



The making of a tragedy

WHEN ENGLISH COLONISATION began in Australia in 1788 there were already at least three distinct ethnographical groups inhabiting the continent and the nearby islands. They came to be known as the Torres Strait Islanders, the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigines.

Geographically isolated from the main areas of human progress, these peoples had nevertheless developed, on the basis of simple communal economies, highly complex and intricate human cultures, still of tremendous importance to mankind and studied as such by scientists and artists.

The lack of grain crops suitable for agriculture and of native animals suitable for domestication in Australia prevented the development of the pastoral and agricultural pursuits which formed the basis for economic advance in other continents.

The English colonists, products of a rising capitalist system, paid scant regard to the rights or needs of the Aboriginal population.

In particular, the drive for land cut across the Aborigines' occupation of their tribal territories. On the island of Tasmania, where all the land was seized by settlers for agricultural and pastoral pursuits, the Aborigines were brutally exterminated before a century had passed.

On the mainland, tribal societies were disrupted, first by the early colonial settlements and later, when the process was greatly intensified by squatters taking up large areas of land for grazing after the 1820s. Aboriginal communities were decimated as a result of the seizure of their land, massacres, ruthless police suppression, and imported diseases.

The northern part of Australia, except for the high rainfall areas, was not occupied until the 1880s, and then only for pastoral purposes. Because of the different climatic and geographical conditions, the pastoral industry in the North followed a different pattern from the southern states (based on cattle rather than sheep) and an uneasy *modus vivendi* could be established with the Aborigines. While massacres occurred, extermination was not carried through to the same extent as in the South. Consequently, it is in the Northern parts of Australia that the Aborigines are the most numerous today.

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FULL HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ABORIGINES AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS

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At first they were regarded as industrially useless but, especially following the enlistment of many white stockmen during the first World War, they were used more and more widely on Northern cattle stations, and soon developed into a source of cheap labour for the cattle industry.

The Torres Strait Islanders, though able to maintain some control in their many islands, were subjugated and placed under the control of the Queensland Government.

Towards the end of the century, the Queensland Government imported many thousands of near-slave laborers from other Pacific Islands, many of whose descendants now live in Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Governments eventually created reserves and settlements on to which the remnants of the Aboriginal tribes were herded. These included Christian religious missions, set up in areas arbitrarily allotted to various sects, and vested with powers of government.

Reserves became pools of cheap labour, where the people were compelled to live in isolated, backward conditions. The Aboriginal population as a whole was deprived of all land ownership and denied elementary human rights.

Today, 180 years after the establishment of the first colonial settlement, the tribal system has largely been destroyed. The estimated Aboriginal population declined in this period from 300,000 to 100,000.

This, in brief, is the genesis of the so-called "Aboriginal problem" which has now become an Australian and international scandal—the problem of many thousands of gifted, capable human beings denied the human rights guaranteed by the United Nations Charter, in the land they have inhabited since ancient times.

In recent years, increased public awareness, the influence of the national policies of the Socialist countries and the world-wide sweep of the postwar national liberation movement have compelled Australian Governments to take some steps—however reluctant, belated and inadequate—towards rectifying some outstanding evils and injustices . . .

But the basic condition of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders remains that of oppressed national minorities. This is emphasized, not contradicted, by the fact that the great majority of them are under-paid laborers, living in poverty.

The high unemployment, sickness and illiteracy rates among them, their generally substandard housing and education, their virtual exclusion from most skilled trades and professions are the direct result of official discrimination against them as peoples, not of any natural shortcomings. Person for person, they have the same potential as any other human being. What they lack is opportunity, encouragement and help.

This program is published with the aim of showing what can and must be done in the interests of justice to the oppressed native peoples of Australia.

Out of the massacres, slavery and contempt . . .

THE ABORIGINAL NATIONAL MINORITY is scattered throughout the continent. In far Northern Australia and in Central Australia, Aborigines are the majority of the population, the backbone of the cattle industry and potentially the most capable workforce to develop those areas. They are also becoming big minorities in some towns and cities, as mechanisation and other causes force them out of the countryside.

No proper count of the Aboriginal population has yet been made. Until May 27th, 1967 when the Australian Constitution was amended, the Aboriginal people were excluded from the census. There is still no exact count—the figure of 100,000 is only an estimate—but the Aboriginal population has been increasing for some years. It is estimated that it will reach 500,000 by the end of this century.

In addition, there are approximately 6000 Torres Strait Islanders and some thousands of people descended from other Islanders. These are distinct minorities, but their general position in Australian society approximates that of the Aborigines. While there are historically formed differences between them, they are tending towards mutual understanding and unity in action, as the conscious movement for their rights develops.

Various problems . . .

THE PROBLEMS OF THE PEOPLE differ from place to place. Few still live in near-tribal conditions. The great majority have been converted into underpaid, underprivileged workers. Some are free, others strictly controlled and restricted on Government reserves and religious missions.

