OFFICIAL POLICY TOWARDS VICTORIAN ABORIGINES 1957-1974*

Gregory Lyons

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, numerous citizen groups in Victoria exerted pressure on the state government to improve the lot of Victoria's neglected Aboriginal population. By 1955 Aborigines had become a political embarrassment. It was not that their numbers were great or that their votes counted. Rather, their presence in camps on the fringes of country towns and in overcrowded city dwellings presented an affront to 'decent standards' and a potential threat to Law and Order.¹

The new Liberal government of Henry Bolte wanted advice as to the steps it should take. In December 1955 the Premier appointed the retired Chief Stipendiary Magistrate, Charles McLean, to review existing policy towards the state's Aborigines, and to recommend policy changes. McLean's Report led to legislation which in 1957 established an Aborigines Welfare Board, which presided over Aboriginal affairs until 1967. In 1968 the Board was supplanted by a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, which in turn was replaced by the Victorian Office of the newly established Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

This paper traces official policy towards Victorian Aborigines from the beginnings of the Board in 1957 to the demise of the Ministry in 1974. It considers the origins and objectives of each body, and their initiatives and methods, especially in the field of housing policy. It also investigates the reasons for their failure, for in each case their achievements fell far short of their stated intentions.

THE McLEAN REPORT

In his 1957 Report, McLean reviewed the operation of the *Aborigines Act* 1928 which was then in force. He was asked to recommend amendments to the legislation and '[w]hether it is necessary or desirable to maintain a system of administration for aboriginal people and if so . . . what persons or classes of persons should be deemed aboriginal for the purposes of the system'.²

Gregory Lyons, formerly a solicitor with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, is now a legal officer in the Victorian Department of the Premier and Cabinet. He is writing a Ph.D. (Law) thesis at Monash University on the work of the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service as a model for delivering legal services to Aboriginal groups.

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¹ Boas 1975:52.

² The full terms of reference of the Inquiry are set out in McLean 1957:1.

Under the *Aborigines Act* 1928, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines³ continued to have authority over those deemed to be Aborigines. 'Half-castes' (with the exception of those licensed in writing by the Board to reside at reserves)⁴ were in general excluded from the Board's area of responsibility.⁵ The spirit of the 1928 Act — that the Protection Board should have responsibility only for Aborigines of full descent — was a carry-over from the *Aborigines Protection Act* 1886 which declared that only those Aborigines of full descent and half-castes then over the age of thirty-four years were entitled to assistance.⁶

As early as 1858 public opinion had advocated differential treatment of 'fullblood' and 'half-caste' natives. It was widely believed that while the former were entitled to be charitably maintained and protected as some compensation for the loss of their tribal lands, the latter ought to be dispersed into the wider society to form a convenient workforce of labourers and domestic servants.⁷

When McLean came to review the policy of dispersing half-castes and offering protection to Aborigines of full descent that was embodied in the 1928 Act, he found ample evidence that it had failed. The one Aboriginal Station⁸ remaining in Victoria in 1957, Lake Tyers, was the home for 186 people of whom at least 161 were of mixed descent. (Only about twenty Aborigines of full descent, all adults, remained in the whole state at the time.)⁹ Those of mixed descent were living at the Station at the time without licences; the system of issuing licences had broken down in 1937 'because of the clerical work involved'.¹⁰ While the remaining Victorian population of Aboriginal descent — according to McLean, some 1,160 in number — were scattered across the state, they were not merging appreciably with the broader population. McLean found that Aboriginal camps in country areas were squalid; humpies of

³ In 1860, the 'Central Board to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines' was appointed. (For an account of its activities, see Christie 1979:163-177). When the *Aborigines Protection Act* 1869 was passed, the Board was given statutory authority and re-constituted under the name 'the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines': McLean 1974:4.

⁴ The term 'half-caste' was defined in the *Aborigines Act* 1928 to include 'half-castes as well [as] other persons whatever of mixed aboriginal blood'. (s.4). Licences, subject to cancellation at any time, were to be granted by the Board only in 'cases of illness, infirmity, or other necessitous circumstances'. McLean 1957:12.

⁵ *Aborigines Act* 1928 s.5(v). Half-castes who were 'deemed to be aboriginals', and hence subject to the Board included any half-caste aged over seventy-five who habitually associated with an aboriginal (s.5[ii]) and any female half-caste who on 1 January 1887 was married to and living with an aboriginal (s.5[iii]).

⁶ *Aborigines Protection Act* 1886 s.4. In this Act as in the 1928 Act, 'half-caste' was defined to include any person 'of mixed aboriginal blood': s.3. For an account of official policy towards Victorian Aborigines earlier this century, see Foxcroft 1941:100-107.

⁷ Barwick 1972:16.

⁸ A 'Station' refers to a supervised settlement on a Crown Land reserve. While Lake Tyers was the only 'Station' in existence, the Framlingham Reserve in the Western District remained.

⁹ McLean 1957:6.

¹⁰ McLean 1957:12.

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makeshift materials often formed extensions of town rubbish tips.¹¹ The contrast between these living conditions and the growing prosperity of the country towns was marked, and it was an obvious source of embarrassment to the Government. In the metropolitan area where some 159 people of Aboriginal descent were said to be, most lived in Fitzroy 'in overcrowded, slum conditions, and frequently in "condemned" houses'.¹² Their overcrowding was more acute than amongst other people living there.¹³

McLean found on the part of the Protection Board that there had been 'a considerable diminution of apparent interest, and some avoidance of its responsibilities, over recent years'.¹⁴ Board members were honorary, and the Secretary to the Board, an officer of the Chief Secretary's Department, was able to devote only a small portion of his time to Board duties.¹⁵ According to McLean, the Board's recent policy was one of '*laissez-faire*';¹⁶ this was a generous description.

McLean found that the Lake Tyers Station was hampering progress towards assimilation. Able-bodied 'half-castes' and their families were living there, receiving rations and being deprived of 'any desire they might develop to seek permanent employment and fend for themselves'.¹⁷ He recommended that 'a firm policy of assimilation' should be implemented so that the number being cared for could be reduced to those who were 'aged, sick, infirm or otherwise necessitous'.¹⁸ He recommended the re-introduction of a system of licences for the admission of any Aborigines of less than full descent to the Station.

