

Aboriginal control

SOONER OR LATER, the Aboriginal cause in Australia must have a national focus of distinctively Aboriginal identity. Without it, many of the demands that the Aboriginal people be heeded and consulted where their own interests are concerned cannot hope to have much meaning.

Creation of an all-black organisation to provide this focus is bound, nevertheless, to cause misgivings and resentments, inside the movement for Aboriginal advancement as well as outside, where the suggestion of anything remotely resembling "black power" tends to be equated, quite unreasonably, with violence and revolution.

The internal problem showed itself strikingly at the weekend conference of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. The tied — and therefore negative — vote on the proposal for an all-black executive reflected a depth of feeling on both sides that could react seriously against the organisation's future effectiveness.

There were two main arguments brought out against the proposal: it was racist because it was discriminatory against white skins and it would risk the loss of much-needed advice, experience and expertise of white supporters.

There is no doubting the first proposition. But whether the type of discrimination involved should be condemned out of hand is by no means self-evident. For a long transitional period one of the principal means of Aboriginal advancement, particularly where legislation is concerned, will be calculated discrimination in favor of the Aboriginal. The goal is equality but the method is none the less discriminatory.

If there is a way around this contradiction in terms nobody has found it yet. Moreover, the aspirations of the Aboriginal people cannot be over-generalised to fit broad statements of principle. The Wave Hill dispute, for one, sought discriminatory action in favor of Aborigines to create an all-black community that would have been branded apartheid if white authority had sought to impose it.

The move for an all-black executive on the advancement council is not the same sort of separatism but there is an important point of similarity: the stress on Aboriginal Australians deciding for themselves what is in their best interests and accepting responsibility for their decisions.

Self-determination to the greatest practicable extent is what activists, black and white alike, have been arguing for years. It will be a curious reflection on their past arguments if white support, in particular, is withdrawn because black responsibility comes of age. But, in any event, the aptitudes of white supporters will not stop the trend if a sufficient number of Aboriginal leaders feels the time for leadership in their own affairs is now. And the conference last weekend suggests there are sufficient numbers.