

NATIVE WELFARE CONFERENCE

PARLIAMENT HOUSE

CANBERRA

26TH-27TH JANUARY, 1961

VERBATIM RECORD OF
PROCEEDINGS

NATIVE WELFARE CONFERENCE 1961.

Commonwealth and State Ministers and officers
attending Conference - 26th and 27th
January.

COMMONWEALTH :Territories.

The Hon. P.M.C. Hasluck, M.P.,
Minister for Territories.

Mr. R. S. Swift,
Assistant Secretary (S. & G.S.)

Social Services.

The Hon. H. S. Robertson, M.P.,
Minister for Social Services.

Health.

Maj. Gen. Refshauge,
Director-General of Health,
representing the Minister for Health.

Dr. W.F.H. Crick,
Senior Medical Officer.

Mr. I. Prowse,
Director (Policy).

Treasury.

Mr. H. Amos,
Chief Finance Officer.

Supply.

Mr. R. Macaulay,
Native Patrol Officer.

STATES :New South Wales.

The Hon. P. Hills, M.L.A.
Acting Chief Secretary and
Minister for Local Government.

accompanied by

Mr. A. G. Kingsmill,
Under Secretary,
Chief Secretary's Department and
Chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board.

Professor A. P. Elkin,
Vice Chairman Aborigines Protection Board.

Mr. H. J. Green,
Secretary,
Aborigines Protection Board.

STATE :

Victoria.

The Hon. Murray V. Porter, M.L.A.,
Minister for Local Government,
Victoria.

accompanied by

Mr. P. E. Felton,
Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare.

Mr. T. N. Garnet,
Secretary,
Aborigines Welfare Board.

Queensland.

The Hon. H. W. Noble,
M.B., B.S., M.L.A.
Minister for Health and Home Affairs.

accompanied by

Mr. McCormack,
Under-Secretary,
Department of Health and Home Affairs.

Mr. C. O'Leary,
Director of Native Affairs.

South Australia.

The Hon. G. G. Pearson, M.P.,
Minister of Works.

accompanied by

Mr. C. E. Bartlett,
Secretary,
Aborigines Protection Board.

Mr. H. Kneebone,
Private Secretary.

Western Australia.

The Hon. C. C. Perkins, M.L.A.,
Minister for Native Affairs.

accompanied by

Mr. S. G. Middleton.

Tasmania.

Mr. G. C. Smith,
Director of Social Services,
(will represent the Hon. J.E.Gaha, Chief Secretary).

Northern Territory.

Mr. J. C. Archer, O.B.E.,
(His Honour the Administrator).

accompanied by

Mr. H. C. Giese,
Director of Welfare

nomad stage; so it will not be easy. But I agree that we have to do something about it and that this problem will become very embarrassing.

MR. HASLUCK.- One can see the problem that arises where a sufficiently distinguished aboriginal is concerned. Doug Nicholls has been mentioned. We need only to have somebody refuse to give an exemption to him, to Harold Blair or to somebody else who is in the public eye.

MR. HILLS.- Where does Harold Blair live?

MR. HASLUCK.- Originally Queensland, and now Victoria. If people like that became involved in an incident in another State, the publicity would be the worst that we could get.

MR. PORTER.- At one time, we had Harold Blair as a member of our board in Victoria.

DR. NOBLE.- He was never controlled in Queensland.

Item 5.

SOCIAL SERVICE PAYMENTS.

The use and control of Social Service payments particularly for those aboriginal pensioners and beneficiaries residing on -

- (a) settlements and reserves;
- (b) missions; and
- (c) contiguous to areas where settled employment has been available.