¹¹ McLean 1957:6-7. Rowley wrote of these fringe-dwellers as 'beyond the statistics of poverty, beside the country towns of the south, often without even a recognized claim to their poor shacks, and dependent on the mercy and whims of the local officialdom'. (Rowley 1973:188). For a graphic description of living conditions in a camp by a rubbish tip (though in Cunnamulla, Queensland), see Robertson and Carrick 1970:34. And see the account of the time he spent at a rubbish tip midway between Mooroopna and Shepparton in McGuinness 1974:63.

¹² McLean 1957:8.

¹³ Victorian Council of Social Service 1950:9.

¹⁴ McLean 1957:13.

¹⁵ In the words of Rowley, the members appeared to have been 'a curious collection of people'. Rowley 1972:88. At the time of its dissolution in 1957, Board members were: the Hon. A.G. Rylah, M.L.A. (Chief Secretary and Board Chairman, *ex officio*); Mr A.J.L. James (Chief Secretary's Department); the Hon. Sir Albert Lind, M.L.A.; the Hon. M.V. Porter, M.L.A.; the Hon. R.W. Mack, M.L.C.; Dr A.R. Haywood; and Major R. Glen. With the exception of the Chief Secretary, Board members had been appointed by the Governor in Council. 1958 Report of the Aborigines Welfare Board:3. (Annual Reports of the Board appear in *VPP*; see Bibliography.)

¹⁶ McLean 1957:13.

¹⁷ McLean 1957:14.

¹⁸ McLean 1957:14. Hausfeld has commented on the illogicality of a 'policy of assimilation'. One can only speculate about his reaction to 'a firm policy of assimilation'. Hausfeld 1963:32. And Stanner has commented upon the difficulties inherent in any assimilation policy: 'We are asking them [Aborigines] to become a new people but this means, in human terms that we are asking them to un-be what they now are'. Stanner 1969:56.

When McLean considered the conditions of the majority of people of Aboriginal descent who were living in 'sordid environments'¹⁹ in country camps, or in overcrowded conditions in the city, he recommended 'an active policy of assimilation'.²⁰ This policy should be extended to all those with 'an admixture of aboriginal blood'²¹ who were in need of assistance. No longer should the Board's responsibilities be limited to Aborigines of full descent, and to those 'half-castes' specially licensed to live at Lake Tyers. McLean's advocacy of a policy of assimilation was in line with contemporary official thinking. At the 1951 Native Welfare Conference (a meeting attended by the Commonwealth, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia ministers with responsibility for Aboriginal affairs), assimilation had been agreed upon as the aim of policies towards all aborigines.²²

This 'active policy of assimilation' placed emphasis on re-housing projects and the development of improved educational and employment opportunities. It was a marked shift from earlier 'protection' policies which had in general excluded Aborigines of mixed descent from their ambit.

McLean's recommendations concerning Victoria's Aborigines had an objective, 'the goal of ultimate assimilation',²³ to which all else was subordinate. In the mind of McLean, and in the understanding of the Victorian government which accepted his recommendations, it seems that 'ultimate assimilation' meant that people of Aboriginal descent would become so like those in the broader community that they would eventually become indistinguishable. If Aborigines were not going to die out,²⁴ they would at least fade from notice.

THE ABORIGINES WELFARE BOARD, 1957-1967

The Victorian government acted promptly on McLean's recommendations, passing the *Aborigines Act* 1957 which replaced the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines with the Aborigines Welfare Board.²⁵ The new Board's function was 'to promote the moral, intellectual and physical welfare of aborigines . . . with a view to their assimilation into the general community'²⁶ and its responsibilities extended to all people of Aboriginal descent.

The Board was established in an atmosphere of political crisis and it was expected to act immediately.²⁷ These were not circumstances conducive to the formulation

¹⁹ McLean 1957:15.

²⁰ McLean 1957:16.

²¹ McLean 1957:20.

²² See the report to Parliament concerning the Conference by the then Minister for Territories (Mr Paul Hasluck), quoted in Stone 1974:196. The full text of Hasluck's speech is in *CAPD*, Vol. 214, 873-877.

²³ McLean 1957:18.

²⁴ Something confidently predicted as late as 1934; see Jones 1934:38.

²⁵ The Act repealed the *Aborigines Act* 1928. The *Aborigines Act* 1957 became, with minor amendments, the *Aborigines Act* 1958 in the Consolidation of that year.

²⁶ Section 6(1).

²⁷ Boas 1975:17.

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of coherent policy goals and procedures. The Board lacked a comprehensive picture of the Victorian Aboriginal population, being guided, at least in its early years, by McLean's limited perceptions. McLean had seriously underestimated the size of the population of Aboriginal descent and had viewed this population as consisting of individuals similar to poor whites.²⁸ He had not perceived the inter-relatedness of different Aboriginal groups, nor had he articulated any notion of an Aboriginal community.

In its latter years, two factions emerged within the Board. One tended to see Aborigines as failed whites, as irresponsible people who were generally undeserving of the Board's efforts on their behalf. The other saw Aborigines as victims of widespread discrimination and prejudice in a culture-clash with white Australians. The latter group favoured compensatory aid for the members of what it regarded as a distinct community.²⁹ It was largely the agitation of the second faction, both within the Welfare Board and outside it, that led to the Board being replaced in 1968 by a new administration, the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs.³⁰

The Welfare Board consisted of ten honorary members: the Chief Secretary (or his Ministerial nominee) as chairman; the Under Secretary; nominees of the Housing, Education and Health Ministers respectively; and 'five other members appointed by the Governor in Council of whom . . . two shall be aborigines and one shall be an expert in anthropology or sociology'.³¹

During its existence from 1957 to 1967, there were numerous changes in its membership. Three members of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines at the time of its dissolution became members of the new Board.³² So too did Dr Donald Thomson, the noted anthropologist. Two Aborigines were appointed to the Board, Pastor Douglas Nicholls³³ and the famed singer, Harold Blair. Although Blair's period of service was short, his successor, Margaret Tucker, remained on the Board until the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs was established in 1968.³⁴ Douglas Nicholls resigned in April 1963 in protest at the Board's announcement in February that it would close

²⁸ Boas 1975:59, 65, 111 and 114.

