



SATURDAY, MAY 11, 1935

No. 3419

Vol. 135

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Protection of Aborigines in West Australia

ANOTHER chapter has been added to the annals, too often distressing, of the aborigines of Australia in the report on conditions in West Australia which is referred to elsewhere in this issue (p. 798). The Commissioner, Mr. H. D. Moseley, to whom the investigation was entrusted in 1934, discloses a situation which in certain respects is sufficiently grave; but happily his statement does not endorse the allegations of callousness and brutality in the treatment of the aborigines to which currency has been given.

For some time, public opinion in Australia has shown a slow but steady growth in the direction of a more rational and considered policy in the treatment of the aborigines. The movement began with the efforts of the late Dr. H. Basedow some years ago to secure substantial reserves of land, upon which aborigines still living under tribal conditions might be ensured in their liberty to range over an area adequate for the exercise of their primitive economy as 'food-gatherers' in the technical sense of the term employed by the anthropologist. Unfortunately this—in the modern view uneconomic—mode of livelihood demands a considerable stretch of undisturbed country for the support of even a small group of people, and although the policy of preserving land for the exclusive use of the native, from which white settlement is barred, of late years has been followed on the whole with consistency, constant vigilance has had to be exercised by anthropologists and others interested in the welfare of the black-fellow to protect him against those who have desired the development of the land for economic uses and to their own advantage. That these efforts have not always been entirely successful is suggested by recent representation to the authorities that the aborigines were in danger of suffering privation through being forced off their hunting grounds by encroachment on their land.

In many respects the aborigines of West Australia have been more fortunate than their fellows in other States. On the whole, conditions have favoured the survival of their tribal organisation to a greater degree than elsewhere except, perhaps, in the central area and in the Northern Territories. The growth of white settlement in West Australia until the opening of the gold fields in the latter part of the nineteenth century was slower and more sparse than in most of the other parts of Australia, and the development of the northern

area, where the nearest approach to untouched tribal conditions still exists, was late. The distinction to be drawn between conditions in the northern and southern areas of the State is clearly to be discerned in the report of the Commissioner, where there is a lamentable picture of degeneration as it occurs among the aborigines of the southern area owing to longer and closer contact with white civilisation. It is especially apparent in the pitiable situation of the half-caste, which has arisen out of the undesirable conditions attendant on the proximity of aboriginal camps to the towns.

Partly as a consequence of this late development, the problem of the aboriginal in West Australia has been approached on the whole with a greater sense of responsibility and in a more enlightened spirit than would have been possible in an earlier day. Policy has been inspired by a genuine, if not always well-directed, desire to secure the well-being of the blackfellow. That policy has been applied for some time past through officials who not only had sympathy with the native point of view, but also had knowledge of aboriginal tradition and organisation. The crux of the problem has been, and continues to be, the aboriginal spoiled by too close contact with white civilisation, who at best lives by casual employment, and on the fringe of the towns often will end by becoming a more or less permanent burden on the community.

To admit that the system of aboriginal protection in West Australia is not without its merits is not necessarily to argue that it is beyond reproach. A perusal of the report of the Commissioner on present conditions would do much to remove that illusion, even though there is a suggestion that friction between missionary and squatter may have been responsible for some of the more serious accusations which have been bandied about; while the denunciation of labour conditions on the stations as virtual slavery would appear to belong to that class of hysterical overstatement which seems inseparable from all agitation for reform. Yet, when all allowances are made, it would be difficult to frame stronger expressions of animadversion than certain sections of this report. This can be conveyed only imperfectly in a summary.

In carrying out his duties of investigation, Mr. Moseley wisely did not confine himself to the examination of witnesses, but travelled about the State to inspect conditions himself. In this way he covered some 14,000 miles within the year. On the whole, his report on conditions in the north

cannot but be regarded as favourable. The 'bush' native, he agrees, is at his best when left alone, and he recommends that in order to ensure this, the lands at present in occupation by bush tribes should be secured to them as reserves, and that further reserves should be declared, to anticipate closer white settlement. Nor does he find that conditions among the natives on the stations, whether privately owned as pastoral farms or Government-owned, are unfavourable. Occupation suited to the character and capacities of the native is open to them in pastoral pursuits. He criticises the Government stations, however, for not keeping the natives sufficiently fully employed.

In these circumstances, Mr. Moseley is by no means in favour of the policy of locating all aborigines on reserves. Throughout the report he stresses the advantage, and indeed the necessity, of finding suitable occupation for the aborigines. On the stations, they are already engaged in suitable pastoral pursuits, and the children receive a preliminary training for these pursuits in the natural order of things. Removal to the reserves, even if an attempt were then made to bring them more under the influence of the code of white civilisation, as has been suggested, "would not react to their advantage". In another section of his report, while considering the proposal in connexion with the aborigines of the southern area, he points to the overcrowding of the reserves which such removal would entail.

