A. Barrie Pittock
Australian Aborigines:
The Common Struggle for Humanity
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AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES:
THE COMMON STRUGGLE FOR HUMANITY

Copenhagen 1979
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FOREWORD

Ideally this essay should have been written by an Aborigine. As a non-Aborigine who has worked with Aborigines for Aboriginal rights and self-determination for more than 20 years, it nevertheless seemed right for me to agree to do it this time. I hope an Aborigine writes such an essay next time.

Meanwhile let it stand as one non-Aborigine's tribute to a long and valiant struggle by Aborigines for their people and for all it means to be human beings.
INTRODUCTION

Despite so much that is common to the cultural heritage and colonial experience of the Australian Aborigines and American Indians, the present legal and socio-political position of the Aboriginal people in Australian society remains even worse than that of the Indians in the United States. The rights of the Indian peoples to land, minerals, water, and a degree of self-determination and cultural distinctiveness are far more secure than those of the Aborigines (where the latter are considered to have any such rights at all). Moreover, the statistics concerning infant mortality rates, life expectancy, median incomes, education and housing which are rightly the object of much concern amongst American Indians are only exceeded as measures of material poverty and deprivation in the so-called "developed world" by those for Australia's Aborigines.

These short notes cannot hope to fully document or explain the above sweeping generalizations, but they may serve as an introduction and point to more comprehensive treatments and documentation.
COLONIAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

Thirteen years before the American Revolution and immediately following the defeat of France in Canada, King George III of Great Britain proclaimed that the Indians

"should not be molested or disturbed in the possession of such parts of dominions and territories as, not having been ceded to, or purchased by us, are reserved to them, or any of them, as their hunting grounds."

This proclamation led to the four main principles which were incorporated into Canada's treaty system: that the Indians possess occupancy rights to all lands which they have not formally surrendered; that no land claimed by Indians may be granted to whites until formally surrendered; that the government assumes the responsibility of evicting all persons unlawfully occupying Indian lands; and that surrenders of Indian land may be made only to the Crown, and for a consideration (Harper 1947:130-148).

Such recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples was first advocated in colonial Spain and incorporated in the Spanish "Laws of the Indies" of June 11, 1594. After the American Revolution the United States inherited these principles from the Spanish and British colonial empires. Thus the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 said concerning the Indians that their "lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent."
Although in the westward-moving frontier situation which prevailed in the U.S. for the next century these fine sentiments were abused and the Indians often savagely treated and dispossessed, the thread of legal recognition and protection was maintained. It formed the basis of numerous treaties and rights which are enforceable today in the courts; it led to the legal purchase of vast tracts of land from the Indians; and it led to the setting up of the Indian Claims Commission and numerous more recent settlements of claims by Indians in Alaska, Maine and elsewhere.

The noted American authority on Indian law, Felix S. Cohen, wrote:

"It is true that... Indian possession was not considered a perfect title, and in the cases it is commonly said that legal title to such lands is in the United States, with a right of use and occupancy in the Indians. But these are sub-treaties of feudal legal theory which meant nothing to the Indians. Our courts have repeatedly said that the Indian right of occupancy and use is as sacred as the fee title, and it is certainly more substantial than the naked legal title which legal theory locates in the (U.S.) Federal Government." (Cohen 1960:237).

Despite important caveats concerning the sometimes overbearing paternalism of the U.S. Federal Government's trusteeship role over Indian lands, the contrast with the situation in Australia could not be more stark.

The traditionally accepted legal view in Australia, at least until the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976, is that expressed by Baalman:
"By the year 1788, the paramount title of the King to the ownership of all land in the kingdom had become little more than a fiction so far as land in England was concerned. In that year, however, the fiction was transported into solid fact when Governor Phillip hoisted the British flag on the shore of New South Wales and took possession of the country in the name of the King. Although the small party of colonizers were probably quite unconscious of the fact, the royal overlordship of feudal doctrine had come out with the First Fleet.

If any contemporary jurist had paused to concern himself about the prior title of the Aboriginal inhabitants of New South Wales, the concern must have been only momentary. Unlike the official attitude towards the Maoris of New Zealand some years later, when the British Government recognized native ownership of their own country, any rights possessed by the Aboriginals were simply repudiated. Nor was there any suggestion of paying or compensating them for their territory beyond a few paltry hand-outs of blankets and the like. John Batman, an enterprising settler in Van Diemen's Land, who became impatient at official ineptitude with regard to the colonization of the Port Phillip District, actually purchased from the Aboriginals a large tract of land in the vicinity of the present site of Melbourne. This early attempt at blackmarketing, however, was disallowed by the colonial government in an official proclamation which announced that any of His Majesty's subjects who claimed title to land by treaty or bargain with the natives would be regarded as trespassers on Crown land. The title to all "waste" land in the Colony was in the King as lord
paramount, and could legally be disposed of only by His Majesty's Government." (Baalman 1955:112-113).

As recently as 1960 an official Australian Government publication apparently saw nothing strange in contrasting policy towards the Aborigines with that towards the natives of Papua and New Guinea which were then under an Australian administration. It stated that:

"Respect for native land ownership was laid down as a basic principle of Australian administration in Papua over 80 years ago."

It went on to say:

"At the time of first settlement in the Australian colonies all lands were deemed to be waste lands and the property of the Crown. In Papua and New Guinea, however, all land other than that previously alienated, was deemed to belong to the native people who occupied it." (Department of Territories, Australia 1960:12-15).

As Australia was colonized by the British only 12 years after (and as a consequence of) the American Revolution, we must ask what accounted for this extraordinary piece of double thinking on behalf of the British, and later the Australian Governments?

Certainly the fault does not lie in the British Admiralty, whose secret instruction to Captain James Cook, dated July 30, 1768 included the following:

"...you are likewise to observe the Genius, Temper, Disposition and Number of the Natives, if there be
any, and endeavour by all proper means to cultivate a Friendship and Alliance with them... you are also with the Consent of the Natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain; or, if you find the country uninhabited take Possession for His Majesty by setting up Proper Marks and Inscriptions, as first discoverers and possessors." (Cook 1768-1779).

Cook, and of course those who followed in 1788, were quickly aware of the Aborigines, and indeed Cook fired several musket rounds at them as his landing party approached the shores of Botany Bay in April 1770. On August 22, 1770, Cook formally took possession of the eastern seaboard of Australia for King George III, the very same monarch who, seven years earlier, had proclaimed the rights of the Indians of Canada to the undisturbed possession of their lands. Cook was not, of course, responsible for the very literal meaning subsequently attached in Australia to "possession by the Crown" in contrast for example to the less substantial "naked legal title" said to reside in the U.S. Federal Government (which is discussed above in our quote from Cohen).

