

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER

THE RT HON. JOHN GORTON

AT THE CONFERENCE OF COMMONWEALTH AND STATE

MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

AT PARLIAMENT HOUSE, MELBOURNE

12 July 1968



AS a result of the 1967 Referendum the Commonwealth now shares with the States powers and responsibilities for the advancement of our Aborigines.

In fact, of course, the powers of the Commonwealth are paramount in the sense that in any conflict of law its law will prevail, but there is no such conflict at present and I have every confidence that none will arise. We are all of us trying to do our best to advance our Aborigines and I believe that we can do this between us in an atmosphere of goodwill, and irrespective of whether we are using a State or a Federal power.

Each State has a different problem—different numbers of Aborigines—different levels of development—different priorities.

I take this opportunity of congratulating the States on the vigour of their approach to the question of Aboriginal welfare which has been manifest in their policies over recent years. We recognise this and are ready and willing to play our part, in full co-operation with the States, in the task of improving the pace of our advance.

It will be recalled that the late Prime Minister, Mr Holt, had already made some significant moves in this matter before his tragic death. He had appointed a Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs, and had set up an Office of Aboriginal Affairs within his own Department. It was as part of this plan that the important conference of Federal and State officers was held early this year to consider the whole Aboriginal situation.

At the end of February, I appointed the Hon. W. C. Wentworth especially responsible to me for the development of Commonwealth policy and its co-operation with that of the States and he is the Minister who will be working directly with you.

Leaving aside the specific Commonwealth responsibilities for Federal Territories I believe that the Minister and the Council, in their relations with the States, should seek to discharge three main functions:

1. To allocate funds from the Commonwealth to the State for Aboriginal advancement, using State machinery to use these funds for an agreed purpose to the greatest possible extent.
2. To gather information regarding Aboriginal matters (especially welfare) and to act as a clearing house for such information both as between the various States and as between States and Commonwealth.
3. Where appropriate to assist the States in the co-ordination of their policy and in setting the general direction of the Australian approach to Aboriginal advancement.

We propose to give the fullest co-operation to the States, and I am sure we will get the fullest co-operation in return.

Our ultimate objective is, of course, the assimilation of Aboriginal Australians as fully effective members of a single Australian society. This policy was enunciated by the 1965 Conference between the States and the Commonwealth on Aboriginal affairs and, from the Aboriginal viewpoint, there is nothing arbitrary about it. I think I should quote again the exact text there decided upon:

‘The policy of assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent 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.’

In other words, without destroying Aboriginal culture, we want to help our Aboriginals to become an integral part of the rest of the Australian people, and we want the Aboriginals themselves to have a voice in the pace at which this process occurs.

We will measure policy proposals against this objective, and will wish to avoid measures which are likely to set Aboriginal citizens permanently apart from other Australians through having their development based upon separate or different standards.

We believe that if Aboriginal Australians can be helped, and encouraged to help themselves, to develop their aptitudes more fully, to accept further responsibility for their own individual activities, to become self-supporting and thus re-acquire their dignity of life—that then they will be readily attracted to and welcomed to the assimilation we aim for. In this way they could contribute from their own traditional culture to the complex of influences so diverse in origin which makes up our national life, and, while sharing in this complex, continue to take pride in their own contribution to it.

However, we recognise that, despite progress over the last quarter-century, many Aboriginal Australians are subject to special handicaps which impede their advancement. We are ready, therefore, to support additional action designed to help Aboriginals overcome these handicaps in the transitional phase.

We propose to assist State policies directed towards these ends in three specific areas:

Health
Education
Housing

We have already had some information from the States on these aspects, and we hope that some general principles in relation to them will be discussed at this Conference. This will enable us to make definite arrangements with each of the States without delay under each of these three headings.

We recognise that the needs of different States will need to be met in different ways, so that a co-ordinated Australian policy need not be a uniform one. It is because of this that we feel it is preferable to make individual arrangements with the various States on the basis of the general principles which may emerge from discussions at this Conference.

After we have received detailed proposals from the various States, and after our own Budget has been brought down, we shall indicate to each State the way in which we think we can best assist and the funds available for such assistance. In dividing the available funds between the States, we shall get some guidance from the size of their Aboriginal populations, although we may not always conform strictly to this rule.

Any amounts contributed by the Commonwealth will be in addition to the normal annual allocations made at Premiers' Conferences and Loan Councils, but we expect any Commonwealth assistance to be a net addition to and not in substitution for any amount which would otherwise be spent by a State upon Aboriginal welfare. And this will be a condition of the grant.

While we believe that the major part of the application of this welfare policy within each State should be done by the State Administration concerned, this does not preclude the possibility of some independent Commonwealth action. Clearly, in any such instance, we shall consult the States concerned before we undertake any such measures within their boundaries.

It is clear that our Aboriginal population is now not only increasing, but is also increasing at a faster rate than the Australian average. Unhappily, the additional population is not yet self-supporting, but remains in large part dependent upon charity, Social Service benefits and similar benefits. The continuance of such a state of affairs is obviously incompatible with the general concept of Aboriginal dignity which we all seek to foster. It should be a primary aim of our policy to make our Aboriginals self-supporting as fully and as quickly as possible. They are entitled to have the opportunity to attain their economic independence. And indeed effective assimilation is dependent upon Aboriginal citizens being able to stand on their own feet.

We are aware of, and welcome, the interest both of the States and of Church and other organisations working towards this objective, and we propose to reinforce what they are doing.

We have therefore approved in principle the provision of a Fund for special assistance, including capital funds, for potentially viable enterprises to be established for or by Aboriginals either individually or co-operatively. Provision of such funds will not, of course, be unlimited or indiscriminate, and we shall be glad of any comments which this conference may make upon the way in which we should administer them. In due course we would hope to obtain advice and help from the appropriate State authorities before approving any particular projects within their boundaries.

This capital assistance will be available on an Australia-wide basis, and will be controlled by the Commonwealth through its Office of Aboriginal Affairs. We regard this proposal as an essential part of our policy of assisting our Aborigines to become self-supporting, whether it be in the field of primary or secondary industry. In parallel with this, the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service will undertake detailed surveys of employment opportunities for Aborigines and of the necessary measures to expand them and to provide incentives for Aborigines to take them up. In this, we shall hope to work with the fullest co-operation of the corresponding State machinery.

In short, we propose to apply ourselves constructively to the task of Aboriginal advancement, with special emphasis upon making our Aboriginal citizens independent. We shall rely very largely upon the State administrations and we are ready to receive and evaluate any suggestions which the States may make to us, either at this conference or subsequently.

Over the short term, the kind of proposals we envisage will undoubtedly increase our outlay upon Aboriginal welfare, but in proportion as our policy succeeds (and I believe, between us, it has every chance of success) our outlay will diminish. In spite of the extra outlay initially involved, I consider this policy to be not just an extension of the 'hand-out' principle, but in fact the very antithesis.

Finally, may I add that we have noted the efforts being made by the States to involve Aborigines themselves in the administration of their own affairs and in the exercise of proper authority among their own people. This is also an essential part of restoring Aboriginal motivation. We welcome these efforts, and will ourselves emulate them.

We feel too that this Conference should now be established on an annual basis, and the Commonwealth would be pleased next year to act as the host for it, should this Conference decide that that is what they wish.