

1874.

—
QUEENSLAND.

Legislative Assembly.

ABORIGINES OF QUEENSLAND.

(Laid on the Table of the Legislative Assembly by Command, and Ordered to be Printed, 7th May, 1874.)

REPORT OF THE COMMISSIONERS.

THE Commissioners appointed by His Excellency the Governor in Council for the purpose of taking into consideration certain questions opened up by a Petition from a number of residents in the District of Mackay, relative to the employment and protection of the Aboriginal inhabitants of that District; and further, generally to enquire what can be done to ameliorate the condition of the Aborigines of this Colony, and to make their labor useful to the settlers and profitable to themselves,—have the honor to report:—

1. That, in view of the difficulty and importance of the enquiry submitted for their consideration, and of the differing conditions of the various native tribes scattered throughout the Colony, the Commissioners considered it desirable to procure from residents in the interior and elsewhere such information as could be obtained relative to the number, present condition, and prospects of the Aborigines in each district; together with the views and opinions of persons qualified, by experience or otherwise, to advise as to the best means of improving their condition.

2. With this object a form of Circular asking for information on the above and other points, was prepared and forwarded to residents in all parts of the Colony. More than one hundred replies to this Circular, as well as numerous other communications (including a letter and Draft Bill from Mr. Alfred Davidson, Correspondent of the Aborigines Protection Society) have been received by the Commissioners. Many of these papers have been prepared with much care by persons well acquainted with the Aborigines, and anxious for their welfare, and contain much authentic and interesting information of a race the great majority of whom, whatever may be done to improve their condition, there is too much reason to fear, are doomed to early extinction. The documents referred to are so voluminous that it would serve no useful purpose to print the whole, and the Commissioners recommend that they be authorized to employ some competent person to extract, under their supervision, such portions as it may be considered desirable to print and preserve for permanent record.

3. Differing as the correspondents of the Commissioners might be expected to do in their suggestions for the improvement of the condition of the Aborigines, there appears to be tolerable unanimity on the following points:—

- (1.) That although their means of living are not more precarious now than formerly, yet the Aborigines in almost if not all the Districts of the Colony are fast decreasing in numbers.
- (2.) That they are passionately fond of intoxicating liquors, which, notwithstanding the law to the contrary, they have no difficulty in procuring whenever they have the means of paying for the same.
- (3.) That diseases which have been introduced by Europeans are committing fearful ravages amongst the young and middle-aged of all tribes.
- (4.) That although there are exceptions, and Aborigines are in some instances satisfactorily employed by settlers and others, yet, upon the whole, they have an unconquerable aversion to persistent labor.
- (5.) That little towards ameliorating the condition of the old and middle-aged, except supplying such of them as require it with food and shelter, can be attempted with reasonable hope of success; but that by education and training much may be done for the young.

It also appears to be pretty generally held that justice and humanity alike demand that no effort or expense should be spared in doing what lies in our power for the welfare of the Aborigines.

4. In addition to several important written communications, the Commissioners had the advantage of a personal interview with Mr. G. F. Bridgman, a leading member of an Association for the Employment and Protection of Aborigines, formed at Mackay, who, speaking for himself and neighboring sugar-planters, represents that the Aborigines of that district, for certain classes of industry, are as good and reliable as that of any other colored laborers—not excepting South Sea Islanders. The Natives in question are said to understand both the terms and period of an agreement, and faithfully to adhere to it, working diligently, and giving their employers little trouble; and the Commissioners are satisfied that the employment of these particular Natives is honestly conducted, and attended with considerable advantage both to employers and employed. Although the Commissioners do not believe that equally satisfactory results are, as a rule, to be expected from the employment of Aborigines in other parts of the Colony, they are yet of opinion that Aboriginal labor, especially for short terms of service, might be far more generally and profitably employed than it has hitherto been.

5. As the result of their deliberations, and with an earnest desire to ameliorate and improve the condition of the Aborigines, the Commissioners recommend:—

- (1.) That Protectors of Aborigines be appointed for specified districts of the Colony, whose duty shall be—
 - (a.) To enquire into all cases of alleged cruelty or ill-treatment of Aborigines.
 - (b.) To see that all contracts or agreements entered into, or about to be entered into, by Aborigines with Europeans, are fair and equitable, and faithfully fulfilled.
 - (c.) To watch over the interests and welfare of the Aborigines, with power to sue for wages and enforce agreements on their behalf.
 - (d.) To reside on the reserves hereafter referred to, and to take charge of the same, devoting their whole time and energies to the special duty entrusted to them.
- (2.) That reserves for the exclusive use of Aborigines be set apart in the several districts of the colony.
- (3.) That the Aborigines (excepting such as are under approved agreements with Europeans) be excluded from towns and places where intoxicating liquors are sold, and that every effort be made to induce them to reside on the reserves.