Many factors have been suggested as contributing to the disregard of the Aborigines and their rights. The highly derogatory descriptions brought back to Europe by the early Dutch explorers, and later by William Dampier, must have predisposed the British to regard the Aborigines as the lowest form of humanity. The lack of even a minimal practice of agriculture, such as was practiced by the Indian woodmen of the east coast of North America, may well, to European eyes, have signified a complete lack of attachment to the land, although this impression must soon have been dispelled by closer observation. The "stone age man" stereotype lingers on even today, often reinforced by shallow and patronizing popular
GOVERNOR DAVY'S
PROCLAMATION
TO THE ABORIGINALS
1816

1. Early European Law for Aboriginal People.
"scientific" accounts, particularly in children's books.

There was certainly resistance by the Aborigines to the invaders, indeed much more, and more highly organized than is usually acknowledged in the textbooks (e.g. Rowley 1970). But perhaps the low population density, difference in armaments, and lack of centralized political organization rendered this too ineffectual. The lack of competition for the Aborigines' allegiance by competing colonial powers certainly contributed to the relative powerlessness of the Aborigines in contrast to the American Indians who entered alliances with and obtained weapons, horses, and trade goods from the rival European powers.

THE "NATIVE QUESTION" UP TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Perhaps it was merely that Australia was so distant in space and time from the liberalizing influences of metropolitan England and Europe that the higher principles of colonial theory and radical democracy never penetrated or came to be enforced in a frontier situation ruled by "practical" men. Indeed highly materialistic expansionist frontier values persist as a major force in Australian political life in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland to this day. An interesting argument along these lines has been put forward by Little (Little 1972:77-87), who suggests that in fact Aborigines in the Australian colonies were not regarded as British citizens but rather had the status of slaves, the essence of which is denial of the common law or basic rights and privileges accorded to citizens, the division usually being made along racial lines. He suggests that with
the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 slaves became citizens, except in Australia where:

"The colonialists illegally and perversely clung to the principle of slavery... To them, black people were 'an inferior class of beings' who 'had no rights or privileges but such as those who held the power and the Government might choose to give them'." (quoted from Judgement in Dred Scot v. Sandford (1857), 19 Howard 393.)

Support for this view includes the fact that Aborigines did not obtain the right to vote in federal elections until 1961, nor the right to consume alcoholic drinks until 1964, and were not officially counted as part of the Australian population until after a constitutional amendment in 1967.

It could even be that the nature of the colonies in New South Wales, and later in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), which were set up as convict settlements rather than as trading posts or farming provinces, led to an initial failure to formulate a cohesive policy on the "native question".

Another important factor may be that Aboriginal administration, which was carried out ineffectually from Britain in the early years of the colonies, was later retained by the various State Governments at the time of federation in 1901. It was not until the passage of a second constitutional amendment in 1967 (the result of a strong campaign by Aborigines and groups sympathetic to Aborigines) that the Federal Government was given the power to legislate on Aboriginal affairs. Even since 1967 the Federal Government has been most reluctant to legislate for Aborigines in the States because of strong States' rights pressures and possible conflicts within the Constitution between the Aboriginal powers and more specific powers retained by the States, e.g., over land policies and local government. Consequences of this situation have been a relative immunity of Aboriginal affairs from international
pressure, and the dominance in the less heavily settled States of a paternalistic expansionist anti-Aboriginal frontiersmen mentality. This is embodied today in the rural landholding and mining interests which dominate State Governments in Queensland and Western Australia and the Legislative Assembly in the Northern Territory. Queensland in the 1970's is not too different from Mississippi in the 1960's, except that federal intervention is less effective (see e.g. Doobov and Doobov 1972:165-170; Nettheim 1973).

Whatever the reasons, early policy in the Australian colonies failed to recognize the root causes of the growing conflict between natives and settlers, which were conflict over land, and the right of the Aborigines to exist as a people. Instead proclamations about equality before the imposed British colonial law were made, stating that any aggression would be punished "with the utmost severity." Repeated attempts to police such a policy led to resentment by the settlers and the massacre or detribalization of the Aboriginal people (Rowley 1970).

As the frontier expanded it left behind pauperized and dependent fringe-dwellers who continued to be ravaged by disease and alcoholism. These were a dispossessed and oppressed people, whose culture in many cases was destroyed by the intrusion of so-called European "civilization". Traditional Aboriginal society had been self-sufficient, stable and well-adjusted to a great range of climates. An estimated 300,000 Aborigines were spread across the continent in some 600 distinctive small-scale societies, or "tribes", each maintaining social, religious, and trade connections with its neighbours (see, e.g., Berndt and Berndt 1964). By the 1930's however, this original population had been reduced to about 30,000 people of wholly Aboriginal descent and maybe twice that number of mixed descent. As recently as the 1960's demographic surveys in the Northern Territory found Aboriginal infant mortality rates (i.e., up to age 1 year) of
around 200 per 1000 live births (Lancaster Jones 1963).

Despite such conditions, a combination of high birth rates with high, but declining, death rates led eventually to the stabilization and subsequent recovery of the Aboriginal population, which by 1970 consisted of some 70,000 people of pure Aboriginal descent, and maybe twice as many of part-Aboriginal descent (these figures depend on definition or self-identification and are therefore only approximate. The distinction which is often made by non-Aborigines between people of wholly Aboriginal descent and those of part-Aboriginal descent is regarded as divisive and even racist by many Aborigines, who maintain that self-identification is the proper criteria of "Aboriginality," not genetic inheritance. For a detailed discussion of definitions and of Aboriginal population structure and future growth, see, e.g., Broom and Lancaster Jones 1973:61-72, Rowley 1970). Aboriginal numbers today are increasing more rapidly than the non-Aboriginal population, particularly in the sparsely populated north, central and western half of the continent. In the Northern Territory Aborigines now account for about one third of the total population.

At least as late as the 1930's however, it was still widely believed that Aborigines were "a dying race" and large reservations were set up in northern and central Australia to segregate them and "protect" them from the white population so as to "smooth the dying pillow." These Aboriginal reserves, like earlier ones in the South, were in fact government owned land set aside generally by executive action for temporary use and occupancy by Aborigines. It was believed that either the Aborigines would die out or else move into white towns, eventually freeing the reserves for other uses. Indeed many sections of Aboriginal reserves were arbitrarily revoked without compensation when a "better use" was found such as closer settlement, an atomic proving ground (Maralinga), a rocket range (Woomera), or mining (Weipa and Yirrkala), to
2. Aboriginal Stockmen.
name a few post World War II examples.

As policies of paternalistic protection and missionary tutelage gradually took hold in the outback during the early decades of this century, the fringe-dwelling part-Aborigines (often forcibly segregated from "full-blood" Aborigines) struggled to survive around the country towns, subject to overt discrimination and either total neglect or highly authoritarian institutionalization on small government or mission controlled reserves. Many chose to be free in shanty towns on river banks and refuse dumps rather than accept the minimal security of the town reserves. Others lived a symbiotic existence on white-run cattle ranches, which were often their ancestral tribal lands, doing seasonal work in return for rations and occasionally (in the post World War II years) small cash wages.

