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CONTENTS

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Victoria.

IAN SPALDING, in this guest editorial, sees the students' 'freedom ride' as a focus of a new attitude to Aborigines:

no genteel silence

The students' 'freedom ride' through parts of northern New South Wales has been fairly widely debated. Reasonable questions can be asked about the wisdom or efficacy of projecting outsiders into those local situations where social class and colour are tied inextricably. Certainly city students of either the long- or short-haired variety would rarely constitute the ideal group for such a purpose.

Social discrimination in many of its forms can be erased by quiet and rational treatment. These methods, some claim, should have been tried in New South Wales. Careful surveys and preparation, they say, should have preceded this year's much-publicised foray.

The 'freedom ride' is not to be assessed only in these terms, nor should too much time be spent on wondering whether the reaction of either the coloured or the white citizens of the various towns is measurable. Similarly, while the policies of individual clubs and municipal councils are important, as are the motives of the participants, concentration upon these aspects is a diversion. Essentially the student action was a stinging challenge to the whole country. It was a youthful tilt at sober sections of the community whose inaction on Aboriginal issues is without beginning or end. It was a direct and rude blow at the genteel silence that has clothed injustices with respectability, a side-swipe at the self-righteousness that has allowed Australians to warm themselves championing the causes of the Bantu at Sharpville or the Negro parents at Little Rock.

The students rode out headlong to identify with Aboriginal poverty and humiliation, nation wide and generations deep.

We all grow up with too little knowledge of the Aboriginal Story. With a few myths for comfort we have turned from the pain which Aborigines have borne, seeing little of the silent erosion of independence and the surrender of character-forming institutions of great antiquity.

Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal people are no longer content with a sad exit. Their populations have stabilised and are increasing. Neither they, nor coloured people elsewhere, will allow the future to be as silent as the past. Can the mutually-developed accommodation be found that has been absent in the past? To what should we look for the root causes of today's problems?

After the initial penal prologue, settlers, compelled by a variety of personal and social influences, came to this country determined to turn its wealth to the support of their own sustenance. They came mindful of their obligations as the outriders of a colonising stream which had carried the great benefits of their favoured civilisation across the world to lesser people for two hundred years past.

Australian historians have yet to study thoroughly the nature of the meeting between Aboriginal occupiers and incoming settlers. Reports, diaries and pamphlets in the archives would probably show a wide range of settler attitudes towards the original inhabitants.

The lack of concern for Aboriginal questions characteristic of the first half of this century was supported by the pseudo-Darwinistic view that the human species was ranked, with Europeans at the top and the Australian 'natives' at the other end. The latter were, according to the 1890 Aldine History of South Australia, 'above all the races of savages yet discovered, the lowest in the scale of humanity . . .' Aborigines were thus beyond concern.

It is not surprising that warmth of understanding could not flourish when such rationalisations wore the respectability of wide acceptance. Nor is it surprising that Aboriginal manners and customs were in-

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terpreted and judged in terms of the viewer's own culture, that 'devilish' customs and pagan languages were stamped out at scores of missions and settlements.

The official British attitudes towards indigenous peoples were often generous and just. A century before English sailors looked closely at Australian coasts, their fellow-countrymen were following royal instructions and negotiating carefully with the Canadian Indians for trading concessions. It is not so well known that Captain Cook was instructed by his superiors to search for and explore the Southern Continent and to 'observe the Genius, Temper, Disposition and Number of the Natives, if there be any, and endeavour by all proper means to cultivate a Friendship and Alliance with them . . .' Furthermore he was instructed to take possession of parts of the country 'with the Consent of the Natives'.

On various occasions the Imperial Parliament and the Colonial Office displayed an active concern for the consequences to Aborigines of British settlement in Australia. Self-government in Western Australia was made conditional upon an undertaking that special provision would be made for the Aborigines. Governor Phillip showed good intentions towards Aborigines. For a time at least, he took the comfortable view that the 'savages' would soon come to value European-style life and government. Many thoughtful and compassionate colonists of the Victorian era probably thought in these terms also. It was a viewpoint which found its classical expression in Governor Hindmarsh's proclamation at Glenelg in 1836:

'It is also, at this time, especially my duty to apprise the colonists of my resolution to take every lawful means for extending the same protections to the native population as to the rest of His Majesty's subjects, and of my firm determination to punish with exemplary severity all acts of violence or injustice which may in any manner be practised or attempted against the natives, who are to be considered as much under the safeguard of the law as the colonists themselves, and equally entitled to the privileges of British subjects. I trust therefore with confidence to the exercise of moderation and forbearance by all classes in their intercourse with the native inhabitants, and that they will omit no opportunity of assisting me to fulfil His Majesty's most gracious and benevolent intentions towards them, by promoting their advancement in civilization, and ultimately under the blessing of divine providence, their conversion to the Christian faith.'

