

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

BY



The Rt Hon. HAROLD HOLT, C.H., M.P.,

ON

ABORIGINALS—GOVERNMENT POLICY

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 7 September 1967]

Mr HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister)—by leave—Mr Speaker, I wish to inform the House of certain decisions that the Commonwealth Government has taken in respect of Aboriginals following the referendum in May of this year and subsequent discussions with the States. Before doing so, may I briefly remind honourable members of the two changes that have been made in the Constitution and the reasons for them?

Section 127 of the Constitution has been repealed. This section provided that, in reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, Aboriginal natives should not be counted. The framers of the Constitution had, as their principal reason for including this section in the Constitution, the practical difficulty of counting the Aboriginal population at that time. In 1900 this was a very substantial problem. Today, however, the facilities for including Aboriginals in a census are greater and the need for the section no longer exists. This was the first change.

The second change has been the deletion of the words 'other than the aboriginal race in any State' from paragraph xxvi of section 51. Section 51 (xxvi) of the Constitution formerly read:

'The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:

(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the Aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws.'

This part of the Constitution had been framed as a protection for Aboriginals but a belief had developed that it was discriminatory and, while the Government considered this to be erroneous, the belief persisted.

It was felt therefore that the words in question should be removed and this has now been done. One effect of omitting the words has been to confer upon the Commonwealth a power to make special laws for the people of the Aboriginal race in any State if the Parliament considers it desirable or necessary. This is what we call

a concurrent legislative power. In other words, it is now possible for the Commonwealth Parliament to legislate, but it does not mean that the States automatically lose their existing powers. There has been, and there is, no intention on the part of the Commonwealth that authority should be, as it were, wrested from the States.

The public voted overwhelmingly in support of these changes and the Government took steps to recognise the implications of that vote. In my second reading speech on the Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) Bill 1967 on 1st March of this year, I said that, if proposals relating to Aboriginals were approved, the Government 'would regard it as desirable to hold discussions with the States to secure the widest measure of agreement with respect of Aboriginal advancement'.

Commonwealth and State Ministers directly concerned with Aboriginal affairs met in Perth on 21st July for their normal biennial meeting. My colleague, the Minister for Territories (Mr Barnes), represented the Commonwealth Government. A wide ranging discussion took place on policy and administrative matters relating to Aboriginals. There was a general agreement among the States on their relationship with the Commonwealth in these matters and there will be, of course, further consultations in the future. A report on the meeting recently held will be made to the House by my colleague, the Minister for Territories, I believe at the conclusion of what I now have to say.

I would stress at this point that, while the Commonwealth Parliament is now in a position to make laws and to prevail should a conflict arise with the States, the Commonwealth does not seek to intrude unnecessarily in this field, or into areas of activity currently being dealt with by the States. There is a big variation in circumstances and needs of Aboriginals in the different States, as all honourable members who have made a study of this matter, will readily agree. For this reason, administration has to be on a regional—or State—basis if it is to be effective. This is the only practical way of ensuring that Aboriginals receive direct attention and assistance.

The Government believes that the needs of Aboriginals should continue to be kept

in their true perspective as predominantly social problems and not magnified or misrepresented to suggest that the problems are racial. The Government also believes that it is not right to say that the Commonwealth and the States have done little in the past for Aboriginals. A great deal has been done by Australian governments in recent years and I will say more on this point later.

The prime function of the Commonwealth, in the light of these changes to the Constitution, will be to carry out a policy co-ordinating role. The Commonwealth will not assume the responsibility for administration which is largely with the States, except in those areas like the Northern Territory where we already have a direct commitment. There will be a significant advantage in policy co-ordination and this should facilitate the sharing of experience by the Commonwealth and the States in the interests of our Aboriginal citizens. It will also allow us to keep the Aboriginal question properly in its perspective in our international relationships.

To achieve this objective, the Government proposes to establish an Office of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra. Its task will be to co-ordinate policy and to provide the machinery necessary for joint consultations as the need arises with the States and with relevant Commonwealth departments. The new Office will draw on the experience of the Department of Territories and have its assistance in any administrative support that may be needed. The Office itself, however, will come within the Prime Minister's Department. It will thus come under my own administration and have a central status as the Commonwealth agency co-ordinating policy affecting Aboriginals. This arrangement will facilitate communication between the Premiers of the States and myself on Aboriginal matters, and further it will provide a special avenue of communication with the Government by Aboriginals themselves or by organisations representing them.