²⁹ Boas 1975:112. Differences within the Board can be glimpsed when a paragraph in the 1966 Report (observing that Board efforts in East Gippsland to find employment for unemployed men 'have been frustrated by the Aborigines themselves . . .', 9) drew a dissent from a Board member, Dr C.M. Tatz, in the 1967 Report:4. (Annual Reports of the Aborigines Welfare Board appear in *VPP*; see Bibliography.)

³⁰ Boas 1975:112-13; Tatz 1982:43.

³¹ *Aborigines Act 1957*, s.3(1)(f).

³² The Hon. M.V. Porter, M.L.A., the Hon. Sir Albert Lind, M.L.A., and Mr A.J.L. James.

³³ Nicholls' biographer, Clark, writes that Nicholls 'was pleased that two Aborigines had been appointed to the new Welfare Board. It meant a slightly louder voice. But he would have liked to see a more democratic approach to the appointments. He believed that the Aborigines should have the right to vote for their own representatives'. Clark 1975:185.

³⁴ The Board had difficulty finding an Aboriginal replacement for Harold Blair: 1959 Report, 3. This was probably due to a reluctance on the part of more prominent Aboriginal people to serve on the predominantly white Board. Clark notes that Douglas Nicholls had met with 'coldness' from some Aboriginal people on his appointment to the Board in 1957: Clark 1975:224.

Lake Tyers Station and shift the residents to country towns. Attendance by the Aboriginal members — Nicholls, Tucker and Nicholls' successor, Cornelius Edwards — at the ten or eleven Board meetings held each year was most consistent. But as Tatz has pointed out, the minutes of Board meetings over a three year period indicate that the Aboriginal members 'uttered only a few dozen words . . . overawed by the proceedings and truly remote from Aboriginal Victoria'.³⁵ The Aboriginal members were, after all, nominated by the Governor in Council, and not elected or nominated by Aboriginal people.³⁶

The Welfare Board's executive role meant it was reluctant to delegate authority to its staff. Its chief staff member, the Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare, was not a member of the Board and had little power over the policy to be carried out by his staff. Members could and did issue instructions to the staff without reference to the Superintendent. It was the Board, rather than the Superintendent, which managed the budget and expenditures. Frequently the relationship between the Board and

³⁵ Tatz 1982:36. Access to the Board's Minutes through official channels is prohibited for thirty years; see Deverall 1978:109. However one Welfare Board member has deposited Board minutes at the A.I.A.S., Canberra. In her autobiography, Margaret Tucker (1977:191-2) refers briefly to her time on the Board.

³⁶ Board membership, 1957-1967, follows. The four successive chairmen were: the Hon. M.V. Porter, M.L.A. (Assistant Chief Secretary, later Minister for Local Government), 30 July 1957 to 20 August 1961; the Hon. E.R. Meagher, M.L.A. (Assistant Chief Secretary, later Minister of Transport), 21 August 1961 to 23 September 1964; the Hon. A.G. Rylah, M.L.A. (Chief Secretary), 24 September 1964 to 30 June 1965. (Mr Rylah did not attend meetings, his chairmanship being nominal); Mr J.H. Davey, 1 July 1965 to 31 December 1967. (Mr Davey was a member of the Board throughout its life, being a member nominated by the Minister of Housing from 30 July 1957 up until his appointment as chairman; he became chairman when pursuant to the *Aborigines (Amendment) Act* 1965, responsibility for the Board's work was transferred from the Chief Secretary to the Minister of Housing). Board members other than chairmen were: Mr A.J.L. James (Under Secretary), 30 July 1957 to 31 October 1961; replaced by Mr J.V. Dillon (Under Secretary, and chairman of meetings during Mr Rylah's chairmanship), 1 November 1961 to 30 June 1965; replaced by Mr A.G. Booth (nominated by the Chief Secretary), c. 1 July 1965 to 31 December 1967. Members successively nominated by the Minister of Education were: Mr J.G. Greening, 30 July 1957 to 22 July 1960; Mr J.R. Lyall, 23 July 1960 to 21 July 1963; Mr J.A. Cole, 22 July 1963 to 12 June 1964; Mr R.P. McLellan, c. 13 June 1964 to 30 June 1967; Mr T.L.W. Emerson, 1 July 1967 to 31 December 1967. Members successively nominated by the Minister of Health were: Dr J. Finney, 30 July 1957 to 16 February 1965; Dr R. Southby, 17 February 1965 to 31 December 1967. Following Mr J.H. Davey's appointment as chairman from 1 July 1965, Mr J.P. Gaskin became the member nominated by the Minister of Housing, until 31 December 1967. Pastor D.R. Nicholls ('being an aboriginal') from 30 July 1957 to 16 April 1963, replaced by Mr C. Edwards, 22 July 1963 to 31 December 1967. Mr H. Blair ('being an aboriginal') from 30 July 1957 to c. January 1959, replaced by Mrs M. Tucker, c. March 1959 to 31 December 1967. Dr D.F.F. Thomson ('an expert in anthropology') from 30 July 1957 to c. 30 July 1967, replaced by Dr C.M. Tatz ('an expert in sociology') from 1 July 1967 to 31 December 1967. The Hon. Sir Albert Lind, M.L.A., 30 July 1957 to 22 July 1960, replaced by Mr A. Holden ('chartered accountant of Morwell and leading figure in Apex') 22 March 1961 to 31 December 1967. Mr D.R. Howe ('businessman and employer of Aborigines at Mooropna'), 30 July 1957 to 31 December 1967. When the Board was increased to eleven, pursuant to the *Aborigines (Amendment) Act* 1965, Dr C.M. Tatz became a member, from 1 July 1965 to 1 July 1967, ('selected from a panel of three names submitted by the President of the Aborigines Advancement League'); replaced by Mr W.T. Onus, 1 July 1967 to 31 December 1967 (similarly selected).

