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The end of the Aboriginal assimilation ideal; Billy Wentworth Peter Howson

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Australia took its first tentative steps away from the policy of Aboriginal assimilation in 1971, when Cabinet confronted the emerging issue of Aboriginal land rights, the Cabinet archives for 1971 reveal.

Cabinet made no formal decision to recognise native land rights, but the record of 1971 shows it split over the issue and decided that the best way forward was to rethink and restate the policy.

Prime Minister John Gorton, who lost the prime ministership on March 10, had increased Commonwealth spending on health, education and housing for Aborigines.

Despite spending more to improve Aboriginal living conditions, Gorton did not want to change the policy of Aboriginal assimilation.

As the Cabinet documents make clear, however, a new direction had to wait until Billy McMahon became Prime Minister on March 10. Cabinet's rethink of its policy was not wholly humanitarian. Political considerations were also uppermost.

Cabinet was clearly concerned at the growing public sympathy for land rights, and the sympathetic media coverage the issue was receiving.

Beyond trying to provide genuine justice to blacks, successive Coalition prime ministers were worried about the political leverage the issue might give the Opposition.

Cabinet wanted to reduce the perceived communist and union influence on the Aboriginal land-rights movement.

In an April 29 Cabinet submission, these mixed motives were clear.

Cabinet was told that one aim in a change of Aboriginal policy was to 'deprive the left-wing unions of any justification for disruptive action', while another was to keep the initiative on land rights in government hands.

The real contribution Gorton made was to appoint William Wentworth Minister in charge of Aboriginal Affairs. He was to have the most lasting influence right into the Cabinet debates of 1971 when Peter Howson took over the portfolio.

Wentworth had already in 1967 proposed a new measure to provide the Gurindji people of the Northern Territory with land at Wattie Creek. At the time, the measure was strongly opposed by the Country Party's Peter Nixon, and even by Gorton himself.

Rejecting separate land rights for blacks was the litmus test for the assimilation policy.

The prime argument for land rights was that the land had once been occupied by black people. They had been dispossessed and were in need of justice.

Assimilationists regarded things a little differently. They saw any special treatment of Aborigines on the basis of race as a way of creating racial divisions in Australian society.

When Ralph Hunt, McMahon's Interior Minister, objected to Wentworth's and then Howson's plans to fund land transfers to Aborigines, he told Cabinet the proposal was discriminatory and separatist and would encourage part-Aborigines to identify themselves as Aborigines to gain economic advantage.

'At least in the Northern Territory, where one-third of the people are Aborigines, new forms of assistance to Aborigines which are not available to white Australians similarly placed will increasingly lead to resentment and bitterness,' Hunt's August 1971 submission said.

Any assistance should be based on need alone, otherwise blacks would be set against whites.

In the first couple of months of the McMahon government Cabinet was forced to confront the issue, despite the strong opposition of people like the Country Party's Hunt.

In a submission dated March 19, Wentworth asked Cabinet to use the powers of the Commonwealth to override the remaining discriminatory legislation against Aborigines in Queensland and Western Australia.

This had been an election promise of Gorton's in 1969.

The planned legislation would, Wentworth said, 'prevent states discriminating against Aborigines by restricting their freedom of movement and control over their own property, or by applying wage discrimination against them'.

On April 23, McMahon took the next step away from assimilationist ideas.

In a speech to the Conference of Aboriginal Ministers, he indicated that Australia would help Aborigines develop their own culture and traditional ways of life, and he called for the creation of a ministerial committee to oversee Aboriginal affairs.

The matter did not stop there. A new obstacle arose.

On April 27, the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory ruled that the Yirrkala people of the Gove Peninsula had no rights to their traditional land.

The Yirrkala people of the peninsula were in dispute with the Nabalco Company over a bauxite mine, and several unions had come to their defence, a fact that Cabinet did not fail to notice.

As one Cabinet submission, dated April 29, makes clear, the implication of the court's ruling in the eyes of the government was that no Aborigines had rights to their traditional land.

Handed down just four days after McMahon, influenced by his adviser, H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, had indicated a change in government policy, the court's decision flew in the face of everything Wentworth and Coombs were fighting for.

The reaction was swift.

Another Cabinet submission from Wentworth summarised the Government's concerns and made a series of groundbreaking recommendations that were later endorsed by Howson, the Minister of the Environment, Aboriginal Affairs and the Arts.

These included Commonwealth protection of Aboriginal land, its use for ceremonial and religious purposes, preference for Aborigines for mineral exploration, compensation for mining rights, and a land fund worth \$2 million over 20 years.

The Cabinet documents, released by the National Archives of Australia, show that by the middle of 1971 the land-rights proposals had led to a Cabinet split.

Hunt objected to the change of policy and warned that already Australia had shifted in parts on its assimilation policy.

In two lengthy Cabinet submissions, Hunt outlined his objections, especially to the land fund proposed by Hewson.

The issue of land rights divided Cabinet enough for one Cabinet minute dated July 30 to say the two sides were irreconcilable.

By August 3, Cabinet had called for a restatement of Aboriginal policy in the light of the debate during the year.