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DON'T GO IT ALONE!

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After the initial shock waves of Black Power had subsided the Aboriginal people of Melbourne did some very serious thinking on the side effects it caused.

The first problem, of course, was, how do you advocate Black Power and its principles, and still retain friendships with non-Aborigines? For example, a great many Victorian Aborigines have married Europeans. Do the Aborigines then forfeit their black heritage and adopt the white culture, or do they encourage the Europeans

All white people, Governments, missions, and workers in voluntary organisations must face up to this challenge to relinquish their power over Black people. Power must be shared politically, economically, and socially.

How will white people and institutions respond? One trade union spokesman saw the Unions as powerful allies of the Aborigines, while a Catholic priest saw a parallel between Roosevelt Brown's definition of "Black Power" and some statements of Pope Paul. But how deep do these reactions go? Another speaker said that Aborigines must build their own power base because "White Australia is not going to do it for them".

Let's look at the background.

Aborigines, part-Aborigines, and Islanders in this country number upwards of 140,000 and their number is expected to double in about 15 to 20 years. This means that an extra seven thousand Aborigines have to be housed, educated, and found jobs each year. It is against this figure that statistics on houses built, school enrolments, and new jobs must be measured. On this basis Aboriginal Australia is going backwards.

Most Aborigines are virtually paupers, owning neither land nor houses, and very little else. They are poorly educated and largely under or unemployed. The infant and child mortality rates amongst Aboriginal people are amongst the highest in the world, and ill-health amongst adults seriously impairs their ability to earn a living.

On top of this terrible situation, which has existed for generations, comes a revolutionary new factor, modern communications. The invention of the transistor has exposed Aborigines to all that they have been missing. They have a new awareness of the abundance of the affluent society with its comforts and material goods. They are also exposed to a national and international perspective. They are now aware of common problems within Australia and overseas, and aware of solutions and progress elsewhere.

Aborigines are now studying the progress and methods of under-privileged peoples elsewhere, including New Guinea, the Maori people of New Zealand, and the American racial minorities. There is a new time scale being put on change, and a new emphasis on protest and action to get change. Within Australia this has led to a new national awareness through publications such as "Smoke Signals", "Aboriginal Quarterly", "National Koorier" and "Origin", and to the growth of all-Aboriginal organisations and demands for a greater Aboriginal say in other voluntary organisations in practically every State.

What does this mean?

Firstly it means new priorities, amounting essentially to action now on a scale large enough to overtake the growth in population. One of the essentials here is a sufficiently large and expanding economic base, which means land rights and capital on an unprecedented scale. If necessary, uneconomic industries must be built up and

subsidised in order to provide employment and avoid an even more costly social problems such as already exists in such places as Laverton in W.A.

Secondly it means a new role for Aborigines, directing policy and administration in voluntary organisations, missions, and government settlements. Wherever there are Aboriginal communities there must be the means for Aborigines to express themselves and exert real power over the direction of their affairs. Voluntary organisations are the obvious and natural place to start, and in any case they are the most vulnerable to an Aboriginal bid for power, if also the place with least power.

Thirdly it means a new role for the radical, Christian, or humanitarian white person. If “knowledge is power, and power is strength”, as one speaker said in relation to Aborigines and the law, then the provision of information and advice on request is an essential function of the educated non-Aborigine. There is also a great need for interpretation of one race to the other, because their assumptions and experiences of life are often very different and this too often leads to misunderstanding and fear, as is the case with “Black Power”.

Finally, it means that white society must be reformed, by whites, so that it can learn to accommodate black people on their own terms. The expectation that black people must conform and be assimilated must be removed, and the double standards of white society exposed. The latter applies particularly to the question of violence: if whites accept violence as legitimate, as most of white society clearly does, then what right have whites to expect Aborigines to be non-violent? The elimination of violence, then, as a task for whites as much as for Aborigines.

Various dangers and objections have been raised in relation to Aboriginal autonomy and Black Power. These are worth examining.

1. Black Power may fail. If this happens, will it set back the Aboriginal cause?

The obvious answer is that white power has certainly failed before today, and left the world in a pretty mess. In any case Aborigines can learn from their mistakes as well as anyone else. Bob Maza, for one, rejected the arguments that Aborigines are “not capable” or “not ready”, out of hand, and the history of colonialism is full of such arguments and their rejections.