MR. SWIFT.- The report of the Committee of Officers is as follows:-

PENSIONS AND MATERNITY ALLOWANCES

1. All aborigines, other than those who are nomadic or primitive, may now qualify for age, invalid and widows pensions and maternity allowances on the same basis as other members of the community. Aborigines other than the nomadic have always been eligible for child endowment and unemployment and sickness benefits.
2. Wherever possible payments are made direct to the individual concerned, although where the pensioner asks, or the Department of Social Services deems it desirable, the whole or part of the pension may be paid to some other person or Authority on behalf of the pensioner. Where aborigines are being cared for in a controlled community, e.g. Church Missions, Government settlements or large pastoral properties, payment is made as to residents of benevolent homes, i.e., part of the pension is payable to

(c) Queensland

Queensland is not experiencing any particular difficulty with the payment of social service benefits in general. Aged aboriginal pensioners are treated in the same way as white people in Eventide Homes, where a portion is paid to the pensioner, and the State retains the balance for maintenance purposes. A similar procedure is followed by the Missions, but the Government has access to the Missions' books.

Child endowment is paid to the institutions but as a general rule the money goes direct to the mother.

Queensland feels that the Commonwealth should agree to the payment of unemployment benefits to Torres Strait Islanders engaged in the pearling industry. These people live up to 100 miles from Thursday Island where they are employed, and during the off season they cannot report each week to register for unemployment benefits.

(d) South Australia

South Australia is facing a number of problems in the payment of social service benefits to aborigines on missions and on pastoral properties.

(i) Missions

Benefits are paid direct to the Missions, who believe that they are not required to account for the money or answer to any follow-up from the Department of Social Services or the State Government. Because the State issues rations in bulk for the whole settlement it still issues rations for the pensioners at some missions. This means that the State is still maintaining the aborigines although the missions are receiving social service benefits on their behalf.

(ii) Pastoral Properties

The pastoralists are also under the impression that they do not have to account for social service payments, so there is no check that the money goes direct to the aborigines or is used for their benefit. Very few pastoralists are prepared to handle social service benefits for aborigines, and some say that it is impossible to spend the amounts granted for the benefit of the aborigines concerned.

The Social Services representative pointed out that prior to the payment of pensions all Mission authorities were asked for, and gave, a written undertaking that the maintenance portion of the pension would be kept in a separate fund and that they would have no objection to on the spot inspections by departmental officers. As new claims are being received from pastoralists they are being asked to give a similar undertaking.

(c) Tasmania

The social service benefits for part-aboriginals in Tasmania will continue to be administered in accordance with the provisions of the Social Services Act.

(f) Northern Territory

The Territory is experiencing no particular problems in dealing with payments of social service benefits. Payments to part-coloured people are handled in accordance with the provisions of the Social Services Act and benefits for full blood aboriginals are paid either direct to the applicant or to the appropriate settlement, mission or pastoralist. Officers of the Welfare Branch may inspect aborigines on Mission stations. The Northern Territory Administration has been responsible for the supervision of payments to pastoralists and missions for the maintenance of aboriginals since 1949 and supervision of social service benefits is but a continuation of this. There would be some cases where the beneficiary was not receiving the full benefit of the payment, but the position is broadly satisfactory, and should be improved as a result of more frequent inspections.

The Missions in the Territory are concerned about the possibility of obtaining some form of unemployment and sickness benefits for aborigines who are fully employed on Missions and Settlements. Itinerant workers, e.g. drovers, also could be assisted by some unemployment benefit during the stand-down period.

8. It was stated that where a native normally engaged in full-time employment on a Government settlement or a Church Mission and became temporarily incapacitated for work and thereby suffered a loss of income a claim could be made. The claim would have to be supported by a certificate from a qualified doctor or nursing sister. Benefit, if payable, could not exceed the weekly rate of wages or other income lost by reason of the incapacity.

9. The necessity for an applicant for unemployment benefit to register for work and to take active steps to seek employment presents almost insuperable difficulties in remote areas and it would be almost impossible for the Department of Social Services to administer these provisions.

10. In the case of unemployment and sickness benefits for natives on government settlements and Church Missions in remote areas, the best solution would probably be for the State or Church concerned to accept responsibility for the short period involved.

11. CONCLUSION

- (1) The difficulties in South Australia warrant a re-examination of the position by the Department of Social Services, the State Government authorities, the Mission officials and the managers of pastoral properties employing aborigines.
- (2) The problem of providing unemployment benefits to aborigines engaged in seasonal employment in remote areas, e.g. Queensland, Northern Territory, might be taken up with the Department of Social Services separately from this Conference, if Queensland and the Northern Territory consider this warranted.

