

The 2004 election and Aboriginal Policy

Peter Howson

In July and August of 2004 I returned to the Kimberleys - one of the many places for which I had responsibility in earlier years as Minister of Aboriginal Affairs. I was naturally curious to find out how the cattle stations that had been handed over to Aborigines during the last 30 years were progressing. That handover started in the 1970s as an important component of the Whitlam government's new self-determination policy for Australia's Aborigines; a policy driven by Coombs and continued with enthusiasm under the Fraser government. I was fortunate on my visit on this occasion in being able to contact people long associated with the pastoral industry in the Kimberleys and the Kimberley Land Council the body responsible for those stations.

What I learned showed, again, just how disastrous the Whitlam-Coombs policies have been. I had, of course, been aware for many years of the total failure of the Whitlam handover of Wattie Creek (now called Dagarugu) to the Gurindji clan. But my discussions also revealed that the same complete failure has been repeated in 30 cattle stations in the Kimberleys and at least ten others in the NT, as well as in the Pitjintjara lands in South Australia. The inability to manage these cattle stations, and their effective vacation, is well-reflected in Richard Allen's diary of his travels in 1997 in the Kimberleys, where he reports a conversation with a school principal who told him:¹

"Not long ago, he says, a Kimberley cattle station, Tirralantji, was bought fully stocked by the government for the Aboriginal people. They were supposed to breed cattle but that never happened. They killed the stock one by one until there were none left, and then they all went back to Derby."

This is how hunter-gatherers have lived for millennia. Their completely rational behaviour in the face of a bizarre and Rousseauvian providence, has not only left the Aborigines living in tragic and third-world conditions in nearby remote communities, but has resulted in a major reduction in export potential for Australia as a whole.

It is time to recognise not only the failure of the Coombsian fantasy, but also to accept the need for a complete policy reversal to help overcome the present situation in remote communities and provide hope for the future of their Aboriginal residents. The Coombsian policy failure illuminates fundamental philosophical and religious differences that are part of the "culture wars" - a phrase widely used in the USA but rarely in Australia.

The absence of that phrase and the understanding embodied within it, in Australia, is unfortunate. The phrase encapsulates the struggle between deeply entrenched ideas and interests, the continuing outcome of which has determined the course of Western civilisation

¹ RR Allen, *Shimmering Spokes*, p 172.

at least since the French Revolution and probably much earlier.²

In the days of the Cold War the struggle was readily identifiable and the players easily recognised. On the one hand there were the cold war warriors, the threat experts, those who placed the struggle against communism at the top of their political agenda. For many of them it was the most important thing in their lives. On the other hand were the communists, the communist sympathisers, and those for whom the passion of the anti-communists was too vulgar to be tolerable. It was easy then to talk about Right and Left. Many who began their political lives on the Left crossed over, becoming champions of the anti-communist cause. Whittaker Chambers and James Burnham are two American examples of such Damascan conversions, whose rejection of communism, and their subsequent contribution to the anti-communist cause, was critical to the ultimate victory of the West over the Soviet Union and its allies at home and abroad.

Today life is much more complicated, and it is noteworthy that the Iraq war has divided people, particularly in the UK, who were staunch allies in the anti-communist cause. So there is a labelling problem here. The terms "Right" and "Left" are the usual labels that are applied here in the culture wars, but in the US the terms "conservative" and "liberal" apply.

In the history of Aboriginal policy in Australia, going back to earliest times, we find the fault line divides the protagonists into inclusionists or assimilationists on the one hand, and separatists or Rousseauvian sentimentalists on the other. Even within the churches, who exercised great influence in Australia in the early decades of settlement, we find both exclusionists, who wished to keep Aborigines away from European society (in order to avoid contamination) and inclusionists who knew that hunter-gathering as a way of life was doomed with the arrival of the European settlers. Captain Phillip's instructions with respect to the Aborigines was wholly inclusionist in its doctrine.³

² See for example, Paul Johnson, *The Intellectuals*, 1989 Harper Collins

³ Arthur Phillip's official instructions, signed by King George III, and read out at the proclamation of his office on the 7th February 1788, included the following

"You are to endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them. And if any of our subjects shall wantonly destroy them or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, it is our will and pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence. You will endeavour to procure an account of the numbers inhabiting the neighbourhood of the intended settlement, and report to our Secretary of State in what manner our intercourse with these people may turn out to the advantage of this colony."

