

Box 1585-P,  
G.P.O., MelbourneSTATEMENT ON THE LAKE TYERS GOVERNMENT ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENT

For some time the Council for Aboriginal Rights has been disturbed by reports from the Aboriginal people concerning the conditions at the Government settlement at Lake Tyers. With the permission of the Government Welfare Board, members of the Committee visited the Settlement on 2nd December, 1961, and report as follows:

Living Conditions and Housing

The Reserve of 4000 acres is situated in very attractive surroundings on the shores of Lake Tyers. Excluding Quarters for White staff, the Settlement has 30 huts for about 150 people. The huts are substandard and over-crowded. Some have two bedrooms but many have only one. There were fewer than 150 beds so that many either slept on the floor or several in single beds. The hygiene arrangements were very inadequate. The huts had no water laid on, and had no bathrooms or laundries. A community bath-house was hundreds of yards away from some houses and was of little use to families with young children. The people washed as well as possible in tins and used an open fire and a large tin for their laundry. Until recent protests were made, the family clothes-line was of barbed wire, the barbs being used instead of pegs. The houses had no kitchen drains and the kitchen slops had to be thrown out, soiling the ground. There was no garbage disposal; in fact no rubbish tins were provided. The toilets were of the pan variety and some appeared to have been recently renovated and painted; others were new. Flies were numerous but none of the huts had flywire. The houses had electricity for lighting, but there were no electrical appliances and the cooking and heating was done on wood stoves.

Health

The poor housing facilities make the maintenance of satisfactory hygiene very difficult. This has led to a very high incidence of infestation of intestinal worms such as ascaris, whip-worm and dwarf tape-worm. In 1957 more than half the children had ascaris, and infestation was still very heavy when tested in 1959. Children with ascaris exhibit loss of appetite and weight, nervousness and even mental retardation. Pneumonia is frequent. We were unable to obtain figures for incidence of illness from the Manager, but the Aboriginal people mentioned that intestinal complaints were still common, and Mr. Felton stated in 1960 that the infant death rate at Lake Tyers was four or five times greater than that of the general community.

Medical treatment is provided by a Bairnsdale group of general practitioners, 55 miles away. A doctor makes a visit once a month and only sees patients selected by the Manager's wife. In an emergency it depends upon the Manager's wife, who may telephone the doctor, whether a patient is sent to Bairnsdale for treatment. The doctors, being 55 miles away, seldom visit the Settlement in an emergency. This medical arrangement is highly unusual in our community whose members usually make a personal approach to a medical practitioners of their choice. We met several Aboriginal people with illnesses who emphasised the inadequacy of the present consulting arrangements. Tragically, one of these, Mrs. Harrison, has since died. There is a small hospital on the property but this was empty when we visited, and is seldom used.

Wages

The regulations governing the Reserve direct that all fit Aboriginal people should work as directed by the Manager who determines the rate of pay, which varies from 7/6 to £4 per fortnight. These extremely low wages are supplemented by a ration hand-out and an issue of clothes. Rent of the sub-standard houses is also free. The present practice should have the scrutiny of the trade unions, and it is very doubtful whether it is legal. The Government regulations state that award rates should be paid except where there is no industrial award or determination applicable to the work done. One young woman is employed as a domestic servant in the Manager's home. Although not paid, there is no doubt that industrial awards cover such domestic work. Similarly, farm work and other work about the Settlement must also be covered by awards. If so, the Manager and the Welfare Board are illegally frustrating the intention of the legislature.

No Workers' Compensation

We met a man who had injured his leg while employed as butcher and slaughterman on the Settlement. Although unfit for work, he was not receiving workers' compensation, and the Manager stated that it was not the practice to pay workers' compensation.

Schooling

About 50 children attend the primary school at Lake Tyers. Three teachers are provided by the Education Department. Only 2 children attended a secondary school in Bairnsdale, although others had reached secondary standard.

### Administration

Control of the Reserve is vested in the Welfare Board and the Manager. Old-fashioned restrictive regulations form the pattern within which Board and Manager must act.

The regulations assume that the Aboriginal people are unable to control their own affairs and must be ruled firmly by the Manager. They may not have visitors without permission, and, similarly, cannot leave the Reserve to visit without the Manager's permission. Although permission may be given, the formal procedure, by its cumbersome intrusion on private affairs, prevents the normal friendly visits and produces an isolation which can certainly allow the unchecked development of administrative abuses, hidden from the scrutiny of the community. This is further promoted by preventing the Aboriginal residents from owning vehicles so that transport to the nearest centre (Lakes Entrance) is difficult. The Manager is responsible for discipline and good order; to enforce his rules the Manager may impose a fine not exceeding £2, without allowing any defence. Until recently, no receipts were given for fines, which, according to the Aboriginal people, exceeded the statutory £2 on occasion. The Manager can vary rates of pay at his discretion, and also move Aboriginal people from one house to another. He also gives the police permission to enter the huts without a warrant. Until the recent formation of a Progress Association, of six men and six women, there had been no serious effort to provide the people with any influence on the management of the community.

### The Present Needs

From our discussions we learnt that an important section of the Lake Tyers people were anxious to improve their conditions at Lake Tyers. There is a definite lack of confidence in the present management. They stated that the work on the Reserve did not develop it and was inefficient and time-wasting. The Aboriginal people have no doubt that they themselves could manage the farming more efficiently than the present management. Many regard the Reserve as their home and wish to remain and develop a trade in souvenirs and a co-operative farming enterprise. They desire the Government to provide the usual community facilities of housing, transport, water supply, etc.

We regard the following as minimal requirements:

1. Removal of present management and vesting administration in an elected council of the residents.
2. The provision of standard housing and community services.
3. The payment of award wages for all work done and the abolishing of the ration system.
4. Adequate medical service; abolishing the system of approach to a doctor through the Manager's wife.
5. Payment of workers' compensation.
6. Provision of secondary education is vital.
7. Securing of the Reserve as property of the Aboriginal residents.
8. Technical and financial support for the development of community economic enterprises owned by the people.

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(Pauline Pickford)  
Honorary Secretary

### NOTE:

Subsequent inquiry has revealed that there is no award in Victoria covering domestic help, but a prevailing rate (of approximately 7/6 per hour) exists and is generally paid. At Lake Tyers, however, only 25/- to 30/- per fortnight is paid in cash to the domestic servant, according to the manager. The manager has also informed us that since our visit representations have resulted in garbage tins being provided. (P.P.)