

Australia's Third World

"Well, you see, I worked in India for some years before coming out here so I am used to the Third World."

"But Australia is not a Third World Country —"

"I am referring to Aboriginal communities . . ."

(from a conversation between the author and a doctor attached to Pitjand'jara Health, north-west South Australia. August 1983)

NOT TOO MANY advanced countries in the world today credit themselves with the creation of a Third World. Yet such is Australia's distinction. Our Third World, however, is of a kind that only a very rich country can afford. We finance and subsidise it. Over the past few years this phenomenon has developed to become a specialised national preoccupation — one might almost say a hobby that is growing in popularity as more and more Australians become aware of it and are drawn into the intricacies and refinements of maintaining it.

Furthermore, in a time of high unemployment, our Third World is one of the few growth points for the creation of new jobs as the various Departments of Aboriginal Affairs in all States conform to Parkinson's Law and as the workers in the field put out more flags.

It was when Donald Horne viewed the contrast between Australia and most other countries of the world that he came up with his title: 'The Lucky Country'. That was about 1965. In the 1967 Referendum the nation was asked, by the then Liberal government, if it favoured a policy of increased aid to Aboriginals. An answer in the affirmative was returned clear and firm. An ensuing Labor government further endorsed this public response. This was the beginning of the spending spree and the introduction of a whole new set of policies. Assimilation was repudiated and paternalism in any shape or form out-lawed. Aboriginals were to be defined as a separate, self-determining, culturally distinct people within the ideal of a 'multi-cultural Australia'.

No one can blame any one else for what has happened since. We're all in this together. Together we can view with surprise and dismay the emergence in our midst of our own fully-fledged Third World complete with an undefinable 'black' minority, privy,

suddenly, to international affiliations. Somehow, in the brief span of hardly more than a decade, we have by dint of excruciating mental effort and the expenditure of enormous sums of money, created a situation reflecting faithfully a pattern that, in countries like India and South America, took centuries to set.

In general amazement people are now turning to each other and asking how this came about when, only a short time ago, we had simply an old slack, always-with-us 'Aboriginal problem' which was gradually, albeit too slowly, eroding itself away and which, in any case, represented numerically, less than a quarter of one percent of our total population?

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Anyone with recall of former days — say from the 1930s and on into the 1960s — will remember when our Aboriginal population was much less and very much more diffused geographically. In out-back areas it was an advantage to be part-aboriginal although no one made a song and dance about it. On pastoral properties 'yella-fellas' were invariably relegated to positions of greater responsibility, though few, if any, ever married white women. (Those with the advantages of education or character melted into the general population almost without comment).

Half-caste women, on the other hand, either married their own colour or, as was invariably their ambition, had children by white men. They tacitly accepted the fact that such children would be cared for by missions or Native Welfare Departments. If they were in a position to raise them themselves they saw to it that they got some schooling and punished them for playing or co-mingling in any adjacent blacks' camp.

No one called these women 'racist'. They were simply regarded by both black and white as good mothers. Today some of them can watch on television as their sons and daughters take up leading positions as 'Aboriginals' and know with satisfaction that it was because they brought them up white.

* Ted Zakrovsky is the *nom de plume* of an Australian writer who has spent a lot of time recently among Aboriginal people.

Those with no recall and no perspective, young Australians and new migrants, a great many of whom now find themselves working industriously for our Third World, accept the present situation as one of long standing like the doctor from 'Pit' Health. A few may be inclined to view what is happening with alarm but they will not dare to express disquiet for fear that such emotion be labelled 'ethno-centric' and contrary to the over-riding virtues of 'multi-culturalism'.

Moreover, once drawn into the affluent orbit of our Third World, new recruits find themselves stimulated by it, enjoy the experience and the well-paid novelty of it all.

