

## **IF JUSTICE MEANS ANYTHING, IT IS TIME WHITES SPOKE UP**

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IT IS sometimes my pleasant duty to go out to speak to groups. These groups are very diverse - ranging from church and peace groups to gatherings of the "land rights for farmers" movement, university students and meetings of business and professional people. I've been speaking to such groups since 1971.

My talks have always been about justice and equality. Except for a handful of extreme cranks, people basically agree with the social necessity of these principles. How the principles can be applied in the very confused circumstances of the Aboriginal/white relationship, and particularly in relation to the question of the occupation of the Aborigines' land, is often the focus of the discussion which takes place after my talk.

The majority of people in these audiences, while disturbed about any personal effect it might have on their lives, concede that Aborigines have a just claim to land rights and land rights compensation.

Since 1983 I've been able to inform audiences of the efforts made by the NSW Government, through the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, to find a solution to this bedevilling question. The act, among other things, enables Aboriginal land councils to acquire land by grant, claim (vacant Crown land) and purchase.

More significant to these audiences is the fact that funds for the purchase of land for Aborigines emanates from their money.

The act provides for compensation to Aborigines. The amount is equal to 7.5 per cent of State land tax revenue collected each year and is to be paid to the land councils for 15 years, from 1983 to 1998.

For many in my audiences, it is the first time they have been made aware of the particulars of the act. They find that they have been contributing to the solution and that doing so has not brought them any great financial distress. The relief experienced by many in these groups has been almost tangible.

The former State Government, possibly trying to avert a backlash from that small but noisy section of the white community which objects totally to anything designed to promote justice and equality for Aborigines, gave this venture little publicity. What publicity there was did not penetrate the public consciousness, nor was it couched in terms which allowed non-Aboriginal people to see themselves as actively involved in any way in the search for a resolution to the land rights issue.

The second problem hinges quite strongly on the first. The Greiner Government, having abolished the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, wants to abolish the act. Because too few people in their constituency are aware of the significance of the act, there's a

great likelihood that the abolitionists will succeed.

Now, I won't argue that the Aboriginal Land Rights Act is the complete solution. The findings of the Human Rights Commission Inquiry into conditions at Toomelah, and the existence of other black residential areas of a similar, Third World standard would squelch anyone posing that proposition.

But the act, and particularly that part of it relating to land purchase, does allow for a number of important considerations, the first of which is practical. Land which might be available to Aborigines through grant or claim (vacant Crown land) is often land no-one else has wanted. The choice parcels of land, whether urban or rural, were taken by whites years ago. The only way blacks can hope to regain any prime land for their development is through purchase.

Blacks have historically been excluded from land ownership, first through land expropriation which left them impoverished, and, in recent times, because of the continuance of this poverty handed down generation after generation.

A solution was in sight - the 15-year program of land purchase for Aboriginal people. It is not to be as good, some said, as a national acknowledgment of the rights and struggle of indigenous people to regain their land - a solution that would have allowed Aborigines to negotiate directly with government towards a more genuinely equitable redistribution of land predicated on the principle of Aboriginal prior ownership.

However, because the funds were coming from a broad and relevant white base - the State land tax - many blacks were able to tell themselves this was an indication that whites did care about justice and equality and were prepared to put money behind that commitment.

The act also allowed white people to feel that they were part of the solution instead of being all of the problem.

Now, as part of the Greiner Government's new Aboriginal Affairs policy, it is proposed to redirect the Aborigines' portion of the State land tax back into Consolidated Revenue. From there, the Government says, it would be used for Aboriginal health, housing, education, etcetera - all of which it proposes to "mainstream".

The Government holds that the 15-year plan hasn't worked for the benefit of Aboriginal people. True, it hasn't achieved its 15-year goal in five years, but then it was not expected to. It should be permitted to run its course. To suggest that the money should be spent on providing what the Government ought in any case to be providing - services such as health, housing and education - is to underrate the intelligence of both black and white communities.

The "mainstreaming" of services for Aborigines belongs to failed policies of the past, specifically assimilation and integration. The extent and severity of black problems were concealed through their inclusion in data generated by the wider community. It will be a tragedy if, in 40 years, we have just come full circle, back to those bad old days.

After what some black organisations are calling "Clayton's consultations" with Aboriginal communities around the State, the Greiner Government has published a discussion paper written by Paul Zammit, the parliamentary secretary assisting the Premier on Aboriginal Affairs. This paper purports to offer four options to the black community for discussion. They range from keeping everything the way it is to abolishing everything. However, the accompanying text leaves no doubt that the Government intends making sweeping changes, and there is every reason to suspect that the baby will be thrown out with the bathwater.

Finally, the paper invites submissions from Aborigines and "other interested parties". People who, through their rental or land tax payments, have been providing the funds that were channel-led toward resolution of the inequitable distribution of re-sources across the races are most certainly interested parties. Copies of the paper are available through the Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

I realise I'm taking a risk by calling non-Aboriginal attention to this concern - but I'm convinced that the majority of people in New South Wales do want to see justice and equality for blacks in their lifetime. This will not occur if the present Government mainstreams Aboriginal services and dismisses efforts which allow Aboriginal people to regain part of their lost lands. Resolution of the ongoing conflict between Aborigines and white settlers must be addressed now, or it will continue to be a bone of contention between our children into the next century. It is up to whites also to let the State Government know how they feel about this matter.