The Commonwealth will make appropriate financial provision required by the policies and particular decisions adopted in the future by the Commonwealth either on its own initiative or arising out of Commonwealth and State consultation. We will also continue the present practice of making financial provision for Aboriginal

advancement through its Departments of Territories and Interior where our direct responsibilities are concerned and to the States in the general context of Commonwealth-State financial arrangements. Through the Department of Health we will conduct special health surveys and campaigns among Aborigines, as we have in the past, in co-operation with the States. We will continue to finance the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies through the Department of Education and Science. The Office of Aboriginal Affairs will be able to exercise a valuable co-ordinating role in all these matters. These Government activities, Commonwealth and State, have been strongly and effectively supported by church missions and by many voluntary organisations throughout Australia. This devoted work, I am confident, will continue.

The Commonwealth has already done much in its own right to advance the welfare of the Aborigines as members of the Australian community. I pay tribute to the States for what they have done in their own fields. At the same time, I commend to your notice the work and results achieved by our own Department of Territories which, for a number of years now, has accepted tasks beyond the normal limits of its responsibilities in Aboriginal welfare.

The Government long ago established a policy of assimilation as the proper policy for Aborigines. At a conference of Ministers in 1965, the definition of assimilation was revised to read as follows:

The policy of assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose—

I emphasise the words 'will choose':

to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community—enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibility and influenced by the same hopes and loyalties as other Australians. Any special measures taken are regarded as temporary measures, not based on race, but intended to meet their need for special care and assistance, and to make the transition from one stage to another in such a way as will be favourable to their social, economic and political advantage.

The word 'assimilation' is often misunderstood. There is nothing mandatory or arbitrary about it and it does not mean interbreeding with the avowed objective of eventually eliminating the Aboriginal physical features or Aboriginal culture. It may be that this will happen but if it does

it is a matter of individual decision and not of policy. Assimilation means that the Aborigines can be similar to other citizens, not, of course, in looks, but with regard to all the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. Our aim is to help the Aborigines to become an integral part of our Australian community life.

The Aboriginal population in Australia is increasing and some forecasts suggest that the number might double by the end of the century. The Aboriginal population in Australia is now a little over 130,000. It is made up of 44,600 full blooded Aborigines, 77,500 part Aborigines and 8,000 Torres Strait Islanders. There is, as honourable members know, the widest range of social levels in our Aboriginal population. There are nomads—a few only now—living an utterly primitive life remote from civilisation. There are some living a tribal existence and some living an urban existence. There are others at all stages of advancement between this and full participation in the life of the wider Australian community as fully assimilated citizens. It is wrong perhaps to put a money value on what we are doing for Aborigines but at least some figures will give evidence that what we are doing is increasing in scale. Last year the Commonwealth and the States spent \$21m specifically on Aboriginal advancement and this year the figure will be higher. Our own figure is significantly higher and we await the States Budget provisions, but we know they will be higher. In 1944 Australian Governments were spending just under \$500,000, so there has been a very big and important increase in expenditure—from less than \$500,000 to \$21m.

The Commonwealth has already provided \$4,500,000 for Aboriginal advancement this year—a 27% increase on expenditure last year. There are other less visible areas of Government assistance to Aborigines because, as citizens, they benefit in the normal way like other Australians from the services provided by various Government Departments.

In the last few years the Commonwealth, State and Northern Territory legislatures have been active in progressively removing all discriminatory legislation from the relevant acts of Commonwealth and State Parliaments and, therefore, direct benefits are not as readily identifiable as they were in the past.

It is sometimes thought that the bulk of the problems arising in connection with Aborigines will disappear provided money is made available on a large scale. This approach does not sufficiently recognise the fact that many of the problems are psychological and social in character and that the expenditure of money that is not directed to solutions based on assured practical foundations will not resolve, but may accentuate, some of the problems.

Assimilation as we have defined it is two-way, requiring adjustment in outlook and a sympathetic understanding on the part of citizens both of European and Aboriginal race in the community. In the legal and formal sense none of the oppor-

tunities open to Australians generally are closed to Aborigines. What is needed in many cases is help which will equip the Aboriginal, by education and in every possible way, and in their outlook, to avail themselves of these opportunities. To attain our goal, patience, persistence and understanding are essential. What we are doing will not mean that Aborigines, as citizens, will lose their identity, their pride of race and their culture. It will mean that, through successive generations, cultural adjustments will take place—as they do in every society the world over—and that our Aborigines will grow, without any enforced transition, into the national environment in which they live.