

CHAPTER 14

This new life made me consider my position in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. While I was on the kidney machine I often thought deeply at night as to what I would do, given my health again. I made many a vow over blood and agony that I must go all out regardless of myself and family, to do what I could to make things better for my people. I knew then as I awoke after the transplant operation that I was committed—all the way.

I then reflected on the past and present circumstances of my role in the Department. I began in March 1969 as a low ranking research officer. I was rather disappointed because there were lots of people above me who knew nothing about Aboriginal affairs. Looking back on it, I think that first year in Aboriginal Affairs was deliberately meant to humiliate me, shut me up and make me conform. I stuck it out and did the best I could. I had no experience with the government and yet I was asked things that were very hard for me. I was action-oriented, in terms of initiating programmes, getting out in the field with people, giving an opinion, arguing, discussing and helping people.

In the Department I worked through papers and memos which told me what to do. Papers told me when to catch a plane, papers told me to make a comment on another paper. It was paper warfare. It was difficult but I suppose, in a limited way, a good experience. I was working with an unknown force, sitting in some unknown office, behind some unknown committee members who were issuing orders that directly influenced Aboriginal people for better or worse. I felt the government decisions were generally for worse. The bureaucracy swallowed me up.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs could have done a lot for some of my people who even at times finished up getting killed through fighting in some Aboriginal camp or through sheer neglect. It gradually dawned on me that other government sections, particularly the Northern Territory Division (Department of the Interior), sat behind their desks and let people die because of their complacency towards the work. And I had to work with paper to even get at them. I could not even speak with them. I was too low a person in a government department to do this.

I used to find release sometimes in waiting for an opportunity to have my say in committee and I would blurt it all out in one hit. They did not always understand me or what I was trying to say: 'Like all Aborigines, he's too emotional. He can't talk about problems in an objective way. He has to get all emotional and blurt it all out. He'll learn, in another forty or fifty years perhaps. In another two or three generations, he'll be like us, very cool and objective.' Typical whites, I thought, always cool and objective about someone else's problems. They soon go off their heads if it really concerns them personally.

I was insulted on many, many occasions and they did not even know it. I had to cover it up by saying nothing and swallowing my pride. One junior officer said to me on one occasion in a committee meeting, 'Oh, the trouble with you mixed bloods is, you're not much good—you're bastards. You're the worst of both worlds.' This has been said by many people and has been printed in newspapers. But to have it said to your face over a conference table by a person half joking but really meaning it, in a contemporary situation, is a devastating blow. I did not mind the facts. It was the connotations I disliked.

I did not have much faith in departmental people in Canberra and I was greatly disillusioned in the first year. Many Canberra officers were cold, hard statues. You could not be friends with them. They were friendly if it was convenient for them, but if you were a threat, they would just cut you dead in an instant. I would sit with them and think, 'What kind of people am I working with? This is the worst bloody place I could have come to. These people are working on a significant human problem and look at the way they behave. They

don't even like each other. If they dislike each other, what feeling would they have for an outsider—an Aboriginal like me?'

I've never been one to make friends. Yet every friend I have had, I have kept. It takes me a long time to make a friend. I could not form a real friendship with many of these people in Canberra. I could not penetrate their armour. And still have not. I suppose this is the typical impersonal nature of the public service. I think it is one of the tragedies in the public service. Many public servants were not humane enough at work or in their attitudes. It would seem a good thing that public servants work elsewhere every ten years to meet the general public on a different level and to humanize them. It would do them personally a lot of good, their families, their work and the general public. Perhaps if superannuation benefits were extended to the public service and the private sector alike, people could move more freely. A lot would move out of the public service and make a great contribution to private industry if this were done. It would be a great boost for the economy.

As far as work went, my wife used to say to me in the first year, 'Well, are you doing anything constructive or meaningful?'

I used to say, 'Well, I think I'm doing something but I have a lot to learn'—a poor excuse on reflection. Some truth, but not much.

