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SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

ABORIGINES.

Mr. HASLUCK (Curtin) [11.45].—I move—

That this House is of the opinion that the Commonwealth Government, exercising a national responsibility for the welfare of the whole Australian people, should co-operate with the State Governments in measures for the social advancement as well as the protection of people of the aboriginal race throughout the Australian mainland, such co-operation to include additional financial aid to those States on whom the burden of native administration falls most heavily; and the House requests

the Government to prepare proposals for submission at the earliest opportunity to a meeting of State Premiers and, in preparing such proposals, to pay due regard to the principles of (a) State administration of native affairs and (b) co-operation with the Christian missions.

I propose, first, to attempt to give a broad description of the present circumstances of aborigines in Australia, and, secondly, to put forward several general propositions, and on the basis of those propositions to pass to an explanation of the precise terms of the motion and the purposes which it is intended that it shall accomplish. As, under the Standing Orders, I shall not have sufficient time to give a comprehensive description of the conditions of aborigines, I shall be bold enough to make the initial assumption that honorable members are not satisfied with the present treatment of aborigines in Australia and the conditions under which they are obliged to live at present. I am confident that honorable members who in their own electorates or from personal interest have direct contact with and first-hand knowledge of the problem will readily endorse that statement. I ask those honorable members who have not first-hand knowledge of the problem to accept the assurance of those who have, and also to accept the verdict which they will find recorded in numerous papers and reports indicating that native administrators, government departments and aboriginal welfare associations are by no means satisfied with the conditions of aborigines at present. I do not intend to raise a scandal or to apportion blame in any particular quarter. If there is cause for blame, I do not think that it can be placed upon any administration or official. The neglect of this social problem in the past has been neglect on the part of the Australian community as a whole. The community as a whole must, therefore, bear the blame. The purpose of my motion is not to place the blame upon administrations, but to arouse the Australian nation to some sense of its responsibility for its short-comings in this matter.

According to the census that was taken in 1944, there were then in Australia 71,895 persons who were

classified as aborigines. That total included 24,881 who were classified as half-castes. Approximately one-third were classified as nomadic and slightly less than one-third were classified as being in employment. Of the remainder, also approximately one-third, the majority were either in supervised camps or were looking after themselves in various stages of transition from bush life to the life of the white community. Those figures do not give an accurate picture of present conditions of aborigines, but they underline certain points. The first is that at least two-thirds of the aboriginal and half-caste population in Australia have already come so closely in touch with the ways of European life that their future cannot be considered any longer as being that of a primitive people living their own tribal life in the remote parts of this country. They are already closely in touch with the ways of Europeans and are living on the outskirts of white settlements. For either good or ill, the future of those aborigines lies in close association with the white community. Indeed, many of the remainder who are classified as nomadic have commenced the process of transition from tribal life to life in contact with white settlers, and already the tribal practices and beliefs which give vitality to a primitive people are being sapped and are losing their force. Therefore—and this is my second point—the problem to-day is not a problem of protection. In the old days when they were a primitive people living under primitive bush conditions, the problem chiefly was to set up a barrier between them and the invading white community. Those days have gone, and the nation must move to a new era in which the social advancement rather than the crude protection of the natives should be the objective of all that is done in this sphere. We must either work for the social advancement of the aborigines or be content to witness their continued social degradation. There is no possibility now of our being able to put at least two thirds of the aborigines back into bush life. Their future lies in association with us, and they must either associate with us on standards that will give them full opportunity to live worthily and happily or

be reduced to the social status of pariahs and outcasts living without a firm place in the community. In other words, we either permit this social evil to continue or we remedy it.

