

# ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS POLICY

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER

The Rt Hon. William McMahon

TO THE CONFERENCE OF COMMONWEALTH AND STATE  
MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS  
AT CAIRNS

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*23 April 1971*

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I am sorry not to be able today to meet the Ministers responsible for Aboriginal affairs throughout Australia. It is, however, appropriate that I should take this opportunity early in the life of my Government to declare the profound concern I and my Government have for the advancement of Aboriginal Australians and our determination to move steadily and firmly towards the solution of the many problems which confront us in achieving it. At the same time I would like to give a brief outline of some of the principles underlying our policies and our administration of them.

I believe that the problems of racial differences and the evils of poverty, ignorance, prejudice and discrimination which so often go with them are among the most urgent and most difficult in the world today. At a time when the moral indignation of the world is directed at these evils it is important for our own sense of humanity and for our relations with the rest of the world that our determination to deal effectively with them in our own society should not be in doubt. While we intend to proceed with discretion and care, we will not allow prejudice or temporary financial difficulties to stand in the way of more effective action to deal with these intensely human problems.

Let me say a little about fundamental objectives. I do not like attempts to embody complex policies in single words like assimilation or integration, capable as they are of varied interpretations and acquiring often irrational associations. We believe that Aboriginal Australians should be assisted as individuals and, if they wish, as groups to hold effective and respected places within one Australian society with equal access to the rights and opportunities it provides and accepting responsibilities towards it. At the same time

they should be encouraged and assisted to preserve and develop their culture – their languages, traditions and arts – so that these can become living elements in the diverse culture of the Australian society. My Government's policy will be directed to these ends.

I welcome this meeting especially as a symbol of our genuinely federal approach to this problem. Aboriginal affairs is not a single functional responsibility like most other portfolios. It is a general care for the whole welfare of a minority people with a variety of special problems. Housing, education, health, employment, economic opportunity, civil liberties – the foundations of community advancement – are in their general aspects the responsibility of a number of Ministers and their Departments, sometimes in a State and sometimes in the Commonwealth. Aboriginal advancement must be built upon the same foundations. Hence I believe that, to the extent practicable, we should move towards devolving upon individual Ministers and their Departments the administration of those aspects of policies for Aboriginal advancement for which they are responsible for the rest of the community.

It will, as I see it, be the function of Ministers responsible for Aboriginal affairs, with the active interest of the Prime Minister, and in the States, I hope, the Premier, to develop policy, to co-ordinate different components of it, and to check up on its balance and effectiveness. Since responsibility for many of these components of policy lies in the State sphere we look to you to participate fully and to give to policies and administration a genuinely local quality and flavour. You may rely upon the genuine co-operation of my Government in your efforts.

In my own Government I intend that the Minister responsible for Aboriginal affairs will have my strong personal interest and support. It will be his task to work out, in collaboration with his colleagues in functional departments and with the Minister for the Interior, policies to meet the special needs and problems of Aborigines.

For this purpose I shall establish a special Ministerial Committee presided over by the Minister. He will, with the aid of this Committee, be concerned to present these various policies as a coherent whole and to ensure their effective balance and co-ordination.

In this work the Minister and the Ministerial Committee will be advised by the Council and Office of Aboriginal Affairs whose functions and powers I am taking steps to clarify and re-state. The close liaison which has developed between the Council and Office and their opposite numbers in the States will, I hope, be strengthened even further.

I have asked the Council, in consultation with appropriate Commonwealth and State Departments and authorities, to review urgently existing Commonwealth programmes for the advancement of Aboriginal citizens and to advise me through the Minister on a programme of action which can be put into effect progressively. This programme will build on the special welfare activities designed to improve the health, housing, education and vocational training of Aborigines now being carried out with Commonwealth financial support primarily through the States.

The programme will be concerned to increase the economic strength and independence of Aborigines by widening their employment opportunities and by assisting them into potentially successful enterprises both as individuals and as communities. Attention will be devoted to the search for opportunities for Aborigines in areas with which they have traditional links. For instance we hope, with the collaboration between the Commonwealth and the States, to find opportunities for them in conservation-type enterprises and activities which may include forestry, flood mitigation, rehabilitation of the natural environment and the development of national parks with special Aboriginal interests. But in parallel with these efforts we will try, by training, accommodation and placement, to assist those willing to move to areas and centres of greater opportunity.

Consideration will be given to an appropriate policy for Aborigines and the land, ensuring to continuing Aboriginal groups effective access to land for recreational and ceremonial purposes as well as for the development of enterprises.

I am happy to inform Ministers that discussions with the States, following the agreement reached at this conference a year ago to examine remaining legislation which appears to discriminate against Aborigines, have proceeded amicably and promise well for a successful outcome. Thereafter it will be our task, with, I believe, the support of the great mass of the Australian people, to move towards the complete enjoyment of normal civil liberties by Aborigines generally.

We believe that this will not wholly be achieved until Aboriginal citizens are given the fullest opportunity to demonstrate the richness of their own cultural life and its potential as a component in our general diverse culture. Consequently we intend to assist Aborigines to protect and develop their own languages, arts, traditions and general culture and to help educate the community generally to understand, respect and enjoy the contribution Aborigines can make to the richness and diversity of our national life.

Finally we believe that Aborigines must be helped to take an increasing part in the management of their own affairs. We welcome the moves that have been taken to develop State, regional and local councils and other representative and consultative bodies in Aboriginal communities and hope that this programme can be stimulated. There is scope for programmes of consultation with Aboriginal groups to be further developed and in particular for types of organizations to be studied which may build up decision making and action by Aborigines themselves. Interesting experiments are in process with organizations in community development and group economic enterprises. We will encourage and help their further progress.

My Government recognises that much has already been achieved in health, education, housing, vocational training, placement in employment and in economic development. However it sees continued and substantial progress in Aboriginal affairs as the test of our community's determination to end racial discrimination in our midst and to deal with Aboriginal Australians with respect, justice, humanity and compassion. If existing programmes can be built upon effectively on the lines I have described I believe we can achieve a break-through to a new level of performance. I welcome your collaboration in proving that we can measure up to this test in the eyes of the world and to the satisfaction of our own conscience.

I wish you well in your deliberations.