On the non-personal level it was educational for me to see how the public service operates. I learnt how to write letters, how to phrase letters, in other words how to kid people up a tree and deceive them. Some public servants are experts in telling people nicely that they are doing something when all the time they may be doing nothing. They say one thing and do another. Their words are carefully selected so as to confuse the reader.

I believe that the public service should be more directly in touch with the public. Government officers should be more visible. It puts them in a little more hot water and makes their lives more uncomfortable but I think the results would be good for the people. It is hard work for the public servant but it should be this way. Many of them are overpaid anyhow. There is great potential and good in the public service yet it is strangled by an outdated system. Public servants should be prepared to move around freely in the service—or out of it, as I said before, every ten years. It is good education and

would save a lot of money—and marriages.

There is no incentive for public servants to take initiative because they are often protected in their inefficiency or otherwise by a vast, overpowering bureaucracy. The system demands conformity and no 'boat-rocking'. It is a quite meaningless approach to contemporary complex problems in which considerable public feedback is necessary. Pragmatism and flexibility should be key points in any programmes designed to overcome problems, especially for social groups at a disadvantage in society. Solutions should be the objective of any race relations or social welfare programme—not continuation of problems over generations. The Aborigines suffer because of this.

The Aborigines are a unique type of people, with unique kinds of problems. Their problems are not solved by white officials sitting in theoretical judgement. That might have worked in the relatively leisurely days of the nineteenth century.

The Aboriginal people are used by white people for their own social, economic or political reasons. The political parties, especially the Country Party, seem to have a vested sectional interest in suppressing Aborigines because the land rights claims of Aborigines conflict with the interests of their mainly pastoral or mining supporters. Administrators in the Northern Territory had been won over to the big station owners' viewpoint.

When I came into the Department I said to Mr Barrie Dexter, the Secretary, 'I don't think you will ever beat the Department of Interior in the Northern Territory.'

Dexter, being new to Aboriginal Affairs, said to me, 'Look, Charles, we'll go about it this way: if we can't go through the front door we'll go through the back door.'

I thought, 'Yeah? You'll have a bloody hard job going through the back door. You'll find it's just as barred as the front door.' I did not say it to him of course.

I said, 'Is that so?'

He said, 'Yes. We'll get to these problems in our own way. Now, there are many, many ways of solving some of these questions of difficulties between departments. I think that good relationships can be developed with some of these people, even though we don't

like them, to achieve our own objectives.'

I thought to myself, 'Well, I'd just like to see if that will happen. I'll give you a couple of years to see if you think the same as you are thinking now.'

Sure enough, eventually Mr Dexter admitted that he was utterly beaten by the system and the powerful individuals involved.

In many ways, that first year in a government department was bitterly disappointing.

Throughout my career, prior to working in the Department and during it, I continually met very interesting political and other people. I get great satisfaction out of my relationships with some of the Australian political bosses. I knew the former Governor-General, Sir Paul Hasluck, quite well. He is a nice bloke in many ways. I used to enjoy having tea with him at Government House on the odd occasion I was invited. He knew me when I was a kid and I used to think that this was the connection between us more than anything. He seemed sad that he missed out on being Prime Minister. He would have made a great Prime Minister. He is a good person. The Liberal Party were stupid to discard him. He in turn was not 'political' enough to chase the numbers—like McMahon.

Gough Whitlam was always sincerely interested in Aboriginal affairs. As Prime Minister, he is coming out with good, strong statements on these issues. Around Canberra, he would often ask my advice on Aboriginal affairs and I would give it quite readily. He has a flexible attitude towards issues which I think is to his credit. That is how the man is in his temperament and his make-up. He is a brilliant intellectual and a very ethical man, like Paul Hasluck. Sometimes he tends to be a bit aloof but this is because he does not tolerate stupid people or stupid ideas. He is a humanitarian.