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The Aboriginal desert settlements are situated on the huge Reserves where three States, West Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory join. Access to all settlements is provisional on a Permit of entry. Originally intended as a protection measure to ensure the seclusion and privacy of the Reserve inhabitants, quite what purpose a Permit serves today is not clear — perhaps so that the depressing situation remains hidden, to be revealed only occasionally and then to suit certain arcane ends and purposes as, for instance, the much publicised World Council of Churches' visit a few years ago.

A large sign-board declaring a 'Liquor Act Warning Prohibited Area' is the first indication one has of having arrived at the threshold of a sanctuary of ancient Dreaming. In all these places the picture that presents itself is depressingly similar and cheerless — a small slum township set in a dust bowl and encircled by a grotesque dereliction of burnt and wrecked motor vehicles, bonnets and boots agape, looking like ancient unclassified monsters marooned by drought. The wind of drought blows through them, in summer scorching hot as the blast of a blow-torch, in winter cold as an Antarctic blizzard.

The millions of dollars lavished on these places is invisible and not a sound or soul is heard or seen to break the low dust-shrouded diorama. High in a cloudless sky a kite-hawk finding an air current moves with out-stretched wings.

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It does not require a weighty Report nor one of those wordy compilations of the findings of teams of experts to see just how closely *our* Third World conforms to the general pattern elsewhere. Ours, however, contains some special distinguishing elements — notably financial support on a grand scale from the nation's coffers in order to maintain it in all its sanctity and to keep it careering upon its present course.

So we find greatly augmented and concentrated groups of Aboriginals caught in the quagmire of squalor, disease, alcoholism, obesity, illiteracy, malevolence, inertia, tribalism in corrupt form and, consequently, schizophrenia. They are breeding indis-

criminately, dying prematurely and have become totally dependent upon the very support that government policies intended they should be proudly independent from.

Saddest of all, child delinquents with self-destructive addictions round out our special Third World's inventory — the sorry lot of it. In this predicament Aboriginals have fallen easy prey to the incursions of the dominant pressure group — anthropological-legalists — working among them with impunity serving science or politics, who knows, other than that they are having a field day . . .

It takes a little while to appreciate what has happened because it has occurred and is occurring so quickly and so unpredictably. Should any doubts about such a state of affairs exist in anyone's mind a look at Aboriginal settlements almost anywhere in Australia today will soon disperse them.

There are a few exceptions — certain enterprises where rapport between a particular Community and its white Advisor can generate a feeling of stability and hope for the future, or where, at some former mission settlement, an ameliorating hand still persists — but they only heighten the contrast elsewhere.

Let us now examine briefly a few of the above aspects of this psycho-physical collapse.

Alcoholism and obesity are areas too obvious for comment and have been long under review by teams of medical men and women, religious, psychologists, dietitians et al.

Illiteracy surfaced more slowly and is a more complex problem. That it should be so widely on the increase is a contradiction in itself considering the enormous expenditure on Aboriginal education in recent years.

The multi-culturalist ideal to 'aboriginalise' education has had the effect of splitting the white teacher attitude and policy down the centre. Some white teachers now argue that *any* conventional education at all is a bad thing. Others strongly oppose such an attitude — we must, at least give them an alternative — the chance to choose. Debate, bitter at times, produces zealots on the one hand and resignations on the other.

Sensing the dichotomy the kids are simply not turning up to school. In places conscientious teachers have taken to going after their pupils in vehicles on early morning musters through the scattered camps but with scant success. One way or another, for one reason or another, education, in any previous definition of the word is evaporating. The goal is not to read, write or count but simply establishing dole eligibility.

As for the ideal of the old men passing on to the young their old knowledge and wisdom, this simply isn't on. For a start the former are all too busy — either engaged on extensive motorised 'lore pisinis', travelling in one day an area that took their forebears weeks of walking, or else being conveyed interstate or internationally as show pieces and front men.

Unrestrained breeding which has brought forth, during the past two decades, a continual crop of

under-sized, under-cared-for children is the direct result of Family Allowances paid to mothers and to 'single-parent' families — the latter proving a particularly attractive bonus for girls of 13 and 14. 'Kid money' is as popular with them as 'Sit-down' money is with the lads — a reward, not support or compensation.