Mr. PORTER. - The reason for the exception at Lake Tyers is that it is virtually a State institution. It follows the general practice for social services in other spheres.

Mr. SMITH. - The position in Tasmania is that no real problems arise out of this, with the possible minor exception that some of the folk on the Bass Strait islands are not eligible for unemployment benefit because they live too far away to do the things that they have to do in order to get it. Other States have referred to this. In the course of this conference, I have realized how I can turn this to the advantage of the people on the Bass Strait islands. I have tried to persuade one particular family to move to Tasmania in order that we may do something and do some more effective case work in the interests of the wife and the children. The man has one supreme ambition in life, and that is to get on to social services. I now propose to tell him that if he will move to Tasmania he may line up and apply for social service benefits and get them.

Mr. HILLS. - We have no problems.

Mr. PORTER. - We have no problems in Victoria. I have already thanked Mr. Robertson for his assistance before.

Dr. NOBLE. - We were very pleased when pensions and the like were given to native people recently, and we have no problems with respect to those who get benefits. But there is an anomaly that I can bring up with respect to people who do not come under the Aboriginals Protection Act. They are Torres Strait islanders. These are a wonderful race of people. They all are fully employed for most of the year and they all lead active and normal lives. There are two anomalies. During the war, the Torres Strait islanders formed a very useful contingent in the Australian armed forces - the Torres Strait Battalion. They were an essential element of the armed forces in the north, and they made very good soldiers. At the beginning of the war, they were paid a very small amount - about 2s. a day. They had a sit-down strike on one occasion, and I believe that Mr. O'Leary made a

quick trip to Victoria Barracks in Melbourne and confronted General Blamey or somebody else high up. The pay of these islanders in the regiment was advanced to two-thirds of that of the normal Australian digger.

Some of these islanders were incapacitated and the like during the war and were given pensions. But, strangely enough, these pensions are much smaller than those of normal Australian diggers. It seems to me that we are only giving lip service to the policy of assimilation if we distinguish between two classes - one coloured and one not coloured.

(Continued on page 102.)

Both classes gave equal service to the country at the time of its need. Let me quote T.P.I. pensions as an example of what I mean. In 1957, the rate for a white Australian Digger was £51 a month, but that for a totally incapacitated member of the Torres Strait Battalion, who gave equal service to his country with that given by the white man was only £10.5.0 a month. The proportion is the same right down the list. For instance, his wife gets £3.15.0 as against £22 for the wife of the white Digger. Similarly, the rate for the first child of the Torres Strait islander is £1.10.0 as against £2.15.0 for the first child of the white Digger. To my mind it is grossly unfair that the coloured Torres Strait Digger should get less than the white Digger. Again, if he were living in Queensland, with full rights as a citizen he would get full pension. Because he lives on the Torres Strait islands he gets infinitely less. It is time that equal benefits were given to the two classes. At least the Torres Strait islander should get a pension commensurate with the salary he was getting as a Digger - two-thirds of the rate paid to the white Digger in Australia. Such differentiation could create a scandal. If it were reported in the world press, the world could point the finger of scorn at us, and rightly so.

Then we come to the question of unemployment benefit. If he were in Queensland and were returned to his settlement upon becoming unemployed he would be entitled to unemployment benefit while so unemployed. These Torres Strait islanders are a great body of people. They rule their own local affairs through councillors. Each island elects its own councillors. The councils meet every three years and make by-laws for the good government of their islands. The only white person on the islands is the school teacher who acts as liaison officer between the islanders and the Government. No white magistrate ever goes

to the islands. These people are a very intelligent race. The chaps up there do very well in the pearling industry. I suppose the overseas income returned to Australia from the sale of pearl shell by the Island Industries Board amounts to £120,000 a year. So, their contribution to this country's economy is no small thing. Some of these men have done very well. A stern diver up there can earn up to £2,000 or £3,000 a year. One of the stern divers saved his money and bought his own luggers. To-day he owns six luggers and has an income of many thousands of pounds a year. He pays full taxes. Everyone on the Torres Strait islands pays full taxes. They are a wonderful race.

