

Report criticises Bryant, Dexter

A parliamentary committee which investigated the financial administration of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has criticised both the Minister of the time, Labor's Mr Bryant, and the permanent head, Mr Barrie Dexter.

The committee said Mr Dexter "must assume responsibility" for the department's failure from the outset to organise to satisfactorily control the spending of large amounts of public money.

However, while acknowledging Mr Bryant's compassion toward the problems of Aborigines, it said it considered he should have been more sympathetic and realistic in the face of the problems of establishing the department.

It also said it was not convinced that the department's problems could not have been overcome by greater co-operation between Mr Bryant and Mr Dexter, and that Mr Bryant's style of administration contributed to a deterioration of the relationship between the two men.

Finance base

The report, tabled in Parliament yesterday by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts, criticised the Public Service Board for not giving the department a proper finance base from its inception in 1972, and departmental officers for not transmitting important information.

The committee comprised both Opposition and Government Members,

and its report, presented by the chairman, Mr Connolly (Lib, NSW) was unanimous.

Replying to it, Mr Bryant, now a backbencher in Opposition, said this was the first opportunity he had been

backbencher in Opposition, said this was the first opportunity he had been given to answer the allegations in his proper forum, Parliament.

The report should prompt Parliament to a fundamental questioning of a distressing malaise in Australian public administration, of "gross intellectual sloppiness" at a high level.

The department had given evidence that was wrong, Mr Bryant said.

'Extremely bad'

Denying allegations made against him, he said that from the beginning of his term as Minister, he had asked for strict financial control to be exercised over funds distributed by the department.

At the time he came to the Ministry, the condition of the Aboriginal people was extremely bad.

He said, "It was important that we got on with the job, and that is what we tried to do."

The committee began its inquiry in 1974, following a reference in the Auditor-General's supplementary report for 1972-73 to deficiencies in financial and administrative control in the department, and a later special report on the department by the Auditor-General.

It held public hearings in 1975 at which witnesses included Mr Bryant, Mr Dexter, departmental officers and other public servants, as well as people connected with enterprises of activities of the department.