I feel for my people as anyone would. Now the shootings, poisonings, and extermination have ceased, so far as I can tell. I get letters from Palm Island, from Mount Isa, from Central Australia, and all parts of Australia from my countrymen, and there is a great improvement in their treatment. We must give the present Government credit for that.

“But for our principal needs, what is done? We talk to politicians, and they say, Yes, they’ll do this, and do that, but the years go on, and what is done?”

“We need education, and we need industry. You will never bring our people forward without those things. The policy of the Governments at present will keep them laborers all their lives. You may read the views even of sympathetic white men. But they are not our views. We are the sufferers; the white men are the aggressors.

“We need a modern technical school for our people. You may ask where is the money to come from. But we have lost countless millions to the whites—the whole wealth of Australia. Are we not entitled to this? Must we lose our money as well as our lives?”

“Our people should be given the training so that they may become doctors and nurses and teachers and teach our tribes the rules of hygiene and the best ways of living. But instead of lifting our people up, the early comers to our country destroyed them.

“They were destroying people better than themselves! If we had been a treacherous race they might have been excused. But there is no excuse for the murders which were committed upon us. There is no excuse for taking a man’s life away without cause.

“Yet if these people had been different, how different already might have been our story! Then you would have had already a colored race that Australia could be proud of. We should have been soldiers, doctors, airmen. We have the courage and the resource.

“Now our people have nothing: all was taken from them. They will never have anything so long as the present state of things endures. They will be laborers, rabbit-trappers, casual fishermen perhaps.

“Nor do I think you can ever bring the present generation of aborigines up to the highest standard. They have a horror and fear of extermination. It is in the blood, the racial memory, which recalls the terrible things done to them in years gone by.

“Even now they do not like to say much. They think, ‘If we open our mouths we will lose even what little we have’. But the next generation of aborigines: you can bring them up to any standard you like.

“In Fiji, not very long ago, the people were cannibals. Now they have their own doctors and lawyers and professional men. Is it not shameful that Australia should be so backward in training her native people?”

“Now we hear much of developing the north. Why should not our own people develop it? Why will the Government not let us have a chance to do it, to make our own State in our own country?”