

MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS
Statement by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon

In my statement to the meeting of Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs in Cairns on 23rd April 1971 I said that I would establish within the Commonwealth a Ministerial Committee to assist the Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs to develop and co-ordinate policies for Aboriginal advancement and to prepare material dealing with these policies for Government decision.

The Committee, which will commence work as soon as possible, will comprise :

The Minister responsible for Aboriginal Affairs;
The Treasurer;
The Minister for Foreign Affairs;
The Attorney-General;
The Minister for the Interior;
The Postmaster-General;
The Minister for Social Services.

Other Ministers including the Ministers for Health, Housing, Education and Science, and Labour and National Service, will join the Committee when matters for which they are responsible are under review. The Committee will be assisted by the Council and Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

The Committee will take into account the policies and programmes in operation in the Northern Territory which are comprehensive and impressive and which it is important should be more generally known.

The Committee will review urgently Commonwealth programmes for the advancement of Aboriginal citizens. These programmes will include those which are carried out by the Commonwealth on an Australia-wide basis or in the Northern Territory as well as Commonwealth financial support for State programmes. The Committee will report to the Government progressively.

There are some aspects of this question on which it would be inappropriate for me to comment until the question of a possible appeal in the Yirrkala Land Case is determined. In the meantime the Government has decided that if an appeal is made it will meet the legal costs of the appellants.

In the Northern Territory areas totalling 94,000 square miles are reserved for Aborigines. Special legislative provision has been made for pastoral and agricultural leases within these Reserves for Aborigines only and a considerable number of applications for these and other purposes has been received. They will be considered by a specially constituted Land Board with Aboriginal members appropriate to the localities concerned.

Financial assistance is also available to help Aborigines in agricultural or pastoral activities and business ventures such as timber, fisheries and various commercial projects. The work of delineating areas of ceremonial or traditional interest to Aborigines is proceeding and a number of these places will shortly be declared for protection under law. Consideration is also being given to setting aside certain areas associated with hunting, foraging or recreation e.g. at Gove and Groote Eylandt. It is impossible to summarise adequately the range of policies and action taken and I have asked the Minister for the Interior to elaborate on them in a statement he will issue shortly.

The Committee has been asked to consider whether changes in or developments of policy in the Northern Territory are desirable in relation to -

- (a) protection of lands reserved for the use and benefit of Aborigines and within such lands
 - (i) ensuring continuing groups of Aborigines the use of land for ceremonial, religious or recreational purposes
 - (ii) making available on appropriate tenure to individual Aborigines and groups of Aborigines land necessary for the conduct of commercial enterprises.
- (b) setting up an Aboriginal Land Fund to acquire land coming on the market in the Northern Territory which can be made available on appropriate tenure to Aboriginal groups for commercial enterprises and other purposes.
- (c) ensuring that subject to the requirements of national development Aborigines on lands reserved for their use and benefit will be given
 - (i) reasonable preference in mineral prospecting and exploration and
 - (ii) the opportunity to participate effectively in mining and related developments.
- (d) supporting commercial enterprises which have reasonable prospects of success on land held by Aboriginal communities (particularly where they are isolated and without alternative opportunities) by grants from the Aboriginal Advancement Trust Account as well as by loans from the Capital Fund for Aboriginal Enterprises.

I do not wish to anticipate the recommendations of the Ministerial Committee or decisions in relation to them but I repeat what I said at Cairns that it is my Government's intention to build effectively upon existing programmes both in its own fields of responsibility and in collaboration with the States so as to achieve a breakthrough to a new level of achievement in the advancement of Aboriginal citizens.