



THE POLICY of ASSIMILATION

*Decisions of Commonwealth and State Ministers
at the Native Welfare Conference, Canberra,
January 26th and 27th, 1961*



A conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers was held at Canberra on 26th and 27th January, 1961, to consider the advancement of the welfare of Australian aborigines.

The following Ministers attended:

Commonwealth:

The Hon. P. Hasluck, M.P., Minister of State for Territories (Chairman).

The Hon. H. S. Robertson, M.P., Minister of State for Social Services.

New South Wales:

The Hon P. Hills, M.L.A., A./Chief Secretary and Minister for Local Government.

Victoria:

The Hon. Murray V. Porter, M.L.A., Minister for Local Government.

Queensland:

The Hon. H. W. Noble, M.B., B.S., M.L.A., Minister for Health and Home Affairs.

South Australia:

The Hon. G. G. Pearson, M.H.A., Minister of Works.

Western Australia:

The Hon. C. C. Perkins, M.L.A., Minister for Native Affairs.

Tasmania:

The Chief Secretary of Tasmania, Hon. J. E. Gaha, M.H.A., was represented by Mr. G. C. Smith, Director of Social Services.

The results of the conference were announced in the Commonwealth Parliament by the Minister for Territories in a statement by leave on Thursday, 20th April, 1961.

NATIVE WELFARE CONFERENCE

Statement by leave by the Minister for Territories (the HON. PAUL HASLUCK, M.P.) in the House of Representatives on Thursday, 20th April, 1961

For the information of members and for the completeness of the record, I wish to present to the House an outline of the work of the Native Welfare Conference held at Parliament House, Canberra, on 26th and 27th January last.

This was a conference of Federal and State Ministers responsible for native welfare and the agenda was formed of items relating to matters which Governments handle in respect of the advancement of native welfare. In keeping with the custom of Federal-State ministerial conferences each participating Minister is reporting the results to his own government and the responsibility will rest on each government to make decisions on matters which fall within its constitutional powers.

The conference agreed on the following statement of the meaning of the policy of assimilation, to which all Australian governments adhere, and on methods of advancing that policy.

THE POLICY OF ASSIMILATION

(a) MEANING OF POLICY

The policy of assimilation means in the view of all Australian governments that all aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. Thus, any special measures taken for aborigines and part-aborigines are regarded as temporary measures not based on colour but intended to meet their need for special care and assistance to protect them from any ill effects of sudden change and to assist them to make the transition from one stage to another in such a way as will be favourable to their future social, economic and political advancement.

In making this statement attention should be drawn to the rather loose use of the term "citizenship" when aborigines are said to have achieved "citizenship" by being exempted from the provisions of special State and Territory statutes which apply only to aborigines. In some respects, the position is somewhat like that of a minor who is basically a citizen but who, because he is under the age of 21 years, may not be able to do everything that other inhabitants of Australia may be able to do, and may be protected and assisted in ways in which the adult is not protected and assisted.

In our view, Australian aborigines are Australian citizens by virtue of the Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948-1960. The special rights and disabilities which they have under State and Territory statutes can in no sense derogate from citizenship in the sense of status as Australian citizens.

In effect then, a person placed under the provision of State and Territorial Native Welfare Acts has certain restrictions placed on him in some States but that does not in any way take his Australian citizenship away from him, although it may limit for the time being his exercise of some of the rights enjoyed by other citizens and may afford him assistance not given to other citizens.

(b) METHODS OF ADVANCING THE POLICY

Secondly, the conference gave attention to methods of advancing the policy. They are:

- (i) Extension, where applicable, of government settlement work to encourage nomadic and semi-nomadic natives to adopt a more settled way of life and to make health services, better standards of housing and nutrition, schooling, vocational training and occupation available to them and their children, as a first stage towards their assimilation.
- (ii) Provision of health services including particularly child welfare services.
- (iii) Provision of education in normal schools and pre-schools to the extent possible otherwise in special schools and pre-schools for all aboriginal and part-aboriginal children.
- (iv) Continual improvement in housing and hygiene standards on government settlements, missions, rural properties, in towns and assistance towards provision of and training in the use of improved housing facilities particularly in town areas.
- (v) Vocational training (including apprenticeship) and employment, particularly in ways which will assist aborigines and part-aborigines to make a contribution to the advancement

of their own people by employment—teaching assistants, nursing and medical assistants, patrol officers, welfare officers, and so on.

