

Aboriginals plead for bi-centenary gesture

LEADER DENOUNCES 200-YEAR MISRULE

The Captain Cook Bi-centenary marked 200 years of degradation and humiliation and the almost total annihilation of Aboriginals, an Aboriginal leader said yesterday.

After 200 years of misrule against Australia's indigenous people, Australians should regard the termination of this state of affairs as an obligation, he said.

Mr J. McGinness, the president of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, addressing the council's annual conference in Canberra, said: "Unfortunately, this infamous history has to be remembered before we can look hopefully to the future.

"Our ancestors were subject to injustice and tyranny at the hands of the early settlers,

police and troops, and opposition usually meant retaliation with a gun.

"Present day Aboriginals still have fears about opposing injustice and at times face gun-toting police as in Laverton, Western Australia, where an Aboriginal was shot last year.

"Discriminatory State laws also keep our people submissive to unfair treatment."

Mr McGinness called for a campaign to have discriminatory laws abolished.

There is no doubt that these laws force Aboriginals to accept a very low social status.

"These laws — one of the major problems of Aboriginals and islanders — allow legal and social discrimination to be widely practised by police and others in authority.

"We receive far too many complaints of unfair treatment of our people; and the only way to protect our meagre rights is to campaign for anti-discrimination legislation in this country."

He urged the 400 delegates — most of them Aboriginals — to ask the Government to take immediate steps to honor the election promise of the Prime Minister, Mr Gorton, to end discriminatory laws in all States.

'Our cause stands by moral worth' — Coombs

The greatest strength of the Aboriginal cause was that it stood squarely on the moral worth of its claims, the chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr H. C. Coombs, said yesterday.

"It is in essence an appeal to standards of justice and humanity which all of us believe should underlie the structure of human society," he said.

"A strategy which fails to build on this foundation or which casts doubt upon it, should be questioned deeply by Aboriginals before they adopt it."

Dr Coombs was opening the Aboriginal conference in Canberra.

He said political strength through numbers or economic resources was not available for the Aboriginal cause at present.

Aboriginal power must spring from the sense of unity of its followers, the clarity of their objectives, the moral force with which they were propounded and the energy, intelligence and devotion of its leaders, he said.

In Sydney, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Wentworth, said he would examine a plan of church-controlled land

under Aboriginal administration.

Mr Wentworth said yesterday he was not yet familiar with the plan, but any action would be in accordance with Federal Government policy outlined by the Prime Minister, Mr Gorton, before the October elections.

Mr Gorton had made it clear the Government would constantly be looking into ways of giving Aboriginals eventual full control over their own affairs.

"Many people seem to have forgotten this policy exists," Mr Wentworth said.

Each case would be examined individually.

The mission boards of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches will ask the Federal Government to place land the three churches administer under the control of Aboriginals.

SEEKING ADVICE

The churches recently met jointly for the first time to discuss land rights in their mission areas and they have set up an advisory committee with people experienced in legal, anthropological and sociological issues to advise the churches.

The areas, mostly in northern Australia, have an Aboriginal population of about 7000 and some have been under church control for 70 years.

Almost all the land is administered but not owned by the churches. Their leases have expired but the Federal and State governments have allowed them to keep control.

ENCROACHMENT ON RESERVES

Mr McGinness said the Aboriginals' campaign for land rights had not been as successful as expected. But it had at least created a general awareness of the plight of both Aboriginals and islanders on this important question.

He knew of several applications by inhabitants of reserves for the lease of reserve land, now controlled by the Aboriginal Affairs Department.

Mr McGinness said: "These people see the need for land rights because of development in the mining and pastoral industries.

"This has resulted in an encroachment on Aboriginal reserves, a disruption to community life and inadequate compensation for the inhabitants.

"Granting land rights will play a significant role in the development of Aboriginals and islanders, as permanent centres have to be established for training and industry. At present these are almost non-existent although the need for them has been given plenty of lip service over the years by the Aboriginal Affairs Department."