

ABORIGINALS AND DEMOCRACY

Kit Carey

Communist Review, February 1945

As "Djulama's" remarks on Aboriginal Administration are admittedly confined to the Northern Territory, a few comments by one with a wide experience on Queensland Stations may be of interest, particularly as that State presumably leads the rest of Australia in such matters.

The aboriginals, of course, come within the jurisdiction of the "Protector of Aboriginals," who, in most parts of North Western Queensland at least, is represented in the person of the local Police Officer. Naturally the individual treatment depends to a great extent on the merits or otherwise of these gentlemen.

As most of the native labour is recruited for work amongst stock, it should be noted that the average "black" is quite as efficient as the white stockman under similar conditions, and frequently more so, his native bush sense being invaluable on the bigger holdings. The lubra is engaged principally for household duties.

When labour is needed on a Station, application is made to the local "Protector", who, knowing the whereabouts of most of his proteges, directs the chosen one on the job. An agreement, usually covering a period of twelve months, is completed and signed by the Manager, while the Aboriginal as a rule implants a large thumbprint at the foot of the document as his contribution to the legalities. He can object to going to any particular property, and is often successful in his objections, but this is left entirely to the discretion of the Officer in Charge. From this it should not be inferred that the majority of Officers are unfair, but it does point out the fact that the native is not free to choose where, and whether or not he will work. In some instances disciplinary measures which range from an actual "bashing" to an acute rationing of tea and tobacco are crude but effective. Added to this is the average Station Aboriginal's mortal terror of the "uniform".

The wage for a black stockman is 30/- a week and for a lubra 15/- with keep. This, while not overstepping the bounds of generosity for what is frequently a seven day a week job, might be considered reasonable but for the fact that exactly one half, that is, 15/- and 7/6 respectively, is deducted from the pay by the Station and paid into the Office of the "Protector". What happens to it from then on is, to most people, even to the Station owners, a complete mystery. It certainly is credited to an account in the name of the employee, and, believe it or not, some of these accounts accruing over a number of years show credits of over seven and eight hundred pounds, which must be some consolation to the worker as it is the last he ever sees of it. He may on occasions get an order on a store for a pair of trousers and a shirt provided his existing one have practically ceased to cover his nakedness, he may even get two or three pounds with which to attend the annual race meeting; but the bulk of it is never seen again. Should he be out of work, he would not be allowed to starve, quite, but he is seldom given the opportunity of being unemployed for long.

These deductions which, in the aggregate, must amount to a very tidy sum, may go towards the maintenance of the various missions which the majority of Aboriginals go to any lengths to avoid; it may go towards maintaining the "Protector" in the business of "protecting," but whatever the ultimate destination is, the natives deeply resent this deduction from their miserable earning, which, as one of them remarked, "Wasn't enough to keep a man in tobacco."

Incidentally, the payment of these alleged wages relieves the Station of any responsibility in the maintenance of dependants or the supplying of clothes, tobacco

and any other “luxuries,” payment for which is deducted from the 15/- a week through the Store Account.

Of course “keep” is supplied. The Aboriginal neither expects nor gets accommodation. He, with his wife and family if any, sleeps on the floor of the cart shed, harness room or anywhere they can find room to huddle, provided it is not too close to the Homestead. Their food is handed out to them from the kitchen and they can sit on the wood heap, on the ground, or stand on their head and eat it if they wish - rain or shine. The white stockmen will not allow them in the dining room under any circumstances. This distinction also applies to the bath showers, which although provided for the whites are non-existent for the blacks, many of whom, contrary to general opinion appreciate a few amenities of civilization. As a matter of plain fact, many of the white men of the North Queensland Stations would do well to put their own houses in order before levelling criticism at the personal habits and cleanliness of their dusky co-workers. One Station Bookkeeper committed the unpardonable social sin of asking a native, who had gone to considerable trouble to save him a long walk from a bogged car, to come into the house and have a meal with him. Amazing as it may seem, the man behaved like a normal human being and departed full of gratitude.

