

Gove plan is 1788 colonialism claims Coombs

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The chairman of the Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr H. C. Coombs, yesterday compared the bauxite mining project at Gove Peninsula in the Northern Territory with the colonialism of the first settlers in 1788.

He said the Commonwealth Government, in granting a mining lease to the joint Australian-overseas company, Nabalco, had overridden the wishes of the Yirrkala tribe. Gove was on their tribal lands.

Dr Coombs said: "What happened in Sydney Cove in 1788 is being repeated on Gove Peninsula — not a story in the history book, but a living event in our own time.

"The Aboriginal community at Gove will deteriorate slowly into a depressed rabble of fringe dwellers."

'BROKEN PROMISE'

Dr Coombs said the Government had been dishonest and the company too hasty.

He was ashamed that the Government had failed even to concede an Aboriginal name for the Gove area.

He said the Minister for External Affairs, Mr Hasluck, when Minister for Territories, had promised to withhold the peninsula from development until it could be developed for the use and benefit of the Aboriginal people. Mr Hasluck had broken that promise, he said.

Dr Coombs said Nabalco would pay royalties at double the normal rate on ore.

The royalties would be paid into the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund, for use in projects designed to help all Aboriginals in the Territory.

Dr Coombs said: "This may seem fair enough in purely financial terms. But, in fact, it is the front of a human problem of frightening complexity.

"The Yirrkala people have no part in, or sense of identity with, the mining venture.

'ALIEN INTRUSION'

"To them it is an alien intrusion, already destructive of things important to them. They can see nothing in it likely to offer them benefit or opportunity.

"Unless we plan wisely and consciously to the contrary, the most likely outcome is a wholly white-owned and operated enterprise, with perhaps an odd Aboriginal employee at lower levels."

Dr Coombs said he was ashamed when he read a letter from the elders of the Yirrkala tribe to the Northern Territory Administrator's advisory council on place names.

The council had chosen Gove as the name for the lease area, rejecting the Aboriginal suggestion, Nhulam-buy, because it would be too hard for the white Australians to pronounce.

The letter from the elders had said: "As long as we have minds to think with, tongues to speak with and eyes to see with, surely there can be an effort on both sides to understand each other's language and customs?"

Dr Coombs said he was ashamed at this symbol of indifference to the customs and problems of the Aboriginal people.

He said all communications between the tribe and white Australia were conducted in a language that the Yirrkala alone had to struggle to comprehend.

There were no more than two or three people who could speak the Yirrkala tongue.

No schools or language institutions taught the language. Texts, dictionaries, records and tapes of the tongue did not exist.

He said: "A solution to the problems is not beyond the wit of man.

"But haste is all to the mining venturer. Every day, the facts of the intrusion are more apparent and the possibilities of benefit appear to the Yirrkala more and more remote.

DIGNITY

"The Yirrkala people are worthy of our interest and respect.

"They are able, self-reliant, and conduct themselves and their affairs with quiet dignity.

"They may not be able to write their language but they can use it persuasively and eloquently.

"We can help build a place for Aboriginal Australians in a society which is diverse enough, culturally rich enough, and politically wise enough to welcome them with dignity."

The chairman of Nabalco Pty Ltd, Mr David Griffin, would not comment at his Sydney home last night.