I suppose the greatest tragedy that ever beset the Liberal Party was the fact that Gough Whitlam never became a member of their party. If the Liberals had him today there would be no doubt they would be in power for at least another twenty-five years. If there is one person who throws an image out to the Australian public of leadership qualities, dignity and prestige, it is Gough. He will certainly keep Labor in power for some time to come with the aid of Bob Hawke, providing he can control to a reasonable degree some of their

excesses and incompetence. Not all ministers in the Labor Party are brilliant executives. The majority in fact are just average people doing the best they can in a most difficult situation—and that is a kind remark. The greatest thing about the Labor Party which will always be most attractive is their basic humanitarian philosophy. Gough complements this with his intellectual brilliance and prestige. He will no doubt be the greatest Prime Minister Australia has ever had, in its most difficult times. No other Prime Minister can carry Australian society through the economic fluctuations and demanding social situation that we have at present. I have always got on well with Mr Whitlam. He is a gentleman. The only criticism I have of him today is that he has become too much of a politician. I believe he is gradually giving the Aboriginal people of Australia the 'golden handshake'. He has lost some of his earlier enthusiasm for our cause and perhaps this is understandable considering some of the embarrassing situations we have placed him in via demonstrations and such. He may also even be losing sight of some of his ideals concerning our people. I hope this never happens, not only for the sake of Aborigines but for him as a man. He is great, but he could be greater. So long as he retains that personal touch and that flavour of humanity.

Then you see blokes like Kim Beazley (MP for Perth) who is a different personality again. He is one of the brains of Australia, I feel. He is very moral in everything he does. He was tied up with all sorts of movements, for example the Moral Rearmament Movement which a lot of people took time out to discredit him for. I thought that the movement had a contribution to make in some ways. It is not the answer to every man's dream but if it can provide a bloke with a good set of values and if a person takes notice of at least fifty per cent of them, he is not doing too badly. Dogmatism in any form is not always such a good idea but if some codes of behaviour have proved beneficial for today's living, then fair enough. Kim Beazley is also a very kind man. He has found his role as Minister for Education. He is very good in this portfolio. I do not know how he would have gone as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. He may have been quite brilliant, although he could be hurt very easily and that is not good in Aboriginal affairs.

Les Johnson, recently appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, is a genuine type of bloke—always has been. The same with Tom Uren and Frank Crean. Frank is a gentleman and Tom is a man's man. These men make Labor, keep its supporters and create a better Australian society. Key people.

I really liked Doug Anthony in the beginning. He and his wife spent time with my wife and me in Hawaii in 1967. When I came back to Australia I did not contact him for a while. When I got into the (then) Office of Aboriginal Affairs I thought I would like to see him one day. I went up to see him to say hello and have a cup of tea with him. I knew I was only a minor official in the office and perhaps I presumed too much. I went and knocked on his door and asked if I could see Mr Anthony for a moment.

The man said, 'Who are you?'

I said, 'Just tell him that Charlie Perkins has called and I will wait out here for a while.' I thought he would know me as a friend—a typical Aboriginal mistake with white people.

The official went into the office and there were murmurings and mumbles. The message came back: 'Oh, he's too busy, he doesn't know if he can see you today at all.'

'Well, I'll come back when he has some time,' I said.

'We don't know when he'll be available. You'll just have to try later on to see. Better still, make an appointment.'

'Oh, you couldn't give me a time now?'

'No, sorry, I can't. We're just too busy.'

I never went back. Nor have I said anything to him about it since. I was disappointed. He really hurt me.

I was in King's Hall one day to hear Senator Neville Bonner, the first Aboriginal Senator, make his speech on his election to the Senate, when along came Doug Anthony and his wife. I turned my back on them slightly. But she said, 'Oh there's Charles Perkins over there, Doug!' She came straight over. I thought that was nice of her. I was forced to turn around then. She was very nice but Doug was dead-keen to get moving. I could sense it in his handshake, in the look in his eyes, and the movements of his body. He did not have to say any words because I could sense it. Aborigines are very sensitive to these things. They know when people want them to buzz off. We

were talking for about half a minute and then they walked off. I thought it was nice of Mrs Anthony to show some recognition.