The third point is that a total of approximately 72,000 aborigines living in an expanding community of approximately 8,000,000 whites is so small that it is manageable. We have on our hands a serious but not a frightening problem. The total number of aborigines constitutes a social group within but not of the white community. Therefore, that group can, and must, be managed. Unless we tackle this problem now it will increase in seriousness. I can illustrate that point from my own personal knowledge of the conditions of the half-caste population in the southern part of Western Australia. In 1934 and 1936 I conducted an investigation of the conditions of life of those half-castes and published a certain amount of material upon the subject. At that time, just after the depression, there was a social problem that affected 4,000 half-castes in that district. To-day, in exactly the same region, after a lapse of only sixteen years there are 6,000 half-castes and their condition is far worse at present than it was in 1934 just after the depression. That is not a reflection upon the present administration. That deterioration has come about in spite of improved administrative efforts within narrow limits in recent years, but it illustrates that a manageable social problem may very quickly become unmanageable if it be not tackled immediately and with determination.

The fundamental point to be recognized is that in this matter we must deal with not one problem but several problems. I shall illustrate that point by referring to the conditions of those natives, approximately 20,000, who are classified as being in employment. That number can be sub-divided into six, or seven, classifications. First, there are those natives who live on cattle stations in the north under tribal conditions and whose subsistence with that of their families is provided by station owners. They live a bush life and during a large part of the year, when they are not needed for mustering, they go walk-

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about and resume their full tribal habits. In the north-west of Australia natives are employed mainly on sheep stations. Because of their tribal background many of them are attached by their own choice to particular stations. They receive wages and largely follow the habits of white workers, although their standards of living are certainly far below those of any white stockman or boundary rider. In the areas farther south the natives in the sheep country may be contrasted with those living in the agricultural areas under conditions roughly approximating those of the white workers, but enjoying a lower social standard, and suffering the disability of social outcasts. There are also natives who are under the protection of missions or government settlements. Then there are those who find regular employment, receive award rates of wages, and live in their own homes. Finally, there are natives who, perhaps, not being so steady in their habits, follow seasonal labour or take contract work, as the fancy moves them or as their need for some new commodity arises. These are only some instances that indicate the wide variation in the types of employment followed by natives classified as "employed" and the extent of this national problem. Any uniform plan to cover all natives in employment which disregarded these wide differences in the competence of various groups of aborigines, their conditions of work and their manner of life would be certain to cause conflict and confusion, and would give neither satisfaction to ourselves nor benefit to the aborigines. In considering this problem we must be conscious, first, of its diversity. Because of its diversity we must remember that we cannot deal with it by adopting a single and uniform policy. The task of solving the problem must be worked at patiently and conscientiously, and with a risk of a certain amount of disappointment, stage by stage in the different parts of the Commonwealth according to the different groups of natives and the different degrees to which they have entered into relations with the white community. We must have regard to local problems of health and tribal customs, and the degree of contact between black and white, which

vary so widely from the north to the south of this continent.

Another point that emerges from a further examination of these figures is the inequality of the distribution of aborigines between the various States. Of the grand total of approximately 72,000 aborigines, three-quarters are in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. Thus, the burden of administration falls most heavily on a few States. In order to point the contrast, and give it full meaning, I mention that whereas Victoria, with an annual consolidated revenue of approximately £45,000,000, expends only £5,000 a year on aborigines, Western Australia, with an annual consolidated revenue of approximately £20,000,000, expends £70,000 on their administration and care. At present the responsibility is unequally distributed among the people of Australia although, as I shall attempt to show, it is a responsibility which should not be shirked by the whole of the people.

Having given that broad account of the present condition of aborigines, I shall attempt to establish, as my first major proposition, that the whole Australian community has a responsibility for their welfare. As the Australian Government is the only government that can speak in the name of the whole community it has a special obligation to ensure that the nation shall accept that responsibility. I know that the Australian Constitution leaves responsibility for aborigines with the State governments, and that the direct legislative and administrative powers of the Commonwealth in respect of aborigines do not extend beyond Commonwealth territories. I do not propose to enter into a constitutional argument or to develop any novel thesis about the situation. Keeping to a practical political level, I merely ask the Commonwealth Parliament as the supreme voice of the Australian nation, to ensure that, irrespective of where the constitutional powers lie, the practical task of the betterment of the conditions of the natives throughout the Commonwealth shall be undertaken. There are many reasons why we should be more emphatic and more co-operative in this matter than we have been in former years.

