

The Student Action for Aborigines group conducted a survey of the occupations and incomes of a number of Aborigines in the north-western and eastern coastal towns of N.S.W. Of a total number of 80 people interviewed, 58 were male and 22 female, which affords our sample a representative status, as a sample of 30 is generally taken statistically to be representative of the total population.

### 1. FINDINGS.

#### (a) Nature of Employment.

For males, employment was confined to the following occupations:

Labouring	Vegetable picking
Shearing	Milk hand
Train driving	Railway signalman
Pastoral work	Cane Cutting
Factory hand	Tobacco Picking.
Banana picking	

For females, the following occupations were noted:

Telephonist	Housewife
Domestic	Factory hand
Assistant Nurse	School cleaner.

As can be seen, the nature of employment is, in the case of shearing, cane cutting, tobacco, vegetable and banana picking, temporary. While the work which occupies the females is not subject to the vagaries of the seasons we found that 9 of our sample number of 22 were unemployed. Of the male sample we found 12 out of 58 were unemployed.

These findings point to significant conclusions:

- (i) That Aborigines have been unable as yet, in country centres, owing to lack of skill and training to emerge from the lower income and status jobs;
- (ii) That unemployment is high among females. This finding was supported by the assertion, by both Aborigines and Europeans in all the centres at which we stayed, that it was very difficult for Aboriginal girls and women to get jobs.

#### (b) Permanence of Employment.

Of our sample of 58 men, it was found the employment of 30 of them was permanent, while that of 16 was temporary, the rest being unemployed. Of our sample of 22 women, it was found the employment of 10 was permanent,

while that of 3 was temporary, the rest being unemployed. The ratio, in the cases interviewed is thus roughly 2:1 in the favour of permanent versus temporary jobs, when one takes into account that 2 of those counted "permanent" are housewives, and in receipt of no remuneration.

A ratio of 2:1 clearly denotes a high proportion of temporary work, another factor which contributes to the low income level and difficulty in finding a home, other than on a Reserve or Settlement, in country areas. It is, very often, the complete absence of income above that needed to keep the family, which effectively cuts Aborigines off from acquiring homes through the normal channels.

(c) Wages.

While some of the weekly wages were as high as £50 a week, for tobacco picking, £25 for labouring, £30 for pastoral work, these jobs represented the peak wages. It was more usual to find the wages varying between £15 and £20 a week. Where much of this work is temporary, the employee thus does not earn a wage all the year round, which considerably lessens his financial status. Allied to the appearance of mendicancy so often presented by Aboriginal families, are other factors closely bound up with kinship relations, thriftlessness, and an optimistic dependence on Government rations or relief should money run out. This however, should be understood in the light of those factors to which Government policy itself has contributed, and not laid solely at the feet of the Aboriginal, as being exclusively his fault.

J. H. Bell presents an interesting analysis of Aboriginal work patterns on the south-coast, which may lead to an understanding of the apparently irresponsible behaviour of many Aborigines. It should be borne in mind too, that the group as a whole has suffered from the application of the stereotype of shiftlessness to all Aborigines, and that this is by no means a fair one, particularly these days, when more and more Aborigines are seeking and holding steady employment.

"White employers on the South Coast, whether they have ever employed Aborigines or not, are highly critical of them as workers. Unreliability was the chief complaint against them. Laziness, drunkenness, lack of personal hygiene and other derogatory characteristics were also given as reasons for not employing them. White employers respect the feelings of the general white community and of their white employees."

"The Aborigines are said to squander their money and to make no attempt to save or invest any surplus. The money earned by them is, with the exception of the few fishermen and the odd farmer who have to

maintain their productive equipment, spent on direct consumer's goods. Large portions of their earnings are spent on liquor, tobacco, and entertainments, particularly gambling and films. Comparatively little is spent on material comfort. The pattern of expenditure in effect, does support many of the statements made by whites about Aboriginal spending habits."