Again, these people are seasonal workers. For three months of the year there is no employment in the Torres Strait in the pearling industry. In Queensland we have seasonal workers in a great many callings. The sugar industry is one. When the mills close down there is a great deal of unemployment in towns such as Cairns and Mackay. The meatworks is also a seasonal industry. These Queensland seasonal workers are paid a special rate awarded by the Queensland Industrial Court because of the seasonal nature of their work. It cannot be argued that these men are employed in the slack season because they are not. They do not work because they get well paid while they are working and, with the unemployment benefit paid to them, they prefer to have the two or three months' holiday.

The men in the Torres Strait islands are playing their part in the economy of Australia. They are the bulwark between Australia and New Guinea and might well prove to be an essential bulwark in the years to come. Heaven knows what is going to happen up there; and it would be nice to know that we have a loyal group of people up there, as we have now. They are engaged in seasonal work. There is no work for two or three months in the pearling industry because the weather prevents the luggers going out at certain season. Again, when working, these men

take far greater risks than does the average man in Australia; and, I repeat, they earn for Australia £120,000 a year by way of overseas income. They are suffering a great injustice at the hands of the Australian people.

The argument used by the Social Services Department is that because they are not living on Thursday Island and seeking employment on Thursday Island, they are not entitled to unemployment benefit. As I see it, it would be a social injustice to these people to keep them on Thursday Island. I can imagine the state of Thursday Island with 500 husky Torres Strait islanders sitting about for two or three months twiddling their thumbs and drawing social service benefits - which they would be entitled to draw if they stayed on the island. Goodness knows what would happen to the island when they got bored with life. Again it would not be fair to their families. You could not expect them to bring their families to the island, and they are away from their families for six or seven months of the year getting the pearl shell. I repeat it is a gross injustice that the Australians do not do the right thing by these Torres Strait islanders and give them their just rights - unemployment benefit during the time of their unemployment.

Sitting suspended from 5.25 to 8 p.m.

(Continued on page 105)

Dr. NOBLE. - I would like to add one comment to my earlier remarks about Torres Strait islanders. They are not picked up on Thursday Island for employment; they are picked up on their own islands for employment. That is very important.

Mr. PEARSON. - I do not want to develop this at any length. I notice that in the conclusions on page 4 of this item, sub-paragraph (1) sets out that there will be in effect a re-examination of the position by the Department of Social Services, the State authorities, mission officials and the managers of pastoral properties employing aborigines. South Australia commends the attitude of the Commonwealth for the action taken in initiating legislation to provide for the payment of social services to aborigines. Any difficulties that have arisen in regard to the distribution of the benefits are purely machinery and I think of a passing nature. With further experience, these problems will be ironed out. The matters that we have raised are, however, real problems. They are not imaginary or even of small moment, but they are matters of administration and I think they can be satisfactorily resolved. I am prepared to rest on the understanding that there will be a re-examination made by the department, the State authorities, mission officials and others concerned. I have no doubt that in due course the problems will be overcome.

Mr. PERKINS. - With the payment of social service benefits, I would like to emphasise that in a big proportion of cases in Western Australia it is very important that warrantees should be appointed. I suppose it will be natural that as the natives become more sophisticated they will be able to handle their own finances, but without the warantee system at present grave abuses could develop. It is also very important to use the warrantee system as a means of keeping those, who have been living at some out of the way place, where they normally belong. If that is not done, and some of these people drift into city life, around Kalgoorlie

for instance, they may become a problem. I would like to emphasise with Mr. Robertson that the warranty system is working well. We are using our welfare officers wherever we can and in other instances we use independent responsible persons. If we run into difficulties, we would like to feel that we could approach Mr. Robertson or his senior officers.