An almost measurable increase in malevolence and violence among aboriginals themselves — apart from the role alcohol plays — stems from the revival of old tribal feuds and past grievances. On missions and on cattle stations Aboriginal discord had been lulled almost to extinction but now, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, 'multi-culturalism' extols the regurgitation of the past and with it all the long-forgotten differences.

Any malevolence of black towards white is of a secondary nature. When it does occasionally surface in desert communities the reasons for it are extremely hard to find. Without warning a dedicated and hard-working white Advisor may find himself suddenly and summarily sacked — by a whim of the Council? by some in-fighting among the latter members? Who knows? No white employee has as yet ever contested or won a case for wrongful dismissal from any Aboriginal settlement. Mystified he must simply pack up and go.

Aboriginal society was, traditionally, a male dominated one. In former days, however, some check and balance upon abuse was kept because of the important food-gathering role played by women.

Today sexism reasserts itself without restraint in a wholly dislocated and distorted tribal revival. Many women live in fear and subjection, their presence as aides in schools and hospitals erratic, their voice on Councils a token only. (The success of some part-aboriginal women, freed from the past by circumstances, and their own character and ability, should not here be overlooked. There is an increasing number in this category who have risen to their present status not because of 'multi-culturalism' but in spite of it.)

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The white inhabitants of the desert settlements who, at present, are all employed by the Aboriginal Councils, consist of an ever-growing team — Advisors, teachers, linguists, publishers (of the settlements propaganda periodicals), book-keepers, religious (yes, still there in 'low-profile'), store-keepers, communication operators, maintenance engineer, out-station managers, builders, carpenters, mechanics, road-makers, well-sinkers, pilots (for the Community's private air-craft), hospital staff, postal service staff, police. Together with their families all these reside in new or recently up-graded domiciles, sometimes in 'reserves' of their own behind barbed wire for protection against the people they are protecting from old protectionist policies.

The Aboriginal population itself lives, by preference, in scattered wind-breaks and lean-tos dispersed over a wide area — sometimes setting up camp

immediately outside their brand new house. (In answer to any questionnaire seeking to ascertain a Community's needs and wishes — 'Housing' will always head the list, followed by 'a school'. In fact both items have zero priority in the present scheme of things.) Every settlement has rows of vacant houses that lie wrecked and befouled in 'cumuna' abandonment.

About mid-morning the seemingly inanimate scene begins to show signs of life. Figures emerge from the camps and start converging in slow procession upon the store. As the doors open, the line of forms leaning upon them disappears suddenly from the bright sunlight into the exciting gloom of the building's interior. The game is on, and one of the kinkier aspects of our particular Third World reveals itself.

Eager but cautious hands self-service into freezers to extract their varied contents — rocky lumps of mince-meat, lamb chops, pork, bacon, steak, stone-hard pies, frost-white chickens. Long arms reach up for bags of flour, rice, spaghetti, potatoes, onions, sugar, tea, tins of jam, powdered milk, honey, fish, baked beans — a pyramid of wrapped, sliced bread, together with a shelf of 'Kimbies', disappears. A rotunda of cassettes and video books is stripped bare in minutes . . .

Swinging on the door of an upright refrigerator a black imp in a new red track suit makes grave decisions. In a corner more track suits are tried on small bodies to exclamations of delight from mothers to see their children so modishly got up. More conventional themselves they flip through racks of floral dresses and button-up cardigans while men look for their right size among a stack of trousers, shirts, fleecy-lined jackets and wind-cheaters . . . Yesterday the Social Service plane with the pension, unemployment, child-endowment cheques flew in from the nearest town — Alice Springs, or Darwin, or Katherine, Wyndham, Kalgoorlie or Port Augusta . . .

Tomorrow things will be quieter. Before the fortnight is out children will be rummaging again in the trash cans of the settlement's white employees and the lucky winners in the big gambling rings will have shot through to the nearest town in their new Toyotas or old jalopies . . .