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its staff³⁷ came close to being unworkable. In these circumstances, policy formulation tended to be haphazard, and decisions made at the monthly meetings were not infrequently reversed at subsequent meetings.³⁸

Annual Reports to Parliament in the period 1958-1967 record the Board's activities and the progress (or otherwise) of Aboriginal policy in Victoria. Rowley's comment is pertinent concerning the capacity of official reports 'to conceal rather than reveal. Ever since the days of British colonial administration a form of words and a phoney optimism had been used to keep the record respectable and the government happy'.³⁹

A tension is evident in the Reports. On the one hand the Board's pleas for greater funding and more staff were based on claims of success in such matters as the satisfactory housing of families previously resident in riverbank camps. On the other, the Board felt obliged to record what it saw as failings: limited success in encouraging Aboriginal students to stay at school; limited success in promoting the employment of Aboriginal adults in steady, year-round work; problems of rental arrears and so on.

Successive reports comment upon lack of staff, especially welfare officers. Full-time staff at the time of the first Report in 1958 consisted of the Superintendent,⁴⁰ the Secretary to the Board,⁴¹ one Welfare Officer and a part-time housing officer at Mooroopna. In addition there was the resident staff at Lake Tyers: a Manager, Sub-Manager, Matron and Assistant Matron. Even when finance was available, there were difficulties in attracting suitable applicants. Although the staff consisted of twenty-three full-time and five part-time members in 1967, turnover was a continuing problem. All positions went to non-Aboriginal people. Whether suitable Aboriginal appointees were available remains uncertain; it seems, however, that the Board made no special efforts to recruit Aboriginal staff.

A re-housing program was at the heart of the Welfare Board's assimilation plan. 'Assimilation', in the view of Board members, meant that Aborigines should remain 'physiologically visible' but otherwise become identical with ordinary white Australians.⁴² It was the Board's belief that if Aborigines could be transferred from sub-standard housing to satisfactory housing that was close to employment opportunities, then they would take up jobs, encourage their children to attend local schools, pay rent and so on. That the Board adopted this broad plan is entirely understandable. McLean had highlighted the appalling housing conditions that were the lot of Aborigines throughout Victoria. He had accepted the view that because indigenous languages and rituals had disappeared, Aborigines ought to be treated as if they were poor whites. For McLean, and for the Board which set out to implement his recommendations, the distinct histories of Victoria's Aboriginal groups were not

³⁷ Boas 1975:60; Tatz 1982:36.

³⁸ Boas 1975:12.

³⁹ Rowley 1973:190. The Board's Annual Reports appear in *VPP*; see Bibliography.

⁴⁰ Mr Philip Felton, formerly a Welfare Officer of the N.S.W. Aborigines Welfare Board (1958 Report:10). He remained Superintendent throughout the Board's existence.

⁴¹ Mr T.N. Garnet, formerly Secretary to the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines. He remained Secretary till 1 January 1964 when Mr J.P. Coutts replaced him (1964 Report:5).

⁴² Boas 1975:61.

known, nor were the relationships both within and between the groups understood. Whether such knowledge would have altered the Board's policies is, in any case, doubtful.

The Welfare Board tackled the improvement of the Aborigines' physical environment with enthusiasm. In April 1958, just eight months after its first meeting, its first housing project, the Rumbalara Housing Settlement, was opened on land outside Mooroopna. Ten specially built prefabricated concrete houses were made available to families previously occupying some of the thirty-four riverside shacks at Mooroopna. The staging houses were let at subsidised rents, and electricity was paid for through a slot-meter installed at each house. Initially, they seemed a success. A part-time officer of the Board collected rents and supervised the settlement; visitors were discouraged. One family was soon re-located in Mooroopna itself, and the Board decided to undertake a similar project at Robinvale. This second project, the Manatunga Housing Settlement, containing twelve pre-cast concrete houses, was opened in 1960.

In 1961, however, the Board decided that the Rumbalara and Manatunga Housing Settlements were 'too segregated' from white communities to fit in with the policy of assimilation. The notion of providing further staging houses was abandoned and the Board concentrated its efforts on providing housing in country towns, not in separate settlements outside them.⁴³

Each successive survey conducted by the Board emphasised that its provision of housing was falling far short of perceived needs. There were three reasons for this. First, the Board started its work believing the Aboriginal population to be considerably smaller than it proved to be. Second, it did not anticipate the growth in the Aboriginal population that occurred. Third, the resources — finance, staff and strategies — at the disposal of the Board were inadequate for the task it set itself.

In 1958, the Board considered that at least 150 houses were required to meet housing needs throughout the state. Only some thirty Aboriginal families had by then become Housing Commission tenants of their own accord. In 1959 in support of its plea to parliament for funding to provide at least some of the two hundred houses then considered necessary, the Board stated that in general, Aboriginal housing was the worst in the state. It also stated that because of the poor physical environments in which Aboriginal children were being raised, many were being placed in institutional care following intervention by police.

As winter approached in 1961, a Board survey revealed that 197 families were in need of housing; about fifty of these families were living in shacks or riverbank humpies. Despite the fact that the Board had provided twenty-nine houses in the past year, young couples establishing families meant there was an undiminished housing need. By 1964, seventy-three Aboriginal families were living in Board houses, and a further fifty-three in Housing Commission houses or flats but a further 205 families were still in need of housing. The Board's housing program was falling behind.

⁴³ While the Board had responsibility for the Lake Tyers Station with its thirty-three cottages, and for the Framlingham Reserve near Warrnambool with its thirteen cottages, the implementation of its assimilation policy towards the residents of these two settlements is a story beyond the scope of this paper. Concerning Lake Tyers, see Long 1970:17-23; for histories of Framlingham, see Barwick 1981 and Critchett 1980.

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In 1965, the *Aborigines (Amendment) Act* transferred from the Chief Secretary to the Minister of Housing responsibility for the Board's work.⁴⁴ The change acknowledged the importance of the Board's housing activities. The legislation also increased the Board's size from ten to eleven; the new member was to be appointed by the Governor in Council from a panel of three people put forward by the Aborigines Advancement League. This amendment, indicative of the League's growing influence, resulted in a political scientist — Dr Colin Tatz — joining the Board.⁴⁵

In its 1965 survey of housing needs, the Board estimated that there were 'over 3,000 part-Aborigines in Victoria' and that 220 houses were required. Few families remained in riverbank shacks and humpies but 'doubling-up' in sub-standard accommodation was still common.