Naturally the native has little education for he has little opportunity of acquiring it, but there is nothing wrong with his intelligence and adaptability given the rare chance of demonstrating it. On one Station an Aboriginal was given the job of “windmill expert” as no other mechanic was available. He performed the work, which included car repairs and other mechanical jobs, quite satisfactorily, jobs which the white stockmen on the property were quite incapable of undertaking. In fairness to the Station, they paid him a reasonable wage, but as usual, a proportion of it went to the “Protector”.

It should be borne in mind, when accusations of loafing and unreliability are made, that they are intelligent human beings who fully realise that they are receiving 15/- a week and no consideration whatsoever for work for which the whites are getting 75/- (in 1943). In addition to this, they are often morally forced to work on properties what they had no desire to be in any case, and compelled to stay there under an agreement of the import of which they had but the vaguest idea when ordered to sign it.

About two years ago, an Aboriginal stockman on one Station wished to marry a girl employed as a domestic on another in the same locality. They had to ask permission of the local “Protector” and permission was refused. Actually neither Manager was prepared to release the employees as labour was scarce. Time went on and many letters were written and read by the Bookkeeper who kept the wheels of Cupid’s chariot turning. The girl became “cheeky” and this was reported to the “Protector” by the Manger’s wife and dire penalties were threatened. Fortunately for the couple, the officer received a routine transfer to another town and another took his place. Permission to marry was again sought, while the Manager’s wife, in a great state of excitement and indignation, demanded that it be refused. To the credit of the Officer it was granted, and probably by now another curly black head has appeared to help solve the Stations’ cheap labour problems.

From the time that the country was taken away from them by force, this colour bar has operated with unrelenting vigour, and is as much in evidence between white and black worker as it is between employer and employee. This, allied to the native’s keen sense of ridicule, makes him uncommunicative on many subjects, and has naturally bred a totally unjustified inferiority complex. If one is fortunate enough to overcome this barrier, the Aboriginal reveals himself as a good companion with a

keen sense of humour and “joie de vivre,” both are virtues among the whites whose main topics of conversation are sheep and their private woes. On one occasion a Wool Classifier, quite a friendly soul, somewhat condescendingly asked a native about his tribal customs. After much edging the latter finally said, “Why should I tell you, you’d only laugh at me.” On another occasion the same boy asked of a struggling black and woolly sheep he was in process of crutching - “What the heck ar you kicking about - it’s only one ‘boon’ shearing another.”

It is interesting to note that in jobs such as shearing, stock work, horsemanship and all classes of station work, the black compares very favourably with the white, in addition to which, in the outback schools where pupils of all colours ar taught, it is by no means the rule that the white child is at the top of the class.

Witness one of these “protected, underpaid, Stona Ge men” as he poked a smiling black and shiny countenance around the Store door one morning in search of tobacco - “You busy?”, he enquired; the answer was a decided “Yes.” “Ah”, he said, “I thought you must be, you haven’t had time to have a shave.

In some countries there might be some vestige of an excuse, babes on chiefly on the fear of labour competition, for the treatment given the coloured races, particularly when employment is scarce under our “democratic” system, but to Australia where the more pressing need is to keep them from disappearing from the face of the earth altogether not even this poor comfort can be granted. As for the fable that the half caste possesses all the vices of both parents and one of the virtues - the Americans have an apt retort in the shame of “baloney.”

Given equality in opportunity, education and respect, together with some small voice in the shaping of their “democratic” existence, the Aboriginals could make a useful contribution to the progress of Australia. Even the contention that they should be “given” a suitable area of country on which to live as they wished is so much “eyewash”, as the whole of outback Australia that is of the slightest use is held in the tight fists of the big pastoral interests, who will not relinquish one acre of it to benefit the whole of Christendom. What is left would not feed one bandicoot to every hundred square miles.