Some are of pure Aboriginal or Island descent, others of mixed origin. But all who identify themselves as Aborigines or Islanders, and are accepted as such, should be so regarded. Unscientific and insulting definitions in terms of "caste" or "blood" should be rejected.

Living and working conditions differ in different industries, towns and areas. Some town and city workers have full rights, wages and housing. Many are casual, underpaid laborers living on the fringes of towns and cities. Others are employed under near-slave conditions on cattle stations and pearling luggers or segregated in Government and Mission settlements.

The special laws covering Aborigines vary from State to State — even in the definition of "Aborigine".

But all Aborigines and Islanders are oppressed, to a greater or lesser extent by Federal and State Governments, and by discriminatory practices arising from false and irrational prejudices against them, cultivated for generations by those who stand to gain from their continued subjugation.

Recent amendments to State and Federal Acts have removed some of the most oppressive forms of official discrimination against them, though many remain. They have been given general Federal and State voting rights but, as yet, no real control over their own affairs as peoples.

The problem is a two-fold one: the problem of workers suffering exceptionally bad conditions, and the problem of peoples fighting for the right to exist as such.

Science rejects the view that there are naturally superior and inferior peoples. The Aborigines and Islanders have the same right as any other nationalities to exist and develop as peoples, and to full social equality with other Australians.

Official policy has never recognised this right, though a beginning is now being made in South Australia.

The fraud of "protection"

IN THE COURSE of the colonisation of Australia by European settlers, the Aborigines' land has been seized and their social organisation disrupted and largely destroyed. Shooting, poisoning, disease, starvation and degradation had, towards the end of the last century, reduced their numbers to such an extent that it was believed they were dying out.

However, as it became apparent that they could be useful as a source of cheap labour, official policy began to turn towards "protection", so that in the years before Federation, most of the State Governments introduced Protection Acts. The main purpose of this legislation was not really protection of the Aborigines and Islanders, but restriction of their personal freedom and other democratic rights in order to ensure a source of cheap labour, especially for the cattle and pearling industries.

This is clearly revealed by the position in the Northern Territory where there was no special Aboriginal legislation until 1918, when a protection-type ordinance on the model of the Queensland Act was introduced. The labour shortage caused by the First World War had suddenly led to an awareness of the labour potential of the Aboriginal population.

"Protection" has meant in practice exploitation and persecution of Aborigines and Islanders under State and Federal laws. It has been the excuse for depriving thousands of defenceless people of elementary human rights, segregating them in isolated settlements under white control, destroying their ancient cultures and customs and not replacing these with the major advantages of modern civilisation.

In the last few years, under growing pressure from the peoples themselves and from democratic minded individuals in Australia and elsewhere in the world, State and Northern Territory laws have been liberalised to varying degrees.

But no Government, State or Federal, (with the exception of South Australia) has yet begun the fundamental program of work and expenditure essential to enable these peoples to move rapidly into the world of today.

New opportunities

THE TREMENDOUS DEVELOPMENTS in Northern Australia during and since the war have created new opportunities. There has been a big expansion of air and road transport; radio and other means of communication have been greatly improved; formerly remote areas have been systematically explored in search of oil, bauxite, iron, copper, uranium and other minerals; inland mines and settlements have been developed; military activities, including establishment of rocket ranges and siting of bases, have covered a wide area.

Before World War II, the white population of the Northern Territory was never more than 5,000. Today it is 35,000 and rising. In addition to the residents, some 20,000 tourists visit the Northern Territory each year — before the war there were practically no tourists.

One very significant result of technical and scientific development has been the virtual disappearance of tribal conditions among the Aborigines and their absorption in a money-commodity economy. Thus in 1938, half of all Northern Territory Aborigines were classified as living under tribal conditions, compared with 400 in 1960, out of a total Aboriginal population of 16,000.

Increasing numbers of Aborigines and Islanders are being drawn into industry. The great majority have become wage labourers. Big numbers of Torres Strait Islanders have been brought to the mainland to work on railway construction and other developmental projects. This has deepened their working-class knowledge and helped to improve Aboriginal-Islander understanding. Aboriginal and Islander leaders of great courage and ability are emerging.

The Aborigines and Islanders are no longer isolated from the working-class movement in the cities, which can now more easily give them moral and material support.

The increase in the Aboriginal population in this period is very significant. During the war years, better medical and hygienic services were introduced, primarily to protect soldiers and construction workers stationed in the area. After the war, the increased white population, and the greater risk of infection from the growing air traffic between Darwin and other countries meant that supervision of the health and hygienic conditions of Aborigines (though still inadequate) had to be continued. The effect of these measures, in some cases, has led to a big population growth among Aborigines. For example, on Groote Eylandt the Aboriginal population has increased from less than 350 in 1941 to 800 in 1965.

