

Land, Capital, Cash Grants Urged for Yirrkala Tribe

Wed Oct 30 1963

CANBERRA, Tuesday. — A select committee of Federal Parliament has recommended land grants, capital grants and monetary compensation for the Yirrkala aborigines of Arnhem Land.

In a report tabled in Parliament today, the committee says the aborigines should be compensated for "loss of traditional occupancy" of land leased to a French bauxite mining company.

The land was formerly part of the Arnhem Land reserve in which the Yirrkalas live.

The House of Representatives appointed the select committee last month to investigate the grievances of the Yirrkalas after they sent petitions to Parliament protesting against the excision of land from the reserve for bauxite mining.

Recommendations

In its report the select committee also recommended:

● For the next 10 years a standing committee of the House of Representatives should examine the conditions of the Yirrkala people from time to time and observe the carrying out of the select committee's recommendations.

● The excised portion of the reserve should be declared a protected area to prevent people other

than aborigines from hunting in it.

● Water resources in the area should be surveyed and developed.

● The Yirrkala people should be consulted as soon as possible on the location of their sacred places within the area, and the sacred places should be set aside for their exclusive use.

Protect Artists

● A bill from which the Yirrkala artists obtain their pigments should be set aside as an inalienable reserve for their use.

● Building lots within the town site in the bauxite mining area should be reserved for aborigines, and homes for Europeans and aborigines should be developed simultaneously.

● The Yirrkala people should be consulted on the location of the proposed town.

● When the town is developed, social service benefits could be paid directly to the Yirrkalas.

Study Soon

The Minister for Territories (Mr. Hasluck) said tonight that the Government would consider the select committee's report as soon as possible.

He had already sent a copy of the report to his department for study and comment.

Mr. Hasluck told Parliament last April that the arrangement made for leasing the land for bauxite mining specific-

ally protected the water supply of the Yirrkala Mission and ensured that the aborigines, mission staff and Government officials would have access to the leased land.

Mr. Hasluck also told Parliament that royalties from the bauxite mining would be paid into a trust fund which might eventually total £4 million, to be spent on aboriginal welfare.

The Minister said that "exceptional measures" had been taken to protect the welfare of the aborigines and give them an opportunity to share in the benefits of the bauxite project.

The select committee reported that it had investigated an allegation by the Yirrkalas that the procedure of excision of the land from the Arnhem Reserve and the fate of the people on it were never explained to them beforehand and were kept secret from them.

"No discussion took place between Administration representatives and the Yirrkala people before excision," the committee reported.

"The discussion was between the Administration and the Methodist mission authorities."

Language Gap

"The committee is of the opinion that it was not an obligation on the Yirrkala Mission authorities to inform the Yirrkala people of Government policy, even if they had been completely certain what it was. Confusion seems to have arisen on this point. The Administration apparently thought that the decision had been given to the people."

The report added that the lack of proficient linguists led to a failure in clear communication after the excision of the land and granting of the mining lease, when Administration officers met representatives of the Yirrkalas to explain what was being done.

"We feel that welfare officers should take competent interpreters with them when matters affecting the people are being discussed," the committee said.

Hunting Area

The report said that although the north-west of Arnhem Land appeared barren and inhospitable, it was capable of supporting a considerable aboriginal population.

For the sake of the dignity and self-respect of the aborigines they should be able to continue their traditional skills in hunting and food gathering. The excised land should be declared a protected area to prevent people other than aborigines from hunting there.

The committee said the development of the bauxite deposits gave the Commonwealth Government its first opportunity to demonstrate urban development by Europeans did not automatically reduce aborigines to the status of fringe dwellers and dispossessed people.

"The Yirrkala people should be free to live in the

town which may develop in association with the processing of bauxite," the report said.

Building Lots

Building lots should be reserved for aborigines nominated by the Yirrkala people. Resale should not be allowed for some years. Education in home making and home maintenance should be provided.

In addition to land grants for agriculture and monetary compensation for loss of traditional occupancy of land leased for mining, the aborigines should be given capital assistance in the form of fishing vessels.

The first £150,000 in royalties from bauxite mining should be used to meet the capital needs of the Yirrkalas.

The select committee consisted of Mr. Dean (Lib., N.S.W.), Mr. Barnes (C.P., Qld.), Mr. Beazley (Lab., W.A.), Mr. Bryant (Lab., Vic.), Mr. Chipp (Lib., Vic.), Mr. Kelly (Lib., S.A.) and Mr. Nelson (Lab., N.T.).