

RECONCILIATION by 2001?

the white man's dream continues the Aboriginal nightmare.

*The Council for Reconciliation admits
that it can only hope to change attitudes.
Attitude change is always an escapable target.
The real problem is that Aboriginal needs
are totally dominated by white people's needs,
forcing Aborigines to rely on their masters
for the basic necessities of life.*

The federal government has established yet another public body which it says will respond to the historically poor relationship between Aborigines and whites in this country. A committee of fifteen people - half of them black and the other half white- are to form the COUNCIL OF RECONCILIATION and have been given a mandate for the next ten years to reconcile the differences between the two peoples.

Clearly the federal government is using the council to give the impression that the government is behind Aborigines, hoping to hide the failure of government programs to bring about needed change

Dogging the government's new approach is the criticism that the whole process is so vague as to be meaningless and that it will simply result in a waste of tax payers' funds. This only further exposes Aborigines to the racist but oft-stated view that we are over-privileged. Instead of Aborigines standing to gain from the process, we may well find ourselves resented even more by whites, through no fault of our own.

Nobody really knows what is meant to happen when the process of reconciliation is complete. Is there meant to be a social policy document capable of being implemented by governments? If so, how could that possibly be better than the 339 recommendations of the Black Deaths in Custody Commission, under consideration by state and federal governments now for several months? And if the council is meant to enquire into the circumstances of Aborigines, has that not already been done, over and over again?

To these sorts of questions, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. Tickner, who has the responsibility for ensuring that the reconciliation process is successful, has

responded with deafening silence. Usually the Minister tells the inquisitive they'll have to wait and see. This hardly justifies the claim that he is entirely on top of all this. And the government's standard throw-away response is that the body can come up with whatever it likes.

This is not good enough. Aboriginal people have a right to be told why they should patiently await the outcome of the reconciliation process, while still suffering because of government neglect to bring on more immediate change. By failing to come clean on this, the government will continue to frustrate Aboriginal people by raising expectations without any intention of satisfying them. This will be particularly important when the Council does its rounds of Aboriginal communities, if it intends to do so.

Without guidelines on what sorts of issues the government expects to be raised, Aborigines will have no idea what to ask for. "We want a four-wheel drive, 3 houses and meat for our dogs" would be an understandable response because the government has failed to explain what the Council can do.

The government cannot rely on its old line that "people can put forward what they like", because that ignores reality. Aborigines know this government's poor record on Aboriginal Affairs. It abandoned its promised treaty, it dumped uniform National Land Rights legislation, and made cuts to Aboriginal training programs. The Aboriginal community is unlikely, therefore, to raise the weighty issues. Unless the government outlines realistic political parameters for discussion, the whole exercise is doomed to an early failure.

Then there is the vital issue of trust. Aborigines are to wait ten years for completion of this process and may arguably expect things to be fairly cosy after the year 2001. After all, one tenth of a decade and millions of dollars later, the people at whom this process is directed should expect **something**. The bipartisan

approach to reconciliation should have put any Aboriginal doubts about trusting the pollies to rest. Yet Dr. Hewson's recent tax package, within which Aborigines are to suffer a ninety million dollar cut, is hardly reassuring.

History will also play a negative part in this process. Aborigines have not forgotten that they lost the whole continent and with it the right to control themselves, consequently ending up the most under-privileged and powerless group in the land. All this was done on the pretext that that "we all may live as one united people". This latest attempt at "bringing the people together" has not changed Aboriginal suspicion at all.

It is becoming easier and easier to accept the widely held view that the whole reconciliation process is nothing more than a government mechanism for enlisting white support for passing on some welfare benefits to Aboriginal people. If this is the case, this can be more efficiently and cheaply achieved by the federal government simply legislating to help Aborigines.

In the meantime, the despair continues. Take one example from the many hundreds. In towns in north-western Western Australia, children infected with parasites fluctuate between their camp homes and the local hospitals. They could be cured if

only running water and decent living conditions were available to them. Where lies their hope for the future?

As far as the federal government is concerned, the future of these children rests in reconciliation. Having legislated the instrument of reconciliation and provided \$2.6 million, the federal government has committed itself to a mechanism which it hopes will erase all the evils which have latched onto generation after generation of Aborigines. On the one hand the Minister raises hopes for a brighter future, but dashes them by failing to provide anything of substance. The Council will be tarnished with an "all cackle and no egg" image which it will find very difficult to get rid of. The reported statement by the Council's Chairman that the thrust of the task was to get Aborigines and whites to pass each other nicely on the street, did nothing to alter the view of the whole exercise as wasting time. But the Chairman should not cop the flak for what is an inherently absurd idea of government. The Chairman is merely showing that if there was a sensible, decent task given to him, he could get something moving.

The uncertainty of the whole reconciliation process is the first thing the Minister has to explain to the public. He will need to show some initiative and direction, for tax payers will be particularly critical in watching the allocation of scarce resources. The result will need to justify the resources spent. Aborigines on the other hand, are growing impatient with having to await the outcome of yet another well-meaning but ill-considered plan of whites before getting back to the only things of importance to them: land, improved conditions and self-government.

March, 1992