2. Alienation of white support, and the possibility of white “backlash”. This is a real problem which requires all the skill and energy of white sympathisers in order to bring understanding to bear. The experience, feelings, and idiom of the Aboriginal people must be interpreted to the white population. Those in positions of authority or who make a living, however honourable, out of Aboriginal affairs, must be helped to understand that they are vulnerable to attack and unlikely to receive gratitude from those wishing to assert their independence. Certainly the Christian Churches must not expect thanks for their missionary activities, even if, as one mission spokesman claimed, “If it were not for the Missions there would be no Aborigines”. The proper role of the Churches, and of others wishing to serve, is that of the reconciler rather than the self-righteous. However difficult, the task must be to concentrate on the truth behind the complaints and bitterness and the supposed exaggerations, and not to fight for the retention of power and prestige.

Much white support in the past has been degrading to Aborigines, and perhaps it is time new avenues were explored. “The degradation of tin-rattling” and second-hand clothes has, nevertheless, to be weighed against the money and the use made of the money.

There is a more serious dimension to the white backlash which worries some Aborigines, and that is the possible closing of white ranks against the Aborigine, particularly in the country town where discrimination and reprisals may increase. Would the as yet silent Aborigine prefer his present under-privileged position to standing up for his rights and perhaps suffering reprisals? I doubt if any white man can know, and even the Aboriginal leadership elite is divided and perhaps unable to decide. Nevertheless, somewhere in the Aboriginal elite, this has to be decided, and the choice will be made. Most of us can only watch, and try to protect the more vulnerable Aborigines from whatever backlash might come.

3. Divide and rule. According to this argument Black Power merely cuts off Aborigines from their white friends and allies. Even where Aborigines do not intend to cut themselves off from their real white friends, perhaps others can use the Black Power slogan to sow distrust and suspicion by charging whites with being “paternalistic” or with “having ulterior motives”.

This is a real danger which only the Black Power advocate can remove by carefully judging his white friends and allies on their merits. He must beware of slick labels and smears, and make it plain that he will welcome genuine support from white people. Above all he must take care to communicate with and understand white people, for Black Power cannot be total power; it must be shared with white power.

4. Confusing the shadow with the substance. Examples of this are regarding find-sounding resolutions, changed laws, and even all-Aboriginal Councils as being solutions in themselves. Resolutions and laws that are not put into practice are mere delusions of progress. It is not words so much as actions in the field, where the people are, which really mark progress. Could the reality be as one speaker put it, that “real progress comes through slow definitive social work”? If so, it is a sobering thought.

The trade unions may have some fine resolutions on their books, as Jack Baker pointed out, but their record in race relations is poor, and the racist attitudes often expressed by workers does not offer much hope for their implementation.

Under the Labor administration in South Australia, the laws were changed for the better, but if the average Aborigine in South Australia cannot tell the difference, was it progress?

Local Councils have existed in the Torres Straits for decades, but when they are subject to manipulation and higher authority, are they merely window-dressing? As one speaker asked, “When there is a clash of interests, who has the power? If Black Power at the local level can be diverted from the interests of the people by manipulation, string-pulling, and the use of personal ambition, is there a need for an organisation on a national scale to act as a watchdog and counter-vailing force to the manipulators? Or would even a national body be subject to the same dangers?”

Perhaps the greatest danger of all, however, is to be so afraid of radical action that we do nothing. Unless drastic changes are made in Aboriginal affairs very quickly, the problem of a rapidly growing population of Aborigines who are under-employed, poorly educated, and increasingly dissatisfied will erupt more and more frequently into brawls, riots, and pointless violence.

The recent incident at Laverton in W.A., in which two policemen were injured and an Aboriginal youth shot dead, is but a pointer in the direction we are heading. As in the ghetto riots in America, the social environment in places such as Laverton (W.A.) is such that it only requires a minor incident to touch off ugly scenes in which pent-up bitterness, frustration, and fear is released in irrational, mindless violence.

The great irony of public attitudes to Black Power, as a slogan in Australia, is that if violence does come it will be because of a lack of Aboriginal power.

Our task then ought not to be to oppose Aboriginal power, but to gain the free, non-violent, and voluntary acceptance by the white power structure of the legitimacy and value of a sharing of power with the Aboriginal people. This can be done by facing those who at present wield power in this land with the truth about race relations.