

ABORIGINES

I raise for discussion the question of the stand we are to take on policy and what our administrative arrangements are to be in relation to the new Commonwealth power to legislate for the people of the Aboriginal race.

2. In our Cabinet discussions before the referendum, we decided, if it were successful, that we would have talks with the States directed to future arrangements. It was in our minds to leave responsibility for administration largely with the States - except in those areas of the Commonwealth Government where we have our own direct responsibilities - but with the Commonwealth having a role in policy in co-operation with the States. Our original purpose was to remove apparently discriminatory references to Aborigines from the Constitution, and not to wrest power from the States. We were conscious that our amendments in the form we presented them did provide the Commonwealth with additional power in this field should we choose to exercise it.

3. Since the referendum with its remarkably large "YES" vote, pressures have come on the Government from various quarters for a rather more active Commonwealth role. The pressures come from spokesmen for Aborigines, from some of our own parliamentary colleagues, from the press, and from the Opposition as the result of the special Federal Conference decision in Adelaide last week.

4. The most detailed representations from the Aborigines have come from Mr. Charles Perkins, who is himself an Aborigine University graduate, and is acknowledged to be one of their most articulate spokesmen. He sought an interview with me in New York because of a visit he was making to the United States and other countries to study how minority racial problems were handled by them. I told him we would be giving thought to the Commonwealth's role and consequential administrative arrangements. I invited him to let me have any suggestions he would like us to consider. In response to this he has proposed the establishment of a Federal Aboriginal Affairs Bureau responsible to a Minister and with access to funds for:-

- (a) the assumption of national responsibility for Aboriginal people;
- (b) the formulation of national policy;

and

- (c) the administration of Federal policy through existing State Departments.

He suggests also, the establishment of training centres, an education foundation, hostels, special housing, a sociological survey, and initiatives in land ownership and in health. He also suggests a non-discrimination provision in the Constitution. Copies of his letter are available separately.

5. Our parliamentary colleagues, notably Mr. Wentworth, have proposed new financial provision to the States, direct Commonwealth disbursements and the appointment of a Minister in charge of Aboriginal affairs. There are also suggestions from our Members on the one hand for a Standing or Select Committee of Parliament, and on the other, for a committee of the Government Parties. The press, as far as it can be grouped together, appears to argue for a programme of finance for Aboriginal welfare, and for a Commonwealth Bureau of Aboriginal Affairs.

6. The Labor Party has announced its intention, on reaching Government, to establish a Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

7. Also, since the referendum, a meeting has been held in Perth of Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs. These meetings have been taking place each two years and the regular meeting fell due and was held last month. At the meeting the State Ministers agreed on certain views which have been conveyed to us by the Minister for Territories, who represented the Commonwealth at the meeting and, in accordance with practice, presided at it.

8. What the State Ministers say, in essence, is that there should be joint Commonwealth/State policy responsibility, that administration be left to the States within the context of agreed overall policies, that the conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers be reconstituted as the Australian Aboriginal Affairs Council (with a Standing Committee at official level) and that the Commonwealth provide a small permanent Secretariat to service the Council and the Standing Committee. The conclusions of the State Ministers at the Perth Conference are available from a document provided by our colleague, the Minister for Territories. These are in the attached draft Cabinet paper. It contains not only the States' proposals, but an analysis of them.