THE FAILURE OF ASSIMILATION POLICY

After the second World War the policies of the various States and the Federal Government for "full-blood" as well as part-Aborigines officially became "assimilation", which was defined in a joint statement in 1961 as follows:

"The policy of assimilation means... that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same res-
ponsabilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians"

Here was a clear counter-part in Aboriginal policy to the "White Australia" policy on immigration, both being geared to the creation and maintenance of a homogeneous Anglo-European society. The concept of a pluralistic society was seen as dangerously divisive, impractical, and in later years as indistinguishable from South African style "separate development." The idea that groups of people might actually choose, or have a right to live differently was un-thinkable.

Consistent with this policy, pressure and incentives were applied to gather semi-nomadic Aborigines into centralized government or mission controlled settlements and for those Aborigines who "graduated" to be moved out into white towns where they would be set up in a rented house and a regular job. In general, education in these settings was based on ignorance and disdain for the Aboriginal way of life. Educational effort was (and often still is) geared to non-Aboriginal goals, to the objective of turning Aborigines into dark-skinned Europeans and to the alienation of the individual from his or her traditions and "more backward cousins".

This policy was a failure because white prejudice militated against assimilation, Aborigines rejected Anglo-European goals and values, and because population growth on the settlements far outstripped the rate of movement into white towns. The assimilation policy meant the ultimate extinction of Aborigines as a race of people. As such it was completely unacceptable to Aborigines who campaigned against it through bodies such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATS1) and the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC).
Urban Aborigines and white sympathizers organized in the 1930's in the cities to combat discrimination and provide social services and self-help through "progress associations" and "advancement leagues". By the 1960's these had grown into significant organizations, some consciously motivated by an Australian version of Black Power ideology, with Aboriginal directed legal aid and medical services employing white professionals on a volunteer or salaried basis. National movements were formed, notably FCAATSI and, for a while, the National Tribal Council which was formed as a reaction to white paternalism in FCAATSI. These and ad hoc coalitions of local Aboriginal organizations around specific issues, mounted significant political campaigns and protests in support of Aboriginal land rights culminating in the "Aboriginal Embassy" in front of the Parliament House in Canberra (the Federal Capitol) which severely embarassed the Federal Government in 1972 (see Harris 1972).

These Aboriginal movements, and indeed the Churches associated with the Australian Council of Churches, and student organizations, also led in advocating greater respect for Aboriginal identity and freedom to retain Aboriginal traditions. The assimilation policy, which has also been applied to non-British immigrants, was also being resisted by the growing European ethnic communities which resulted from the massive immigration encouraged by the Australian government in the 1950's and 1960's. Led by the South Australian Australian Labour Party (APL) Government, assimilation as an official social policy or goal was gradually abandoned in the early 1970's. When the Federal Labour Government came to power in Canberra in 1972, assimilation as an official policy was abandoned and a policy of "Aboriginal self-determination" was adopted together with policies advocating the preservation of Aboriginal culture and identity. This was confirmed in 1975 when the conservative Liberal National Country Party coalition holding power in Canberra formally acknowledged the fundament-
al rights of Aborigines to retain their identity and traditional lifestyle if they wished to do so. Only the extremely conservative Queensland State Government has stubbornly resisted this change.

Aboriginal stockmen (cowboys) in the Pilbara (the hinterland of Port Hedland, W.A.) went on strike in 1946 for higher wages and better working conditions. This prolonged strike, which the Western Australian Government sought to repress by jailing its leaders, eventually led to important concessions and the setting up of an Aboriginal cooperative cattle ranch which still exists. This represented a turning point in that although the while power structure in Western Australia and the frontier attitudes had not changed, public opinion curbed the worst excesses of white power which alone could have kept the Aborigines down. Support for the Aborigines from some (mainly left-wing) white trade unions played an important role then, as it did later when some 200 Gurindji stockmen went on strike for higher wages and land rights in the Northern Territory in 1966.

**MINING RIGHTS AND THE ABORIGINES**

In 1963 the Yirrkala Aborigines of North Eastern Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) presented an historic petition to the Federal House of Representatives protesting the excision from the Aboriginal Reserve of land for mining on Gove Peninsula. This led to the setting up of a Select Committee of the House which for the first time in Australia, recommended that:
"Direct monetary compensation should be paid for any loss of traditional occupancy, even though these rights are not legally expressed under the laws of the Northern Territory."

These recommendations were not followed, and in 1968 the Aboriginal clan leaders initiated an unprecedented court action seeking to establish Aboriginal land rights and to prevent the mining, or at least to gain compensation. This action gained the public support of senior advisors to the Federal Government and created widespread public interest and support.

Final judgment in the "Gove Case" was handed down in 1971 by Judge Blackburn of the Northern Territory Supreme Court. He found that the clans who had brought the case had indeed been able to establish an essentially "religious" relationship to the land, but that this is not compensable as a property right under (white) Australian law. He found that the international law as appealed to was not applicable and that British common law did not afford protection to the Aborigines. More recent academic studies question the validity of this judgment (see, e.g. Lester and Parker 1973:189-237), but it has yet to be tested in an Australian court.

By 1972 the Aboriginal movement with support from the churches and coupled with international pressure particularly from the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism (see, e.g., World Council of Churches 1971), the Anti-Slavery Society (London) and Papua-New Guinea and New Zealand Maori politicians, had persuaded the Australian Labour Party to adopt a policy supportive of land rights for:

"Aboriginal communities which retain a strong tribal structure or demonstrate a potential for corporate action in regard to land at present reserved for Aborigines or where traditional occupancy according to tribal customs can be
"Full rights to minerals" were to be granted also, and sacred sites preserved.

Unlike the United States, mineral rights do not normally go with surface rights or title to land, but continue to reside in the Government which can grant or lease them independently of the land ownership. Thus the granting of mineral rights to Aboriginal owners would constitute recognition of a special Aboriginal relationship to the land not parallel to that of non-Aborigines.

In December 1972 the ALP (Australian Labour Party) became the Federal Government and appointed Judge Woodward to recommend:

"Appropriate means to recognize and establish the traditional rights and interests of the Aborigines in and in relation to land, and to satisfy in other ways the reasonable aspirations of the Aborigines to rights in or in relation to land."


When the ALP government was dismissed from office in 1975 its Aboriginal land rights legislation was still before Parliament. However, the incoming Liberal and National Country Party coalition government (of essentially conservative political complexion) was by this time pledged to support some form of Aboriginal land rights, and in 1976 passed a watered-down version of the ALP's draft legislation (which in turn was based on a diluted version of Judge Woodward's recommendations.)

