

Future Policy for Lake Tyers Station

During library research over more than four years on the history of Aboriginal policy in Victoria and during twelve months anthropological field-work among Aborigines between October 1960 and April 1962 I have been made aware that the desire of the dark people in Victoria to retain and have free access to the remaining Aboriginal reserves is widespread, genuine and long-standing. The letters and depositions of earlier generations of Aborigines who protested against removal from Coranderrk, Lake Condah, Ebenezer and Ramahyuck proved futile, but are not forgotten by dark people living today. On January 28, 1952 the Melbourne Age reported a statement by Mr. Laurie Moffatt of Lake Tyers which I consider well represents the sentiments of a majority of Aborigines now:

We do not want to see Lake Tyers finally sold to the white man in the same way as Ramahyuck, Condah, Ebenezer Mission and Coranderrk Reserves have been sold. All these have been hostels for the aborigines in my lifetime and have been sold to the white man to cultivate.

Although the Aborigines' desire to retain this land has in recent years been given publicity and support by white members of voluntary welfare organisations, it is demonstrably untrue to say that their sentiments were inspired by political agitators or by confusion and misunderstanding.

The remaining reserves have come to have more than an economic value for Aborigines today: the threatened loss of the last remnants of "our Aboriginal land" signifies to many the Victorian government's continuing disregard for their opinions and their desire for some self-determination.

In the anthropological and historical study of Victorian Aborigines which I am preparing for publication I have had to state that throughout the period of European contact officials have rarely formally consulted Aborigines about matters of policy and have consistently ignored opinions expressed in informal protests. The Aborigines have been conditioned, by their own experience and by the tales of their elders, to believe that government policy decisions are both arbitrary and unpredictable and that their only lasting security lies in allegiance to relatives and friends. The well-developed kinship and community ties of Aboriginal groups have not been utilised in encouraging the development of self-respect and responsibility, but instead have been considered a hindrance to individual "assimilation". Neglect of Aboriginal opinion and attempts to ignore or disrupt these community bonds have produced resentment and distrust of government authority, and apathy or resistance to government welfare schemes.

Because so many can remember, and the younger people have been told of the removal of Aboriginal communities from reserves which had been their homes and the subsequent sale of this land, the remaining reserve communities are on the whole suspicious of efforts to move them into nearby towns. Because their occupation has so often been threatened, and because the reserves have been their only security in the face of seasonal unemployment and discrimination in times past, they are the more reluctant to leave voluntarily.

These sentiments are rightly recognized in the 1959 Report of the Aborigines Welfare Board. In discussing the question of whether the Board should adopt an active policy of rehousing Aboriginal families in new districts, the report says:

The Board has no power to dictate to them where they shall live, therefore it would have to rely for the success of any such scheme on the full co-operation of the families themselves. There is no certainty that they would take kindly to a programme of displacement.

To ignore this attachment to the remaining reserves would seriously antagonize a majority of the Aboriginal people in Victoria and make the Board's job of gaining their trust and co-operation even more difficult. To remove even a small number of Aboriginal people from their homes without their free consent would bring about strong opposition from the Australian public. The alternative, in line with the Aborigines' own preferences, would be some form of community development.

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reserves shall remain self-governing closed communities or become self-governing municipalities, open towns like any other in Canada.

A similar programme would, in my opinion, provide a satisfactory solution for the communities at Lake Tyers and Framlingham. Such a scheme would utilise, rather than futilely oppose, the Aborigines' well-developed community ties. The residents of such a community would be less isolated from desirable influences than many are now while they live in substandard housing in and near Gippsland towns. To win the confidence of the Aboriginal people, in the face of the suspicion and resentment which now exists, the supervisors of such a scheme would have to be carefully selected, and the limits of their authority made clear; moreover, a written guarantee securing the land to the Aborigines is a prerequisite. This agreement should be of such character that it cannot be broken, as so often in the past, should official opinion change.

A five year plan for improving facilities and living conditions at the reserve, providing vocational training and employment opportunities at normal wage rates, eliminating the special assistance and special restrictions of the present system, and developing favorable attitudes towards and acceptance of responsibility may readily be drawn up once the fundamental principle of community development is accepted. Advice and assistance could easily be secured from the Canadian Indian Affairs Branch, the American Indian Affairs Bureau, the Society of Friends (which has sponsored a number of successful village development schemes among American and Canadian Indians), and from Professor Sol Tax of the University of Chicago, the founder of "action anthropology". Professor Tax has already indicated to me that he would be pleased to recommend reading material and supply advice to persons interested in beginning such experiments in Australia.

Before this or any other proposal for the future of Lake Tyers is adopted, intensive research into the human as well as the agricultural and industrial potential of the reserve is necessary. The failure of several ill-prepared families to adjust to resettlement must be taken as a warning that encouragement to move into the general community is not enough. Officials must have a clear and sympathetic understanding of their aspirations, their actual knowledge of opportunities available to them, their insight into the habits and modes of the larger community, and their preferences in regard to family life and employment. Even more important, Officials need much more detailed knowledge of the behaviour and attitudes of white people in communities where Aboriginal families have succeeded or failed in settling.

Catapulting Aborigines from Lake Tyers, without real preparation, into ordinary community life is in a very real sense unjust, for failure will further increase their uncertainty and dependence and undermine their self-esteem. For many, perhaps a majority of Victorian Aborigines, their communities of kin and long-time friends are a vital source of security and reassurance, of undemanding acceptance. To go alone into the larger society where this acceptance is lacking, expecting (too often rightly) that white people will regard them with condescension and some wariness, if not actual antagonism, is difficult for any Aboriginal family: to go without knowledge of the housekeeping standards expected in normal housing, without practice in allocating their wages, being unfamiliar with modern amenities or the responsibilities of ordinary citizens is a further, and unnecessary, handicap. At present, the Board has admitted, many are dependent, insecure, and ill-equipped for resettlement. Self-confidence could best be restored by allowing them to practice, in the uncritical security of their own community, the habits and skills required of ordinary citizens; to build up, by the successful handling of small decisions, the confidence and capability required to ultimately manage their own affairs.

(Dr.) Diane E. Barwick,  
27th November 1964.