Great care would need to be exercised if the suggestion to pay unemployment benefits were adopted. I could imagine that many natives would never do any more work for the rest of their lives and by one means or another would make themselves unattractive to employers.

DR. NOBLE.- They would not be paid unemployment benefit.

MR. PERKINS.- But it is very easy to get yourself into a position where nobody wants you. I appreciate the difficulties that you are in, Dr. Noble, and I am not suggesting that in genuine cases something like that may not be developed and could be a big help. However, I suggest that if the Commonwealth Government is contemplating that extension, particularly to meet needs such as Dr. Noble has mentioned, there would be need to arrange for discussion with our departmental officers to ensure that abuses are not likely to develop in other cases where perhaps the position is not exactly parallel.

DR. NOBLE.- The Torres Strait islanders are completely assimilated. They have pride of race. You never see a part-coloured Torres Strait islander because they do not want to live with white people.

MR. HASLUCK.- I think I am right in saying that under your State laws the Torres Strait islanders are not aboriginals. I do not want to take a technical point, but they are not really within the purview of this conference.

DR. NOBLE.- It does not cost one penny to keep the Torres Strait islanders. They keep themselves by pearl diving and other activities. They have shown that they are doing a real job in the economy of this country and they are worthy of receiving unemployment benefit, just as sugar cane workers do.

MR. PERKINS.- I thought Dr. Noble contemplated the payment of social service benefits in certain circumstances to actual Australian natives.

DR. NOBLE.- I am talking about Torres Strait islanders.

MR. PERKINS.- Did you not cover the others as well?

DR. NOBLE.- No. The natives on our settlements would be entitled to unemployment benefit when they came back from employment, but we do not want it for them. When they come back on to the settlement they are paid a wage to work part-time on the settlement. In the Torres Strait, it is a different thing altogether. They are independent. It does not cost us a penny to keep them. They are picked up on their own islands. They go to work and they pay taxes, just like others, but for some reason they do not receive unemployment benefit during the period of one or two months of the year that they are unemployed.

MR. PERKINS.- I think my point would be covered if Mr. Robertson could arrange that whenever any alteration in the arrangements for payment of social services to natives is envisaged, senior officers of his department discuss it with our senior officers. I think it is very much better to have that discussion early in the piece than to start something and then find that difficulties are arising. I would like to assure you that we are most anxious to give you our fullest co-operation.

Mr. ROBERTON. - The introduction of social service benefits to the aboriginal natives of our country on the same basis as other people has given me great satisfaction. The scheme, now that it has been in operation for twelve months, seems to have met with the complete satisfaction of all States, with certain minor reservations. In New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania a state of perfection has been reached where social service benefits are paid direct to the aborigines in precisely the same way as they are paid to European residents in this country. That is the intention of the Commonwealth Government. That was the intention of my department when I introduced the amendment to the Social Services Act. My intention was that as soon as possible all semblance of discrimination against the aboriginal natives should disappear. It is very satisfying to me that that has taken place in so many States.

It is not easy to amend a Federal act any more than it is easy for any State Minister to amend a State act. The only way that I was able to effect this amendment was that I could assure the Federal Cabinet that I would get the whole-hearted co-operation of the States and an unqualified assurance from the Premiers that there would be no retraction from the traditional State responsibility with regard to native welfare. That, as far as I can judge, has been carried out in the letter and in the spirit. For those reasons, if for no other reason, the amendment to the act has been justified.

I would like to refer to some of the difficulties that have been encountered. The major difficulty seems to be in South Australia, where there has been a degree of misunderstanding. Apparently it is not clearly understood in South Australia that the intention was to pay social service benefits to the aboriginal natives who qualified for them in precisely the same way as they are paid to other people within the limits of the physical capacity of the people concerned to manage their own affairs. In some of the missions in South Australia I am informed

that the impression is held that the moneys that are paid on behalf of particular individual aborigines can be used for a variety of general purposes. That is not so. Similarly, some people imagine that if these funds could be used for the general promotion of aboriginal native welfare without regard to the particular individuals to whom they rightly belong, the amendment would be quite justified on those grounds. That is not so. The social service benefits are made available to the aboriginal natives with the clear and precise intention that as soon as possible those benefits should go to the individuals who qualify for them. In all States and in the Northern Territory my officers have been instructed that they should keep in close touch with people associated with native welfare and that they should be guided by their advice and recommendations to achieve that end.