Officially, therefore, Australia's aboriginal peoples were to be brought into civilised society. They were not to be enslaved, they were not to be destroyed, and their "affections were to be conciliated". This was the first official articulation of inclusionist policy.

Anthropologists have usually supported exclusionist doctrines. Baldwin Spencer, arguably the greatest of the Australian ethnographic pioneers, provides a good example in this regard. He was strongly, even bitterly, opposed to Pastor Strehlow's work at Hermannsburg. An example of this exclusionist sentiment is found in Spencer's report of the Horn expedition of 1894

"To attempt . . . to teach them ideas absolutely foreign to their minds and which they are utterly incapable of grasping simply results in destroying their faith in the precepts which they have been taught by their elders and in giving them in return nothing which they can understand. In contact with the white man the aborigine is doomed to disappear: it is far better that as much as possible he should be left in his native state and that no attempt should be made either to cause him to lose his faith in the strict tribal rules, or to teach him abstract ideas which, are utterly beyond the comprehension of an aborigine . . ."4

But as a general rule we can say that most of the time, the Left, particularly the communist Left, has been exclusionist, and that the Right has been inclusionist or assimilationist.

Looking back over half a century of close interest in aboriginal affairs (including two years as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs), what I find most striking was the speed and totality, in the brief period 1967 -1973, with which the separatists defeated the assimilationists of the Hasluck era. What now can be seen as a successful policy of gradual and unforced assimilation was very quickly denigrated and rejected, and replaced by a separatist policy which included self-determination, land-rights, reconciliation, a treaty, and ultimately aboriginal sovereignty, and which culminated in ATSIC in 1991, the Mabo decision in 1992 and the Wik decision of 1996. The consequences of this swift and comprehensive change in policy which took place over thirty years ago have been tragic, and the expense has been appalling.

After the Great War the Old Left were the primary movers in this campaign of separatism, beginning with the Communist Party of Australia's commitment, in 1931, to Aboriginal sovereignty,

The "Draft Program of Struggle against Slavery" appeared in the official paper of the Communist Party of Australia, the "Workers' Weekly" of 24th September 1931.

The "Struggle against Slavery" is a long statement. It was one of the consequences of the massive swing to the left which the Comintern (Communist International) executed, under Stalin's orders, in 1928 and 1929. As a result of Comintern action the right wing faction of Jay Lovestone was displaced in the CPUSA and replaced by the hardline leftism of Foster and Browder. In Australia, the right wing faction of Kavanagh and Ryan was displaced as a result of the visit of a Comintern agent from the US, H M Wicks. The new, hard left leadership comprised Sharkey, Dixon and Moxon. (Wicks, interestingly, later became an FBI

⁴ quoted by Mulvaney and Calaby, *SO MUCH THAT IS NEW*, 1985, Melbourne University Press, p 126

agent)

In the USA the new CP leadership lost no time in calling for the establishment of a separate Negro state, and the new Australian CP leaders were not far behind in demanding a separate state for Australia's Aborigines.

The two key sections of the CPA's "Draft Program of Struggle against Slavery", are as follows

"* Liquidation of all missions and so-called homes for Aborigines, as these are part of the weapons being used to exterminate the Aboriginal race by segregating the sexes and sending the young girls into slavery.

* The handing over to the Aborigines of large tracts of watered and fertile country, with towns, sea ports, railways, roads, etc, to become one or more independent Aboriginal states or republics. The handing back to the Aborigines of all Central, Northern, and North West Australia to enable the Aborigines to develop their native pursuits."

Nearly 57 years after the publication of this seminal document, the now defunct Communist Party weekly, "Tribune", carried on its first issue for 1988, its bicentennial issue, a cover page with an artist's portrayal of the First Fleet at anchor in Botany Bay. Superimposed over the ships was the Aboriginal Land Rights flag with the banner headline "Sovereignty in 88".