Philip Lynch, before he became a Minister in the previous Liberal Country Party Government, was the one who presented me with the Young Man of the Year Award on behalf of the Australian Jaycees, down in Hobart in 1968. His wife was also very nice and a real lady. It is difficult for Aborigines, for a bloke like myself, coming from the riverbank, with a poor social background, to be able to project yourself into a sophisticated situation and be comfortable in it. He and his wife were very good and made me feel comfortable. Philip is smooth. He was telling me then that he was going to stand for Parliament as a Liberal. I wished him the best of luck. He thought he had quite a good chance and he was subsequently elected. So I sent him a telegram when I heard about it. My wife and I were pleased. We felt closely connected with him and his wife. When he came up to Canberra he became Minister for the Army, and I went up to see him. Philip Lynch is a good bloke with a slightly dull exterior perhaps, but certainly very clever and a tough political individual.

I have often been asked my opinion of Steele Hall. Quite frankly, I have never but admired him for his courage and conviction. Very few politicians would throw away an extension of their time as Premier of a State and very few men would undergo the trauma that he has over the past few years to stand by the principles (and not only political ones) that he feels are important. I like Steele Hall. He is probably one of the few real *liberal* politicians in Australia.

Bob Hawke would be one of the most charismatic characters in Australia. He is a nitty-gritty man from way back. He clings to his principles with passionate zeal and often goes out of his way to the point of embarrassment to maintain his connections with the masses. He is a good man, a brilliant leader and a strong and determined personality. Everytime I see Bob I think of him as the epitome of the Australian man in every possible way. He beams warmth and cares about humanity. The only probable weakness with Bob is that he is often too honest to be a politician. I do not agree with his defence of the Israeli Government which tended to smother the equal claims of the Palestinian Arabs. Also his often

abrasive defence of unionists tends to somewhat betray him as slightly oneeyed. If Gough left the Labor Party, Bob should, and eventually could, take his place.

Dr Coombes has always been somewhat of a mystery man to me. He wears a number of hats which I don't think even he could keep count of. He is the economic phantom in Australia. He is a politician behind the politicians. He is a very difficult man to nail down to a strong opinion when it comes to the open crunch on vital questions. In Aboriginal affairs, in his own heart, he wants to side with the Aboriginal people but then his own political 'common sense' tends to caution him and restrain his actions. I have seen him at many demonstrations on behalf of Aboriginal rights. He never demonstrated openly with us but was always there for a variety of reasons. He wished us well but could go no further. We wanted to lean on him for strength in times of crisis, but how can you lean on a phantom? Perhaps his basic philosophy is that he feels the Aborigines must at first carry the fight and then he will support, openly and positively. Some people have said that he is an ego-tripper and not humble, but very arrogant. Perhaps this could be true, but it has not been my experience with him. I know he has fought for us at many a secret meeting at the very highest governmental level. The only unfortunate thing is that I find some contradiction at times between his ideals and the eventual results. For example, Barrie Dexter still remains the Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which would not be the case if Coombes gave advice to the contrary. Nor have Aborigines permeated the Department to the extent one would expect Coombes to feel satisfied with, considering his presumed philosophy on Aboriginal self-determination and decision-making in their own affairs. He condones the racist policy and administration of that Department and its officers. He still remains on the Council of Aboriginal Affairs which is comprised entirely of whites. This Council is supposed to consult Aborigines on their problems and then advise the Government.

I met the late Harold Holt when he was Prime Minister of Australia only once, and that was in the Waldorf Astoria in New York in 1967. My wife was with me. At the time I was sick and tired

of looking all over the place, getting bull-dusted by all the Yanks and the people from the Australian Embassies. I thought, 'I've had these jokers. I'll read the paper or go to the pictures or something. I'll go down to stinkin' Broadway. There might be a show on. At least we can get away from the smell of New York.'