This legislation granted ownership of the existing Aboriginal Reserves in the Northern Territory to traditional Aboriginal land-owning groups, with administration in the hands of one of two Aboriginal Land Councils, one for the
northern half of the Territory and the other for the Central Australian region. A third Land Council was established in 1978. These councils consist of representatives of each Aboriginal community in their respective areas.

The Government chose to retain ownership of the minerals but stipulated that some royalties are to be paid to the Land Councils, part of which would be distributed to the local communities affected by mining. The Land Councils are also empowered to negotiate the terms and conditions of mining to go ahead, except for several important categories of mining. The latter include uranium, all existing mining and exploration leases (which cover most of the Reserves), and any judged by the Government and Parliament to be "in the national interest" (which is not defined). These provisions have already been used to pressure the Northern Land Council into agreeing in 1978 to uranium mining on the Ranger prospect in Arnhem Land where it was strongly opposed by most Aborigines. Indeed the Australian Government would appear to have deliberately set up an organization which seems to represent Aboriginal interests, but which in practice is constrained by white advice, complex legislation and powerful institutions to submit to the wishes of the Government and the mining industry.

A former senior advisor to successive Australian Governments on economics and Aboriginal affairs, Dr. H.C. Coombs, wrote to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on 20 September 1978 concerning the Ranger agreement. After referring to an earlier letter in which he had urged that Aboriginal communities "be given the opportunity to quietly discuss the issues involved... and to reach a consensus about them", Dr. Coombs wrote:

"You have chosen rather to pursue a course which has denied the Aboriginal groups concerned real knowledge and understanding of what is involved,
and the opportunity to consider it by the processes traditional in their society."

Dr. Coombs was adamant that the Government should reconsider and allow the Aboriginal people more time. To refuse to do so, he said, would be:

"A confession that the Ranger agreement has indeed been concluded under duress, and that the Australian Government rates the immediate profits of mining companies more highly than the deeply-felt anxieties for their ancient way of life of those Australian citizens whom we have, over the last 200 years, continuously robbed of what was theirs by plain and sacred right."

The Government has not reconsidered, and mining is expected to be under way in 1979.

Provisions in the legislation, which only applies in the Northern Territory, do allow for Aborigines to bring claims for traditional lands not covered by the Old Reserves, but the procedures are cumbersome and in the case of alienated land subject to the Government seeing fit to compensate the non-Aboriginal interests in the land (usually leaseholding). Early decisions under these provisions do not augur well for Aborigines, who have gained only small fractions of their claimed land.

Whatever the shortcomings of the legislation which applies in the Northern Territory, it is in marked contrast to the complete lack of protection or recognition of Aboriginal land rights in the two states which have the largest Aboriginal populations and areas: Queensland and Western Australia.

Both of these states have extremely conservative governments dedicated to economic expansion through mining develop-
4. Mount Brockman, a very sacred site near the Ranger Uranium mine site.
ment, and which will not let Aboriginal interests stand in the way. Queensland indeed is notorious for its paternalistic and racist legislation (see e.g. Doobov and Doobov 1972, Nettheim 1973), and has repeatedly defied and rejected federal policy aimed at giving Aborigines security of tenure and effective local self-government. This has recently been manifest in a protracted controversy over the powers of Aboriginal Councils set up by uniting Church mission administrations at Aurukun on Cape York and Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Aurukun is the likely site of a major mining development and the Federal Government attempted to give the Aboriginal Councils powers which would enable them to negotiate from a position of some strength. In response the Queensland Government has disbanded the Councils and attempted to set up its puppet administrations. Federal policy has been to avoid a direct confrontation with the State Government, apparently because of States' rights sentiment and uncertainty as to its constitutional position. At the time of this writing the issue remains unresolved.

The States with smaller Aboriginal populations have tended to give token recognition to Aboriginal land rights, but only South Australia (with a very liberal ALP administration) appears to be making an adequate effort to make this effective.

With basic land and mineral rights still hardly established, the issue of water rights, which looms so large in western United States, has not yet become a major issue. As industrial and population growth extends into the more arid parts of Australia this will undoubtedly become an important issue.
POLITICAL RIGHTS

Questions of Aboriginal sovereignty have not been raised in those explicit terms in Australia, as Aboriginal tribes were never considered to have any sovereign powers like the Indian "Nations" of North America. Nevertheless, the recent and gradual recognition of Aboriginal land and mineral rights, and the granting of local self-government in varying degrees has implicitly raised this issue. Some of the church missions pioneered the establishment of Aboriginal Town Councils and recent federal legislation gives some recognition and encouragement to Aboriginal Councils. At present however, these councils in general have only marginal powers and little funding. Access to income from minerals is changing that in the Northern Territory, and the two Land Councils are already exercising significant powers.

Under the ALP government of 1972-75 a National Aboriginal Consultative Council, composed of elected Aboriginal representatives from around Australia, was set up for the first time. However, inadequate administrative support, too large electorates, and inexperience rendered the NACC relatively ineffective, particularly as it was given very little power or responsibility. The NACC has been reconstituted by the conservative Fraser government as the National Aboriginal Conference but it remains to be seen if it will be any more effective. Certainly so far no government has seen fit to
5. A Northern Land Council Meeting.
hand over to a nationally elected Aboriginal body any real power or responsibilities, and vested interest within the established government bureaucracies militate against it. Suggestions have been made that the Federal Government enter into a "Treaty of Commitment" (Harris 1978:7) and hand over the administration of Aboriginal affairs to some such body, but this seems an unlikely prospect in the near future. Meanwhile, however, a policy of Aboriginal preference is placing some Aborigines within the bureaucratic structure of the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs, which now is the sole government administrative body in all States except Queensland (which refuses to cooperate).

Aborigines make up a substantial minority in the North-western half of Australia, reaching in excess of 25 per cent of the population in the Northern Territory. Potentially they may have considerable effect on the outcome of elections for a member of State and Federal seats in a finely balanced two-party electorate. In the 1972 and 1974 federal elections the impact of the Aboriginal vote was not great, several independent Aboriginal candidates gaining only very small percentages of the vote. However, the Aboriginal vote in the 1977 elections for the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly was credited with swinging three rural seats to the ALP, including one which was won by an Aborigine, Neville Perkins, who became deputy leader of the ALP opposition in the Assembly.

There is one Aborigine in Federal Parliament, Senator Neville Bonner, who is a member of the conservative Liberal Party. He has a strong personal following in Queensland where he consistently polls several percentage points more votes than his fellow Liberal party senators. Nevertheless, his position is an uncomfortable and controversial one, serving as a frequent internal critic and public conscience of the Federal coalition government, which often fails to follow his wishes on Aboriginal policy.

