

# 'Assimilation' Something Of A Dirty Word

By A STAFF CORRESPONDENT

THE official policy of the Commonwealth Government and of all the State Governments towards the aborigines is still assimilation. But splits have appeared in the official facade of late, and among those who work for aborigines independently of governments, "assimilation" is something of a dirty word.

It implies, as they are quick to point out, that the aboriginal is inferior to the white man and is worthless until he takes up the white man's ways. And it assumes that two peoples of two different cultures can never live amicably together unless one is absorbed in the other.

That, ultimately, is what assimilation means, the complete absorption of the aboriginal race by the white community; and nowhere is this clearer than in the official statement of policy drawn up by the latest conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers concerned with aborigines at Darwin last year.

"The policy of assimilation means that all aborigines and part-aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and 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."

The policy of absorption could hardly be spelt out any more clearly. Not only are the aborigines to have the same rights as white Australians, but they are expected to behave, think and feel like

them as well. The aim, as it was in the ruthless days of exploitation, is that eventually the aborigines as a race will disappear.

Quite apart from whether this is desirable, the question arises: is it practical? Can 100,000 aborigines, rapidly increasing in numbers and most of them living lives separated by a vast gulf from the white Australian way of life, ever be absorbed into the community?

## GROWING BODY

There is a growing body of expert opinion which answers, quite simply and brutally, "no." In the academic world there are such people as the Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University, Professor W. R. Geddes, an expert on Maoris and the similar problem they present in New Zealand, who believes that if Australians really do want to assimilate the aborigines they are going the wrong way about it anyhow.

On the administrative and educational side there are such people as Mr Charles Rowley, former principal of the School of Pacific Administration and now engaged in a special three-year study project of aborigines, and Mr A. T. Duncan, the first full-time tutor for adult aborigines appointed in Australia,

who are both outspokenly critical of the present policy. And the many aboriginal progress organisations and co-operative movements are united in their opposition to assimilation.

This is not always obvious to the general public, which for years has been led to believe that once the aborigines have been assimilated out of existence everything will be rosy. Even the newly formed Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, a welfare organisation which recently held an appeal in Sydney to help aborigines, talked of "assimilation" in its publicity.

The wariness is understandable: assimilation is such a tremendous advance on the old doctrine of "protection" that its critics are loth to attack it too vehemently. Australian aboriginal policy switched to assimilation about the start of the second world war, largely due to the pioneer work of such men as Professor A. P. Elkin.

It had to overcome bitter opposition at first from a community which had largely hidden aborigines out of sight on reserves (until 1939 in N.S.W. anyone of apparently aboriginal blood could be forced to live on a reserve under strict white control, and black children were not allowed to attend white schools), but over the years

it has won a certain measure of acceptance. The various State departments have, in theory at least, tried to prepare aborigines for assimilation and a few have passed into the white community.

But in general the policy has worked no better than it did in the United States, which abandoned the attempt to assimilate its Indian population in 1939, and in New Zealand, which abandoned it as its Maori policy even earlier. (America abandoned assimilation as a failure in the very year that Australia took it up.)

"Aborigines are a proud people. They don't want to lose their identity, become just like us," Mr Duncan said last week. A teacher for many years in country aboriginal schools such as Hillston, he has spent his life working among aborigines in all parts of the country. "We're kidding ourselves if we think we can change them, make them adopt our ways. For instance, aborigines have a very strong community feeling; they share everything, so that if any member of the group earns money it immediately disappears into everybody else's pockets."

"They don't accept the individualism of white people, and they don't understand the importance we place on possessions. You go into an aboriginal's home outside of Waggett, say, and you might see just a bed, a table, a few chairs. The people in the town may say it's because they're irresponsible with money, but really it's because possessions aren't status symbols to them. . . ."

## COMMUNITY LIFE

What the aborigines in these reserves and shanty settlements, and those in Sydney too for that matter, have done is to build up a strong community life of their own, a sort of mixed culture which borrows elements such as clothes, cars, taxis, "grog," the cinema (and prostitution) from white society but which is firmly based on their old communal feelings and traditions. (In N.S.W. alone 14 aboriginal dialects still survive, though there are less than 200 fullbloods left in the State.)

To many the white man is still the enemy, the "gabba," who took their land away from them years ago and still



PROF. GEDDES

makes them wait in the back of the shop when they go into town for provisions. Group loyalty is strong, and if any aboriginal wants to assimilate he knows he has to turn his back completely on his own people—and has to try to move into an alien society where he is made aware, every day, that he is not accepted.

It is against this background that pressure has mounted throughout Australia for the abandonment of assimilation as official policy in favour of the policy which has been followed with success by the United States and New Zealand Governments, "integration."

## WORD VAGUE

The word is vague but the concept is not. Basically it means recognising that aborigines for years to come will form their own distinct social groups, and helping them to live their own lives equal to but distinct from the white man's. This does not imply segregation, but simply the existence of two cultures side by side.

Some aborigines, of course, may choose to assimilate; it may even be, as Professor Geddes believes, that the best chance for assimilation will occur once the aborigines have built up their own institutions and cohesion and feel secure in their dealings with the white community. But for the time being at least the aborigines, like the Maoris and the American Indians, must be helped to go their own way.