The CPA held to this line steadfastly during the decades following 1931. What was extraordinary was the rapid acceptance by the Liberal Party of the essence of separatist doctrine in the years following the defeat of Paul Hasluck by John Gorton for the Prime Ministership in 1968⁵. As Minister for Territories, Hasluck had dominated policy making vis a vis PNG and the NT. I think it is now established, beyond any argument, that Paul Hasluck successfully pursued an inclusionist policy, not only during his highly distinguished political career, but also from his days in the 1930s as a journalist and a promoter of aboriginal welfare. The term "assimilation" was used to describe his policy, -

"The superiority of Western civilisation both on its own merit and in its established position as the way of life of the vast majority - indeed the incompatibility of civilised usage and pagan barbarism - left only two possible outcomes: separate development or assimilation"⁶

Hasluck's policy included the concept of introducing the nomadic tribes-people to fixed settlements, where they could learn how to be horticulturalists, gardeners, woodworkers,

⁵ I was an active supporter of Paul Hasluck in this contest. When it became clear that Gorton was gaining the edge over Hasluck, his supporters pleaded with him to pick up the phone and do some lobbying on his own account. His failure to do so cost him the Prime Ministership, by less than five votes. Hasluck was not an easy man to work with, but he would have held the line on Vietnam (which Gorton failed to do) and he may well have influenced US policy for the better.

⁶ Paul Hasluck *Shades of Darkness*, 1988, Melbourne Univ Press p.8

leather-workers and where they could develop their talents as artists. He built a team of dedicated advisers, patrol officers, and missionaries who helped the Aborigines to learn to work in a range of cooperative ventures in the remote communities, which were originally established either as mission stations or as ration depots to provide food in times of drought. The principle of work and reward was established by these means, a principle destroyed with the establishment of sit-down money under Whitlam in 1975. Hasluck always regarded these communities as stepping stones towards the goal of complete participation in the wider Australian community.

In order to turn official Aboriginal policy from "inclusionism" to "separatism", the word "assimilation" had to be turned into a word which was impossible to defend in political debate. This was achieved with remarkable speed under Whitlam. What was extraordinary was the readiness with which the Liberal Party, under Malcolm Fraser, agreed to this profound and reactionary change in the language of policy and politics.

Soon after he was elected Prime Minister, John Gorton delegated aboriginal affairs to a new ministry and a new minister, Bill Wentworth. Although Wentworth was an enthusiastic cold-war warrior and played a pivotal role in the Petrov affair, he was opposed to Hasluckian doctrines of assimilation and he supported Nugget Coombs in his chairmanship of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs. Sentiment in the ALP and even within the Liberal Party was building up in favour of aboriginal land-rights in some shape or form. The Gove Land Rights case, in which the Aboriginal plaintiffs were represented by A E Woodward QC and the late Ron Castan was a milestone.

A summary of the Gove Land Rights Case (*Milirrpum v. Nabalco Pty. Ltd. and the Commonwealth of Australia*) is as follows. A number of Aborigines, suing on behalf of several native clans which made economic and ritual use of certain areas of Arnhem Land in the Gove Peninsula, sued Nabalco Pty Ltd, a company which mined bauxite in the area, and the Commonwealth, for relief relating to the occupation and enjoyment of the areas by the several clans.

Mr Justice Blackburn found against the plaintiffs. His judgment, handed down in April 1971, is set out in 150 pages of closely argued legal scholarship, but we can summarise his judgment, I think, in one paragraph.

"The question (whether NSW was a settled colony or otherwise) is one not of fact but of law. Whether or not the Australian aboriginals living in any part of New South Wales had in 1788 a system of law which was beyond the powers of the settlers at that time to perceive or comprehend, it is beyond the power of this Court to decide otherwise than that New South Wales came into the category of a settled or occupied colony."⁷

⁷ The distinction at issue is whether Australia was settled or conquered. Mr Justice Blackburn discussed at length the differences between the settlement of Australia and New Zealand.