"Little is spent on housing or household equipment and most dwellings have an indigent appearance. On the Stations, houses are provided by the Aborigines' Welfare Board with nominal rents ranging from 17/6d. per week to 15/-d. per week for three-bedroom and two-bedroom units respectively. However, the Board experiences difficulty in obtaining rents from many tenants. As the payment of rent is considered to be a social obligation and part of the policy of preparing the Aborigines for assimilation, the Board proposes to take appropriate action. Some residents at Wreck Bay admitted that they were over £100 in debt. One man said,

'We should get the houses free. I can't pay rent and keep eight kids when there's no work.

The lack of economic opportunity is undeniably one contributing factor in the rent issue and allowances are made for it by the Board, but the feeling of dependency on the Government by many Aborigines is very significant."

"To understand what whites refer to as 'reckless and wasteful' spending and improvidence by Aborigines it is necessary to examine the latter's attitude to money. Whites, in general, desire to acquire money as a means of providing security. But the Aborigines do not value money as a means of protection against economic contingencies, but rather for its immediate purchasing power. Premeditated acquisition and hoarding is alien to their value system. Anything acquires is either personally used or shared or given away according to acknowledged rules. As the Aborigine is not a ruggedly individual owner of property, security for him lies not in accumulated personal wealth but rather in the kinship system with its concomitant obligations. These kinship obligations have been kept alive partly by the economic vulnerability of the Aborigine (those in employment feeling obliged to assist unemployed relatives in some material fashion) and partly by the in-group feeling built up on the bases of common racial characteristics, continuity with a common past, contiguity, and racial prejudice. The knowledge that one can depend on relatives in times of economic necessity encourages the spending of money earned."

"Furthermore, the Aboriginal attitude to money is explained by the way in which the Aborigines have been made dependent upon government resources and the white community."<sup>1</sup>

Early in Australia's colonial history the Aborigines were deprived of their land and the natural fauna by the spread of white settlement. They thus became dependent upon government bounty and the white community. In this the attitudes of past governments have been at fault, though it is not unusual that they should conceive of their duty to the Aborigine as protection, rather than one of positive training as well as assistance to take part in the community. Labouring under theories of the racial inferiority of Aborigines, their conception of the Aborigine's role in the social and economic life of Australia, was severely limited.

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1 J.H. Bell, Mixed-Blood Aborigines on South Coast of N.S.W., pp.196-197.

"A third factor in explaining their attitude to money is the delay in introducing the Aborigines to a money economy. In the course of the acculturation process the economy for the coastal (and inland) Aborigines has changed from one of nomadic food gathering to one of credit economy whereby payment for work performed was usually made in credit against which goods could be drawn when required, and finally to an economy based on money, but still retaining traces of the credit economy. For example, in the case of Child Endowment payments, the Commonwealth Authorities refer each application to the Aborigines' Welfare Board for a recommendation as to whether endowment should be paid direct or administered by the Board on the endowee's behalf. Before a recommendation is made, reports are obtained from local officers as to the character and reliability of the person concerned to expend endowment moneys wholly for the benefit of the children. In the cases administered by the Board, orders are issued on Storekeepers entitling the endowee to obtain goods to the amount indicated. The comparative recency in which the Aborigines have been introduced to money has not given them sufficient time in which to adopt the attitudes of the white community."<sup>1</sup>

(When we say "white community" it should be understood that we do not regard whites as having a monopoly on thrift, or that we do not recognize that many white people exhibit the same tendencies to mendicancy and thriftlessness, as do Aborigines).

It is distinctly not a racial trait, but is a way of life, fostered by the three factors quoted above, kinship obligations and support, Government policy, and the recency of being fully introduced to a money economy.

## 11. ANALYSIS.

Enough has been said to indicate where the root of the "Aboriginal problem" lies. It is assumed that the Committee realizes that the above Analysis does not apply, by any means, to all Aborigines, and in fact, those who are economically self-sufficient have gone a long way to becoming "assimilated."