In Western Australia the governing conservative coalition
has made strenuous efforts to hinder and discourage Aboriginal enrolment and voting (*The National Times*, week ending September 2, 1978:19). This is ironic testimony to the potential power of the Aboriginal vote in that State and highlights a curious anachronism in Australian democracy. It has for many years been compulsory for Australian citizens to vote in elections. However, when the franchise was belatedly extended to Aborigines in federal elections in 1961 it was not made compulsory for Aborigines to register to vote, and only those who have registered are legally compelled to vote. This was rationalized on the grounds that many Aborigines were illiterate and ill-informed about the political process. The same argument is now being used in West Australia in an attempt to hinder registered but illiterate Aboriginal voters in the exercise of their vote by preventing them copying votes on specimen "How-to-vote" cards handed out by party canvassers, even when the Aborigines concerned state a clear preference for one party.

One other significant movement, entirely initiated by the Aboriginal people, should be noted. This is a movement out of the centralized settlements set up by the governments and missions, back into their traditional homeland areas (Coombs 1974:135-143). It has been facilitated by a willingness by the federal administration in the Northern Territory to provide at least minimal facilities, such as water supplies and radio contact for medical emergencies in these more dispersed communities. Some Whites have seen this movement as a return to savagery, and predictably the Queensland Government has strongly opposed it. From an Aboriginal perspective it has many advantages. It reasserts tribal authority and cohesion, avoiding the inter-group conflicts which often arose in the larger settlements. It has greatly eased the tensions involved in black-white confrontations, and the problem of alcohol, and it has reasserted the close Aboriginal ties to the land. It has been accompanied by a
revival of Aboriginal ceremonial life and pride in Aboriginal identity. It is also evidently leading to a healthier people as reliance on highly processed and unbalanced store foods gives way to a diet based on products harvested from their land. In part it has been an attempt to escape from a growing White bureaucracy and technocracy on the larger settlements, but it faces Aborigines with the need to choose what elements of technological society they want to retain and how these can be handled.

Until a decade ago there were literally only a handful of Aborigines professionally and technically trained in White society ways. This is now rapidly changing as a growing wave of younger Aborigines rise through secondary schools and Universities to provide expertise in coping with the dominant society for their own people. Now that the basic principles of Aboriginal land rights have been established, along with the beginnings of economic and political power, this new generation of Aborigines may be expected to widen the bridgehead and push forward to claim a rightful place for the Aboriginal people as part of a prosperous multi-cultural society on this island continent in the South Pacific.

The Aboriginal people still have a long struggle ahead against racism and exploitation at home, and against the growing pressure of the multi-national mining companies which seek to exploit their lands at the least possible cost to the companies. The Aboriginal people share a bitter experience of colonial oppression with the Indians of North America and other indigenous peoples, and a continuing common necessity to struggle against assimilationist pressures and economic exploitation. They look to the Indians of North America and indigenous peoples everywhere for a growing conscious sharing
of experiences and unity of purpose, for they are engaged in a common struggle. They are engaged in the preservation and growth of a cultural tradition which respects the Earth and values humanity above material growth and exploitation.

In a world increasingly threatened by centralised cultural conformism, global pollution, energy "shortages", and ideological conflicts, the Aboriginal people are fighting for greater local autonomy, a more responsible human lifestyle, and a greater measure of justice. Theirs is a struggle which needs to be waged on behalf of all of human kind. The Aborigines deserve our respect and support.
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ABORIGENES AUSTRALIANOS:
LA LUCHA COMUN POR LA HUMANIDAD

Resumen y traducción:
Teresa Aparicio.


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PROLOGO

Lo ideal hubiera sido que este ensayo hubiera sido escrito por un aborigen. Como no-aborigen que ha trabajado con los aborígenes en defensa de sus derechos y de su autonomía por más de 20 años, me pareció correcto el aceptar ahora a escribirlo. Espero que la próxima vez sea un aborigen quien lo escriba.

Entretanto, que este ensayo quede como el tributo de un no-aborigen a la larga y valiente lucha de los aborígenes por su pueblo, y por todo lo que significa el ser seres humanos.
A pesar de que la herencia cultural y la experiencia del colonialismo es muy similar entre los aborígenes australianos y los indios norteamericanos, la situación legal y sociopolítica de los pueblos aborígenes de Australia, es en la actualidad incluso peor que la de los indios de los Estados Unidos. Los derechos de los pueblos indios a la tierra, a los minerales, al agua y a un cierto grado de autodeterminación y diferenciación cultural, son mucho más seguros que los de los aborígenes de Australia.

TEORIA Y PRACTICA DEL COLONIALISMO

Trece años antes de la Revolución Americana e inmediatamente después de la derrota de Francia en Canadá, el Rey Jorge III de Gran Bretaña proclamó que los territorios de los indios, a menos que fuesen expresamente cedidos o comprados, debían considerarse como territorios de caza de los nativos. Esta proclama condujo a la formulación de cuatro de los principios más importantes que fueron incorporados en el Sistema de Tratados de Canadá: Que los indios poseen derechos
de ocupación de todas aquellas tierras a las que no han renunciado formalmente; que las tierras reclamadas por los indios no pueden ser concedidas a los blancos hasta ser formalmente cedidas por los indios; que el gobierno asume la responsabilidad de deshauviar a todas aquellas personas que estén ocupando ilegalmente territorios pertenecientes a los indios y, que las renuncias de territorios indios deben hacerse únicamente a la Corona, previa compensación.

En los Estados Unidos, después de la revolución, se expresó en las Ordenanzas de 1787 que las tierras y propiedades de los indios nunca debían tomarse sin su consentimiento expreso. Aunque en la zona fronteriza del Oeste de los Estados Unidos, se abusó de estos principios y los indios fueron muchas veces salvajemente maltratados, el reconocimiento legal y la protección fueron mantenidos.

A pesar del paternalismo mostrado por los gobiernos federales de los Estados Unidos sobre territorios indios, el contraste con la situación de los aborígenes en Australia no puede ser más rigido.

Hasta la confección del Acto de los Derechos Territoriales de los Aborígenes en 1976, el punto de vista legal tradicional y aceptado en Australia ha sido que los derechos territoriales de los aborígenes fueron simplemente repudiados, sin ningún pago o compensación por los territorios tomados. Además, se prohibió a los colonizadores hacer transacciones de tierra con los aborígenes a título personal, ya que todos los territorios pertenecían al Rey y solamente podían disponerse legalmente de ellos, a través del gobierno de Su Majestad. (Baalman 1955:112-113).

Tan recientemente como en 1960, una publicación oficial no vio, aparentemente, nada extraño al contrastar el programa político hacia los aborígenes por una parte, y hacia los nativos de Papua y Nueva Guinea por la otra que entonces estaban bajo la administración del Gobierno Australiano. Esta publicación declaró que:
"El respeto por la propiedad nativa a la tierra fue formulado como un principio básico de la administración australiana en Papua, hace más de 80 años."