The Board's last Report to Parliament noted that only twelve or so riverbank humpies remained in the state. Some were recently built. By 1967, the Board had provided 116 houses in various country areas and at least 145 families were tenants of the Housing Commission. Stated in statistical terms, the assimilation policy as expressed through its housing program may seem to have been successful. But whatever success the Board had in achieving 'assimilation' was gained at a very high price. Tatz has characterised the Board's policy in the following way:

[I]n Victoria, policy — if it had any meaning at all — was a matter of getting Aborigines into white-type houses, anywhere, anyhow, so that an aerial inspection could demonstrate the essential integration, assimilation, likeness, equality and colourlessness of galvanised iron roofs.⁴⁶

Decisions about who was to be housed, when, how and where were made by the Board. Victoria's Aboriginal population was administered in much the same way that a stern principal runs a school; decisions were made on high and imposed on those below. The language of the Board's Reports is often indicative of how it viewed its role. Aboriginal families were to be 'trained', 'rehabilitated', 'supervised', 'promoted' to new housing when they had 'proven themselves', and so on. While improved housing was desperately needed, the Board's approach assumed that if housing were provided, those who were formerly living in riverbank camps would quickly adapt to it and to white patterns of behaviour, and be eternally grateful.

The style and design of houses provided by the Board was typically suburban. They were almost invariably of three bedrooms, despite the large families the Board frequently reported, and despite the frequent inter-house visiting by relatives and friends that the Board so abhorred. Housing design was a powerful instrument of the Board's assimilation policy, and was not negotiable with those to be housed.

In its 1965 Report, the Board admitted that its system of defining housing priorities was not being communicated to those to be housed. The Board's selection of families

⁴⁴ Section 2. The Minister of Housing was then the Hon. L. Thompson, M.L.C., who was succeeded in that portfolio by the Hon. E.R. Meagher, M.L.A., on 1 July 1967.

⁴⁵ Tatz comments that he was appointed (even though not a League member) because he was considered 'more acceptable than the nominated League Chairman and League Secretary', 1982:36. For comment concerning his period as a Board member, see Tatz c. 1970:22.

⁴⁶ Tatz 1982:37.

to be re-housed must have seemed arbitrary to those waiting. They had no formal way of making their views known to the Board.

In 'pepper-potting', or scattering Aborigines from riverbank humpies into towns and suburbs wherever the Board was able to buy land and build houses,⁴⁷ the Board was acting either deliberately or unwittingly so as to threaten Aboriginal kinship ties and community living. Both Tatz and Boas suggest the attempt to sever ties between individuals and groups was deliberate.⁴⁸ No doubt Board members considered that if Aboriginal families could let go of the old ways, their chances of fitting in to white neighbourhoods would be enhanced.

Although the Board certainly knew about the appalling housing conditions, poor health, poor education standards and poor unemployment record of its charges when it began work, its members had little knowledge of the dynamics of this minority group, little appreciation of its values and of the ties of some of its members to particular localities. While the Board was able to see that traditional customs, languages and ceremonies had all but disappeared, it was not able to appreciate that new and coherent patterns of behaviour and belief had taken their place. What to the Board was senseless overcrowding was to Aborigines a matter of finding accommodation near seasonal work (without the fear of rebuff at white sources of accommodation) and a matter of maintaining ties with kin and friends.⁴⁹ In general it seems that the Board thought it was dealing with passive individuals whose behaviour could be moulded into acceptable white patterns of living. The thinking seems to have been: 'If we can house these people in white houses, they will quickly come to act like white people'.

Not surprisingly, despite improved housing for many Aboriginal families, the Board's activities proved counter-productive. Rental arrears, poor housekeeping standards, property and overcrowding were all matters that regularly came to its attention. All can be seen as the logical responses of people who had been forcefully displaced.⁵⁰ The force used was not physical; it was administrative, bureaucratic and paternal. Some families resisted it by refusing to be re-housed and staying put in sub-standard housing.⁵¹

The Board's administration in the areas of education, employment, health-care and welfare work was informed by the same kind of approach used in the housing area. Even though the policy of assimilation that the Board was implementing was re-defined in December 1966,⁵² the thrust of its activities continued to be to try and

⁴⁷ Tatz 1982:36.

⁴⁸ Tatz 1982:36; Boas 1975:107.

⁴⁹ See Barwick 1963 and Tatz c. 1970.

⁵⁰ Civil disobedience (such as non-payment of rent, damage to property and so on) as a means through which powerless minorities can assert some measure of independence is considered by Tatz 1980:11-12; see also Tatz 1975:67.

⁵¹ See the Hon. E.R. Meagher, Second Reading Speech, *Aboriginal Affairs Bill (No. 2)*, VPD, 534, 536.

⁵² See 1967 Report:12-24.

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shepherd Aboriginal people into white patterns of employment, education⁵³ and housing.

Within the Board, especially since the inclusion of Dr Tatz, one group was having doubts about its administrative structure, and about its methods of policy formulation and implementation. This group began to lobby for the Board's replacement by a Ministry and Department of Aboriginal Affairs. As public criticism was growing concerning the Board's administration (especially with regard to the Lake Tyers Station), the state government in October 1967 introduced legislation to establish a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. That a complete reassessment of Victorian Aboriginal affairs policy was urgently needed was indicated by the fact that the state opposition strongly supported the new legislation.⁵⁴

THE MINISTRY OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS 1968-1974

Although Victoria's *Aboriginal Affairs Act* 1967 came into operation on 1 January 1968, repealing the *Aborigines Act* 1958 and establishing the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, it was May 1968 before new initiatives began to emerge. It was then that the Ministry's Director, Mr M.R. Worthy, a social worker, took up his position. Because the new Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, E.R. Meagher, had additional portfolios (Housing and Forests), the new permanent head had a large degree of autonomy in formulating specific policies.⁵⁵ The broad policy objective embodied in the new legislation was the promotion of 'the social and economic advancement of aborigines in Victoria'.⁵⁶

The Minister's responsibilities, to be carried out by the Director, were extensive. They included taking appropriate measures to provide housing and housing loans; educational assistance; health and medical care; employment and training; rehabilitation and welfare programs and legal aid. The Minister was also required to coordinate the activities of voluntary organisations concerned with the welfare of Aborigines and to disseminate information to the public concerning Aborigines. His extensive powers indicated the government's determination to effect sweeping changes. The somewhat haphazard administration of the Aborigines Welfare Board was to be replaced by an efficient, powerful government machine.