- (4.) That huts and other proper buildings and offices be erected on these several reserves, and that the necessary rations, clothing, and implements be supplied for the use of the Aborigines resident thereon.
- (5.) That medical aid be afforded in needful cases.
- (6.) That light occupation in connection with the soil, such as the cultivation of sweet potatoes, bananas, &c.; rearing stock, and other employments suitable for Aborigines, be encouraged on the reserves.
- (7.) That special effort be made to improve, educate, and Christianise the young, by the establishment of schools in the reserves for their benefit.
- (8.) That more stringent legislation be enacted with a view to suppress the sale of intoxicating liquors to Aborigines.

6. The Commissioners are aware that to give practical effect to these suggestions will involve much trouble and difficulty, especially at the outset, and also that legislation and the annual expenditure of considerable sums of public money will be necessary. They, however, are persuaded that the Legislature will not withhold any reasonable aid that may be needed for such an object. It cannot be denied that the settlement of Europeans (whether unavoidably or not is little to the purpose) has been the source of great evil to the Aborigines, and that those tribes have suffered least which have had the least intercourse with our countrymen. The Commissioners do not wish it to be understood as their opinion that the Natives have been harshly treated by the settlers; on the contrary, they have reason to believe that, at any rate in the settled districts, the Aborigines, generally speaking, receive much kindness and forbearance, and that many attempts have been made to improve their condition. The isolated efforts of private individuals, however, are quite inadequate for the fulfilment of a duty which, to be successfully performed, must be undertaken by the Government.

7. More than one-fourth of the entire revenue of the colony (or £350,000 annually) is derived from the sale and lease of those Crown lands which the Aborigines originally occupied, and the Commissioners think it no more than just and reasonable that some small portion of this large sum should be set apart and held by the Government in trust for the benefit of those who are left of the tribes who formerly held these lands in possession. Neither legislation nor money will, however, much avail, unless the services of persons earnest and zealous in the cause, and especially qualified to inaugurate and carry out a scheme of moral and intellectual training, can be secured: a judicious selection of officers is essential to success.

8. As any system must, in the first instance, be experimental, it is recommended that the appointment of Protectors of Aborigines be, at the commencement, limited to the following districts:—

Moreton
Darling Downs
Wide Bay and Burnett
Port Curtis
Mackay and Bowen

deferring further appointments until practical experience may afford data on which to base more complete and effective arrangements.

9. The Commissioners would here willingly close their Report, but feel that there is another phase of the question which cannot be overlooked. It is, of course, apparent that any measure for bringing the Aborigines under the special protection of our laws, and ensuring to them justice and fair treatment at the hands of Europeans, must also impose restrictions on the Aborigines, and subject them to penalties for breaches of its provisions. Hitherto the Aborigines have been almost exempt from both the protection and penalties of our laws, and, except in cases of personal violence towards Europeans, the records of our courts of law show but a very small proportion of Aboriginal offenders. It is well known, however, that petty aggressions and misdemeanors on the part of Aborigines are of frequent occurrence, but that, in consequence of the difficulty of obtaining legal proof, and

the unsuitable character of the penalties provided by law, most persons prefer to submit to losses or inconvenience, or to take the administration of punishment into their own hands.

10. Among civilized people accustomed to long periods of residence in one locality imprisonment is more a moral than physical punishment, and does not, as a rule, prejudice health; but, with the Aborigines, such close confinement is so much at variance with their ordinary habits that it is prejudicial to their bodily health, while the unavoidable contact with other classes of prisoners does not tend to any moral improvement. It is therefore expedient to introduce some system by which Aboriginal offenders may be imprisoned apart; and to provide places of confinement where the discipline may be so modified as to admit of outdoor or field labor rather than punishment of a sedentary character. It would scarcely be practicable to have a prison on the mainland which would combine security with sufficient space for the employment of the prisoners in cultivating land, but there are several islands off the coast which meet the requirements of isolation combined with ample area of land adapted for agriculture.

11. The Commissioners have the honor to submit to His Excellency the Governor in Council the foregoing Report, as the result of their enquiry and deliberations, and to hand to the Government the several papers and documents which have come to their possession in connection therewith.

Given under the hands of the Commissioners, at Brisbane, the 30th day of April, 1874.

W. L. G. DREW.
A. C. GREGORY.
CHARLES COXEN.
JOHN G. HAUSMANN.

Price 3d.]

By Authority : JAMES C. BEAL, Government Printer, William street, Brisbane.