

ABORIGINES AND THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS

As a result of a complaint by a "Herald" correspondent, the chairman of the Aborigines' Welfare Board, Mr. Kingsmill, has called for a full report on the living conditions of aborigines near Coff's Harbour. Complaints of this kind crop up at regular intervals. They are customarily directed at bush or "river-bank" "humpies." The significance of our correspondent's criticism is that it applies to almost new houses—they were finished only three years ago—and to aboriginal occupants who were considered, by the board's well-informed and experienced officers, to meet the standards necessary for them to be assimilated without fuss into the white community.

If the correspondent is correct, a serious situation has indeed been disclosed, and one which suggests that the board's policy of providing off-station housing is not working out as well as had been hoped. At this stage, however, the complaints should be treated with extreme reserve. They contain some glaring inaccuracies. It is, to begin with, untrue that the aborigines concerned were rounded up by the board, in conjunction with the local shire council, and "herded" into a row of "disgusting huts." There were no huts, as Mr Kingsmill mildly points out; but there were simple, inexpensive houses which would be welcome to many a slum-dweller in Sydney.

They were unquestionably a great improvement on any shanty settlement, about which our correspondent would doubtless be the first to complain. She has painted a gloomy picture of the land which is far from "forbidding," though it is certainly isolated. And that, of course, is the real point. The land was the best available to the

board, which badly wanted to buy building blocks in the town of Coff's Harbour itself. It failed to do so because the local council would not co-operate. There could hardly be a better illustration of the practical difficulties which confront the official policy of merging aborigines with the white community.

The ideal procedure would have been to build the houses on vacant land in the town, and to keep them well separated from each other by white people's homes. This has been done in a number of towns—Casino is one example—with striking success. But the practical co-operation of the white community is essential. In Coff's Harbour it was not forthcoming, and the board had therefore to do the best it could—with misgivings, because it was obviously a second-best. Its officers were anxiously aware of the disadvantages. No doubt the aborigines were, too. They were certainly not compelled to occupy the houses, though they were rightly encouraged to do so because it would take them away from their unhygienic bush shanties.

Now we have allegations which imply that these aborigines have, in spite of past experience, by no means progressed beyond the need for the board's assistance, and the board's supervision. Some of the claims, as Mr Kingsmill says, may cast an unwarranted slur on decent people. The result of the board's inquiry will be awaited with interest. It is just as well, though, that

attention should be focused on these houses. Their mere existence in that locality shows that the board, in the past, has not had the public support which it may reasonably expect; and that its policy, though enlightened and pursued with both vigour and intelligence, is not as clearly understood as it should be.