Sometimes official beneficence was translated into government action. Small reserves were proclaimed, blankets and food provided at selected places, and individual 'protectors', although few in number, were appointed. But commonly Imperial instructions and Imperial dreams evaporated in the colony itself, and the consequences were cruel.

The occasional recognition that Aborigines were human was rarely matched by doubts concerning the European's right to take complete possession of the land itself. The occurrence of disease, and minor payments, were frequently sufficient to achieve the desired land transfer. But there was often the assistance of a police detachment or the rifle.

For most of our history, governments have expressed their cynicism or concern about Aboriginal difficulties in gaunt policies of protection. The churches, meanwhile, had less and less to say to the nation, while Mission worked quietly at its special interests on the distant frontiers.

For a good while it has been our custom to look back to the acts of atrocity and dispossession with a sad and judgmental shake of the head. No such escape is in fact available, and the question of Aboriginal control of traditionally-occupied lands is now a current one in a score of places; and methods which appear arbitrary and unnecessary are still being employed against Aboriginal and also part-Aboriginal people.

But there is a further vital consideration which will not allow us to look back comfortably to a past from which we wish to be divorced. In the minds and emotions of a hundred thousand Aboriginal people there are firmly embedded the happy and the disastrous contacts of the past with Europeans. This abiding memory has been part of the life of Aborigines from the times when the early European settlers were well aware that they had Aboriginal neighbours, through the generation immediately preceding our own, in which our parents strove to wish the so-called Aboriginal 'problem' out of existence, and right up to this year.

AND NOW many young Australians seem to be recognising that the representatives of two peoples, not one, are the occupants of this land. The 'freedom riders' belong to such a company.

To criticise the initiative of Student Action For Aborigines on the grounds that the individual participants could not possibly understand the situations into which they made a forced entry is to miss the essential point. The episode is bigger than those who participated in it.

What the 'freedom ride' has said in a mass of newspaper reports, widely-circulated photographs, and a score of editorials and interviews is that a long, unwholesome silence has ended. It has pointed to signs and conventions which say 'No Aborigines' at rest rooms and cafe tables, and it points also to the good people who live in the towns where these constrictions exist. It has called out that Aboriginal people have been hospitalised on segregated verandahs in New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia and that Aboriginal mothers have been directed to separate labour wards. It has underlined the fact that Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal families share a disproportionately small amount of the national wealth. It says that fear exists where there might be friendship. It suggests that the majority group often displays an insensitive brashness of self-esteem which allows arrogant questions to be asked of Aboriginal individuals.

In saying these things the 'freedom riders' have been heard as rarely before by adults who as church, club and union members, and as politicians, have seen and said too little in the past.

At its roots the Aboriginal problem is a moral issue. This makes it imperative that each generation must say publicly whether or not it stands for the unrelieved aggression from which it benefits.

Calls for a moral approach to the indigenes have been heard on occasions. The most notable of these is surely the Statement on Aboriginal Policy issued by the National Missionary Council of Australia in 1963. The principles enunciated in the statement suggest that the Aborigines are a distinct ethnic group with rights which must be safeguarded; that no laws based on either race or culture should limit political or social rights in any way; that Aboriginal groups have a distinct existence of their own which must be respected; that Aboriginal initiative and consent, not force of any kind, must precede change; and that Aborigines have just claims for assistance based upon their prior occupation of this land.

These principles should now be digested by the Australian Council of Churches. They deserve to be brought to the notice of Roman Catholic authorities as well. More than this they should be given life by courageous and, if necessary, public application to current happenings.

It is doubtful whether the Church's record on Aborigines stands any higher than that of other sections of a neglectful community. But the country waits to see the extent to which humanity and morality may become ingredients of Aboriginal policy. Sacrifice, atonement and reconciliation are never likely to be common topics at tea tables, although they seem relevant to Aboriginal issues. However, there are distinct signs of change in the community. Perhaps one day Christian citizens in congregations across the country will cease talking about the 'assimilation' of Aborigines and turn to discuss the right of the Aboriginal person to justice and to compensation, and his necessary freedom to make mistakes.

When thousands of church people are setting this kind of lead, then, at some time in the future, far beyond the tenure of the present Government, an Australian Prime Minister may find that he has the courage to speak to the nation of right-dealing and obligation as far as Aborigines are concerned. He may use terms as unmistakable as those employed by President Johnson after Selma. The 'One People' dreams of our founding fathers deserve a public interment. This is a multi-racial society. When the fact is recognised we will feel more at ease with ourselves. We will also be better equipped as a nation for a difficult future. At the same time, Aborigines and part-Aborigines will know that they are valued in their own right. Perhaps then they will freely look away from a massive indignity towards the array of possibilities offered by the modern world.