Whereas the Welfare Board had always experienced funding difficulties, no such problem faced the Ministry. Funding came largely from the Commonwealth Office of Aboriginal Affairs within the Prime Minister's Department.⁵⁷ The Office was established to advise the Commonwealth government concerning the formulation of national policies towards Aborigines. While the main responsibility for formulating and implementing policies concerning Aborigines remained with the states, the Commonwealth now contributed financially to the various states' programs.

⁵³ For an account of the Board's view of its role in the field of education, see Felton 1969:4, 8-12.

⁵⁴ See the comments of the Hon. F. Wilkes on the *Aboriginal Affairs Bill (No. 2)*, VPD, 541-51.

⁵⁵ Boas 1975:115.

⁵⁶ *Aboriginal Affairs Act* 1967, s.4.

⁵⁷ The origins of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs are set out in Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1974:1-3. See also Dexter 1974:1, 6.

The *Aboriginal Affairs Act* 1967 also created an Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Council to advise the Minister. With the changes brought about by the *Aboriginal Affairs (Amendment) Act* 1968, membership of the Council was to consist of the Director as chairman, six people appointed by the Minister because of their expertise in areas such as health care, education, housing and social welfare, and six Aborigines who were to be elected on a regional basis. Although the Council met on a monthly basis, it came to be seen by Aborigines at least, as a 'powerless and paternal organ'.⁵⁸ In reality, power over the shape and implementation of Aboriginal affairs policy in Victoria was firmly in the hands of the Director.

In 1969 the Ministry's staff increased from thirty-four to seventy-four, including twenty-three Aborigines, thirteen of whom were employed as farm hands at the Lake Tyers Station. In 1970, when it was estimated that there were about five thousand Aborigines in Victoria, the Ministry's staff had increased to eighty-six. For the next four years, the number of staff remained at about this level. Generally about 30 per cent of the Ministry's staff were Aboriginal, most being employed pursuant to the *Aboriginal Affairs (Amendment) Act* 1968 which allowed it to employ Aboriginal staff without having to comply with the provisions of the *Public Service Act* 1968. At any one time, about ten of the Ministry's employees were social workers. In addition, there were visiting nurses, housekeeping advisers, liaison and field officers, rent collectors, research and publications officers and administrative staff. Not all the staff were based in Melbourne; some lived at Lake Tyers or at regional offices at Shepparton, Swan Hill, Robinvale, Ballarat, Bairnsdale and Morwell. This commitment of resources to the area of Aboriginal affairs was unparalleled; finance provided by the Victorian government each year was significantly augmented by Federal funds.

Compared with the Welfare Board, the Ministry had more accurate information concerning the size and geographic location of Victoria's Aboriginal population, and as a valuable legacy from the Welfare Board days, it had the Board's 1966 policy document. That document, in seeking to define the overriding policy of assimilation, emphasised that Aborigines had a right to retain their unique cultural identity if they so desired. The document also emphasised that Aboriginal views on matters affecting them should be given 'full consideration'.⁵⁹ Despite the creation late in the Board's life of a progressive and coherent policy document, the Ministry saw as its guiding light a concept of equality which was to be achieved by 'interventive technologies'.⁶⁰ Aborigines in Victoria were to become equal to other Victorians through a series of interventive programs which would eliminate Aboriginal deficiencies in education, employment, health and housing and as well, modify the views of the white community concerning Aborigines. The broad strategy of the Ministry has been described as a 'race relations' program.⁶¹ Whereas the Welfare Board's primary aim was quite specific — to improve the poor housing conditions of Aborigines, conditions that were highly visible and politically embarrassing to the government of the day —

⁵⁸ Boas 1975:172.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the 1966 Welfare Board's policy document, see Tatz 1982:37-43.

⁶⁰ Boas 1975:123, 165.

⁶¹ Boas 1975:163.

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the Ministry directed programs towards both the Aboriginal and white populations of Victoria. The programs, across a broad range of areas, were designed to produce 'boundary permeability'.⁶² Obstacles preventing Aborigines from participating fully in the life of the general community were to be removed. These obstacles were seen to include inadequate job and social skills, poor health standards, and the unfavourable images of Aborigines held by large sections of the white population.

While the Welfare Board wanted to avoid conflict and tension in implementing its housing program, the Ministry believed that conflict could be engineered and then managed to achieve desired ends.⁶³ The Ministry was supremely confident of the efficacy of its social work theories and strategies,⁶⁴ believing that Aborigines would ultimately benefit from the programs, even if in the short term the programs produced uncertainty or a sense of crisis in their recipients. In his first report, the newly appointed Director thanked Victoria's Aborigines for 'their willingness to attempt to understand the confusing changes which have again been thrust on them'. While Mr Worthy promised that in future 'consultation will be the key and the basis for all advancement in Aboriginal Affairs',⁶⁵ this in practice amounted to little more than attempts to ascertain the likelihood of acceptance for, or opposition to, already formulated plans. Despite the fact that the Ministry had a number of methods of consulting Aboriginal opinion,⁶⁶ it is difficult to believe that that opinion counted for much alongside the faith shown by officials in the scientific basis of their programs.

The Ministry's first concern was to abolish any practice that smacked of a paternalistic, 'hand-out' mentality. In its view, if it acted as a buffer between Aborigines and the usual sanctions applied by authorities within the community for acts such as damage to property or omissions such as non-payment of rent, Aborigines would receive confirmation of their inferior status. This strand in the Ministry's thinking was at odds with its determination to make up the deficit for Aboriginal people in terms of health standards, education levels, job skills and so on. On the one hand, the Ministry saw no justification for behaviour which treated Aborigines 'differently'. On the other, the whole *raison d'être* of the Ministry was to promote 'the social and economic advancement' of the state's Aborigines by providing special schemes for Aborigines. It seems the Ministry never clearly resolved this dilemma. In the name of promoting 'equality', it scrapped some Welfare Board schemes and

⁶² Boas 1975:167.