From remarks made by many white Australians interviewed during the but-tour, and on subsequent occasions, the dependence on Government unemployment benefits is one of the most resented features of Aboriginal life. Those who don't exhibit such dependence, but who live on the Reserves, because of family and friendship ties, fall under the general censure applied to those who are not self-sufficient. It is rarely recognized however, that the Aborigines do face serious economic problems, and that they are, in any case, entitled to unemployment relief, as are any other Australians who are out of work. Yet many persist in regarding the drawing of such relief as an irrefutable sign of the Aborigines' laziness and unwillingness to "help themselves". In many cases it may be, but such refusal to work,

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p.198.

(where it exists) and refusal to pay rents goes far deeper than mere laziness. There is a deep-rooted belief among the Aborigines, fostered by years of economic depression, and ungenerous handling by past Australian Governments, that the Aborigines have been callously and cynically robbed of that most vital source of wealth, the land. It is true, of course, and does no credit to our governments, either state or federal, that they have never made any attempt to provide any re-imbusement of land, as the governments of America and New Zealand have done, to the Indians and the Maoris.

Thus the modern-day descendants of the Aborigines of settlement days, have often adopted the attitude that "the Government owes them a living". Nor is this attitude unreasonable, when one considers that, with a shrewd analysis of the behaviour of governments in the past, they are never likely to get any land. Do we then merely scoff at this idea as "unpractical", "inoperable" or "totally unrealistic"?

Student Action for Aborigines suggests that if we continue to take such a line, there will never be any real basis of faith between white and black Australians. Such action has destroyed faith in the past, and will continue to obstruct white and black economic and social relations in the future, if nothing is done to atone for it. These are not mere "white hopes" of an idealistic pro-Aboriginal group. Such a course of action has precedent in the actions of America and New Zealand, whose history of colonialism is not unlike our own. Why should Australia be exempt from making such remuneration, even though it is belated? South Australia is taking steps to restore and develop land, to the Aborigines, through farming co-operatives.

### III. SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY.

- (a) That an intensive investigation be undertaken to explore ways in which land capable of development can be restored to Aborigines, where there are homogenous groups willing and capable, (or capable of being trained) to develop it.
- (b) That the policy of South Australia, in this respect, be thoroughly investigated, with a view to adopting such policy.
- (c) That under the State Government, attempts be made to stimulate opportunities for employment in country centres, by means of industry, where suitable.
- (d) That every opportunity be taken to house Aborigines in towns, where

they are willint to be so housed. As the Reserve system is broken down, there will be more pressure to learn the approach to economics which will ensure some tangible economic security and benefits.

- (e) That means be explored whereby rural co-operatives can be developed, as the social organization of the Aborigines is often particularly suited to such employment. The argument that such a policy goes against the stated aim of assimilation is a specious one. The economic self-sufficiency of an Aboriginal group is more likely to assist its assimilation, than its living together as a dependent group. With self-sufficiency comes self-respect, and a greater degree of admiration by the white community. However, while it is dependant it will never be assimilated. Better that a group should develop economically on its own, than it should not develop at all. Such racial grouping in business is not going to cut the Aborigine off from the social life of the town, and is likely to facilitate assimilation, owing to the attainment of an equal economic status.
- (f) For years "crash housing programmes" have been called for, to ease some of the intolerably squalid conditions in which Aborigines are forced to live, owing to not being able to acquire homes through the normal channels. This is generally because of sheer lack of finance, though in many cases is owing to their being unacceptable as applicants for Housing Commission homes. S.A.F.A. believes that every attempt should be made to encourage such people to learn rudiments of home craft and care, perhaps through the setting up of evening classes on Reserves, where people from adjoining shanty settlements can come, and the lessons be given by people for whom the Aborigines have a liking and respect. So often, in the delicate business of instructing people about basic home-care and hygiene, furious resentments are aroused, and little is gained. The fact that the greater parts of the lives of adult Aborigines have been subject to petty supervision and restriction, makes such a programme appear yet another effort to "instruct them for their own good". That is why it would be necessary to train Aboriginal girls in this kind of work. It has not yet been realized sufficiently by our government, that a very real "colour-bar" does exist between white and Aborigines, based rather on resentment of whites by Aborigines than on the fact of colour alone. For this reason, such work as envisaged above, should begin with trained Aborigines.