

White paper, black question

THE Prime Minister's Australia Day White Paper on Aborigines is the fruit of compromise. And, like most compromises, it is both satisfying and frustrating. It makes a number of positive advances. It codifies the rights of Aborigines and their place in our predominantly white society. It sets down, firmly, humanely and without ambiguity, the objectives of present Government policy. It asserts the Aborigine's right to hold an "effective and respected place within one Australian society" with equality of opportunity in that society. It also asserts the right of Aborigines to choose the degree to which, and the pace at which, they come to identify themselves in the Australian community at large. More importantly, perhaps, the paper rejects unequivocally the concept of separate development South African-style.

Economically, there are advances too. The policy of giving encouragement and practical help to Aborigines to establish their own economic enterprises, initiated last year, will be continued. The object is to make them not just providers of unskilled labor but also providers of skilled services, as well as proprietors and managers. To this end a new form of lease, called a general purposes lease, will be created, under which Aborigines will be free to apply, individually or corporately, for a lease of reserves land for "economic and social purposes". An Aboriginal land fund will be created to buy up land outside the reserves as it comes on to the market.

On the tribal land rights question, the Government has not changed principles but has produced new safeguards for the tribes. The White Paper echoes the judgment of the Northern Territory Supreme Court last year in rejecting the principle of land rights based on traditional association and affinity. Instead, it reasserts that Aboriginal rights to land should be limited to those cases where it can demonstrably be put to economic and social use. Ever since the Gurindjis walked off Wave Hill station five years ago, and established their squatters' camp at nearby Wattie Creek, the land rights question has been a lively, if not always burning, issue. Mr. McMahon's statement has done little to defuse the issue.

No less contentious, and of even more practical concern, are the provisions relating to mining and exploration leases. The Government has decided that it is in the national interest, as well as in the interests of the Aborigines themselves, for mineral exploration and development on Aboriginal reserves to continue. However, the Government will consult with Aboriginal communities who may be affected by such activities so their welfare and interests can be taken into account. When a licence is issued to a non-Aboriginal company, that company is required to "do its best" (whatever this phrase may mean) to ensure that the Aboriginal community in question has a share in the economic benefits which are derived. The Government also "desires" — but does not insist — that the company employ resident Aborigines for surface exploration, and train them for more complex tasks.

Clearly, much would be left to the discretion of the individual persons or bodies appointed to judge the various rival claims. Administered wisely and impartially, the policy could prove immensely beneficial to Aborigines. Badly administered, it might spell disaster. The White Paper, it is true, promises that in the granting of exploration licences a degree of preference "may" be granted to Aboriginal applicants with a particular interest in the area concerned. The word "may", however, casts some doubt on the worth of the assurance.

Australia was wrested from the black man 200 years ago by force of arms and weight of civilisation. We have had time, in the years since, to wonder who was the most civilised as the evidence mounted of our insensitivity and inhumanity to the Aboriginal race and culture. Mr. McMahon's statement falls short of an absolute guarantee that public policies have caught up with public attitudes and conscience. It is, however, a great advance. It is backed by a considerable public investment. We wish that it might have been more categorical in several places, but we think it essentially realistic. Administered with good will and sincerity it could be good policy.