

ABORIGINE POLICY QUESTIONED

The present policy of aboriginal assimilation, accepted by all Australian governments, was questioned by some-aboriginal, anthropological and missionary opinion, Dr. I. A. H. Turner told ANZAAS delegates yesterday.

Dr. Turner, who is lecturer in history at the University of Adelaide, was addressing the history section of ANZAAS on the Framework for a History of White-Aboriginal Relations.

He said the object of the policy, which was adopted in 1939, was to equip all aborigines for full citizenship rights.

Aborigines were expected to attain eventually the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.

Separate

Sociological and demographic studies, however, suggested that aborigines were not at present assimilating into the general community, and desired some separate community existence of their own.

Anthropologists and other informed critics of present policies suggested that these policies involved over much paternalism, and that aborigines should be encouraged to form self-acting communities of their own, which would achieve some visible economic integration with the general community.

"Some aboriginal spokesmen indicate resentment at what seems to be the threatened extinction of the cultural and social identity of their people," Dr. Turner said.

He said a similar concern was expressed recently by the National Missionary Council in a statement declaring, "The assimilation of aborigines into the life of the community must be subject to their consent."

Enlightenment

"The principle must be recognised that the existence of distinctively Aboriginal groups, at the wish of the aborigines themselves, need not be detrimental to national well being."

Reviewing the changing policy of white men towards the aborigines since the "European invasion" of Australia, Dr. Turner said it had passed through four phases. White men came to Aus-

tralia with two contradictory "enlightenment" assumptions concerning the aborigines: A "happy savage" view of aboriginal life, and a belief that the aborigine would quickly realise the superiority of European culture and "attach" himself to it.

Hopes of attachment soon foundered on the reality of a white-aboriginal conflict on the edges of settlement, and a policy of pacification was instituted.

Christian and humanitarian pressure sought to check this by civilising the aborigines and adapting them to a settled existence, but these efforts failed when they ran up against aboriginal intransigence and white opposition.

It was not until the aboriginal population had declined to the point where it was no longer a serious threat to white settlement that serious policies of protection were instituted.

These generally took the line of segregation of the remaining aborigines, in the expectation that they would soon die out. Segregation was replaced by a policy of assimilation in 1939.

"Today, assimilation at least has the merit of conforming more closely to the reality of a largely de-tribalised aboriginal remnant," Dr. Turner said.

"Whether this is reality for aboriginal as well as for white Australians remains to be established."

Canberra Times
23rd January 1964