Statement by leave in the House of Representatives, April 9, 1963, by the Minister for Territories, The Hon. Paul Hasluck, M.P.

I have asked leave to make this statement because it has come to my knowledge that a good deal of misleading information is being passed around concerning the effect on the life of the aborigines of the Gove Peninsula of the granting of mining leases over bauxite deposits with a requirement for the early commencement of mining and the eventual development of an alumina plant. Members on both sides of this House have been good enough to direct my attention to statements made on this matter and have suggested that an official rebuttal is needed.

We all deeply respect the motives and the warmth of sympathy of most of those Australians who have the welfare of the aborigines at heart and I do not question for a moment the genuine concern of such persons. We would be blind, however, if we did not also recognise that the Communist party has also seized on this issue and is assiduous in trying to misrepresent what has happened.

The bauxite deposits are on Gove Peninsula on the north-eastern tip of the Arnhem Land Reserve. The Arnhem Land Reserve for aborigines totals 35,000 square miles. It was created in 1931 at a time when official policy for those aborigines who were still tribal nomads was to protect them from contact with other Australians by keeping them apart on inviolable reserves. On these isolated reserves, Christian missions were established to bring the Christian religion to the people and to minister to their physical needs. One was established by the Methodist Church at Yirrkala on Gove Peninsula.

In the present generation considerable changes have taken place. Under the policy of assimilation the intention is that the aboriginal people should have the opportunity of living without any limit on the exercise of their Australian citizenship and on equal terms with all other Australians. For the sake of their advancement, more purposeful measures in health, education, housing and occupational training have been commenced. On Government settlements as well as on the missions, facilities and staff have been increased and the Government has helped finance the missions both with capital assistance and with subsidies for staff so as to improve schools and promote industry. With these changes in the manner of living and with the increase in the aboriginal population that has taken place as a result of them, one of the emerging problems on all settlements and missions today is how best to help the transition from a sheltered life on a mission to a full life in the general Australian community at the normal Australian standards. At the heart of this task is the difficulty of providing gainful occupations. If there is nothing profitable to do at home the up-and-coming educated younger generation will either leave home too early and make a mess of their lives or they will stay at home and rot in disappointment. In gardening, fishing, cattle-raising, forestry, production of aboriginal artefacts for sale and similar enterprises we have been trying to foster home industries at all missions in Arnhem Land side by side with measures for the advancement of the people. In these circumstances the coming of industry to Eastern Arnhem Land can represent a valuable opportunity for an advancing people and need not be a source of any harm.
In negotiating the terms of the mining leases we have kept in mind several different interests of the aborigines. Basically we have tried to ensure that no social evils will have a harmful effect on the aborigines either as individuals or as a community, and that the work of the Yirrkala mission, in sheltering, guiding and inspiring them, can continue undisturbed for the benefit of the community centred on the mission. We have also been conscious on the one hand of the need for ensuring that those of the older generation, for whom the ancient traditions are strongest, shall not lose access to their totemic sites or spirit centres; and on the other hand that those of the younger generation shall obtain the greatest possible benefit from any new opportunities of employment and training that may be created.

In the negotiations of the leases and agreements for mining development we have relied on the Director of Welfare and his officers in the Northern Territory, who are in close touch with the aboriginal people themselves, to advise us on what conditions should be imposed to serve the interests of the aborigines. There is not a single condition that the Director of Welfare thought necessary that has not been obtained. We have also been in close consultation with the mission authorities, who are perhaps in even closer touch with the people. I have personally had discussions with the General Secretary of the Methodist Board of Missions, the Reverend C.F. Cribble, and with the Superintendent in the Northern Territory, the Reverend C.J. Symons, about the details of the leases and on my last visit to the Yirrkala mission also discussed the prospective situation with the missionary in charge. Before the leases were concluded arrangements were made for representatives of Gove Bauxite Limited, the prospective lessee, to meet the members of the Methodist Board of Missions in Sydney to discuss all problems.

The Methodist Board of Missions has agreed to a statement of measures safeguarding the interests of the aborigines. It is of public interest to know that the General Secretary of the Methodist Board of Missions, in informing me that the board had accepted this statement, wrote as follows:

"We feel that there are going to be many problems, some of them perhaps grievous ones, arising in our work with the aborigines in this area. However, we believe that your department and the mining company have taken all possible care to safeguard the interests of the people. We trust that if difficult situations arise from time to time as the venture proceeds we will be able to reach amicable agreement on the best course to follow for the welfare of the aborigines."