Y continuaba:

"En las primeras colonias de Australia, todas las tierras fueron consideradas como baldíos y propiedad de la Corona. Sin embargo, en Papua y Nueva Guinea, todas las tierras que no hubieran sido alienadas con anterioridad, fueron consideradas como propiedad de los nativos que las habitaban." (Departamento de los Territorios, Australia 1960:12-15).

Como Australia fue colonizada por los ingleses solamente doce años después (y a consecuencia de) la Revolución Americana, cabe preguntarse las razones de esta extraordinaria forma de pensar doble por parte de los ingleses y, más tarde, por los gobiernos australianos.

El fallo no pertenece ciertamente al Almirantazgo británico ya que, en las instrucciones secretas que fueron entregadas al Capitán Cook el 30 de Julio de 1768, se mencionaba que, de estar habitadas las tierras descubiertas, debía cultivar la amistad de los nativos y formar alianzas con ellos y que, con el consentimiento de éstos, debía tomar posesión de terrenos convenientes en nombre del Rey de Inglaterra. En Agosto de 1770, Cook tomó formalmente posesión de la parte oeste de la costa de Australia en nombre del Rey Jorge III, el mismo monarca que, siete años antes, había proclamado el derecho de los indios de Canadá a la posesión de sus tierras.

Se han sugerido muchos factores que pudieron contribuir a la indiferencia de los blancos hacia los aborígenes y sus derechos. Las descripciones despectivas que los primeros
colonizadores holandeses llevaron a Europa, debieron predisponer a los ingleses para considerar a los aborígenes como la forma más baja de humanidad. La falta de agricultura, como por ejemplo la que era practicada por los indios de los Estados Unidos, debió aparecer a los ojos de los europeos como una completa falta de adhesión a la tierra.

Los aborígenes resistieron a los invasores y, ciertamente mucho más y mucho mejor organizados, de lo que se reconoce en los libros de textos. Pero quizás la baja densidad de población, diferencia de armamento y falta de una organización política centralizada, hizo ineficaz su resistencia.

LA "CUESTION INDIGENA" HASTA LA SEGUNDA GUERRA MUNDIAL

Quizás Australia estaba tan distante en espacio y tiempo de las influencias liberalizadoras de Europa, que unos principios más altos sobre el colonialismo y sobre la democracia, nunca penetraron o fueron cumplidos en esa zona fronteriza regida por hombres "prácticos". Todavía hoy en los estados de Australia Occidental y de Queensland así como en el Territorio del Norte, persiste ese punto de vista material y expansionista como una fuerza mayor en la vida política australiana.

Los aborígenes no obtuvieron el derecho al voto hasta 1961, así como tampoco el derecho a la consumición de bebidas alcohólicas hasta 1964, y no fueron oficialmente considerados como una parte de la población australiana, hasta 1967. En ese año una enmienda constitucional (consecuencia de una fuerte campaña realizada por los aborígenes y por grupos que se adherían a su causa) extendió al Gobierno Federal el poder
de legislación en asuntos aborígenes. Sin embargo desde entonces, el Gobierno Federal se ha mostrado poco dispuesto a legislar en favor de los aborígenes en los distintos estados de Australia por causa de las presiones de estos últimos, y también por temor a posibles conflictos dentro de la Constitución, entre los poderes de los aborígenes y los poderes específicos retenidos por los estados sobre política de tierra y gobiernos locales.

Las consecuencias de esta situación han sido una relativa inmunidad en los asuntos aborígenes ante una presión internacional y, la dominación en los estados con una baja densidad de población, de una mentalidad paternalista, expansionista y anti aborigen. Este punto de vista se mantiene todavía hoy incorporado en los intereses mineros y en los intereses de la propiedad privada agraria que dominan los gobiernos de estado de Queensland y de Australia Occidental así como la Asamblea Legislativa del Territorio Norte.

Por cualquiera de las razones, la política colonialista no logró reconocer las causas de los conflictos entre nativos y colonizadores, conflictos sobre la tierra y el derecho de los aborígenes a existir como seres humanos. A medidas que la frontera se extendía, iba dejando atrás pauperización y poblaciones fronterizas completamente asoladas por enfermedades y alcoholismo. Eran pueblos que fueron despojados y oprimidos, cuya cultura fue destruida por la intrusión de la llamada "civilización" europea.

Una población que a la llegada de los europeos contaba con alrededor de 300.000 aborígenes, fue reducida en 1930 a 30.000 personas de descendencia aborigen y quizás el doble de descendencia mixta. No obstante un porcentaje de mortalidad infantil muy alto (en 1960 alrededor de 200 por cada 1.000 nacimientos en el Territorio Norte) una alta natalidad ha estabilizado la población aborigen, y en 1970 el número se elevaba a 70.000 personas de descendencia aborigen y más o menos, el doble de descendencia mixta.
Todavía en 1930, se creía que los aborígenes eran una raza en vía de extinción. Para "protegerlos" de la población blanca, se instalaron grandes reservas en el Norte y en el Centro de Australia. Estas reservas estaban localizadas en territorios pertenecientes al Gobierno, y se utilizaron como medida "temporal" hasta que los aborígenes se extinguieran, o bién, se integraran en las ciudades. Muchas de estas reservas fueron posteriormente evacuadas cuando se encontró un "mejor uso" de los terrenos: una base de pruebas atómicas (Maralinga), un campo de lanzamiento de cohetes (Woomera), o minas (Weipa y Yinkola), para nombrar algunos ejemplos de pasada la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

Durante las primeras décadas de este siglo, los aborígenes de descendencia mixta lucharon por sobrevivir en la proximidad de las ciudades de provincia, o bién ignorados, o bién sujetos a una abierta discriminación en reservas autoritarias regidas por el Gobierno o por entidades religiosas. Muchos aborígenes eligieron trabajar en ranchos de propietarios blancos que, frecuentemente, estaban situados en sus tierras ancestrales. Se pagaba a los aborígenes con productos y, más tarde, con reducidos sueldos.

EL FRACASO DE LA POLITICA DE ASIMILACION

Después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la política de los varios estados y del Gobierno Federal, tanto hacia los aborígenes como hacia los aborígenes de descendencia mixta, fue la de "asimilación" que, en 1961, fue definida de la siguiente forma:
"La política de asimilación significa que... se espera de todos los aborígenes y aborígenes mixtos, obtengan la misma forma de vida que los demás australianos, teniendo los mismos derechos y privilegios, aceptando las mismas responsabilidades, observando las mismas costumbres y siendo influyenciados por las mismas creencias, las mismas esperanzas y las mismas lealtades que los otros australianos."