"I have already suggested some of the historical explanation of the development in New Zealand of detailed laws relating to native occupancy of land. Of some significance also

Mr Justice Blackburn also remarked

"I cannot help being especially conscious that for the plaintiffs it is a matter in which their personal feelings are involved."

The Gove case is also noteworthy in that Justice Blackburn found the evidence put forward by anthropologists, notably Ronald Berndt, more compelling than that put forward by the Rev Wilbur Chaseling, the Methodist missionary who had founded the mission at Yirkalla in 1935. It was from Yirkalla that the land rights claims had originated⁸. But we now know that Ronald Berndt committed perjury in giving evidence in the case.

Gough Whitlam came into office in December 1972 and in February 1973 established a Royal Commission, chaired by A E Woodward QC to enquire into Aboriginal Land Rights. Out of that Royal Commission came the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act, which was finally passed by the Fraser Government in 1976 with Ian Viner as the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

The argument which lay at the heart of the Aboriginal Land Rights Movement was this. Aborigines have a special affinity for the land and suffer first in a spiritual sense, and then in a physical sense (there is hardly any distinction in the Aboriginal mind), if they were unable to perform the ceremonies which they believed were causally connected to the production of food on the land - both vegetable and animal. To perform these ceremonies they had, at a minimum, to visit these tribal lands periodically. Within these lands were often found sacred sites, usually connected to places where the ancestral spirits emerged from deep underground, and then having traversed the landscape, re-entered into the subterranean depths.

The connection was made, at an early stage in the land rights campaign, between aboriginal deprivation and immiseration and an alleged inability to perform the ceremonies required to maintain the supply of what is now often called, admiringly, "bush tucker"; an inability allegedly brought about by the absence of legal recognition of title to these traditional lands. It was argued that a unique form of title for Aboriginal land was necessary to provide a remedy.

It is not that the Aborigines in question suffered from want of food. The problem in a sense

was the series of Maori Wars which took place between 1865 and 1870. I am not competent, nor is it necessary, to examine their effect upon the legislative policies which were adopted: it is enough to say that one of the reasons for the fact that a system of native land law exists in New Zealand and does not exist in Australia is that in New Zealand the government had several times to wage armed conflict with organised bands of natives, which never occurred in Australia."

Since those words were penned it has been a constant ambition of left wing historiography to establish, retrospectively, a permanent and organised insurrection, or war of resistance, by the Aborigines against the European settlers. Henry Reynolds has been notorious in this enterprise.

⁸ Max Griffiths, *Aboriginal Affairs: A Short History*, 1995, Kangaroo Press, Sydney

was that they had very easy access to food which was of the wrong kind for their nutritional well-being. But their ceremonial life was seen as critically important to aboriginal well-being regardless of the purposes for which it was carried out.

Although land-rights was only part of the separatist programme it was, particularly in symbolic terms, the most important part. Self-determination, for example, required the removal of white patrol officers and missionaries and the transfer of authority to elected bodies which were completely alien to traditional Aboriginal authority structures. The transfer of commercial responsibility for cattle stations, for example, to elected councils was a recipe for complete failure, and if Whitlam had not provided sit-down money many thousands would have starved.

Following his election in 1975 Prime Minister Fraser and his Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs, Ian Viner and Fred Chaney, particularly, became enthusiasts for the new doctrines of separatism, land rights, Aboriginal victim-hood, self determination, and so on. There was no voice within the parliament prepared to challenge the new doctrines. When Bob Hawke succeeded Fraser as Prime Minister, shadow ministers such as James Porter, Chris Gallus, Michael Wooldridge, maintained doctrinal support for Labor Ministers such as Clyde Holding and Gerry Hand.

One of the compelling manifestations of the total failure of the NT Land Rights Act is the story of Wave Hill and the Gurindji claim on that famous pastoral lease, owned in 1971 by Vestey's. The Gurindji attracted nation wide attention when they walked off the property and set up camp at Wattie Creek in an attempt to gain higher wages. What began as an industrial campaign turned into a campaign for land rights.

