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New name but same game for Aboriginal body

Jack Waterford looks at progress made by the department set up for blacks, and challenges ahead for the new Commission.

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The Department of Aboriginal Affairs goes out of existence today, to be replaced on Monday by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Few departments have begun with such high aspirations, few have had such humiliating experiences in learning that real change is harder to achieve than to imagine. But, disappointments or not, the department deserves credit for most of the significant advances in Aboriginal affairs over the past 20 years.

The department had its origin in the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, established by Harold Holt to advise him on matters Aboriginal in the wake of the 1967 referendum which gave the Commonwealth power to legislate in the area.

The size of popular support for the referendum had staggered Mr Holt. The council consisted of Nugget Coombs, the late anthropologist Professor Bill Stanner and former (and future) diplomat Barrie Dexter, the latter heading a small office providing the council with support.

Mr Holt's initiative reflected a wide spread feeling that the Commonwealth ought to be doing more in the field, but it would not be true to say that the Commonwealth had not been playing a considerable role for years. It had, through the Department of the Interior and its management of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. The problem was that Interior was a Country Party fiefdom with strong assimilationist views. More modern integrationist models were bluntly rejected.

The early years for the council were focused on lobbying the alternative view — a role not taken kindly by the entrenched and adamant bureaucrats in Interior. The real wars were not between the politicians but between the views championed by the various bureaucrats.

At first, Mr Dexter's office had at least the Prime Minister's ear. When John Gorton became Prime Minister, he made his energetic and very interested Minister for Social Security, Bill Wentworth, Minister in charge of Aboriginal Affairs as well. In one sense an upgrading and a recognition of the importance of the office, it was, however, also a backward step in that it deprived the office of the clout of being with the Prime Minister. This loss of clout was accentuated when Gorton fell, and Wentworth's successor, the lacklustre Peter Howson, was appointed Minister for Aborigines, Environment and the Arts, widely and correctly seen as the ragbag odds-and-sods job.

But the same times saw the political importance of Aboriginal affairs increasing. The Wave Hill walkouts, and the development of the land-rights movement, concerns about Aboriginal civil rights, reports about appalling Aboriginal health, housing and

education, the increasing attention given the area by the trade-union and student movements and, in 1972, the Aboriginal tent embassy outside Parliament House, were creating enormous pressure for change.

A new generation of young and articulate Aborigines — one of whom, Charles Perkins, one of the first Aboriginal university graduate, joined the office in 1969 — was also beginning to frame its demands. Labor won office in 1972 having pledged to do something concrete, and having adopted the phrase of self-determination for Aborigines. It was the mood of the day.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs was formally established in late December, 1972, with Dexter announced as its permanent head early the next month. The Minister was Gordon Bryant, a man with a deep interest and background in Aboriginal affairs, and a passionate concern for righting all wrongs, and quickly. The department quickly acquired a substantial budget, control over the old Interior functions and a sense of mission.

But there were immediate problems, of philosophy as much as personality. Dexter's commitment to improving Aboriginal conditions was absolute, but he did not want his department to become a new super welfare agency, a dole-out of blankets and cash. He placed far greater emphasis on the possibilities of the department being a coordinating agency, consulting with Aborigines and establishing their needs, then working, in a leading role, with other agencies to solve them.

The job was not, in his view, short-term palliatives but long-term development.

This tension of the immediate with the long-term has been perhaps the department's major long-term problem, one that has oscillated with the times, the ministers and the budgets.

Bryant might not have disagreed with the Dexter philosophy as such, but continually saw the short-term needs as very urgent. Aggravating the philosophical dispute were deep suspicions of the bureaucracy from within Brant's office (a problem revived during Gerry Hand's term), an impatience with procedure or ordinary legal accountability requirements on Bryant's part (his department was soon complaining that he did not inform it of commitments he had made and that some breached the Audit Act) and the fact that the department's activities and budget grew at a far greater rate than its capacity to manage. This was not Dexter's fault as such — he was a policy man not an administrator, but it meant that, when the inevitable blow-ups occurred, the Minister would attempt to lay the blame on him. History and a later parliamentary inquiry were far more kind.

The department was also intensely suffering what would be its bugbear to its death: the difficulty of simultaneously meeting Aboriginal and white aspirations. "It's like walking with one leg on either side of a barbed wire fence," as one permanent head once described it.

On the one hand, Aborigines were intensely critical of what they saw as the lack of pace and action. On the other, white opinion, initially not reluctant to spend vast sums on Aboriginal affairs but probably expecting that the mere injection of resources would

be the panacea, became increasingly alarmed at suggestions of waste and incompetence.

