

FACTS TO STIR A LORDLY CONSCIENCE

If (as Lord Vestey has said) he can see no reason to feel guilty about Vestey's treatment of the Aborigines, then Lord Vestey has either a lack of knowledge or a lack of conscience.

For example, this is what Mr. Bill Jeffrey (former Welfare Officer in the Northern Territory) wrote about conditions on Vestey's Wave Hill station around 1967.

"They lived in huts like dog kennels that scorched in the summer and froze in the winter. Amenities, even of the crudest kind, were non-existent. Medical care was not for the Aborigines, nor were toilets, schooling, decent food or average wages.

"Their return for toiling from daylight to dark was cruelty and indignity."

As for Aborigines' wage rates, it was Vestey's pastoral superintendent, Mr. P. A. Morris, who was principal witness for the Cattle Producers Council in opposition to the 1966 arbitration case for an end to wage discrimination against Aborigines.

These facts about Vestey's record as employers of Aboriginal labor are recalled by Mr. Peter d'Abbs in his booklet "The Vestey Story", recently published by the Victorian branch of the Meatworkers' Union and reviewed in the August 19 issue of *Tribune*.

Vestey's record makes it all the more damning that the Federal Government contin-



LORD VESTEY

ues to resist the Gurindjis' demand for restoration to them of 500 square miles of the 6158 square miles of Wave Hill station now held by Vestey's on a lease from the Government.

Vestey's, like other employers of Aboriginal stockmen, had up till 1957 been able to get away with paying them only five shillings a week, plus what passed for "keep."

From that, the rate of cash pay had been raised first to \$4.85 and then (including a "clothing allowance") to \$6.35: less than one fifth of the minimum wage to a white stockman.

The opposition to the 1966 claim for an end to wage discrimination was based largely on an argument that Aborigines were not as efficient or productive as white workers.

Aborigines, in fact, rate among the world's best stockmen.

But irrespective of that, Dr. Colin Tatz, in a study published in 1966, pointed effectively to the relationship between the conditions of work and life imposed on Aborigines and the way they worked. He wrote:

"The relationship between health and employment and training can be explained this way: people cannot achieve their maximum productive capacity when they are suffering from chronic anaemia, toxæmia, induced by intestinal parasites, trachoma, tuberculosis, venereal disease, malnutrition, chronic respiratory infection, and the like. They cannot produce effectively for production in these circumstances.

"It is also doubtful whether people who do not enjoy social well-being — because of prejudice, discrimination, historical legacies of brutality and the resultant antipathies, sullenness and resentment — can have the same goals, desires and motivations as whites or, rather as healthy Australians.

"The people who have

shorter life expectancy, who accept lowered standards of health as normal and the inevitability of infant deaths, can hardly perform, or be expected to perform, or want to perform, in the same way as healthy people."

It is against this background that Mr. d'Abbs in his booklet, concludes his section on "Vestey's and Aborigines" by saying:

"Responsibility for the condition of Aborigines in Australia certainly doesn't rest solely with Vestey's. All those Governments, both Liberal and Labor, which have either ignored the situation or actually worsened it, the successive generations which elected these governments, including our own, which seems to think that voting Yes in a referendum is all that's needed to rectify the situation, have contributed.

"But as long as so much power remains concentrated in one overseas-based family, it is difficult to foresee the emergence of either humane and just policy toward the Aborigines or a policy for the development of Northern Australia which is based on Australia's real interests."

Hence the development of rising pressures on both Vestey's and the Government by the campaign now being conducted for a boycott of Vestey's goods (most of them sold under the name of its Angliss subsidiary) and other measures to force satisfaction of the Gurindjis' modest claim for a little of the land that is so rightly theirs.