

Dexter scraps charges

The Permanent Head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Barrie Dexter, withdrew yesterday charges against the suspended Aboriginal public servant, Mr Charles Perkins.

He said he expected Mr Perkins to report for duty today.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Cavanagh, said he understood that Mr Perkins had agreed to get on with the job of assisting Aborigines from within the Public Service.

Mr Perkins said from Adelaide last night that he was pleased with the decision but did not want to comment until he had seen Mr Dexter and heard the terms of the lifting of the suspension.

He said he had agreed to confine his future remarks to matters concerning Aboriginal affairs.

"It is the same undertaking as I gave in January after the last incident", Mr Perkins said, "and I believe my remarks about the Liberal and Country Parties in Western Australia did not contravene that agreement".

Mr Perkins said he had been called to a meeting with Mr Dexter at 3.30pm today.

Criticism not mentioned

In his "public explanation" of his decision Mr Dexter made no reference to the criticisms made by the Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, of his original decision to charge Mr Perkins.

Nor did he refer overtly to Mr Whitlam's opinion that the section of the Public Service Act under which the charge was made was so wide that an adverse finding would be fantastic and unlikely to be implemented.

However, Mr Dexter said that before charging and suspending Mr Perkins, "I received advice from the Secretary to the Attorney-General's Department [Mr C. W. Harders] that there was evidence on which Mr Perkins could be charged with improper conduct".

He added that Mr Harders "has since examined the matter again and has confirmed his advice".

The charge arose from statements made by Mr

Perkins in Perth criticising the Liberal and Country Parties. This incident followed a strong warning from Mr Dexter six weeks before, when Mr Perkins criticised two ministers, including his own.

At that time Mr Perkins agreed that in future he would not comment on the department, ministers or any issue in an improper way. He also agreed to ask permission before making public statements.

In his statement Mr Dexter said that he had given much anxious thought to whether the disciplinary action should proceed, and had been advised by Attorney-General's that it was legally open to him to withdraw.

In his considerations he had been motivated primarily by two things, his concern for the administration of his department

and his concern for the traditions and integrity of the Australian Public Service.

Mr Dexter explained his concern for his department and the traditions of the Public Service thus:

"Disciplinary actions in the Public Service are designed to retain the confidence of the public, including members of Government and Opposition parties, in the ability of the Public Service to carry out its proper role under our system of proper parliamentary government".

Two matters* in particular had led to his present conclusion—Mr Perkins's praiseworthy action in connection with the incident at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs last Thursday when a man held members of the staff at gunpoint for two hours

and his discussions with Mr Perkins following that incident.

Mr Dexter said he had been led to believe that Mr Perkins "now wants to get on with the important job the department has of advancing the well-being of the Aboriginal people and realises that there are ways for a public servant to do this within the Public Service system".

Mr Dexter said that he had made quite clear to Mr Perkins the importance of maintaining [the] tradition of a politically impartial career public service".

Senator Cavanagh said yesterday that it appeared Mr Perkins had agreed to make no further controversial statements while the Public Service Act remained unchanged.

He presumed that Mr Dexter had changed his mind about the charge after discussing the matter with Mr Perkins and taking into account his role during the incident at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs last Thursday.

The Labor Party was committed to changes in the Public Service Act, Senator Cavanagh said, and he supported such a move and hoped that the Act could be changed during the present session of Parliament.

He thought that the controversy surrounding Mr Perkins's public statements would help to accelerate the introduction of changes to the Act.

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