

6 April 1973

ABORIGINALS AND SOCIETY

Statement by the Prime Minister, the
Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P.,
circulated to a conference of Commonwealth and State
Ministers concerned with Aboriginal Affairs in Adelaide,
Friday, 6 April, 1973

The referendum of 1967, by an overwhelming majority, gave to the Commonwealth concurrent powers with the States in respect of Aborigines. The constitution provides that in matters where concurrent powers are held Commonwealth legislation will prevail. It is my Government's belief that Aboriginal Affairs is a matter of national concern, requires the exercise of the fullest range of legislative, executive and financial powers, and represents in the eyes of the world a test of the integrity and humanity of the whole people of Australia. My Government intends therefore to assume full responsibility for policy and finance in respect of Aboriginal Affairs and will take any necessary legislative action to this end.

At the same time, my Government is convinced that, in formulating and giving effect to its responsibility, it must draw upon the knowledge, experience and services of all sections of Government. It will not therefore aim to establish an omnibus Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs. It will instead seek to devolve upon a wide range of Commonwealth, State and local authorities, as well as upon organisations of Aborigines themselves, responsibility for carrying out the policies decided upon by my Government. These authorities would be responsible for Aborigines in the same matters and in the same way as they now are functionally responsible for the community generally.

We have already taken some steps towards a rationalisation of our own administration of Aboriginal Affairs in the Northern Territory by combining the former Office of Aboriginal Affairs and Welfare Division of the Northern Territory Administration and by transferring responsibility for Aboriginal health and education to the Ministers for health and education. Further transfers of functional responsibilities will be arranged. I believe that we have already made significant progress in rationalising the administrative structure and welding into a single unit those responsible for the initiation of planning and policy proposals.

In matters of State constitutional responsibility such as health, education and so on, my Government will be seeking the help of all State Ministers and their Departments both in assisting the Commonwealth Minister and Department of Aboriginal Affairs to formulate appropriate policies and in giving effect to them within their State jurisdiction. I hope that Ministers will collaborate with us in the next few months to enable their officials to confer with ours to work out the most effective means of putting this plan into operation.

The basic object of my Government's policy is to restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. Bryant, will be introducing into Parliament, I hope during the budget session, legislation to enable Aboriginal groups and communities to incorporate for the conduct of their own affairs. We see these incorporated societies, set up for purposes chosen by their Aboriginal members, determining their own decision-making processes, choosing their own leaders and executives in ways they will themselves decide, as the primary instruments of Aboriginal authority at the local and community level.

The Government will also set up, on the advice of Aboriginals, procedures for the election of freely-chosen Aboriginal representatives from the various regions of Aboriginal population to form a consultative council with which the Government will confer on matters affecting Aboriginals. Mr. Bryant has already convened initial meetings towards the establishment of this body.

Traditional Aboriginal societies have had close associations with specific areas of land, and there are many Aboriginal communities which have maintained that association substantially unbroken. In respect of land reserved for Aboriginal use and benefit it is the firm policy of the Government to vest such lands in the Aboriginals, as far as practicable in ways which accord with traditional Aboriginal law and practice. Mr. Justice E.A. Woodward has been commissioned to confer with Aboriginal communities concerned and to advise the legislative and administrative actions required. His enquiry will also, of course, extend to land outside reserves. The Government will await with interest his recommendations in respect of those situations where traditional association can be established for such land outside reserves.

In the meantime, my Government plans, as opportunity offers, to purchase or acquire land which it will vest in the resident Aboriginal communities and you will be aware that it has undertaken to provide \$5 million per year for the next 10 years for this purpose. In this way my Government hopes to restore as far as possible the traditional association of Aboriginal communities with their land and also provide them with a base for their economic and social development.

This policy of re-establishing the traditional association of Aboriginal communities with the land is linked with support for the preservation and development of Aboriginal languages and culture generally. A start has already been made in basing education of Aborigines on literacy first in their own tribal tongue. Increasing support will be given to the Aboriginal arts and Aboriginals will be helped where they wish to do so to maintain the active ceremonial life on which these arts were traditionally based.

An opportunity for self-determination and independent action would serve little purpose if Aboriginals continued to be economically and socially deprived. The Government therefore plans to help them as individuals, groups or communities, in crafts, trades and professions and as business entrepreneurs. To this end programs of socially valuable special work projects, vocational training and grants and loans in support of enterprises, will be actively promoted.

More generally, my Government is anxious that 200 years of despoliation, injustice and discrimination have seriously damaged and demoralised the once proud Aboriginal people. The Government, on behalf of the Australian people, accepts responsibility for their active and progressive rehabilitation.

We will legislate to outlaw all forms of discrimination and will allocate greatly increased resources to overcome the handicaps under which Aboriginals now labour and to improve their health and capacity generally. We will not rest until they have taken up, as a distinctive and honoured component in the Australian society, the position to which their rights as the first Australians entitle them.