El concepto de una sociedad pluralista fue estimado como divisoria e impráctica y, años más tarde, prácticamente indistinguible del estilo de Sud Africa "desarrollo separado". La idea de que grupos de gente pudieran elegir, o tener derecho a vivir de forma distinta, era impensable. Consecuentemente, la vida aborigen fue desdennada y, la finalidad del sistema de educación, incluso todavía hoy, fue la de transformar a los aborígenes en europeos. En suma, la alienación del individuo, de sus tradiciones y de su cultura.

La política de asimilación significaba la extinción de los aborígenes como raza. Como tal, fue completamente inaceptable para los aborígenes, que hicieron campañas en contra a través de asociaciones tales como, El Consejo Federal Para el Avance de los Aborígenes y de los Indígenas de las Islas de Torres Strait (FCAATS1), y, El Comité Nacional de Aborígenes Para el Día de la Observancia (NADOC).

También se organizaron significantes campañas políticas en apoyo a los derechos de propiedad sobre la tierra de los aborígenes, que culminaron en la "Embajada Aborigen" enfrente del Parlamento de Canberra, poniendo en un grave aprieto al Gobierno Federal en 1972. Cuando en ese año el gobierno laborista subió al poder en Canberra, la "asimilación" como política oficial fue abandonada, y se adoptó una política de "Autodeterminación Aborigen", junto con un programa de preservación de la cultura e identidad aborigen.
Esta política fue confirmada en 1975 por la coalición del Partido Conservador entonces en el poder. Solamente el Gobierno de Queensland, extremadamente conservador, se ha opuesto tenazmente al cambio.

En 1946, unos aborígenes que trabajaban de vaqueros en la región de Pilbara, hicieron huelga para obtener sueldos más altos y mejores condiciones de trabajo. El Gobierno trató de reprimir la huelga encarcelando a sus líderes, sin embargo, esa huelga condujo a importantes concesiones y a la puesta en marcha de una cooperativa de ganado aborigen, que todavía existe. Esta huelga significó un cambio decisivo ya que, a pesar de que la actitud de las autoridades fronterizas y la estructura de poder de los blancos no habían cambiado, la opinión pública frenó los excesos del poder blanco que hubiera podido reprimir a los aborígenes. El apoyo a los aborígenes de algunos sindicatos (principalmente de izquierda), jugó entonces un papel importante, como también lo hizo más tarde cuando en 1966, alrededor de 200 Gurindji, también vaqueros, hicieron huelga por salarios más altos y derechos de tierras en el Territorio Norte.

DERECHOS MINEROS Y LOS ABOРИGENES

En 1963 los aborígenes Yinkala del Noreste de Arnhem Land (Territorio del Norte), presentaron una petición histórica a la Cámara Federal de Representantes, protestando por la excisión de tierras de la reserva a favor de proyectos mineros en la Península de Gove. Esto llevó a la formación de un Comité de la Cámara de Representantes que, por primera
vez en Australia, recomendó que cualquier pérdida de territorios tradicionalmente ocupados, debía ser monetariamente recompensada. Estas recomendaciones no fueron seguidas y, en 1968, los líderes de clanes aborígenes (con el apoyo de la opinión pública) iniciaron una acción judicial sin precedentes, tratando de establecer derechos aborígenes en los territorios y tratando de impedir la minería, o al menos, obtener una compensación.

El juicio final del "Caso Gove" fue emitido en 1971 por el Juez Blackburn en la Corte Suprema. Este juez encontró que los clanes que habían puesto el juicio, habían establecido una relación esencialmente religiosa con la tierra, pero que ésto no era aplicable como derecho de propiedad bajo la ley (blanca) australiana, y que la ley británica no podía ofrecer protección a los aborígenes. Recientes estudios académicos, ponen en duda la validez de este juicio, pero todavía debe ser probado en los tribunales de Australia.

En 1972, el movimiento de los aborígenes con apoyo de la Iglesia y en conjunto con una fuerte presión internacional, persuadieron al Partido Laborista australiano a adoptar una política de apoyo a los derechos territoriales de los aborígenes. Derechos a los minerales debían también ser garantizados, así como también debían preservarse los lugares sagrados.

A la diferencia de Estados Unidos, los derechos a los minerales en Australia no van normalmente juntos con los derechos o títulos a la superficie del terreno sino, que continúan estando en manos del gobierno que puede otorgarlos o cederlos independientemente del derecho de propiedad al terreno. En consecuencia, la concesión de derechos sobre minerales a los aborígenes, constituiría el reconocimiento de una relación especial de los aborígenes a la tierra distinta a la de los no-aborígenes.

El Gobierno eligió retener la propiedad a los minerales pero estipuló que debían pagarse derechos a los Consejos
Territoriales (Land Councils). Estos Consejos tienen el poder de negociar los términos y condiciones de los proyectos mineros, excepto para algunas categorías de proyectos, por ejemplo de uranio, que son considerados por el Gobierno y el Parlamento de "interés nacional" (el cual no es definido). Estas provisiones ya han sido usadas para presionar al Consejo Territorial del Norte (Northern Land Council) que, en 1978, aceptó un proyecto de minería de uranio, contra el que se opusieron la mayoría de los aborígenes. Ciertamente podría parecer como si el Gobierno australiano hubiera formado una organización que representara los intereses de los aborígenes, pero en la práctica, está construida para el consejo de los blancos, a una compleja legislación y a poderosas instituciones que la hace someterse a los deseos del Gobierno y de la industria minera.

Las provisiones legislativas, que solo son aplicables en el Territorio del Norte, permiten a los aborígenes levantar demandas en territorios tradicionales que no cubran las viejas reservas, pero estos trámites son molestos y, en caso de tierras enajenadas, sujetos a si el Gobierno considera conveniente compensar los intereses no-aborígenes de tierras. Decisiones tomadas bajo estas provisiones legislativas no han sido un buen augurio para los aborígenes, que solo han ganado pequeñas fracciones de los territorios reclamados.

A pesar de los defectos de la legislación que es aplicable en el Territorio del Norte, contrasta ésta marcadamente con la completa falta de protección o reconocimiento de los aborígenes a la propiedad territorial, en los dos estados que cuentan con la mayor densidad de población aborigen y con las mayores áreas aborígenes: Queensland y Australia Occidental.

Ambos estados tienen gobiernos extremadamente conservadores, dedicados a la expansión económica a través del desarrollo de la minería, y no dejarán que los intereses de los aborígenes se pongan de por medio. Queensland es notoria por
su legislación racista y paternalista, y repetidamente ha desafiado y rechazado la política federal, que aspira dar a los aborígenes una seguridad de derecho a la tierra y un autogobierno efectivo. Esto se puso de manifiesto en una reciente controversia acerca de los poderes de los Consejos Aborígenes, iniciada por la administración de dos iglesias misioneras en Aurukun, Cape York, y en la Isla de Mornington, en el Golfo de Carpentaria respectivamente. Aurukun es el lugar de mayor desarrollo minero, y el Gobierno Federal ha tratado de dar a los Consejos Aborígenes poderes que les permitieran negociar desde una posición fuerte. La respuesta del estado de Queensland ha sido la de disolver los Consejos e intentar establecer sus administraciones de marionetas. La política federal por su parte ha sido la de evitar una confrontación directa con el Gobierno del estado, aparentemente debido a los derechos específicos de los estados y la inseguridad del Gobierno Federal acerca de su posición constitucional.