Some of them may be shortly summarized as follows: First, the pattern of contact between whites and natives has changed in the 50 years since federation. Whereas in 1900, the number of aborigines closely in touch with settlement was roughly the same in all States except Victoria, to-day the special burden on two States and on the administration in the Northern Territory has become more marked. Secondly, the financial autonomy of the States has changed very greatly. The States are not able to undertake the financial commitments that they were able to accept in the years immediately after federation. Without a recognition of a special need by the Australian Government it would be beyond the practical capacity of any State, even in times of the greatest prosperity, to make proper provision for its relatively greater responsibilities for its aboriginal population. Thirdly, the Australian Government, through its acquisition of the Northern Territory, shares a common problem with the States in the administration of the aboriginal population in the Northern Territory. These are all arguments why it is necessary to make a re-appraisal of the role of this Parliament in the problem of native welfare and to give a lead in the formulation of a joint national programme.

There also seems to me to be other arguments why the Australian Government should make its voice heard in this matter. The Commonwealth Parliament is the custodian of the national reputation in the world at large. Our record of native administration will not stand scrutiny at the standard of our own professions, publicly made in the forum of the world, of a high concern for human welfare. We should be condemned out of our own mouths if those professions were measured by the standard of native administration accepted in Australia to-day. When we enter into international discussions, and raise our voice, as we should raise it, in defence of human rights and the protection of human welfare, our very words are mocked by the thousands of degraded and depressed people who crouch on rubbish heaps throughout the whole of this continent. Let us cleanse this stain

from our forehead or we shall run the risk that ill-intentioned people will point to it with scorn. When we have done that we shall be able to stand with greater pride and more confidence before the world as a self-respecting nation.

In the course of our participation in international discussions we have allied ourselves with solemn declarations and in the case of the charter of the United Nations have made positive commitments to promote the welfare of depressed peoples and to uphold human rights. So, by international undertaking, we have acquired this additional responsibility as a national parliament to ensure that these obligations shall be fulfilled. Over and above the division of powers between the Commonwealth and the States, and unlimited by it, is the conception of the people of Australia as a whole. When the welfare of the Australian community is under consideration—and by the term “Australian community” I mean all the inhabitants of this continent—we as a national parliament have an obligation far more extensive than that of any single State parliament to ensure that that welfare shall be promoted. In matters such as defence, in relation to which the Commonwealth has clearly defined powers, we can legally take action to ensure that those powers shall be exercised. In relation to matters in which this Parliament has restricted power, such as the welfare of the aborigines, I suggest that it is our responsibility to initiate steps that will produce co-operation between the various administrations and so ensure that action shall be taken and that the authorities in whom the powers are vested shall have the means to make such action effective. Those are the arguments why this Parliament should accept some responsibility in the matter.

My plea for action by this Parliament is reinforced by a consideration of the attempts that have been made in the past to do precisely what I am now suggesting this Parliament should do. The subject of native affairs was raised at the Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers in 1936, and in 1937 a conference of Commonwealth and State representatives in