I hope that as a result of this conference these minor confusions will disappear very rapidly and that social service benefits will be paid to the individuals who qualify for them and who are capable of managing their own affairs.

I should like to refer to the general observations made by Dr. Noble regarding natives of the Torres Strait, who at the moment are excluded from unemployment and sickness benefits. If the criticisms of Dr. Noble were valid, they would provide ample justification for a tightening of the administration of the act in Queensland. Dr. Noble alleges that tens of thousands of people habitually receive unemployment benefits. He referred to seasonal workers engaged in the sugar and other industries in Queensland.

Dr. NOBLE. - They are entitled to those benefits if the Commonwealth cannot find other employment for them.

Mr. ROBERTON. - Dr. Noble's criticisms are not strictly valid. If we have a work force of 5,500,000, and I believe that our work force must exceed that figure if we have a population of 10,300,000 and if only 3,250,000 are children under 16 years of age, only a proportion can qualify for unemployment and sickness benefits in the strict terms of the act. Those people are industrial workers in the concentration points of population.

Unemployment and sickness benefits were introduced in 1947 for the
2.2

purpose of allowing those people in those industrial communities to maintain their social circumstances for a comparatively short space of time in order that they could be re-absorbed in industry as soon as possible.

(Continued on page 110)

At no stage was unemployment benefit or sickness benefit designed by this or any previous government as a permanent and enduring social service benefit. It is a complete delusion to imagine that today tens of thousands of people - seasonal workers and those engaged in itinerant industries such as the sugar, meat and other industries - are constantly receiving unemployment benefits for long periods each year. That is simply not true. Today, for example, there are some 14,000 people, in a work force of 5,500,000, receiving unemployment benefits. Unemployment benefits were introduced purely for industrial purposes to tide the industrial worker over a brief period of unemployment in the hope that he would be reabsorbed into industry as rapidly as possible. With a work force of the dimensions I have mentioned, the fact that we have only 14,000 people in receipt of unemployment benefits in the six States of the Commonwealth and the Territories, demonstrates the fatal flaw in Doctor Noble's argument. The people who qualify for unemployment benefits are those who can conform with the terms of the act.

To conform with the terms of the act and qualify for unemployment benefits people must, in the first place, be unemployed. They must register; they must be ready and willing to accept employment anywhere and they must produce evidence from time to time, at regular intervals, that they have themselves tried to find employment. Indeed, it is said almost every week by my own department and by the Department of Labour and National Service that it is not the function of the Government to find jobs. It is the function of the governments - and I speak in the plural - to assist people to find jobs but the initiative lies with the people themselves. They must constantly produce evidence that almost from day to day, in the concentration points of population, they are trying to find employment and are anxious and willing to accept it. That is the provision placed in the act and it was done, wisely, by a previous government.

It was done for the very reason - I think it was Mr. Pearson or Mr. Perkins who emphasized the point - that unemployment benefit is not a permanent social service benefit which can be enjoyed by the community at large for indefinite periods. That sociologically, would do incalculable harm to the industrial character of our people and our country. For that reason the benefits were restricted to those who can qualify in these simple ways; registration, in the first place, and readiness and willingness to accept employment anywhere.

Dr. NOBLE. - Where it is found for them.

Mr. ROBERTON. - No, they have to find it themselves.

Dr. NOBLE. - But what if they do not look for it?

On your own figures the unemployment figures in Queensland have risen by 1,500 in the last month. You are paying those people at Mackay and Cairns, who work in the sugar fields and in the meat industry at Gladstone, where unemployment is rampant today - and if you do not know that you should, as Minister for Social Services - unemployment benefits, so why in God's name can you not pay it to the other people of Australia such as the Torres Strait Islanders, who do very good work for nine months of the year and would do more, if the work was available? Some of these parsonic arguments make me sick.

