

Black power and the purse

RHETORIC has its pitfalls. Last year the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee was voted into existence to the accompaniment of a Prime Ministerial pledge: "The Federal Government aims to restore to Aborigines the power to make their own decisions about their way of life. So, after its second meeting, the NACC has asked for that fundamental power, the power of the purse. It wants immediate control over the \$70 million allocated by the capital funds for loans and grants for Aboriginal enterprises. Eventually it wants to control the total budget administered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The move is perhaps understandable. It is difficult to see how decisions can be made on a way of life unless there is the ability to decide how and where money can be spent. But the request is unwise and premature, possibly unconstitutional and probably politically dangerous. The NACC for a start should be warned by the shadow of the Auditor-General's report which hangs over the department. Remember the dreadful saga of the Torres Strait turtles, a story which may not yet

have ended? (If rumors about the report on departmental management contain some truth, then it may be difficult to sustain the claim that the NACC's lack of sufficient administrative experience debars it from handling the budget.)

But the point is that administrative efficiency is necessary not only to spend money to the best advantage, but also to stem white backlash. Departmental administration must be improved if it is found to be at fault. The propriety of handing over control of part of national funds to a particular group is open to serious argument. There are no grounds for such discrimination. The other factor to be considered is that it would be more politically prudent for the NACC to act as an advisory body and a pressure point, letting the department shoulder the responsibility.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Senator Cavanagh) has said he hoped the time would come when the NACC could justify the control of all Aboriginal expenditure being handed over to it. Now clearly is not the time. The NACC still has to shake down. It is a body alien to traditional Aboriginal structures in the Northern Territory and there must be doubts whether tribal and semi-tribal Aborigines have yet found their voice on the committee. That massive amounts of money are needed is not open for debate: on the same day that the NACC talked of control of spending, a parliamentary standing committee in Darwin was being told that one-third of the

children under five at Yirrkala suffer from serious malnutrition. What matters is that money is well spent — and this means on projects which are economically viable and, perhaps more important, projects which may involve a loss but which have social benefits.

The Government's philosophy, a sound one, is that Aborigines must be helped to help themselves, to make their own decisions. While the present call by the NACC can be safely set aside, it is the responsibility of the Government to ensure that the NACC has the opportunity to become a real and representative forum, one which can forcefully put its priorities in the expectation of being listened to. Ruthless repression and benevolent dictatorship were no answers to the problems of Aborigines. Nor will paternalism help them find their own way to their old dignity.

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