- (vi) Encouragement of social and sporting activity both among aborigines and part-aborigines and participation by them in general community activity.
- (vii) Extension of welfare work, particularly to assist those people living in or near towns to adjust themselves to the life of the community.
- (viii) Welfare services provided for other members of the community to be available to aborigines and part-aborigines, for example, child, family and social welfare services.
- (ix) A liberal approach to the removal of restrictive or protective legislation as soon as the capacity and advancement of the individual makes this possible.
- (x) Positive steps to ensure awareness in the general Australian community that implementation of the policy of assimilation is not possible unless advanced aborigines and part-aborigines are received into the community and accepted without prejudice, and to ensure, as far as possible, that the Australian community plays its full part in this programme.
- (xi) Further research into special problems associated with the native welfare programme.

It is recognized that some of these methods may not be applicable in every State of the Commonwealth and that methods may vary from State to State. For example, in a State such as Victoria the need for all of those methods may not arise although in an area such as the Northern Territory we will wish to use every one of them, because every one of them is necessary. I am sure the House will appreciate the point that the conditions of people of aboriginal race vary very greatly from place to place in Australia, but the methods, the list of which I have read to honorable members, are the methods which the conference of Ministers agreed would best serve advancement of the policy of assimilation.

(c) FURTHER MEASURES REQUIRED TO BE TAKEN EITHER SEVERALLY OR IN CO-OPERATION TO ADVANCE THE POLICY

The conference also gave attention to methods of advancing this policy, to be taken either severally or in co-operation.

The conference agreed that, apart from measures covered by other items on the agenda, particular attention needs to be given to the following:

- (i) *Housing*: Notwithstanding the considerable progress that has been made, shortage of sufficient houses for aborigines and part-aborigines ready to accept employment opportunities which would enable them to take their place in the community is a major factor militating against assimilation. Special attention needs to be given to increasing facilities and resources in order to meet this general problem.
- (ii) *Transitional Housing*: It is believed that in some States there is a need for transitional housing for aborigines and part-aborigines who are able to accept award employment but require further guidance in home management before they can manage a normal home. Such houses may be simple in construction and established quite cheaply but should conform with local government minimum building standards.
- (iii) *Supervision by Welfare Staff*: In all phases of assimilation welfare workers must be available to assist the people in making the necessary adjustments. Personal contact and guidance must be continually available to each individual and family. In some States an increase in the number of welfare workers is necessary.
- (iv) *Welfare Work*: Aborigines who are deemed fit to take their place in the community must be provided with the opportunity by way of employment placement and housing to do so. They need to be encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities and stimulated to a greater degree of self-reliance. Welfare policy should be more strongly directed towards creating an interest in the new way of life.
- (v) *Education*: A major instrument of assimilation is education of aboriginal children. There has been a marked increase in the extent and range of facilities available and this trend should be continued. At this stage particular attention could be given to the extension of pre-school training as an essential basis for further educational advancement. I would say in passing that, if it is considered that a child who comes from a normal Australian home needs the advantage of pre-school teaching

as a preparation for further education, the need for pre-school education of aboriginal children who are handicapped in their homes is even greater.

In addition to the matters I have traversed, the conference of Ministers examined closely a number of other matters and I shall enumerate some of them. Attention was given to the problem of aborigines who, by moving from one State to another, may come under restrictive legislation. In one State, they may be free of restriction. They cross the border into another State and because in that State they are regarded by law as coming under special legislation, their position may become different. The Ministers agreed to confer with their Governments on any measures that might be necessary to overcome this problem.

The conference agreed that the extension of social service benefits to aborigines, which has now been in operation for twelve months, has worked very smoothly. There should continue to be close co-operation on the administration of social service benefits. In any case where there was misunderstanding, arrangements were made for consultation with the Department of Social Services. At this point, I should interpolate that the conference had the assistance of my ministerial colleague, the Minister for Social Services, in this part of its work.

The special problems of nomadic and semi-nomadic people moving between South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory were recognized as involving co-operation between the authorities concerned and it was agreed that a consultative committee be established. This is a problem affecting a comparatively small number of aborigines who are still in a nomadic or semi-nomadic condition and roam freely across the borders of those two States and the Northern Territory. We will co-operate to see that they are dealt with to the best advantage.