"This store turns over \$50,000 a week — now that last store-keeper was a crook — took me six weeks to straighten out the books but soon I'll be making a profit here and giving them what they want — last week I sold 5 Honda motor bikes and wait till T.V. comes — Boy! The sky sure is the limit, I have 50 sets on order already . . ."

Less than 50 years ago some of these big, stale, benighted desert settlements consisted of only a few drums of water, a few bags of flour, left, once a month, by a local Road Board truck on a corner of neutral tribal ground in a perishing drought. After the vehicle was well away the desert men would come out of hiding, drink the water and savour the 'manna'. There were no ritual proceedings for sharing the latter as required with the scant bush foods. First come was first take. So some sat down then and there and waited for the truck's return. More followed suit. They were

naked, quarrelling and unredeemed the Missionaries heard tell . . . and so tenuous points of neutral tribal territory became the places like Jigalong, Cundeelee, Warburton, Yuendumu, Yalata . . . (Hermannsberg, too, but its story is older).

When the desert men joined in the hymns they received trousers. Some cut their hair, gave their brow-bands to their uncles and took to wearing hats. Women, too, put on dresses to speak to the Book people and undefined arrangements to leave their children with them were made . . . These were the waste lands.

In the more productive areas of sheep and cattle, stations contact between the races began earlier. Loose pacts, mutually useful and beneficial, were made between the Aboriginals and the pastoralists. Every station came, in time, to have its complement of still-tribal but co-operative groups, the men worked for half the year in the stock-camps while their families lived adjacent to the homesteads . . . a pattern set that lasted in places for 60 years. Then action, spear-headed by radical whites who surfaced after the War, forced the issue regarding the payment of wages to Aboriginal pastoral workers.

This was a reasonable enough idea for any group having an alternative such as the collection and sale of surface minerals, but reform proved a disaster for most station Aboriginals. Pastoralists simply divested themselves of all their Aboriginal workers together with their families . . . Camps, adjacent to the nearest bush town were set up to meet a temporary emergency which, over the years, became a permanent one. These town settlements have also become now separate autonomous Communities, and all around the northern coast-line the original old Missions are the nucleus for similar settlements in line with the new order. Although from place to place beginnings vary the present is remarkably consistent.

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Was it too optimistic then after ten years of the new enlightenment, the big U-turn in official policy from assimilation to separation and the joint national effort to make a reality of 'multi-culturalism', to have hoped to see some general improvement instead of an extraordinarily depressing botch of a Third World?

Anyone can ask questions but who can supply the answers? Do current policies aimed at re-identifying the Aboriginal gratify or bewilder? Do those in remote settlements see themselves as abandoned, used, or newly liberated? How, in fact, do they see themselves at all? How do they want to see themselves? How would they have themselves presented if asked?

Nearly white in well-tailored suit hurrying up the stairs of Parliament House in Canberra, brief-case in hand, vocal and televised? Savage and noble? Old and naked on the red ground at Yilpilli, Warakuna or Kintore long hair matted with mud — reincarnate from the pages of Spencer and Gillen? At the town store in Hall's Creek — pink stretch jeans, Stetson hat

and neck ornament, (not teeth or finger bones but a sign of the Zodiac, silver, as the single earring is also silver), chatting loftily with a group of less sartorial young men? Astride a horse? (This in memory only now and nostalgically), swaying to Country and Western music at the Battle of the Bands for the great sports weekend at Yuendumu — dazzling in green satin, weighed down with a gleaming instrument shaped like the jaws of a shark and trailing amplification cord?

In a bright red guernsey embracing a fellow player for kicking a goal? Asleep where he fell with the bottle beside him? (No. None of those, burn them! Burn the lot!) In a peaked cap — nonchalant, confident — at the wheel of a big new vehicle with plenty of torque?

Stop there, settle for that one . . .

And drive, drive on, out of the nightmare?

Could it be as simple as that?

They thought so in the ivory towers set among manicured gardens beside the manufactured waters of Lake Burley Griffin.