I looked through the paper and saw he was in New York. I rang him and asked for an appointment. He agreed. I was pleased, as it was a most critical time in Aboriginal Affairs in Australia and here was an opportunity to talk with the Prime Minister. Anyway I finished up having three-quarters of an hour with him. I found him to be a tremendous personality. I really liked Harold Holt. I think he was a truly genuine bloke. I cannot say any more than that. Things coming from him to me—his eyes, the way he looked, the way he said things—I really think he had thought about the question of Aborigines and had a humane attitude. What more could one want? He cared. At the end of our discussion he said, 'Well, what do you reckon's wrong? What do you think should be done?'

I made several propositions right off the top of my head.

He said, 'Look, write them down point by point. Elaborate as much as you like.'

I said, 'Well, I'm travelling all the time.'

He said, 'All right, write it while you're travelling, as much as you can. Get it to me urgently.'

Both Eileen and I felt comfortable with Mr Holt and liked him.

He forced me to set out my views on paper. That is when I formulated my first rough systematic plan on what should happen in Aboriginal affairs. One idea was the Aboriginal Bill of Rights. All these things are listed in the 1967 *Quadrant* issue. Most of these objectives have, after five years, been realized.

Miss Ainslie Gotto made the arrangements for me to see Mr John Gorton when he became Prime Minister. She was really wonderful to me. I found her, on that occasion, a co-operative and nice person to talk to. A lot of people were jealous of her in the Australian Public Service. They found it hard to have a young slip of a girl directing them around. Government officials are used to shoving everyone else around. The people they controlled could not even squeak.

They either got the boot or got shifted to another department. Or were ignored.

I had a good hour's discussion with John Gorton on Aboriginal affairs. He was very interested in my views about race. I argued with him too. We had a cup of tea and we sat down and talked. I thought it was decent of him. He had all the big guns in the world wanting to speak with him and yet he found time to talk personally about these matters. I hope that my arguments helped him to be more understanding towards Aboriginals.

He is a bit of a hard-head. He has had a tough life and for this reason is not given to compromise in his opinions. In Aboriginal affairs or any other social issue this is not good. It has been his problem all through his political life. When he has made up his mind, he is uncompromising. That has proved to be his downfall. He had preconceived ideas about all sorts of things. I do not think you could ever change this prejudice. I have always been inclined towards Gorton. I have a lot of time for him then and now. However, I disliked the statements he made on the Aboriginal Embassy. He said some very nasty things. I have to admit now that in some things he was correct. The Embassy was a symbol for our people. True, certain Aborigines did not do the right thing. However the fact is we supported it and it symbolized many things for us.

I never liked McMahon from the moment I set eyes on him—and I still don't. I reckon he is not worth a bumper on social questions. He might be a political machine man but his whole attitude is not one that fits this present world. Twenty to thirty years ago he would have been right. In this day he has no place, certainly not as Prime Minister, and this is why I think the Liberal Party lost the 1972 election. He is out of date and out of touch.

I met him once in Parliament House when he was the Federal Treasurer. Sir Doug Nicholls and I walked into his office and wanted to meet him. He did not have much time for us. I thought to myself: 'What an arrogant sort of bloke.' I thought he was short, sharp and shiny. I did not like him from that day on. He would only be friends to his own friends. Mr McMahon is a bit of a snob. He belongs to the so-called society world of Sydney which I have no time for, so perhaps my judgement is biased because of this.

Dr Doug Everingham is probably one of the greatest humanitarians in a real sense within the Labor Party. He has depth and sincerity and compassion. People like him and Les Johnson, Gordon Bryant and Kim Beazley are people of great value to our nation.

The current Premier of Queensland, Mr Bjelke-Petersen, is probably the most unreal politician or man I have ever seen. He is a man of the past who demands that his wierd influence be taken seriously in Australia. It certainly is a condemnation of the ignorance and naivety of the Queensland people that he should ever receive one vote. I feel very sorry for him, and for our nation that such a man with outdated ideas can be taken seriously. He is the ultimate in paternalism, especially when he is dealing with Aborigines.

John McEwen was a bloke I liked as Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the Country Party. He and I and Sir Douglas had a good talk. However his conscience concerning the contemporary Aboriginal situation was nil. I hated his politics. Our conversation was interrupted by Rupert Murdoch, the newspaper millionaire.

