

\$13m grants to Aborigines



But will it work? Dr. Coombs is non-committal

From MICHELLE GRATTAN

CANBERRA. — The Federal Government will grant up to \$13 million over five years to buy Aboriginal communities land outside reserves.

The Government will also make grants — in addition to existing loans — to assist Aboriginal enterprises which have a reasonable prospect of success, either inside or outside reserves.

The Prime Minister (Mr. McMahon) has announced these Government policies in an Australia Day statement on Aborigines.

Mr. McMahon also said a new "general purpose lease" would be created which would be available on certain conditions to individuals, groups and communities of Aborigines on Northern Territory reserves for economic and social purposes.

At present, leases are only granted for one specific purpose, such as a pastoral enterprise, or a business or recreational area.

However the Government has refused to grant Aborigines land rights on reserves based on traditional association.

Mr. McMahon said that "to do so would introduce a new and probably confusing component, the implications of which could not clearly be foreseen and which could lead to uncertainty and possible challenge in relation to land titles elsewhere in Australia which are at present unquestioned and secure."

The chairman of the Commonwealth Council for Aborigines Affairs (Dr. H. C. Coombs) said last night his council was disappointed at some aspects of Mr. McMahon's statement.

'Premature'

But he said it would be premature to speculate on how the new policy would work.

He said it would depend on "the spirit in which the decisions are administered and on the understanding and reaction of Aborigines to them."

Mr. McMahon also announced that:

• The Government would strengthen the law to protect Aboriginal reserves.

• A new mining code has been drawn up for mining exploration and development on Aboriginal reserves.

• Ten per cent. of the royalties paid by the Nabaleo mining operation at Gove will be made available from the Aboriginal Benefits Trust Fund to the Aboriginal community at Yirrkala.

Mr. McMahon's statement, which was issued as a White Paper, follows a continuing review of Aboriginal policy by a Cabinet committee. It began last May.

It represents a compromise between the views of the Department of the Interior and the Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs, whose chairman (Dr. Coombs) threatened to resign late last year if the Government did not change its policy on Aborigines.

Mr. McMahon said a five point "statement of objectives" would form a general directive to those responsible for the formulation and administration of Commonwealth policies affecting Aborigines.

The fundamental objective was that Aborigines "should be assisted as individuals and if they wish as groups, at the local community level, to hold effective and respected places within one Australian society with equal access to the rights and opportunities it provides and acceptance of the responsibilities towards it."

"At the same time, they should be encouraged and assisted to preserve and develop their own culture, languages, traditions and arts so that these can become living elements in the diverse culture of the Australian society," Mr. McMahon said.

The Government recognised the rights of individual Aborigines to effective choice about the degree to which, and the pace at which, they came to identify themselves with the Australian society.

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