Canberra drew up a number of admirable principles and made some exceedingly sound recommendations. Any action that may have followed that conference was so slight as to bear little relation to its decisions. Again, following discussions that took place at a conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers in 1947, when this subject was raised by Mr. Ross McDonald, the Minister for Native Affairs in Western Australia, a conference of Federal and State officials was held at Canberra in 1948. That conference made recommendations that all members will agree were fundamentally sound and showed its recognition of the seriousness of this problem. Once again, the action that followed bore little relation to the extensiveness of the recommendations. With those past experiences in mind, I submit that, if we agree, as I hope honorable members do agree, that this Parliament should act in this matter, we should consider more than the simple passing of another resolution or the initiating of another conference. We should consider starting a new era in which direct, positive and effective action is likely to be taken. It seems to me, from the lessons of the past, that among the reasons why the action taken previously was less effective than the solemn professions that were made indicated that it would be, was that the discussions in each instance took place without sufficient preparation. The subject of the conditions of the aborigines was left for discussion at the tail-end of the proceedings of the various conferences. It was treated as one of the left-overs rather than being made at any time the principal matter for discussion. Another reason was that permanent administrative arrangements were not made to give effect to the decisions of each conference so as to maintain co-ordination among the authorities that had participated in the discussions. A third reason lies in the fact that hitherto two problems in connexion with such discussions between the Commonwealth and State authorities had not been properly resolved before the conferences were held. I refer to State rights and finance. For a new conference to succeed and to result in effective action being taken, it would be necessary from the outset for a clear understanding to have been

reached on those two matters. The States should be assured that local administration will not be disturbed, and the Commonwealth and States should agree that when extra finance is needed, and is not obtainable from the normal sources of revenue, such finance will be available in accordance with the need for it.

Before concluding I wish to refer to the work of the Christian missions in Australia. The 50 government institutions care for 9,300 natives and 54 Christian missions care for approximately the same number of natives. Government institutional staffs total 283 and mission staffs total 219. It is plain, therefore, that if it were not for the Christian missions Australia would be doing only half as much in respect of the welfare of the aborigines as it is now doing. In addition such voluntary organizations as the Flying Doctor Service also extend their benefits to aborigines. I realize that there are good missions and some missions that may not act as wisely as they might, but generally speaking all missions bring into the field of native administration a body of devoted and zealous workers whose zeal and sense of vocation cannot be, and never will be, matched by the ordinary methods of Public Service recruitment. Any government should accept with gratitude the services of so dedicated a body of people. Furthermore, the Christian missions enlist behind their efforts the support, interest and sympathy of the whole community.

The motion before the House attempts to cover the grounds that I have rapidly sketched in brief outline. In the first place it is based on two propositions which are as follows:—(a), that the Australian Government exercises a national responsibility for the welfare of the whole Australian people and therefore should co-operate with State governments in promoting the welfare of aborigines; and (b), measures of native welfare should be directed towards the social advancement as well as the protection of aborigines. The motion then goes on to say that co-operation should include additional provision of finance. It then asks that in order that effective administrative action may follow, the Government should prepare definite proposals to place before

the State Premiers and thus accept the role of co-ordinator and energizer in matters relating to native administration. Finally, the motion lays down the principle that due regard should be paid to the following:—(a), State administration of native affairs; and (b), co-operation with the Christian missions. It does not attempt to prescribe the methods that the various administrations should adopt. Any one who has had first-hand knowledge of the native problem will agree that the present conditions of the aborigines are so diverse, and the possibilities for their advancement are so dimly seen, that the programme can best be worked out in relation to the day-to-day tasks of routine administration. We cannot hope for a sudden transformation or to hit upon a single plan that will transform the position overnight or that will immediately reform this great social evil. We know that discouragement will be encountered and that the response to various demands will be different from what we may hope for, and that in such circumstances this programme for the benefit of the aborigines will have to be worked out bit by bit and day by day over the course of several generations. If the House adopts the motion, what I hope to see is chiefly that the responsible Minister for the Australian Government shall at once apply himself to the preparation of a plan for further Federal-State co-operation and that such a plan will be presented to and be accepted by the Federal and State representatives and will lead to the improved care of the natives and an improvement in the carrying out of the precise tasks of native administration under a truly national programme in the course of the next two or three generations. I also hope that that programme will be directed to the social advancement of the native people. I do not seek to attempt to sketch the details of such a plan, but I suggest that it might include among other things a plain declaration of the objects of native administration in Australia and clear definitions of the tasks that have to be done immediately.

Mr. SPEAKER.—Order! The honorable gentleman's time has expired.