

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

THE enthusiasm which the members of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee are bringing to the discussion of matters which come within the scope of their concern will be greeted with general satisfaction. There is some puzzlement, however, at the unexpected approach the committee is showing at this early stage of its deliberations, the emphasis apparently being on the personal emoluments and requirements of the elected members of the committee rather than on what is the object of the whole exercise, the Aboriginal people as a whole. The fact also that the committee is asking already that it be given direct responsibility for the expenditure of vast sums of money voted by Parliament for the welfare of the Aborigines comes as a surprise. The remainder of the proceedings of the committee's meeting which ends tomorrow, may provide explanations for the order of priorities which the members seem to have in mind. They have good reason to adopt a sceptical attitude toward a departmental bureaucracy that has given the impression of being unco-operative, arrogant, and at times incompetent. The belief also that the officers of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs are not answerable to the elected members of the committee seems to be weighing heavily on their minds.

On the whole, the NACC experiment, conceived originally by the previous Government and at first accepted by the present Government as an exercise in consultation, is a worthy one. It is still in the embryonic stage, however, and will manifestly have to evolve considerably before it becomes a useful tool in giving the Aborigines a sense of participation in the making of decisions affecting them. It must be accepted from the outset, too, that the form the process of consultation has taken initially may have to be radically overhauled or even replaced, possibly by elected representative bodies exercising power at the local level or by the appointment of full-time advisers selected on merit and attached to the staffs of the various ministers whose responsibilities impinge directly on the interests of the Aborigines.

Diverse groups

The Aborigines themselves, and other Australians as well, must bear in mind that the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee is a novelty for which there

is no identical precedent in Australian constitutional history. The Aboriginal people itself is not a homogeneous entity now; neither has it ever been anything like one people in the past. The tribal groupings that still exist and the urban Aboriginal populations that are scattered all over Australia also are at various stages of cultural development. They represent a variety of degrees of integration in the white man's cash economy and in his social structures, so that there cannot be one overall Aboriginal policy. Neither can any policy designed to improve the conditions of Aborigines in general be conceived or implemented in a totally Aboriginal context without any reference to or co-operation from the white community. There may then well be sound reasons for heeding the objections of those Australians who foresee the emergence of a kind of apartheid based on black electoral rolls, on black bureaucracies, and on evolving exclusively black solutions to problems which are not in effect completely black, if the idea of what has mistakenly been called an Aboriginal Parliament is carried too far. This easy and insidious simplification of an issue that is neither all black nor all white is already taking shape in attempts to set up "black power" movements in Australia.

It is inescapable that all Australians can be governed by only one sovereign Parliament in the end and that this Parliament cannot give up its obligation of being answerable to the nation for the expenditure of public money for whatever purpose. It is as impracticable and undesirable to make one ethnic group of the Australian population totally responsible for its own needs as it would be to give the same privilege to the farmers in the administration of Primary Industry or to the migrants in the administration of Immigration. The time-honoured recipe of setting to work in a new field without pre-conceived notions and of proceeding gradually and pragmatically to the eventual formulation of a definite program surely applies also to the consultative committee. And one would expect the committee to at least map out a detailed program of action based on extensive and painstaking research and self-education before asking to be given complete control. The salvation of the Aboriginal people will come from their own efforts to master their destinies much more than from the tantalising pot of gold held out by the Federal Government.

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