“The Gurindji demanded the return of sufficient of their traditional land to establish an independent Aboriginal-owned cattle enterprise”⁹

When Bill McMahon succeeded John Gorton as PM, I was appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (amongst other responsibilities) and soon found that Nugget Coombs was more influential on policy matters than the Minister. McMahon instructed me, whilst in London in June 1972, to ask Lord Vestey for his consent to an excision from the Wave Hill lease to allow the grant of a lease by the Commonwealth to the Gurindji, in the Wattie Creek area, for the purpose of running cattle. Nugget Coombs remarks that the Department of the Interior was opposing such grants of land ¹⁰ and I was filled with foreboding about the issue. Nevertheless, I met with Lord Vestey and he consented to the proposal without demur. Worse was to come when the PM, no doubt at the instigation of Nugget Coombs, asked me repeat the exercise with respect to the Everard Park lease in the Pitjijinjara lands of South Australia. This lease was owned by Byron McLachlan. Mr McLachlan had different attitude from Lord Vestey but eventually agreed to negotiate. Prolonged negotiations ensued and were not concluded when I left office in December 1972. Today there are no operating pastoral leases in the Pitjijinjara lands. They have reverted to the arid and empty state of

⁹ H C Coombs, *Trial Balance: Issues of My Working Life*, 1981, Sun Books, South Melbourne, p 281.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p282

pre-European times.

On 16 August 1975, in a much publicised ceremony, Prime Minister Whitlam handed the title deeds to an excision from the Wave Hill Station, over to the Gurindji. Today, that pastoral lease is deserted, as are many other properties transferred to Aboriginal ownership under the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act, or purchased with money from the Indigenous Land Fund. Australia's cattle industry is now enjoying a revival, driven by mad cow disease scares overseas, and the prospect of increased access to the US market under the US FTA. It is very difficult to obtain production figures for cattle in the NT, the Kimberleys, and North Queensland since the NT Land Rights Act, and the establishment of the Indigenous Land Fund, which enabled open market purchases of pastoral leases to be made, came into effect. But it is clear that very large areas of grazing land have been taken out the cattle industry, and where some Aboriginal cattle production is taking place, it is doing so on a much reduced scale. This is a serious economic consequence, for the NT particularly. It should also be of concern to the Federal Treasurer, since export losses which are the consequences of Government policy, and which can be remedied by a policy change, ought to receive his attention.

But economic loss is far less important than the human tragedy which has accompanied separatism. For more than a decade, the calamity which has befallen those people, particularly women and children, who live in Aboriginal communities has been evident to anyone who sought to inquire about it. For example, in 1971 Professor Colin Tatz, a prominent publicist and advocate for separatist policies, visited 77 Aboriginal communities in the five mainland states and the Northern Territory. In 1990 he revisited these same communities and in a report entitled "Aboriginal Violence: A Return to Pessimism" he wrote the following:¹¹

"we all must face up to a set of realities for which there is, regrettably, abundant evidence."

Tatz listed eight of these realities.

1. the great deal of personal violence within Aboriginal groups, even within families;
2. the great deal of child neglect, as in hunger and lack of general care;
3. the considerable amount of violence and damage committed in sober states;
4. the marked increase in Aboriginal deaths from non natural causes;
5. much destruction of property, both white supplied and own acquired;
6. increasing numbers of attacks, often violent, on white staff who work with the groups;
7. the vast amount of alcohol consumed, commonly and generally offered as the sole and total explanation of the above;
8. the constancy about the way Aborigines externalise causality and responsibility for all of this.

¹¹ Australian Journal of Social Issues, 1990, 25(4), page 249,

In addition to these eight points Tatz noted that the excision from Wave Hill at Wattie Creek, renamed Dagarugu, was deserted, along with other leases that were supposed to have provided various Aboriginal groups with an economic base. The ready availability of sit-down money, of course, undermined any ambition to make these leases profitable, even if there had been an authority structure capable of implementing such an ambition. Thirty cattle stations in the Kimberleys and several more in the NT and SA have suffered the same fate as Dagarugu.