Los estados con poblaciones aborígenes de menor densidad, han tendido a reconocer el derecho territorial de los aborígenes, sin embargo, solamente el estado de Australia Meridional parece estar realizando un esfuerzo efectivo.

DERECHOS POLITICOS

Bajo el gobierno laborista ALP (Australian Labour Party) de 1972-75, se formó por primera vez un Consejo Nacional Consultativo de Aborígenes (NACC), compuesto por representantes aborígenes de distintas áreas. No obstante, un apoyo administrativo ineficaz, inexperiencia y unos electorados demasiado
largos, hicieron a NACC relativamente ineficaz, en especial, debido también al poco poder y responsabilidad que se le dio. NACC fue reconstituido bajo el gobierno conservador de Fraser como Conferencia Nacional Aborigen, pero falta por ver si ésta podrá ser de alguna eficacia. Lo que si es cierto, es que hasta la fecha, ningún gobierno ha considerado conveniente conceder poder y responsabilidades a una entidad aborigen elegida a escala nacional y además, los intereses creados dentro del gobierno establecido, militan en contra de esta idea. A pesar de lo cual, una política de preferencia aborigen está colocando algunos aborígenes en la estructura burocrática del Departamento Federal de Asuntos Aborígenes, el cual, es por ahora la única entidad administrativa en todos los estados, excepto en Queensland que rehusa cooperar.

En el noroeste de Australia, la población aborigen constituye una minoría importante y en el Territorio del Norte sobrepasa en mucho el 25% de la población. En las elecciones federales de 1972 y de 1974, el impacto de los votos aborígenes no fue grande. Sin embargo, en las elecciones de 1977 para la Asamblea Legislativa del Territorio Norte, los votos aborígenes hicieron oscilar tres escaños rurales de ALP, incluyendo uno que fue ganado por un aborigen, Neville Perkins, que se convirtió en uno de los líderes de la oposición laborista en la Asamblea.

En el Parlamento Federal hay también un aborigen, el Senador Neville Bonner, miembro del Partido Liberal conservador. Su posición es controvertible e incómoda, sirviendo frecuentemente como crítica interna y conciencia pública del gobierno de coalición federal, el cual, falla muchas veces en seguir el consejo de este Senador en cuestiones sobre política aborigen.

A pesar de que para los ciudadanos australianos es obligatorio votar en las elecciones, cuando en 1961 el derecho al voto se hizo extensible a los aborígenes, no fue obligatorio para éstos el ejercer este derecho. Esto se racionalizó basándose en que muchos aborígenes eran analfabetos, y mal
informados sobre los procesos políticos. Estos mismos argumentos se están usando todavía hoy en el estado de Australia Occidental por el gobierno de coalición conservador, en un intento por impedir que los aborígenes analfabetos pero registrados, puedan, a través de sus votos, influir en la estructura política. Hasta el punto de impedirles que puedan copiar de unos folletos "Como Votar" distribuidos por los partidos, incluso cuando los aborígenes en cuestión, muestran una clara preferencia hacia un partido determinado.

Un movimiento importante, enteramente iniciado por los aborígenes, debe notarse. Este es un movimiento que existe fuera de las colonias centralizadas y organizadas por el Gobierno o por las misiones, y situado en las áreas aborígenes tradicionales. Este movimiento ha sido facilitado por la buena voluntad de la Administración Federal en el Territorio del Norte, para proveer al menos con las facilidades mínimas, tales como suministro de agua y contacto de radio para emergencias médicas a las comunidades más dispersas. Algunos blancos han visto en este movimiento una vuelta al salvajismo, y, el fácilmente pronosticable Gobierno de Queensland, se ha opuesto fuertemente.

Desde una perspectiva aborigen este movimiento tiene muchas ventajas. Reafirma la autoridad y la cohesión tribal, evitando conflictos entre grupos que muchas veces habían surgido en colonias de mayores dimensiones. También ha suavizado las tensiones producidas por las confrontaciones entre blancos y negros, ha atenuado el problema del alcoholismo y, por último, ha reafirmado la estrecha relación que los aborígenes tienen con la tierra. Este movimiento ha sido acompañado de una reviviscencia de la vida ceremonial aborigen. Todo esto ha conducido a crear una salud más robusta entre los aborígenes puesto que su dieta no está basada únicamente en alimentos industrializados y poco variados, sino más bien en productos agrícolas propios.

En parte, éste ha sido un intento de alejarse de la creciente burocracia y tecnocracia de los blancos que rigen
las grandes colonias. Sin embargo, confronta a los aborígenes con la necesidad de elegir qué elementos de la sociedad técnica desean retener, y cómo deben tratarlos.

Hasta una década, existía literalmente solo un puñado de aborígenes que habían sido profesional y técnicamente entrenados bajo las formas de la sociedad blanca. Esto está cambiando rápidamente y una creciente ola de aborígenes jóvenes que han pasado por universidades y escuelas secundarias, pueden ahora proveer de expertos y profesionales capaces de competir con la sociedad blanca en favor de su propio pueblo. De esta nueva generación de aborígenes, puede esperarse que amplíen y continúen adelante con las demandas de su pueblo, para poder existir como parte integrante de una sociedad multicultural y próspera en esta isla-continente del Pacífico del Sur.

El pueblo aborigen tiene todavía una larga lucha por delante en contra del racismo y de la explotación, y también, en contra de las presiones de los intereses internacionales mineros que tratan de explotar sus territorios al menor coste posible. El pueblo aborigen tiene una experiencia amarga de la opresión del colonialismo, que comparte con los indios de Norteamérica y con otros pueblos indígenas, así como, una continua necesidad de lucha común contra las presiones de asimilación y de explotación económica. Los aborígenes miran a los indios de Norteamérica y a otros pueblos indígenas, con una creciente conciencia de solidaridad y de experiencias que comparten, porque todos los pueblos indígenas están dentro de la misma lucha. Su empeño es el de preservar y cultivar la tradición cultural que respeta la Tierra, y que valora a la humanidad por encima de toda explotación y desarrollo material.
En un mundo cada día más amenazado por el conformismo cultural centralizado, la polución global, "escasez" de energía y conflictos ideológicos, los aborígenes están luchando por una mayor autonomía local, por una forma de vida humana más responsable y por una mayor medida de justicia. La suya, es una lucha que necesita lucharse en favor de toda la humanidad. Los aborígenes merecen todo nuestro respeto y ayuda.
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