What would integration mean in practice? Integrationists believe the aborigines should be encouraged to develop their own communities with their own forms of self-government, to shape their own adaptation to the society around them. They should be given land which they own, as do the American Indians (in the whole of Australia there is hardly an aboriginal who actually owns land). They should be encouraged to develop their holdings, to form their own co-operative projects, and should share the responsibility for the management of their affairs.

## CRASH PROGRAM

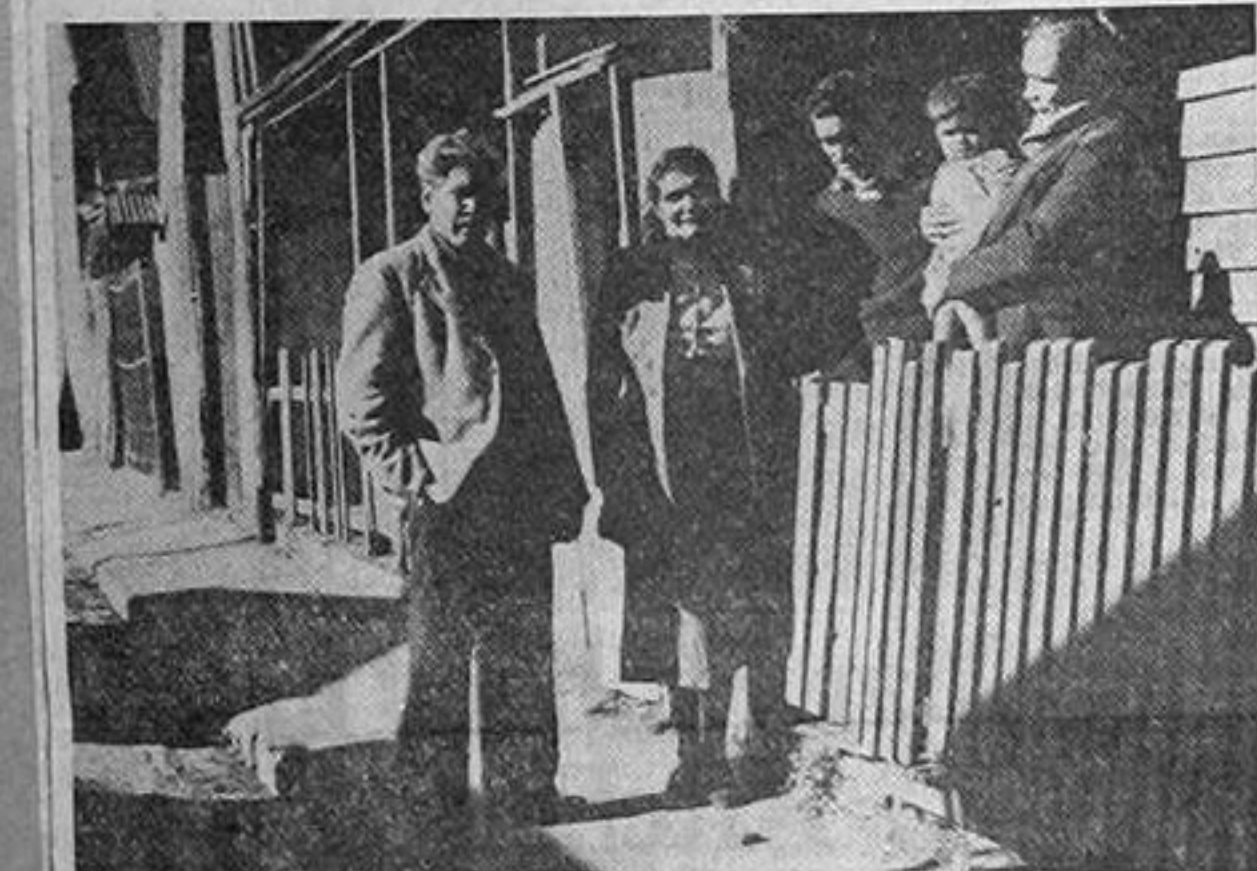
The aborigines also need a crash program to give them advanced education, training in skills, and the know-how to help them become self-sufficient.

Such a policy would require a revolution in official thinking, but this occurred before when assimilation was brought in and there is no reason why it could not happen again. Already there are signs that a change is in the air.

But the sea-change can hardly occur if the ordinary public is kept in ignorance of the policy issues which are being fought out, because in the end integration will depend largely upon the acceptance by ordinary Australians of the fact that the aborigines will never be assimilated—that, like the Greeks and the Chinese in our midst, they will form a distinct community which is integrated with the rest of society but still separate from it.

Indeed it means that Australians, for the first time in their lives, will have to accept the reality of cultural pluralism—that the old ideal of a single, white, monolithic society unified in everything from race to aspiration is no longer realisable, if it ever was, and that Australia is now and must always be a multi-racial, multi-cultural society.

(This is the second of two articles. The first appeared on December 14.)



An aboriginal family group outside their home in a N.S.W. country town.