In the same spirit, I can give an assurance on behalf of the Government that the care we have shown over native welfare at the inception will be applied at every stage of the development and in the handling of any difficulties that may arise. I should add that the representatives of the mining companies, both Australian and French, showed throughout our discussions an appreciation of the principles that both the mission and the Government will apply and a readiness to co-operate in finding the most practical way of applying these principles.

I turn now to describe what has been done.

First, an area of 140 square miles has been excised from the Arnhem Land Reserve. Excision was regarded as the most practical way of handling the administrative arrangements to be made both in respect of the mining venture and the welfare of the aborigines.
The mining leases, which have been granted over a defined area, contain provisions, inter alia:

(a) protecting the water supply of the mission;
(b) protecting completely the access of aborigines at all times to the leased land;
(c) permitting and protecting the access of mission staff and Government officers to the leased land to carry out their duties or to gain access to other areas; and
(d) enabling the Administrator to require the lessee to erect such fences as he may consider necessary.

The lease documents also provide that if, at a later stage it is considered desirable to move and re-establish the mission the whole cost of removal and re-establishment will be borne by the lessee.

A collateral letter accompanying the lease contains provisions designed to ensure that the aborigines and the mission shall participate in the benefits of employment and the supplying of requirements to the mining operation. These provisions include the training of aborigines for skilled labour. If the lessee employs aboriginal wards it will accept in principle the preservation as far as practicable of the family unit so that employees will either live on the mission while working for the lessee or be provided by the lessee with suitable housing units of a standard laid down by law. The mission authorities will in the latter case continue to have full access to the wards and their families for spiritual, physical and social welfare purposes. On the request of, and after discussion with the Administrator of the Northern Territory, the lessee will make available to the mission arable areas or areas of religious significance to aborigines within the boundaries of the special mineral leases, and if required will surrender such areas from the mineral leases.

The special authorisation of the Administrator will be required before the lessee can conduct mining inside the mission boundary fence or within a mile of the mission, whichever distance is the greater, and if there is any loss of developed land the lessee will either pay compensation or provide equivalent improvements on other land.

The lessee will, in consultation with the Administrator and the mission, make rules for the conduct of its employees towards the aborigines.

It will be seen that exceptional measures have been taken to protect the welfare of the aborigines and to give them a full opportunity to share in the benefits of the development. Our belief is that they will gain considerably in the coming years from the establishment of an industry close to them and that the younger generation, who are now receiving an efficient schooling on the Australian pattern, will find new and unexpected opportunities in the years ahead of them.

In addition, under an Act of this Parliament resulting from a Bill which I had the privilege of introducing in 1952, the royalty on all minerals mined at Gove will be double the usual royalty and the whole of this royalty will be paid into a trust fund for the sole benefit of aboriginal wards of the Northern Territory. At a conservative estimate, if the full plans for the Gove development are realised, this trust fund might well reach a total of £4 million.
In the immediate present, as an earnest of the good intentions of the Government and the mining company towards the aborigines, our officers are entering into consultation with the leaders in the native community at Yirrkala to provide some tangible form of compensation, probably in the form of a series of cottages to be built for them. This will be a witness to the older men, who themselves may not share in the full future benefits of the venture, that the development is intended to be for the good of their people.

When talking of compensation I think that in the interests of accuracy, it should be stated that the creation of an aboriginal reserve did not create any legal title either to the land or resources of that reserve for those living on it. Reserves were created as an act of policy in furthering what was considered to be the welfare of aborigines, in isolating them from the mass of the population. Our aim, however, is to ensure that any development of reserves takes place in such a way as to promote their welfare. For example, in other parts of the Territory we are embarking on planned forestry development on reserves so as to provide a future industry for the local population and, in yet other places, directions have been given that land with agricultural potential is to be held on the reserves so that when a coming generation seeks opportunity in farming there will be land available for application by them. In the same interpretation of the nature of a reserve, the double royalty is to be levied on minerals and the royalty, instead of going into consolidated revenue, will be paid into a trust fund for aboriginal wards.

There will be those who would argue that a new industry in Northern Territory with a potential investment of, say, £45 million and a great export potential is worth having for itself. I think that this advantage outweighs other considerations. I do not myself argue in that way. I trust that all Australian citizens will also agree, after considering the statement I have made, that in grasping this prize we have also been not merely considerate but scrupulously careful of the interests of the 450 aborigines who will be directly affected by this major national development. There will be a continuing need for care but it should be noted that the development will take place progressively over the years and that the full impact of change will not be felt at Yirrkala for at least seven years to come so that the younger generation of the people will be growing up with the Gove project. The impact of change can be harsh for any group of people. We will take the utmost care for the protection and advancement of these people in the changing circumstances.