⁶³ See 1970 Report:7; and Boas 1975:21.

⁶⁴ The Director commented on the Ministry 'social engineering' program at Lake Tyers; see Worthy 1973. The plan for this Station was indicative of the Ministry's view of its role throughout Victoria. Reference to the 'social engineering' principles guiding the Ministry appeared in its Reports: 1972 Report:7-8; 1974 Report:5. And see Boas 1972:21, 25; but for an expression of doubt about the state of knowledge concerning planned social change see Boas 1975:179.

⁶⁵ 1968 Report:2.

⁶⁶ An annual meeting with 'a limited representation of Aboriginal people'; annual 'consultations' in each of the State's seven regions; and monthly meetings of the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Council: Boas 1975:167.

launched a wide variety of programs of its own in the fields of education, housing, employment and training, and public relations.

These activities took place during a time of rapid social change in Australia. American and Australian involvement in the Vietnam war was provoking a widespread reassessment of national goals and values. Government policies towards Aborigines made up just one aspect of life in Australia that was widely being subjected to scrutiny. Not only were people taking an increased interest in Aboriginal affairs, they were actively involved in trying to help. In 1969, there were thirty-five voluntary organisations in Victoria working in the field of Aboriginal affairs, seventeen of them in Melbourne.⁶⁷ It was the Ministry's task to coordinate the activities of these various groups, as well as the occasional work done by service clubs, church groups and schools. The task was a formidable one.

The Ministry saw improved educational standards as central to creating greater opportunities for Aborigines and as the key to promoting increased acceptance of them. To encourage secondary students to stay at school and to assist their families financially, it extended a scheme commenced by the Board under which students were paid an annual clothing and book allowance. In 1969, the system of giving clothing vouchers to those eligible was replaced by a system of direct cash payments. The indignities of the Board's paternalistic approach were being removed. While enrolments in secondary schools continually increased during the Ministry's existence,⁶⁸ there was a continuing concern that Aboriginal students were seriously under-represented in the upper forms and in tertiary education institutions. The Ministry supported an adult education scheme at Swan Hill and it initiated a tutorial scheme which involved undergraduate students at tertiary institutions visiting Aboriginal students in their homes to offer assistance and advice concerning study.

Financial assistance was provided for the needy parents of primary students, and under one scheme, payments (known as 'scholarships'), were granted to children and parents on the basis of satisfactory attendance and achievement at primary schools by the children. A pre-school scheme was introduced in 1972 and a year later, a mobile pre-school (staffed by two kindergarten teachers and two Aboriginal assistants) began operating in East Gippsland.

The Ministry continued to acquire and rent houses, announcing that it would be 'several years before every Aboriginal family is able to obtain adequate conventional housing'.⁶⁹ In 1969 it introduced grants of \$1,500 to assist with the purchase of properties. After screening applicants, social workers recommended the payment of some twenty to thirty grants each year. Meanwhile the Rumbalara and Manatunga 'transition settlements' were dismantled.

Numerous programs were developed as part of a wider plan of 'social engineering': training and employment schemes and public relations activities. The Ministry's faith in the scientific basis of its programs was unwavering:

⁶⁷ 1969 Report:17.

⁶⁸ In 1967, 243 Aboriginal students were enrolled in secondary schools; by 1974, the number was 640: 1974 Report:10.

⁶⁹ 1969 Report:11.

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The Ministry believes that social engineering principles are as fundamental as any relating to the physical sciences. The programs which have been developed and maintained in this State, based on these principles, are a clear demonstration of the validity of this claim.⁷⁰

But the 1974 annual report revealed that the programs, and those who implemented them, were not always appreciated:

The foundations for the development of initiatives to remove the need for welfare have been laid using the social engineering skills of a dedicated staff who, on many occasions, have been misunderstood by the people whom they have served.⁷¹

The ultimate goal was 'a truly united community with all citizens sharing equal responsibility and opportunity'.⁷² This vision meant Ministry efforts were aimed at encouraging Aboriginal people to use the health, welfare and legal aid facilities already supplied by other government departments or employment, housing or welfare agencies. These services were not to be re-shaped to meet Aboriginal needs; the people were to be prepared to cope with the services. If the Ministry were successful, it thought it could work itself out of a job in twenty years. In the early 1970s, separate Aboriginal health and legal aid services were being discussed, much to the chagrin of the Ministry. The idea that Aborigines should 'run their own affairs' was anathema to those who hoped that the affairs of Aborigines would soon merge with those of the rest of the population.⁷³

Yet Aboriginal people did want to run what they saw as their own affairs. The Ministry was unprepared for opposition to its policies and administration, and opposition there most certainly was. The principles of social engineering were being implemented at a time when Aboriginal groups and individuals were becoming politically active and when the numbers of their white supporters were growing. A keener sense of identity meant Aborigines were moving away from the integration plan guiding the Ministry. The 1973 report noted that Aboriginal people in Melbourne were planning their own health service, which was quite contrary to Ministry policy. Matters were beginning to get beyond its control and the experience was not pleasant; opposition increased.

The popular fashion in Aboriginal affairs this year [1973] is to "knock" government departments irrespective of whether it is action or inaction which is under scrutiny. The result is always the same — we are damned if we do and damned if we don't . . . If we employ Aborigines they are accused for being "stooges"; if we don't employ them we are accused of denying them employment opportunities . . . If we promote Aboriginal organisations we are told we have supported the "wrong ones"; if we neglect to promote Aboriginal organisations we are told we are "empire building" for white administrators . . . It is interesting to note that on all occasions there are Aborigines and members of the public who take both sides of every issue.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ 1974 Report:5.

⁷¹ 1974 Report:6.

⁷² 1971 Report:2.

⁷³ 1972 Report:7-8; and see Boas 1972:26-7.

⁷⁴ 1973 Report:4-5.