The Ministers agreed that aboriginal children should be educated in schools with special curricula and special teaching methods only for as long as the educational authority considers that they will derive greater benefit from a form of education developed to suit their stage of advancement than they would under the normal curriculum. Where such schools are needed they should be either conducted or supervised by the authority responsible for aboriginal education which in most States is the Education Department. Unless this applies, the children should, wherever practicable, be educated in normal schools rather than in special schools. This is particularly important for children in higher grades. Ministers from States where the schools are conducted by the Education Department emphasized that they

would continue that method. It should be recognized that already very large numbers of aboriginal children are attending the same schools as are other Australian children.

The Ministers paid a tribute to the valuable work the Christian Missions have done and are doing in education for aborigines.

Consideration was given to problems of staff for welfare work. The Ministers agreed that, while there are common elements of training associated with welfare work in all States and the Northern Territory, the recruitment and training of welfare workers is primarily a matter for each State, having regard to its particular requirements.

The conference considered the laws of those States and the Northern Territory which limit the supply to or consumption of alcohol by aborigines. The discussion brought out clearly that conditions in the States in which some limitation still applies vary greatly and that therefore a common policy throughout Australia is at this stage not possible and may be undesirable. It was agreed that the matter is one that should be decided by each Government concerned.

Consideration was given to further study and research in respect of particular problems that may arise in such fields as health, nutrition, education, housing and vocational training.

It was agreed that, while further research into health problems is necessary, the most urgent need in this field is to educate aborigines and part-aborigines in an understanding of the basic requirements of health—personal hygiene, preparation of meals, feeding of infants, and pre-natal and post-natal care. The Ministers agreed that the National Health and Medical Research Council should be asked to discuss particular fields in which further research should be carried out.

The conference considered problems of education, including the use of English in teaching, and the nature of the curriculum for aboriginal children in the process of transfer from settlement to normal schools.

Employment, particularly the types of jobs in which aborigines are at present engaged and the extent and diversity of jobs available now and in the future, was discussed.

The conference agreed that further research was necessary into the social organization of aborigines and the nature of social change. It was agreed that a number of topics should be referred to the Social Science Research Council which should be asked to put them before appropriate University authorities.

The Ministers agreed that Directors of the State authorities and the Northern Territory should keep each other informed on research projects on aboriginal welfare which are undertaken in their various States, and that the Department of Territories should consult the Bureau of Census and Statistics to seek suggestions on the way in which the State authorities and the Northern Territory might present the statistics in their report to facilitate comparisons, and the Department of Territories should pass any suggestions to the State Directors and the Northern Territory Administration. One of the difficulties and the cause of much misunderstanding in any public discussion of this problem is that figures which may be used by one authority in its reports are not directly comparable with figures which may be used by another authority. A good deal of misunderstanding and even misrepresentation occurs just because we do not have that common statistical basis.

The Ministers agreed that the discussions at the conference had been valuable, and decided to hold meetings in future at two-yearly intervals. The next conference is expected to take place in Western Australia early in 1963.

That concludes this summary of conclusions reached by the conference of Ministers. In reviewing the work of this conference—work which was essentially practical and was confined to matters involving Government responsibilities—I would suggest to the House that we should keep the matter in perspective. We are concerned with the problems of advancement and adjustment of a racial and social minority of approximately only 70,000 people in a total population of ten millions.

It is estimated that there are already—apart from these 70,000—approximately 30,000 aborigines or people of aboriginal ancestry who do not come under any form of restrictive or protective legislation but live like other Australian citizens. Where special legislation applies to aborigines only, it is solely because of a clear and temporary—I accentuate the word “temporary”—need for this in their own interests. Contrary to popular belief, the restrictions are of limited effect. For example, in three States that have protective legislation the persons who come under protection are fully eligible to vote at elections. In two States there are no restrictions of any kind. In all States and Territories restrictions are being lessened.

The recent conference demonstrated the strong and growing interest of Australian Governments in aboriginal welfare and the fact that a considerable effort is being made. Continuing changes in legislation and administrative practice have advanced the policy of assimilation.

While it is recognized that each State and the Northern Territory have particular problems in aboriginal advancement and that conditions differ from place to place the exchange of views at the conference was valuable to every one concerned. The decisions arrived at will accelerate the attainment of the objective of a single Australian community.

In conclusion we should emphasize, however, that although the Governments can do a great deal towards helping the aboriginal people towards assimilation, ultimately the success of assimilation will depend on acceptance of aborigines by the whole Australian community, and assistance to them in this difficult period of transition. At the present stage the most direct challenge comes not to governments but to the whole of the Australian community.

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