

AN AUSTRALIA DAY COMMUNICATION

'You must recognise our claims now!'

AT FIRST a murmur, now a demand and soon a clamour, the Aboriginal land claim has created a variety of reactions in the minds of white Australians.

A not untypical reaction goes something like this: "What, land to the bloody boongs? Once they start, where will it end? If I were a boong, I know the bit I'd claim — right on the corner of Market and Elizabeth Streets — in the name of King Freddie!"

This kind of ignorance is pardonable because Aborigines have not been able to articulate their deepest feelings on the land question. Just what are the implications of the Aboriginal land claim?

To answer this, it is probably best first to outline what the land rights claim is not. White critics have suggested that if land were granted, Aborigines would withdraw to these lands, set up an apartheid settlement and hurriedly re-embrace a Stone Age culture.

This is nonsense. However much today's Aborigines may still yearn for a freer, happier time, not one of them deludes himself in this manner. We know that we cannot turn back the clock.

We know that, given the means, we will have to forge a new life style for ourselves which will fuse aspects of the traditional with the realities of modern life. Further, no Aboriginal would be so foolish

as to even bother dreaming about reclaiming Benelong Point or the Town Hall site. So, what do we want? And what is behind this wanting?

In tribal areas, we want the lands listed as reserves and mission settlements on tribal land to be restored and deeded in perpetuity to the tribe as a whole. Where detribalisation has occurred, notably in the southern areas of Australia, we want all existing reserve and mission lands, which have a strong emotional tie for the people, to be restored and deeded to the Aboriginal people in perpetuity.

Wherever possible, the deeds to reserve areas now occupied by Aborigines who have traditionally lived there would be lodged with these people.

Where this is not possible, the deeds would remain with an Aboriginal Land Trust to be composed of Aborigines elected by Aboriginal people. This election would have to be completely independent of Government control or nomination.

Because of the historical theft of all Aboriginal land, land restoration in the southern States must also include a large tract in each State. All areas of traditionally sacred or cultural significance, such as the art areas at Mootwingee, the various bora grounds and the Aboriginal weapon factory sites should be placed in Aboriginal hands.

By KEVIN
GILBERT

Whether separate or inclusive of sacred areas, it is necessary for Aborigines also to have a large tract of land — say 500,000 acres in NSW — to identify as "ours." This claim, plus monetary reparation, is a brief outline of what we want.

What is behind this wanting?

To Aborigines, land is implicit with identity, spiritual satisfaction and emotional security. The denial of land positively symbolises injustice, dispossession, theft and the abuse of natural justice.

Since colonisation, the mind and soul of the Aborigines have been constantly and traumatically tortured by this theft and the blatant disregard of their human rights by a society which professes — but has not the character to practice its social idealism — justice, equality, honesty.

The "fair go mate" philosophy is a bitter, farcical self-deception which continues to keep the average Australian in the realms of fantasyland and effectively keeps a harsher truth away from his perception.

In the early 1900s, the Aborigines were restrained by the various statutes covering them

to remain as prisoners on reserves and mission stations. They were used as slaves and made to work under the Aboriginal Ward Acts. Under this wardship, they were given rations for their labor.

These Acts empowered Government departments to remove whole families from any reserve and send them to any area — often hundreds of miles from their tribal country. Children were forcibly removed from their parents and sent as slaves to other areas, often never to see their parents again. Husbands were removed from their families, wives from their husbands.

In the hearts and minds of the Aboriginal people, the Aboriginal reserves and missions were indeed Aboriginal land — all they had left. These were the land sops given to them by greedy whites who had stolen the rich land and given back to the "Abo" useless, semi-arid land for his own use.

Aborigines nevertheless, identified with these pieces of land because they felt that it was theirs. But slowly the

encroachments began again. For example, the La Perouse tribal reserve land was taken. The greatest, most generous European image in the minds of Aborigines was Queen Victoria.

This great monarch, they claim, deeded the La Perouse mission land back to them. The land-thieving white man, with the co-operation of the authorities slowly chipped away at the mission area. The Aborigines now live a quarter of a mile away from the original boundary.

Queen Victoria! The Queen may or may not have treated so justly with the Aborigines but she is, in their minds, the most just and vital European to have ever emerged from the European ranks. Now we are told that it was all just sheer fantasy — not a great white person, but a great white lie!

There is no land for us. We have been truly dispossessed. We are landless outcasts in our father's land. You, the white conscienceless thief, rule triumphant.

"Land" is a symbolic recognition of our rights in justice, our rights in principle, and our status as men in this land. Our claim for land is a call to other Australians for a recognition of justice.

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