Lake Tyers
and the
Aborigines
of
Gippsland

An article prepared for and approved by the Victorian State Executive of the Communist Party:

Pastor Doug Nicholls, possibly the best-known Aborigine in Victoria, last month resigned from the Aborigines' Welfare Board in protest against the plans of the Bolte Government to disperse the Aborigines now living on the Lake Tyers Reserve in Gippsland.

His action has focussed public attention on this planned final disgrace against the few hundred Aborigines in this state.

There is a popular belief among the Aboriginal people that Reserves such as Lake Tyers were deeded to the Aboriginal people by Queen Victoria. Unfortunately, this folk tradition has no legal basis.

British governments and, later, the Australian state and Commonwealth governments, have persistently refused to recognise Aboriginal ownership of former tribal territories.

Until the British came, the whole of Australia was divided among the various Aboriginal tribes. Subsequently, the British government seized this land by force from the Aboriginal people. However, some reserves were proclaimed, and the remnants of
The reserve at Lake Tyers was formed in 1861. At first the people were of local Gippsland tribes; as the land of other reserves was handed over to white settlers, other Aborigines were sent to the Lake Tyers reserve. However, due to intermarriage, it is thought that most of the present residents can claim descent from the original Gippsland Aborigines.

No Australian government, in the past, has attempted to return to the Aboriginal people or their descendants the land that was stolen from them.

The land at Lake Tyers is coveted by farmers, land estate promoters and others.

Should the Government be allowed to expel the Aboriginal people of Lake Tyers and hand the land over to capitalist profit-seekers? Or should the people decide that this territory is morally, if not legally, Aboriginal territory which should be recognised as Aboriginal property?

Big interests are seeking Aboriginal reserves elsewhere in Australia, and no doubt are anxious that Lake Tyers shall never become Aboriginal property, to be used as an example for restoring bigger reserves elsewhere to Aboriginal ownership.

However, the demand of the Aborigines for ownership of the reserves is national, and is gaining support.

Although anti-Aboriginal propaganda has confused many people, it should be clearly understood that ownership of the land has nothing to do with segregation, isolation, etc. Are the white people to whom the Boile Government wishes to hand over Lake Tyers going to be segregated or isolated? Of course not. Then why should the Aboriginal owners?

As a corollary, the government refuses to recognise that the Aboriginal people have any land rights, and it plans to dispose of Lake Tyers. It sees the Aboriginal residents of Lake Tyers as potential cheap agricultural labor.

Some well-meaning people regard assimilation as a means of ending racial discrimination. But as practised by the government, assimilation does not necessarily eliminate discrimination, in fact, in practice, by pushing the Aborigines into the lowest economic strata of our community, with consequent demonisation, the assimilation policy promotes discrimination.

In 1884, the Aboriginal Board declared: "The Board are unanimously of the opinion that all able-bodied half-castes capable of earning their living should be merged as soon as practicable in the general population of the colony."

In 1886, an Act was passed to exclude part-Aborigines from the reserves. Regulations included in the 1928 Act, which remained until 1957, stated that, "All half-caste, quadroon, and octroon lads on the Board's stations and reserves of or above the age of 18 years shall leave same on notification from the Board, and shall not again be allowed upon a station except for a brief visit to relatives, periodically, at the discretion of the manager of stations. In all cases such visits shall not exceed beyond ten (10) days."

In pursuance of the policy of assimilation, in 1898 the Victorian Board adopted the practice of taking part Aboriginal children from the reserves and placing them under the control of the Department of Neglected Children. This was still illegal until 1927. Regulation 12 under the 1928 Act reads: "The Governor in Council may, for the better care, custody and education of any Aborigine or half-caste child, order that such child be transmitted to the care of the Children's Home Department."

This applies to the enforcement of assimilation are well-known — demonisation and failure.

This policy of assimilation, together with continual discrimination and neglect, have produced the present parlous situation in Victoria.

A new policy is obviously necessary.

From overseas experience, caution is warranted on the economic development of groups and not merely individuals allows a stable advance. This policy demands respect for the Aboriginal people, their rights and their land, in place of discrimination and continual expulsion from the reserves.

For those outside the reserves, there should be a policy of proper housing in places selected by the Aborigines and close to permanent work, and not indiscriminate scattering of people throughout Victoria. Assisted education and training for both children and adults is necessary owing to the educational neglect of the past.

The policy of developing groups has produced rapid economic advance in socialist countries.

Also in many capitalist countries, e.g., New Zealand, Canada, U.S.A., the indigenous people have won the right to own part of their former territories. In the U.S.A., Roosevelt's Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 provided firm authority for tribes, not only to set up and run their own local governments, but to form corporations for business purposes. The reserves are owned by specific groups of Indians and are held in trust for each group by the U.S. No part of a reserve can be disposed of in any way without consent of both the owners and the trustee.

Eventually the governments of Australia must be forced to accept Aboriginal ownership of reserves.

In the case of Lake Tyers it will be necessary to decide which Aborigines will be entitled to ownership. In general, the present residents and any recently purchased of the reserve should automatically qualify, then others who formerly lived on the reserve and who wish to return should also be eligible.

There are about 130 residents at present, and it is probable that
many others would be eligible and desire to return if the reserve were owned by themselves.

For the community to be self-supporting, the economic potential of the reserve would need development.

A plan for development requires to be worked out by the Aborigines with expert advice. The first step would be to develop the resources.

At present, 3,000 acres of the 4,000-acre reserve is covered by timber. Scientific farming and cropping of the 1,000 acres of cleared land and logging and milling and eventual scientific farming of the timbered land, together with fishing, would probably support approximately 18 families of 72 people.

Until prohibited by the Board, tourist excursions to Lake Tyers were well patronised. If conducted by the Aborigines, these could be re-introduced as a dignified exhibition of boomerang, spear and weet-weet-throwing, combined with demonstrations of other authentically Aboriginal activities and artefacts. An admission fee would be charged. In addition, authentic replicas of the more popular Aboriginal artefacts could be manufactured and sold at Lake Tyers. These activities should support about 12 families or 48 people, provided the enterprise is well promoted.

Initial the Aboriginal people would require considerable expert advice and both practical and financial assistance, especially during the transition stage from the present incompetent management of the reserve resources.

Generalisations and exaggerations based upon the present attitudes and activities of some demoralised Aborigines can only serve the purpose of those who wish to take Lake Tyers for themselves. The Aborigines' alleged deficiencies, where they exist, are due to lack of training, official bungling and hostility, not to any inherent deficiencies.

We can be confident that given the opportunity to become self-reliant and self-supporting, the Aborigine will develop equally with the rest of the community.

The Lake Tyers Aborigines deserve our full support in their fight to retain their last reserve in this state and transform it into a democratic community.

You can help by protesting to the Victorian Premier against the threatened closure of the reserve.

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