

No rejoicing for Aborigines

By CHARLES PERKINS

AUSTRALIA Day is a day of celebration, when Australians commemorate the arrival of the First Fleet and the beginning of the British settlement of Australia.

For a number of "Australians" this day could be called a day of mourning, with no cause for joy, because it is the day that marked the end of the way of life they had lived for more centuries than man can remember.

The "First Australians", the Aborigines, arrived on this continent some 30,000 years before the white man. They had endured and conquered the difficulties of often harsh country, they had built a civilisation that satisfied their needs, and they lived in harmony with their environment, with nature for centuries before the British colonisation.

The early collision of the cultures of the British and the Aborigines almost solved any "problem". Devastated by the loss of their lands — their hunting grounds — and by introduced diseases and fighting, Aboriginal numbers grew less and their morale grew low.

Despite a policy of "protection", and despite the well meaning attempts of missions and governments to "save" them, it seemed obvious that they were a dying race, a race doomed to fall before the influx of "civilisation".

But man is an eternally adaptive animal, regardless of race, and by the 1920s and 1930s it became apparent that these poor people were not only surviving but were increasing all over the country. This was a bit of a shock to the policy makers, but they met it by deciding that the Aborigines would, of course, be gradually absorbed into the general Australian community, in a process of "assimilation".

The "problem" grew, the numbers continued to increase, and the various difficulties did not disappear. If anything, they grew larger. Whatever else would happen in the future, two facts were obvious:

The Aborigines were not a dying race,

They would not move quickly into the Australian community and happily adopt white ways and ambitions.

Which virtually brings us to 1974. Despite

changes in Government policy, and despite the entry of the Australian Government into the field as the main body dispensing policies and money, Aborigines are not really any better off than they were at the beginning of the 20th century.

They have worse housing, health, education, employment opportunities than the rest of the population. They are discriminated against both through the law and by many of their countrymen.

Certainly some of them have "made it" — look at Evonne Goolagong, Lionel Rose, Sir Doug Nicholls, — but these are somehow pointed out as exceptions, and not as representatives of a people who are no less talented, no less intelligent than other Australians.

This year could mark the beginning of a much better future for Aborigines — just possibly. Many of us, both black and white, tend to be pessimistic, even if we are hopeful.

So many "new deals" have been promised in the past, so many times the promises have dwindled into the same thing under a new name.

Aborigines cannot go back to their old, traditional ways, and the word "back" does not imply the opposite of progress, it merely means that no one

can go back to the way the world was in 1788, and Aboriginal people have to change with the changes that go on around them, the same as every other Australian.

But changes cannot be forced upon them. Many past proposals have failed for this reason, and the present Government's policy is based on the idea that change initiated and planned by the Aboriginal people is more likely to succeed.

Many Aborigines now have increased confidence in the value of their traditional culture. In areas where they have lived as fringe dwellers of towns and cities for a couple of generations, interest is reawakening in the stories and languages of the past.

In areas where the traditional ways are still passed on to the children, compromises are apparent with the children being fully versed in their own heritage and learning enough of the white man's ways to be able to cope with whatever may happen.

But the most important point in this is the regained pride in their Aboriginal heritage, a pride that may make it possible for them to contribute a great deal to the overall Australian community. The only problem with this is that white people may not yet be prepared to accept this contribution, to accept that they may have much they could learn from the black Australians.

If they could all accept this, the Aboriginal people of Australia may be able to accept Australia Day as a day of celebration too, when people of different cultures can be part of one society, and none are disadvantaged by their differences.