



At the annual conference of the National Council of Aboriginal and Island Women; From left, Mrs G. Nicholls, Victoria State president; Mrs A. McGinness, Cairns; Mrs G. Briggs, National president; Mrs M. Jackomos, Victorian vice-president.

Women's Conference

DULCIE FLOWERS

Aboriginal and Island women have played a very important role in the advancement organisations and it appears that because of the very nature of the movement generally, little attention has been paid to the special needs of Aboriginal and Island women.

During one of the FCAATSI conferences, the number of women delegates present was noted and a meeting of women convened. Every woman present saw and felt the need to have a national organisation of women but the problems seemed insurmountable.

As stated previously, the women were already involved in the general movement. What was needed was someone to concentrate specifically on the job of bringing women together. That someone was Mrs Geraldine Briggs from Shepparton, Victoria. About two years ago, Mrs Briggs formed the Victorian Aboriginal and Island Women's Council which has functioned with success around Aboriginal affairs in Victoria.

The natural progression from activity on a State basis to

working nationally has finally occurred with the formation of the National Aboriginal and Island Women's Council.

Aboriginal women from New South Wales, Victoria, North and South Queensland, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Torres Strait met at the National University in Canberra early this year. The occasion marked the first official meeting of Aboriginal and Island women on a national basis, and the conference opened with the delegates speaking in the various languages of the groups they represented.

Conference welcomed the presence of Dr H. C. Coombs, chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, and Miss Brigellia Bam, a representative from the World Council of Churches, both of whom addressed the delegates.

Main speakers were Senator Neville Bonner; Pastor Frank Roberts, who spoke on Land Rights; Mr Lex Grey of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, on the establishment of pre-schools; Dr Diane Barwick, on the changing role of Aboriginal women in Australian society; Mrs Faith Bandler, on the participation of women in politics; Mrs Shirley Smith who reported on the Aboriginal Medical and Legal Services; and Mrs Sekai Holland, who pointed out the need for the participation of women in the Aboriginal movement. Representatives of the various States also reported on the living conditions in their areas.

One of the most moving reports came from Mrs Trindle of Alice Springs, who described how Aboriginal people

lived in the dry bed of the Todd River. Mrs Trindle pointed out that these people were in such dire straits that food, clothing, shelter and medical care were needed before anything else could even be considered. Mrs Bandler added that she had personally witnessed the horrifying spectacle of the flooding of the Todd River and the white spectators viewing the Aborigines as they fled for their lives before the onrushing water.

Mrs Smith's contribution on her work in both the Legal and Medical Services in Redfern was warmly received. During the conference, Mrs Smith also displayed skill in being "Madam Chair" for the first time in her life.

Mrs Amy McGinness, wife of FCAATSI president Mr Joe McGinness, and a Trade Union delegate in Cairns, spoke about the need for Aborigines to recognise Island people as being part of the Aboriginal movement, and described the conditions under which Island people live, both in Torres Strait and on the mainland.

At the Annual General Meeting which followed the conference, Mrs Geraldine Briggs was elected President and Miss Margaret Briggs General Secretary of the Council. The delegates representing the various States were elected State Organisers.

The conference passed resolutions concerning (1) the drawing up of Commonwealth Government legislation to preserve the culture of the Aboriginal people; (2) the employment of Aboriginal welfare workers in Victoria; (3) the granting of land ownership to Aborigines; (4) conference's lack of confidence in the Prime Minister, Mr McMahon, and Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, Mr Howson, and called for their resignations.

This report on a very important conference does not reveal the enormous amount of work that was necessary to organise it: the raising of finance to pay delegates' fares, the coping with the failure of speakers to arrive at the times they were due to speak, the efforts of one of the Victorian women who missed most of the conference because she acted as a chauffeur, and the 101 difficulties that arise in the organisation of a conference of this nature. Mrs Briggs and her group coped admirably and were rightly proud of the success of the conference.

Nor does it reveal the tremendous enthusiasm of the delegates, the feeling of unity that prevailed, the receptive attitude to every word spoken from the platform, the fact that some of the women were speaking in public for the very first time and being extremely articulate in putting forward the demands of the people in the localities they represented, and the meeting of people from interstate with not only similar problems but the same desire to rectify them.