

THE BUDGET CUTS AND ABORIGINES

“a relish for kicking the underdog”

by Victoria Adam

As Gough said in his reply to the Fraser budget, its treatment of Aborigines “perfectly illustrates the qualities of this government - its dishonesty, its pitiless treatment of inarticulate and unorganised minorities...” Elsewhere he says “The budget shows a positive relish for kicking the underdog.”

Last year, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs spent \$139.5 million. This year it has been allocated \$111.3 million, a cut of \$28.2 million.

Lynch himself admitted a cut of \$33 million in what he called programs of direct assistance to Aborigines.

Aboriginal education has been cut by \$6.1 million; housing by \$15 million; health by \$1 million; advancement programs under social security and welfare by \$8.8 million and development of Aboriginal community amenities by

Aboriginal community amenities by \$1.7 million.

Beneath Contempt

Mr Whitlam commented, “Any government that can budget for an 18 per cent reduction in health funds for people with the highest rate of infant mortality in the world is beneath contempt”.

Not only must the spending cuts affect welfare and living standards among Blacks directly, they must also increase Black unemployment, already higher than the national average. The number of registered unemployed Blacks is at least 10,500.

The former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Les Johnson, said on August 2: “Due to the isolation and the lack of awareness of many Aboriginal people of their entitlements to such benefits, this figure (Black unemployment) was most likely to

be underestimated by at least 400 per cent.”

Smear Campaign

Smear Campaign

In preparation for savage cuts to Aboriginal Affairs spending, Fraser and the media have been conducting a vicious smear campaign against Blacks and spending on their projects.

Mr Whitlam claimed in Parliament that on May 18 this year Mr Fraser entertained newspaper editors at the Lodge "and justified the forthcoming cuts in the Aboriginal Affairs budget by reading from what was described by the editors as a two page document."

The document alleged lack of supervision of Black housing associations by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, waste and extravagance and that the housing associations at Port Keats, Bathurst Island and Redfern had spent large sums for little result.

This was taken up by the press and repeated by Mr Fraser in a TV interview, despite the immediate denial of the allegations by representatives of the associations named.

Mr Whitlam stated that "The three housing associations were in fact producing houses on a very competitive basis..."

Ministerial Conflict

The **Bulletin** magazine on June 12 published an article continuing Mr Fraser's allegations. Its information was repudiated by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Viner, as containing "many grossly misleading inferences and statements".

The **Bulletin** replied that the "article was based entirely on a two-page report prepared for the Prime

Minister" and provided for them "on the authority of the Prime Minister."

According to **The Bulletin** the senior official who provided the document claimed that it was a preliminary extract from the full

report on the administration of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs by Mr David Hay.

In fact the Hay Report is no basis for the cuts to Aboriginal spending, as the **Financial Review** of August 25 points out.

The report does criticise aspects of the department's administration of funding programs, and says that in some areas, urgent remedial action is needed.

However, it points to a number of successes in Aboriginal housing, and says that the picture in the urban and country areas is "more favorable."

The Hay Report says that where remote Black communities have little or no base for profitable economic activity, assistance by grants for Aboriginal enterprises was appropriate to exploit what resources there are and to provide services to communities, according to the **Financial Review**.

The **Review** quotes the report as saying, "These enterprises offer training and employment opportunities," and says that it describes the service provided by the Aboriginal Loans Commission as effective.

Important Service

The budget cut support for the Land Councils from an expenditure of \$241,997 last year to an allocation

of \$241,997 last year to an allocation of \$175,000 this year. The Hay report

says that the one council it examined was "effectively delivering a most important service."

"It appears to have the understanding and knowledge to identify and gain the confidence of Aboriginal tribal leaders."

According to the **Financial Review**, "some of the central criticisms made by the Hay report about the present administration of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs concern the inconsistency or obscurity of policy objectives..."

The report argues that "the needs and priorities of most Aboriginal communities have not been assessed by means of consultation between the communities and the many departments with aid responsibilities in a co-ordinated and meaningful way."

The report points up several areas of weakness and suggests remedial action which might require additional funding, but which certainly does not justify cuts in the budget.

At the same time, it points to improved community attitudes and more active attention by the State governments to the needs of Aborigines. "For these," it says, "the department is entitled to much of the credit."

Mr Fraser's last excuse for the budget cuts to Aboriginal Affairs has been demolished. Will he now plead gross racism? □





The Redfern Aboriginal Housing Project