Tatz's report was ignored. Federal Ministers Gerry Hand and Robert Tickner were securely imprisoned in the separatist cage which they had helped to construct, and it was not until the appointment of John Herron to the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio in 1996 that the slow deconstruction of separatism could begin.

An even more tragic account of the crisis in Aboriginal life was written more than ten years ago by Rosemary Neill in "The Australian" of June 18, 1994. Entitled "Our shame - How aboriginal women and children are bashed in their own community - then ignored" it describes the epidemic of domestic violence and rape which has spread throughout aboriginal communities in recent times. It is an awful story. I will quote just one paragraph

"The book *Through Black Eyes*, published by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, states that:

- * Up to and over 50% of Aboriginal children are victims of family violence and child abuse.
- * In the early 1990s, a survey carried out among 120 Aboriginal households in Adelaide found 90% of the woman and 84% of the young girls had been raped at some stage in their lives.
- * A related statistic says that, in most States, more than 70% of assaults on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are carried out by their husbands or boyfriends.

The indifference of ATSIC to this state of affairs was one of the reasons for the loss of political support leading to the decision foreshadowed by Mark Latham in March 2004 to abolish ATSIC; a policy switch immediately taken up by PM John Howard who introduced legislation to achieve this end in August 2004.

Prior to the election, 17 September 2004, Aboriginal Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone signalled a major policy shift. It received virtually no publicity during the campaign, but now that the Coalition has been returned it should become the subject of analysis and debate. Arguably the most important element is the abolition of sit-down money. Sit-down money was instituted by PM Whitlam in 1975. It provided the answer to the question "what will Aborigines do in the remote communities in which we expect them to live under the new separatist policies of the post-Hasluckian era?". The answer was "nothing", and the use of the unemployment benefit, on demand, was to enable this state of affairs to continue indefinitely.

Sit-down money has been the major factor in the destruction of Aboriginal life which has taken place since the 1970s. It's abolition means the end of separatism, since the unemployment benefit will be available only on identical terms as for other Australians and

this means getting a job. It also means abandoning the remote communities, since apart from aboriginal paintings and other works of art, these communities are places where money flows in, and nothing flows out. There is no economic life in these places.

“The facts are that since 1981, the Aboriginal population in remote areas has grown by more than 20 per cent. There are about 1200 discrete Aboriginal communities with a total population of more than 100,000. Almost 900 communities contain fewer than 50 persons. The romantics think this is wonderful: an Aboriginal nation arises! The reality is a disaster for the inhabitants”¹²

It also means taking education for Aboriginal children seriously. The Prime Minister made much of his proposal during the election campaign to establish old-style technical colleges in various parts of Australia, in order to make vocational training available, again, to the vast majority of teenagers for whom university education is a waste of time. This doctrine will have to be expanded greatly for the benefit of Aboriginal children and teenagers, whose need for jobs will never be satisfied unless they can read and write in English, do basic arithmetic, and acquire the habits of punctuality and self-discipline which are essential to holding down the most humble of jobs. The late Austin Gough set out the ambition which should guide policy

“For me, reconciliation will be a reality when I can keep an appointment with an Aboriginal dentist in the morning, and then in the afternoon travel to Sydney in a Boeing 767 flown by an Aboriginal captain, to attend the Sydney Piano competition where the Australian contestant in the top six will be an Aboriginal pianist, trained perhaps, in Bologna”¹³

Amanda Vanstone has hit upon the keystone in the separatist arch. By removing that keystone the whole demoralising structure of mendicancy and victim-hood will collapse. Australia can now abandon the Rousseauvian fantasies which have caused so much tragedy and begin, again, to welcome those Australians of Aboriginal descent into the great benefits which Australian civilisation affords.

Pathways to the Future

At the Bennelong Society's conference in September 2004 Minister Amanda Vanstone signalled major changes in policy and rhetoric.