McEwen was a clever bloke. He put on a front of innocence: 'I'm just a hick from the sticks—you can put anything over me' was the impression he gave. You could put nothing over him though. This act of innocence was an image that he always cultivated and he could not help practising it with us. His involvement with Aboriginal affairs went back quite a long way to when he was Minister for the Interior. He brought out a fairly progressive statement on the Aborigines when he was in that position. It was the high water mark in his dealings with Aboriginal people. His thinking stopped there. He did not catch up with the new race issues of the seventies in Australia. As far as his interest in contemporary Aborigines was concerned, he could not care one way or another. Nevertheless he was an interesting person to meet.

I have always liked Gordon Bryant. He was the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Labor Government. He was always friendly. From the beginning he went down well with a lot of Aborigines. He put himself out to attend their meetings. He mixed in. He is a slight paternalist in many ways. Yet, he deplores

paternalism. He is not sure of Aborigines owning land or property and being in a position to exercise initiative in terms of controlling large funds or property. He perhaps considers, like many Labor, Liberal or Country Party members, that Aborigines will either drink the land away or give all the land away. Like most Australians he is sometimes fearful that Aborigines will abuse the privileges given to them.

Although Mr Bryant is a political person you would never meet a nicer bloke. He was the best Minister for Aboriginal Affairs I have ever worked under. He was for us more than any other white man before him. Wentworth fades into insignificance in comparison to Gordon. Wentworth did not really care for us as a race of people. He does not like part-Aborigines—probably because they answer him back.

Gordon Bryant's big mistake was in four directions. He surrounded himself with generally the wrong people, who sometimes gave him disastrous advice. He eventually became offside with the Department and the parties then drifted apart. There was no communication. He was too sincere and believed in getting things done by Aborigines. He was ahead of his time and finally he fell out with Mr Whitlam on other matters and this influenced his responsibilities in Aboriginal Affairs.

Basically, however, Gordon Bryant is a good man and I now regret that he has gone. He paid his dues and he could sing the blues—in other words he's been through the mill with us over the years and he is part of us. We listen to him. Gordon Bryant is good news for Aboriginal and Island people. He is just about our man in Parliament.

In all my relationships with politicians and other people I have tended to leave myself wide open in terms of placing some value in such relationships. It is typical of Aboriginal people that we treat individuals who are very friendly towards us as close friends. Often we are doomed to disappointment. Aborigines often get disappointed in their relationships with whites. There is not always any great depth and not many white people make a sincere effort to understand the delicate Aboriginal ingredient in such relationships. It is our fault, I suppose. A white bloke says hello to us and we

immediately think, 'He's a good bloke . . . he is my mate.' I suppose Aborigines have just got to get used to this cultivated social practice. We still live in two different worlds. We have to change from one to the other all the time. The values are different. I have to really work hard at times to feel comfortable in the white society. With my own people I can relax.

I was therefore meeting people in all walks of life, politically, while holding down a minor official position in a new government department. I was always frustrated because things were not happening fast enough for my people but my health over nearly two years prevented me from adopting a more aggressive position. I had to play it cool for these years to protect my family and physically survive. I came under fire from my own people for not doing enough.

Following the kidney transplant, however, as I steadily returned to health. I became determined to return to the struggle in the power centre in Canberra. Nevertheless, I stayed on working in Adelaide. I was getting better all the time. I went to numerous meetings in Canberra with the Department and had many an argument with the people there.

I was back to the same old situation of never finding any consensus among the people that I was working with as to what should happen in Aboriginal affairs. They were all riding their own hobby horses, grinding their own axes and reinforcing the prospects of their own careers in the public service. The Aboriginal people of course were being left a little bit in the background. Every meeting I attended I seemed to have a blow-up with my public service colleagues on vital issues.

When Labor won the election I kept in constant contact with the office. It was not long before Mr Dexter and Dr Coombes suggested that I come back to work in Canberra. I was just waiting for the opportunity.