The widening gap between the Ministry and those it was meant to serve is evident in the following report of two meetings:

In addition to the consultation between Ministry officers and Aboriginal people during normal activities, two formal meetings were held in the Goulburn Valley and East Gippsland areas. It was clearly evident from the tension which was created during the meetings that communication between Government authorities and the people must increase. Heated discussion, denials and counter-denials revealed a serious credibility gap.⁷⁵

For an increasing number of Aboriginal people, the Ministry was becoming 'the enemy'. It was a bureaucratic government department staffed principally by white people. The Ministry, rather than Aboriginal people, decided how 'Aboriginal money' (money allocated for spending on Aboriginal affairs) was to be spent. Inevitably it became the first target for Aboriginal groups and individuals exercising new-found political power, principally because its policies gave Ministry officials considerable power over the lives of Aboriginal people. They decided which Aboriginal families would be allocated housing loans and Ministry rental accommodation;⁷⁶ which tenants would be evicted; which subsidised rents would be increased to commercial levels; which potential employees would receive training; which non-Aboriginal voluntary organisations would receive Ministry assistance; which Aboriginal organisations would receive Ministry funding; and so on. The Ministry set the priorities. It initiated some schemes, and rejected others, all in the name of 'social engineering', a program designed to merge Aboriginal people with the broader population. It became a focus around which Aboriginal groups coalesced because of their opposition to the Ministry's administration. The Ministry was indeed fostering political activity, but not the type it favoured.

Opposition meant that the position of its Director, Mr M.R. Worthy, became untenable. During debate in October 1974 on the *Aboriginal Affairs (Transfer of Functions) Bill* (the proposed legislation to pass administration of Aboriginal affairs in Victoria to the Commonwealth), the former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Meagher, paid tribute to Mr Worthy, '... one of the greatest friends of the Aboriginal people in Australia'.⁷⁷ The compliment brought a swift response from Victorian Aboriginal organisations, and from the Opposition spokesman on Aboriginal affairs, Mr Barry Jones. After a meeting convened on 27 October 1974 by the Aborigines Advancement League, representatives of eleven Aboriginal organisations repudiated

⁷⁵ 1974 Report:17.

⁷⁶ Such decisions may have been based on considerations other than those relating to housing needs: 'There is every reason to believe that this weapon [discrimination between Aboriginal families] has been used in the past to persuade members of the Aboriginal community, who might be vocal in their criticisms, to modify them or to be silent altogether, rather than lose what is in many cases a substantial concession — the opportunity of renting a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs home ... People who do the right thing by the Ministry, and do not kick over the traces or object to what the Ministry does will have a better chance of obtaining a Ministry house ...'. Mr B.J. Evans, (Country Party), *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 2416.

⁷⁷ *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 318, 910-911. (The Hon. V.O. Dickie replaced Mr Meagher as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on 23 August 1972. Mr Dickie remained Minister till 31 December 1974).

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the statement, saying that 'Mr Worthy had never been a friend of the Victorian Aborigines. He is a public servant implementing the policies of his State Government and not the wishes of the Victorian Aboriginal people'.⁷⁸ Mr Jones observed that 'those who approve of Mr Worthy — Ministers, journalists and public servants — have one thing in common; they are all white'.⁷⁹

In April 1973 negotiations began between the Victorian and federal governments concerning the transfer to the Commonwealth of responsibility for Aboriginal affairs, which was effected by the Commonwealth *Aboriginal Affairs (Arrangements with the States) Act* 1973 and the Victorian *Aboriginal Affairs (Transfer of Functions) Act* 1974. The Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs ceased to exist on 31 December 1974; the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, through its new Victorian Regional Office, took over most of its responsibilities the next day.

While supporting the Victorian legislation in principle, the state Opposition reviewed the Ministry's period of stewardship and concluded that its underlying philosophy had been one of assimilation, a view with which the former Minister, E.R. Meagher, agreed.⁸⁰ Mr Worthy did not take up the position the state government expected he would occupy: first Director of the Victorian Office of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs.⁸¹ Probably because of the strength of the opposition to his style of administration, especially from Aboriginal organisations, he took up instead a Department of Aboriginal Affairs post in Brisbane.⁸²

CONCLUSION

If Aboriginal affairs from 1957 to 1974 can be characterised by a desire to merge Aborigines with the broader population, that policy can be judged to have had limited

⁷⁸ The organisations issuing the statement were the Aborigines Advancement League, the National Aboriginal Congress — Areas 1 and 3, the Aboriginal and Island Women's Association, the United Council of Aboriginal Women, the Nindethana Theatre Company, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, the Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd, the Goulburn and Murray Valley Aboriginal Co-operative Ltd. (Speech of Mr Jones, *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 1840.)

⁷⁹ *VPD* Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 1839. Comments concerning Mr Worthy continued to pepper debate on the *Aboriginal Affairs (Transfer of Functions) Bill*. The Minister tabled letters of support for Mr Worthy from Sir Douglas Nicholls and Mr Stewart Murray, Director of the Aborigines Advancement League: *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 2334. It was subsequently pointed out by Mr Jones that Sir Douglas Nicholls was then working 'within the framework of the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs' (as a consultant to the Director) and that Mr Murray had recently accepted an appointment to the Ministry: *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 2334. Tributes to Mr Worthy came from the Hon T.W. Mitchell (Country Party) *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 1851; the Hon. Mrs D.A. Goble (Liberal Party), *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 2424.

⁸⁰ *VPD*, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 2331.

⁸¹ The State Government's expectation is made clear when one considers Clause 6 of the draft arrangement between the Commonwealth and State Governments: the Director of the Ministry was to be 'entitled to elect to be appointed . . . to the office of Director [of the new Department of Aboriginal Affairs Victorian Regional Office]'. *VPD*, Mr B.O. Jones, Session 1974-76, Vol. 319, 1837.

⁸² Mr Worthy was later to return to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Office in Melbourne. One view of Mr Worthy's period of administration in Aboriginal Affairs is contained in 'Worthy of Contempt!' in *Mureena: The Aboriginal Student Newspaper* 3(3) August 1978, 3.

success. By the end of the period the continued sense of identity among Victoria's Aborigines was finding expression in the creation of Aboriginal organisations such as health and legal services. To the officials who had hoped that Aborigines would make use of existing community services, such developments were anathema. With funding made available as a result of new Commonwealth policy aims, Victorian Aborigines could at last achieve ambitions long frustrated by policies formulated by white officials in what were thought to be the best interests of Aborigines.

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