Making unconditional welfare "a thing of the past" by removing the current exemption of residents of remote communities from the mutual obligation requirement, and hence putting CDEP on a "no work, no pay" basis, is a critical step forwards. It would certainly help overcome one of the problems I was told about in Darwin en route to my visit to the Kimberleys. The question being discussed at that time was where to get the labour needed to pick the many thousands of mangoes ripening in the vicinity of Katherine. The obvious

¹² ,Gary Johns: Romantic Aboriginal policies fail reality, Australian 6 Oct 2004.

¹³ Paper delivered to the Galatians Group Workshop, 20 March 1997

answer was to offer Aborigines the job. But none had responded. In the end backpackers had to be used including some from places as far away as New Zealand.

The proper application of the mutual obligation principle should in future provide such seasonal labour but, more importantly, it should extend more widely the all important experience of working for a living. That will be very much in the interests of improving the welfare of Aboriginal residents, particularly their children.

But major changes in other policies will also be required. Of the main changes needed, two stand out.

First, additional assistance will need to be provided to help Aborigines find work outside remote communities. The reality is that private sector labour markets in the great majority of these communities are either very limited or non-existent. Such assistance should include the provision of help with transport to and accommodation costs at centres where jobs are likely to be available. In practical terms, the mutual obligation principle can only be applied to residents of remote communities if they are able to obtain low-cost accommodation in job centres and if those centres have a sufficient supply of such accommodation. The cost of such assistance will at least partly be offset by the lower cost of the existing CDEP scheme.

Those attending the Bennelong Society conference heard from Elaine McKeon, Aboriginal Chair of Aboriginal Hostels Ltd, about the excellent work that organisation is doing in providing away-from-home accommodation for both Aboriginal men and women. But with a staff of only 550, that organisation is still quite small and not focussed on providing accommodation for employees. Minister Vanstone should include a major expansion in additional low cost accommodation and transport assistance as part of the mutual obligation policy.

Second, she needs to ensure that a high proportion of children in remote communities are actually attending school, and receiving an education that provides them with adequate literacy and numeracy. My discussions in the Kimberleys confirmed what is now widely talked about but about which virtually nothing is being done, namely the extremely high rate of truancy at most schools serving remote communities. This in turn means low or zero literacy and numeracy amongst such children.

Yet unless these children become literate and numerate their job prospects will be extremely limited, and a substantial proportion risk ending up either as unemployed or involved in crime - or both. Additional expenditure that ensures adequate schooling will be an investment that provides good returns for the taxpayer as well as a better life for the Aboriginal children.

The Bennelong Conference was fortunate indeed in hearing what can be done to effect a major improvement in the education of children in remote communities. Alan Baillie, Director of Schools in the Mt Isa district, and Barry Riddiford, who started as a indigenous teacher and is now a regional director in the Queensland department of education, outlined the success of their pro-active approach in going out into the communities to persuade Aboriginal parents that their children would benefit from being sent to school.

Riddiford uses his own family and schooling experience as a model of what can be done

(and what should not be done too!) An approach along these lines suggests that educators must adopt a new role that recognises the importance of directly and actively involving Aboriginal families in schooling. It was clear that, once that message had penetrated communities, attendance rates had soared in the Mt Isa district.

Almost as importantly, a residential college has been established in Mt Isa taking 55 boarders - and with a waiting list. This allows the Aboriginal children to escape from possible "bad influences" at home and the boarding school takes students from 15 remote communities. Boarders are allowed to return home if family problems develop.

Again, Minister Vanstone should give a high priority to a major expansion in schools at which Aboriginal children can board, at least on a weekly basis, and where they can still return home as necessary. Importantly, such schools are more likely to attract appropriate teachers too. But it will also be important to ensure the teachers are sufficiently trained to impart the necessary skills, particularly the English language. That may require the establishment of training and re-training courses for teachers.

Now that the Howard Government has been returned with an increased majority the opportunity is available to confirm the abandonment of separatist policies and to explain that the new policies are being adopted in the interests of Aborigines themselves. The pathway to the future for Aborigines lies not in the remote communities but in moving progressively closer to the rest of the Australian community. That requires, however, major additional policy changes to those already announced.