Other people were urging me to go back to Canberra because there was to be a reconstruction within the Department under the new Minister, Mr Gordon Bryant. Everyone was in a dither as to what was really going to happen. I made arrangements to go to Canberra just after Christmas in 1972.

On coming back into the Department in Canberra, it was plain to see that there had been a tremendous amount of new thinking in the short time since Labor won the election. A great deal of stimulus had been given to this thinking by the policies of the Labor Party in general and the new Minister in particular. Even so, there was some resistance to change within the Department. It is very difficult for some public servants to even contemplate doing things differently. They say they are liberal-minded and very flexible but they will adapt only so far as is convenient for them. They will change as long as it does not project them into a situation where their careers may be in jeopardy or held up to scrutiny.

I found most of the departmental officers in this sort of predicament when I came back and they were quite unhappy about it. They were happy at the thought of possible promotion. Aboriginal Affairs was going to be made into a separate department in its own right. That meant everybody would go up the scale in public service status. But they were not too happy about closer surveillance by Aborigines themselves or the possibilities of new thinking in the Department. The usual attitude was: 'Oh, the bloody Aboriginal boongs will be coming up here soon, telling us what to do. We've never had to face them before: we could always buzz them off or hide behind doors or send them papers explaining everything. Now we will be confronted by them. This is going to be an impossible situation!'

A few of the public servants were really panicking. Of course, this did happen, and Aborigines did do that. They stormed up to the office. After all, this was our Department of Aboriginal Affairs. They were throwing their feet all over the desks, drinking cups of tea here and giving orders there. They were asking awkward questions.

Every time a group of Aborigines rolled up a few of the Departmental people would freak out because they just could not cop the situation. It was physical confrontation with Aborigines who really had something pretty strong to say, and said it in very colourful language.

Mr Dexter had told me that I would be promoted when I came back to Canberra. He said that I would be promoted to a section that would be taking charge of consultations and liaison, between the

Government and tribal and urban Aborigines around Australia. I thought this was not a bad idea. I was interested in this field and I felt that this would be a significant contribution on my part. However, this promised promotion did not come easily. Let me explain what happened.

Immediately after the elections I felt that there was some funny business going on in Canberra, that certain meetings were taking place and things were happening that I did not know anything about. I thought that I should be involved and should know more about these things. So I sent two telegrams. One to Dr Coombes: 'In the re-organization I expect to be consulted', and one to Mr Dexter. I hoped that they would not get them until Monday morning. Surprisingly, they got them on the Sunday morning. When I spoke to Dexter he was absolutely furious. He was livid that I had the audacity to send him a telegram to question, to his mind at least, his integrity. This was where the break came in our relationship. I was no longer the messenger boy in the office.

I decided to apply pressure. The departmental hierarchy had listened before but only so far as it suited them. Now they had to listen and take notice, whether it suited them or not. They had to try and do something about the things that I said. The new Government twisted the whole thing around. It gave Aboriginal affairs a completely new perspective. If it had not been for the Labor Government we would have gone on in the same old way.

This is why I think it is a bad reflection on Dr (Nugget) Coombes. In the four years he, Professor Stanner and Mr Dexter met as the Council for Aboriginal Affairs while the Liberals were in office, only twice did they ever call me (for example) into that meeting. It was absolutely disgusting. Not only did I have a contribution to make in certain fields, but they never brought any other Aborigines in either! These three white men made all the decisions and still do. They thought they knew what was good for Aborigines. I was used merely as a symbol in much the same way as a gum tree is used for a symbol of Australian culture. We were picturesque objects for people to gaze upon in a government department. I could not see that I made any other contribution. They did not really want me to make any either.

The three Aboriginal Liaison Officers were a front like me and were turned loose like three cattle dogs, to roam the Australian paddock at will, to do whatever they wanted to do, any time they wanted to do it, with little or no direction or assistance from the Office. It is no wonder that what they achieved over the first three years could be written on the back of a cigarette paper. We were used as a facade. It has wrecked two of the four of us. We were their black messenger boys.