Bryant fell, to be replaced by Senator Jim Cavanagh and later Les Johnson. Both tightened up on the free spending and concentrated more on the long term. It was in their time that the ground was laid for substantial developments in housing, employment initiatives and education.

WHEN Labor fell, it had been generally expected that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and its programs would suffer enormously. Ominous words about tightening up and consolidation were the order of the day. Surprisingly, however, though the department suffered some cuts, and much more rigorous controls were developed, the department survived and so did its programs.

Although it was to be a very junior ministry under Malcolm Fraser, all of the early ministers Fraser put in to what was regarded as a ministerial graveyard — Ian Viner, Senator Fred Chaney and Senator Peter Baume — were highly competent and professional, and as determined to advance the department as themselves. These three prospered: all later being promoted to Cabinet on the strength of their performance.

The high profile of the area — and crises such as Aurukun and Mornington Island, and the Noonkanbah affair — also maintained a high level of Prime-Ministerial interest, generally benevolent. The last Liberal Minister, Ian Wilson, made little impression on what had been developed by his predecessors.

Dexter went in 1977, to be succeeded by David Hay (knighted in 1979), who had earlier made his reputation in helping bring Papua New Guinea to independence, then in 1980 Tony Ayers, later Secretary of Social Security and now of Defence, took over. Ayers was succeeded by Jack Taylor, now Auditor-General, in 1981. (It is a curious fact, incidentally, that all previous ministers for Aboriginal Affairs, and the permanent heads, are still alive.)

The Fraser consolidation saw the department considerably sharpen its performance. This is not, however, necessarily the public perception, nor that of the Aboriginal community. Few areas of Aboriginal affairs have been more politically contentious; and cries of corruption, incompetence and mismanagement have always abounded, as have inquiries of one sort or another.

Not a few of the inquiries have indicated shortcomings, but few have ever proved the charges which brought them on. More often, it has been failures at the Aboriginal community level, and accusations of poor departmental supervision of its grants, which have had some substance. Against this, however, a departmental answer has been both the need to take some gambles, and the fact that the supervision which was in place was already absorbing a crippling proportion of funds. Few Commonwealth agencies have withstood the scrutiny DAA has; few would come out of it as intact.

The policy commitment to self-management has also created problems. The idea that Aborigines should control their own affairs must of course be supported. But the responsibility and pressure this has created has been out of all proportion to that placed on non-Aborigines.

Ordinary Australians do not have to organise their own health services, their own garbage services, to attend meetings all day and all week about how every intimate aspect of community life is organised: they delegate the job to outsiders, including their politicians. But at the remote community level self-management comes to mean that.

The failures this has caused have haunted the department, particularly because they have suggested to the critics that Aborigines cannot manage.

Under the next Minister, Clyde Holding, many of the functions of the department went into hold, because he put almost all of his emphasis on achieving national land rights legislation — an aspiration ultimately dashed.

Holding, however, was to appoint the first Aboriginal Secretary of the Department, Charles Perkins, who had been there from the beginning. Perkins — simultaneously the Government's adviser and loyal servant, and on the other the most visible Aboriginal and its Ambassador to white

Australia, personified many of the dilemmas in which the department found itself; at times before he had embarrassed the Government by speaking out on Aboriginal conditions; at other times he was an effective operator for the Government in hosing down Aboriginal dissent.

The last Minister, Gerry Hand, came into office more than a little suspicious of the department (much of his background knowledge of Aboriginal affairs came from the legions of Aborigines discontented with the department) and tended to make most of the decisions from within his office.

He became committed to the notion of establishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission as both an Aboriginal parliament and the executive agency carrying out the job in Aboriginal affairs. He soon fell out with Perkins, who was pushed aside (if later vindicated in the range of inquiries in allegations made against him) and replaced by Bill Gray, another departmental long-server who had played a critical role for the department and the Government during the Ranger negotiations in the 1970s.

WHETHER ATSIC can avoid the deficiencies that, so many have seen in DAA remains to be seen. Hand's rationale, is based primarily on the argument that the major failure in Aboriginal affairs has been one of establishing and achieving what Aborigines really want. DAA's record of consultation was never brilliant but some of those who have espoused this have imagined, naively, that Aboriginal aspirations lie like nuggets in the sand, only waiting to be picked up: the fact is that Aborigines, like others, are not sure what they want, that what people in one area, or one family, want differs from what people in the next area or family want, and that wants have to be matched against scarce resources.

The key problem in Aboriginal affairs has been one of effective service delivery, not of consultation, and it is not clear that ATSIC promises any better.