If Mr. Moseley finds little on which to comment in the social and economic condition of the aborigines of the north—even the so-called slavery, whereby no wages are paid, is shown to be beneficial to the native rather than an economic advantage for the farmer—the case is far otherwise when the question of health and provision of medical attention is under consideration. The lack of provision for early diagnosis and hospital treatment is made the subject of severe comment. In fairness, it must be pointed out that responsibility for the inadequacy of the measures for dealing with leprosy, which call for the most serious strictures, are not entirely those of the State, as the care of leprosy comes under the authority of the Federal Government—affording material for consideration by those who advocate that the entire responsibility for the aborigines should be handed over to Federal authority. Mr. Moseley offers certain suggestions for dealing with the provision of medical treatment; but he regards the question as one of such gravity as to

warrant the appointment of a medical man to hold the office of district protector of the aborigines.

Stricture of the lack of proper medical attention and hospital accommodation is not confined to conditions in the northern area only, though there, owing to the conditions of settlement, it presents the more serious problem. In the southern area it is a problem which can be solved by the enlargement of existing hospital arrangements, although these, it may be mentioned, are also severely criticised, both for their character and their limited extent.

Apart from the medical question, the problems of the southern area are essentially different from those of the northern area—the Commissioner notes, with a surprise that is almost naïve, the relative unimportance of the half-breed element in the north. The grave problems of the south—and they are indeed grave—are the half-castes and persons of aboriginal descent, the character of the Government settlements, and the situation of aboriginal camps in proximity to the towns. Nothing could well be stronger than the criticisms which are levelled against existing conditions. They constitute a grave indictment of the methods of administration, and call for no further comment. Here Mr. Moseley recommends what is virtually a wholesale clearance and the provision for able-bodied aborigines and the half-castes of Government farm stations, which will allow of agricultural and horticultural allotments, and give facilities for training very much on the same lines as the provision which has been made in Queensland.

While conditions such as those censured at the Moore River settlement must be attributed to lack of supervision and as such chargeable to the administration, the report recognises that the system, and not the responsible official, the Chief Protector of the Aborigines, is to blame. The Chief Protector has been chained to his office at Perth, and it has not been possible for him to perform his proper function of travelling and inspection. Much of the work of his Department, it is admitted, has been highly successful; but it is pointed out that the system of honorary protectors has not functioned, except in the granting of permits for employment.

It is evident that if, and when, the changes, administrative and other, recommended in this report are brought into effect, the Department for the Protection of the Aborigines will be a vastly more costly undertaking than it is at present. To an outside view it certainly would appear that a duty which must necessarily entail a heavy

expenditure to make it worth while at all, has suffered in performance from economy. In this connexion, perhaps, the relevant figures may be left to speak for themselves. Of all the States of the Australian Commonwealth, West Australia has by far the greatest number of aborigines under its control. They approach thirty thousand (29,021). Next come the Northern Territories (under Federal control) with 19,336, and Queensland, with 16,957. The lowest is South Australia with 3,407, and New South Wales comes next with 9,724. On the other hand, West Australia is proportionately the lowest in expenditure, her aboriginal administration costing £28,340 per annum as against Queensland, £41,128, New South Wales, £53,124 and South Australia, £23,000. While cost per head would be no fair criterion, owing to the difference in the conditions under which the natives live, for the cost of 'bush' natives is low and small numbers entail relatively heavy expense, yet when every allowance is made, the figure for West Australia seems far too low in comparison with that of other States. It would appear that undue exercise of economy has allowed the practice of the State to fall below the standard of modern policy in dealing with the aborigines.

Mr. Moseley's report is a valuable document. Its outstanding feature is its constructive character and its grasp of realities, sympathetic, but unclouded by sentiment. In this connexion, however, it must be recognised that it takes a very definite line that does not entirely coincide with the aim of those who have advocated a liberal policy in dealing with the Australian aboriginal. Only in part does it endorse the segregation of the blackfellow from white civilisation on reserves; where by contact with white civilisation native organisation has broken down, either in part, as on the stations, or has become wholly degenerate, as near towns and settlements, the measure suggested is occupation and training under supervision or protection along lines which, following present trends, eventually will make the aboriginal self-respecting and self-supporting. On no other condition does Mr. Moseley see in the degenerating blackfellow and the half-caste anything but a danger to the community. If his policy be adopted, it remains to be seen whether the difference in conditions in Australia will favour a course, which, eminently reasonable as it seems in itself, has not as yet proved an unqualified success when applied elsewhere.