Mr. ROBERTON. - I cannot cope with these emotional outbursts.

Dr. NOBLE. - You come to Canberra and live in your ivory tower and it makes me sick to hear you air your lack of knowledge of what is happening in other parts of Australia.

Mr. ROBERTON. - I do not live in Canberra; I never have, and, by God's grace I never shall. I live in Riverina, which is equally remote -

Dr. NOBLE. - You have said it.

Mr. ROBERTON. - It is equally as remote as is north Queensland, and the circumstances are the same. I want

you to understand the Social Services Act and the position of the Minister, no matter who he may be. As soon as a person qualifies for any kind of social service benefit it is paid forthwith consistently and without question by the department throughout the period during which that person is qualified. It is beyond my power as Minister or the power of the department to grant social service benefits of any kind to people who do not qualify. If the department, by some error of judgment or some defalcation on the part of the applicant pays a social service benefit to a person who is not qualified the department, under the act, must recover the overpayment and prosecute forthwith. The act is clear and distinct in that regard. It is not possible for any Minister for Social Services, no matter who he might be, to ease the circumstances with regard to certain people or certain localities within the country.

Dr. NOBLE. - Why do not these Torres Strait islanders qualify? Where do they not qualify, under the act?

Mr. ROBERTON. - I have explained to the Prime Minister and he has explained to the Premier of Queensland what the precise circumstances are.

Dr. NOBLE. - In your letter to the Premier of Queensland the precise circumstances were that if they lived on Thursday Island you would give them unemployment benefits.

Mr. ROBERTON. - Never, at any stage, have I said that. However, we do not want to argue about this.

Dr. NOBLE. - Then all I have to do in Queensland is to give these people full citizenship rights. Then it will be a public scandal if they do not get unemployment benefits.

Mr. HASLUCK. - Is this the proper place for this particular phase of the argument? This is a native welfare conference.

Dr. NOBLE. - And this is a matter of native welfare.

Mr. HASLUCK. - Under your Queensland legislation the Torres Strait Islanders are a distinct class. They are not

aborigines.

DR. NOBLE.- That is only playing with words.

MR. HASLUCK.- They are regarded as a distinct class.

As I understand the position that you have been putting recently it is not that you want these people to get any particular benefit or assistance because they happen to be coloured people, but the whole trend of your argument is that they are a special group in the ordinary community. Surely that is not a problem for this conference. This conference is dealing with a special group of aboriginal people who in some respects are a bit different from the rest of the community. If the Queensland Government has a case to present in respect of this special minority group of the ordinary community, I think it is an argument that you have between the Premier of Queensland and the Prime Minister and I do not think it is an argument which we can thrash out here. To take it to its conclusion, what could we do at this conference of State Ministers? What opinion could we express on that question?

DR. NOBLE.- Here are these blokes who have fought in the war and they have repatriation benefits, I know, but I will make a public statement on this matter in Queensland.

MR. ROBERTON.- I want to come to that point. The Repatriation Act is administered by the Minister for Repatriation and he, like the Minister for Social Services and every other Commonwealth and State Minister, is bound by the strict terms of his act. It would be a great pleasure for me and for most other ministers if we could sometimes step outside the limits of our acts.

DR. NOBLE.- But you have not told me why they cannot qualify under your act.

MR. ROBERTON.- **As regards** the terms and conditions of the Repatriation Act, we must remember that they were evolved at a time when the nation was in an emotional stage and was generous to those in the services, within certain limits. Dr. Noble has forgotten that there were at least two armies in Australia during the last war and the conditions which applied

to each of them were entirely different.

DR. NOBLE.- You would not go on the public platform with that kind of statement.

MR. ROBERTON.- I have here a copy of the letter of the Prime Minister, addressed to the Premier of Queensland and it might be of some interest.