Once they (the Council for Aboriginal Affairs) asked my opinion as to whether they should resign. I said, 'No, you shouldn't resign.' I hoped things would get better. However, when they asked my opinion again after the Labor Government came into power, at a departmental meeting in Canberra, I said to Coombes, Dexter and Stanner, 'Absolutely . . . definitely go. You have no further role to play. The Council has outlived its usefulness.' That is what I said and that is exactly what I meant. Unfortunately the Council lives on.

Coombes was so busy he was glad to get out of it as a Council member but he wanted to stay involved in Aboriginal affairs. I think Professor Stanner was very hesitant. Mr Dexter saw his associates upon whom he had leaned for so many years being pulled away from under him. Henceforth, he had no one to lean on but the blacks! This was very difficult. This made it awkward for him. He had to turn to Aborigines and the Department for advice! One of the persons he would have to lean on immediately would be myself! This was not a comfortable situation for him to contemplate at the best of times even.

I was a very controversial and noisy character. I was very upsetting in that I criticized programmes already announced and even implemented. It would have been far better to have had somebody around who could agree with him most of the time. I meant to keep him on his toes, and through him, the Department.

The trio of Coombes, Stanner and Dexter were not very happy about it but I think they accepted it with good grace. They realized that it was time to rely on Aboriginal opinion. Not my opinion, but the collective and individual Aboriginal opinion. This is, I think, a key in Aboriginal affairs today. This is the only way it will go ahead.

One of the reasons I have stayed in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs is to see that this eventuates. I wanted to see Aborigines speaking for their people from their own areas, advising and becoming proficient in policy and administration matters. With the recent elections of forty-one National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) members perhaps this will eventuate.

Urgent departmental meetings were held on such subjects as 'What is going to happen in the Department?' and 'What is the future of the Aborigines?' I was quite forceful in expressing my opinion as usual. It was a good, wonderful time in many ways, to be there in Canberra and see some new thinking coming into the Department. The dreamtime of the old Office was over and it certainly worried a lot of people.

As it has turned out now, things are not really working out. I was promoted to the position of Assistant Secretary but events have proved that this has not made any real difference to the dreadful conditions of our people.

Yet I was approached by Mr Dexter who said shortly after the Labor election, 'We'll have to give you a promotion to put you in a position of authority where you can take charge of certain areas of Aboriginal affairs.' Obviously the department heads had a lot of discussion before that ever came to me. Who they discussed it with I do not know but obviously they had talked amongst themselves. Anyway Mr Dexter said, 'We'll have to get you promoted. But we'll have to do it pretty slowly because there might be objections.'

I thought, 'Oh yeah?' I was Class 7 in the Australian Public Service. Most of the people above me in the Aboriginal Affairs Department had never even met an Aborigine before. They had never had anything to do with blacks but they were my superiors. I was quite angry about this situation because some individuals within the Department had friends in high places who helped them to get promoted quickly. So when Mr Dexter said he would have to do it slowly, I replied, 'Make it as quick as you can . . . I want to be able to operate effectively. I don't care who is against me. If they can beat me in my job, then good luck to them! If they want the job of being in charge of consultation amongst the Aborigines, let them have it. As far as I'm concerned, Mr Dexter, I can do that job for you.'

I want to be promoted into that position right now! I have waited over thirty-six years. The Aborigines have waited for two hundred years to take command of their own affairs!

Soon after he called me in and said, 'We have promoted you to Assistant Secretary in the Department.'

This was a gigantic leap from my original position as a clerical assistant some years before. Nobody had objected (not even through the *Public Service Gazette*) or if they did it was not made public. I was not appealed against within the public service and thus in this sense alone I felt my promotion justified.

At last I was in a position to be involved in the decision making about Aborigines, on a government level. I hoped for massive changes in the conditions of living of our people. I was doomed for disappointment and, worse still, the people suffered on despite my efforts. The disappointments spurred me on to take more positive direction action. With my new kidney all this new activity was possible. Something had to give.