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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CREEK

THE Sydney University students who are at present "freedom riding" round the country towns of New South Wales have already achieved their main purpose: they have made everyone think and talk about the way we treat our Aborigines and half-castes—not least the white people who live there with them. Naturally their visit has not been popular. No one likes outsiders—particularly young outsiders—telling you how to run your affairs. The people of Moree and Walgett are especially angry because they know in their hearts that what the students say is true. There is colour prejudice in these towns and in practice a rough and ready kind of apartheid is the rule.

This should not be exaggerated. The situation in our country towns is very different from that, say, in Alabama or Mississippi. There is little hatred of the Aborigines and no downright cruelty—no Aboriginal is lynched or beaten. Racial prejudice shows itself rather in a general contempt and disinterest, a damning apathy which is content to regard the Aborigines as an incurable disease which should be kept out of sight as far as possible. They are part of the landscape but not quite part of the community, human beings but not citizens. The law says that they must be allowed to drink in pubs and that their children must be educated in the same schools. Custom allows them to play sport with and against whites, but that is about the limit. There is no friendship, no sympathy and precious little interest.

In all the reports on the freedom riders and in the discussion on "Four Corners" on Saturday between Mr. Perkins, the courageous leader of the students (himself a part-Aboriginal) and the mayor of Walgett, one argument is always brought up by the whites. It is not a matter of colour but of hygiene—the Aborigines are dirty. In Moree, for instance, that is the reason given why most Aboriginal children have so far been banned from the swimming baths. And of course it is often true. Anyone who has seen the appalling shanty towns in which most of these Aborigines and half-castes live—without sanitation, electricity and often without water—will hardly be surprised. But it never seems to occur to the townspeople that they have any responsibility for these conditions.

Symbols of equality—like equal access to clubs and swimming baths—are important. But in the long run it is far more important to see that the Aborigines in our country towns are properly housed—preferably within the town and not on some settlement the other side of the creek—and trained to use their houses properly and keep them clean. Obviously this throws a great burden on the local councils and they deserve help from the Aborigines Welfare Board and the State Government. But the white people in towns like Moree and Walgett must surely accept some responsibility for the Aborigines in their community and should not put up with the present degrading squalor just because it has existed as long as the oldest inhabitant can remember.

Might one suggest that the students at Sydney and other universities should not be content with this first gesture, successful though it has been, but might form teams which would offer to go and work during the vacation at rehousing the Aborigines and cleaning up the squalid camps in which they live? Girls could help the women look after their houses and teach them how to cook and look after their children. In the long run this might be more valuable—and more acceptable to the white Australians—than a single act of protest.