Powerful effects

IN THE COURSE OF THE POSTWAR YEARS, the great national liberation movements in many countries, the freedom movement of the US Negroes, the South African and Rhodesian issues and the worldwide struggle against colonialism in all its forms have made an increasing impact on Australia. The Australian Aboriginal movement has become part of the world movement for national liberation. Those fighting for Aboriginal rights have begun to gain more support. Criticism in the United Nations by Soviet, African and other delegates of Australian policies towards the peoples of New Guinea, the Aborigines and the Torres Strait Islanders has helped Australians to realise that the conditions forced on these peoples are among the worst in the world.

The great postwar immigration has compelled Australians to learn to live with people of various national origins. The inhuman treatment of the Aborigines has become even more obvious when contrasted with official attitudes to "New Australians."

Public knowledge of hitherto concealed facts about the condition of the Aborigines has improved. Revelations of the squalid conditions on most Government and Mission settlements have led to demands for drastic improvements from many sections of the community.

State and Federal Government handovers to Australian and foreign monopolies of millions of acres of land formerly reserved for Aboriginal occupation have underlined the fact that the Aborigines have no title to their ancestral lands. Long established settlements have been destroyed and the people forcibly removed at short notice. Aboriginal rights to land ownership have thus become an urgent and immediate question.

Movement grows

THE MOVEMENT FOR ABORIGINAL RIGHTS has begun to assume a new quality in recent times.

It is becoming an organised, growing *mass* movement, in which capable Aboriginal representatives are increasingly taking leading parts, with a number of trade unions and other organisations playing an increasingly important role.

Conferences for Aboriginal advancement have brought together Aborigines from all over Australia, increasing their awareness of themselves as a people.

In 1963, for the first time, the Congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions adopted a sound basic policy, opening the way for much stronger participation by the unions. This policy has since been strengthened. Wage-rates in the Northern Territory have been improved, though pastoralists are trying to offset this by reducing work-forces.

The former handful of devoted individuals has expanded into a network of organisations fighting for Aboriginal and Islander rights, with centres in all States, many linked together in a strong Federal movement, but some acting independently.

The organisations have made systematic studies of the conditions of the Aboriginal and Island people in all parts of the Commonwealth and formulated sets of demands.

Trade union representatives, members of political parties, especially of the left, youth, religious and women's organisations, scientists and other professional people and progressive individuals are active in this movement and helping to arouse Australian consciousness of the situation.

Actions have been undertaken against particularly glaring injustices, with considerable success. Governments have been compelled to pay serious attention to a problem they had thought successfully buried.

A profoundly important development is the fact that, throughout Australia, Aborigines and Islanders are feeling the growing strength of their movement and, knowing that they have many allies in the white community, are developing greater confidence and skill in formulating and presenting their economic and political demands.

Assimilation and Integration

FROM THE EARLIER OFFICIAL policies of "protection"; the State and Federal Governments moved in 1951 to proclaim "assimilation" as the way forward for Aborigines.

The Governments' problem was to frame legislation which maintained discrimination without appearing to do so, as Australia's racist policies and legislation were coming under increased national and international criticism. In an effort to solve this problem, the Northern Territory Welfare Ordinances of 1953 were applied by naming in the Government Gazette individuals to

whom they applied. Thus Northern Territory Aborigines were declared wards of the State and came under the legislation's restrictive clauses, without the word "Aborigine" being mentioned.

The policy of "assimilation" was publicised to make it look as though something was being done.

Aborigines or Islanders should have every right to become assimilated in the general community if they wish to do so. But this should be their voluntary, individual choice. In practice, however, little has been done to make it possible for most Aborigines or Islanders to become so assimilated.

The great majority are still discriminated against and forced to live under conditions which make it impossible for them to acquire the knowledge and experience necessary to enter the major Australian communities on equal terms. In North Queensland and elsewhere, a deliberate policy of enforced segregation on backward settlements and islands is pursued.

The official assimilation policy is not the way forward. Stripped of pretence, it means in practice the elimination of the Aborigines as a people, through enforced absorption into the general population of Australia. As a former South Australian Minister in charge of Aboriginal Affairs put it, assimilation means that the Aborigines "are called upon to make the changes, to learn our languages, our ways, our food, our laws, our customs and our sophistications."

But there are many undesirable features of Australian capitalist society and many things of great value in the experience accumulated over centuries by the Aborigines and Islanders.

In their own environment, they have developed unique skills and arts, great courage, initiative and intelligence. The few who have been able to overcome the barriers have demonstrated that Aborigines and Islanders can hold their own in any occupation in the Australian community.

They have much to contribute to Australia and the world from their own social and cultural heritage. Assimilation as intended by Australian governments, would destroy what they have to give to mankind, as well as denying them the fundamental right of all peoples to preserve their identity and develop along their own lines.

The policy which upholds their right to exist as separate peoples has come to be known as "integration". This means that Aborigines and Islanders should be free to live as they choose, either as members of the general Australian community, or in their own autonomously controlled communities, according to individual choice. In other words, this policy provides for the minorities to be integrated into the Australian community without losing their identities.