MR. HASLUCK.- Before we get on to that I think this conference, as a native welfare conference, might consider how far it wants to carry this particular argument. As Chairman, I do not want to lay down any rulings and say that this is outside the scope of the conference. If the conference wants to discuss something I will not raise technical points and stand in its way. But I put it to the conference that this question regarding the repatriation benefits of the Torres Strait Islanders - a subject which has been discussed extensively by the Queensland Government with the Minister for Repatriation - and the question of the position of the Torres Strait Islanders as ordinary members of the community, has also been discussed between the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government. If the Ministers present here want to continue discussing this question I will not use my authority as chairman to stop them. But I wonder whether it is the sort of question which can be brought to a conclusion at this conference. As practical politicians each of us should ask ourselves whether we can arrive at a conclusion. What you want is something from the Commonwealth Government which will answer your question.

DR. NOBLE.- All I want is proper rights for these people in their field of endeavour. I do not care a damn whether I get back into Parliament or not and I will make a public issue of this.

MR. HASLUCK.- The point I am putting for your consideration is whether you can get the issue you want resolved resolved at this conference.

DR. NOBLE.- The Minister for Social Services has not told me why these people cannot get the benefits.

MR. HASLUCK.- He is here to discuss social service benefits for aborigines and these people are not aborigines.

DR. NOBLE.- You are missing the point.

MR. HASLUCK.- I am not.

DR. NOBLE.- Your point is that we must overcome the propaganda from overseas against what we are doing for our coloured people. Here is something where we can prove that we are not just giving lip service.

MR. HASLUCK.- If you, as Ministers, want to express your opinions on this I will not take technical points and stand in your way, but in my view it is the sort of thing which is more likely to be brought to a satisfactory conclusion by direct discussion between the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government.

DR. NOBLE.- I will stump the country on this.

MR. HASLUCK.- I am not trying to stop the discussion and the way is still open to the Queensland Government to make as emphatic a case as it chooses to make to the Commonwealth Government. The argument can be ^{conducted} government to government, but is it one in which other ministers want to participate?

MR. HILLS.- We are hearing discussion and suggestions by Dr. Noble about the difficulties surrounding coloured peoples and it is unfortunate that a controversy like this was begun even between the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government.

DR. NOBLE.- If I could hear one tangible reason why the Minister cannot give the normal unemployment benefits to unemployed people who risk their lives for nine months of the year to make £120,000 in overseas funds for the Commonwealth Government the position would be different. I want to hear why they cannot get the benefits like the sugar cane workers receive.

Mr. ROBERTON. - I have given you two million reasons.

There are two million people who are excluded by their circumstances from ever qualifying for unemployment benefits. There are all the self-employed people and those who work on farms and in remote localities. Let me give you the reasons, which you do not seem to understand. They don't register with the Department of Labour and National Service as unemployed, they are in no position to accept employment anywhere, they are in no position to seek employment anywhere and, as a consequence, they are in no position to satisfy the work test. These are the reasons why they cannot qualify in the terms of the Social Services Act. If they could qualify or could come within a hair's breadth of qualifying under the Social Services Act these benefits would be paid to them. It will do your soul good, if nothing else, if I say that the only reason why people are not paid unemployment benefits is that they cannot qualify in the terms of the Social Services Act.

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The terms and conditions for the payment of unemployment benefit are laid down by the Department of Labour and National Service. When that department informs me that a person or group of persons is unemployed, that person or group qualifies forthwith without a moment's delay. But when the Department of Labour and National Service says that people are not available for employment or are doing nothing to obtain employment for themselves and therefore do not qualify, they are disqualified from unemployment benefit whether they live on the Torres Strait islands, in the Northern Territory, in the Riverina or anywhere else, and there are millions of them all over the Commonwealth.

DR. NOBLE.- I did not know that there were so many unemployed in the Commonwealth. You are not giving me your normal figures. There were hundreds unemployed in Queensland last month in the sugar and meat industries. The only analogy with the Torres Strait islanders that you can make concerns those who work in the seasonal industries - the meat and sugar industries and the like. The Torres Strait islanders are in exactly the same position, but because they live on the islands of Torres Strait and have not a vote at the present time, they do not qualify.

MR. ROBERTON.- What you are suggesting is that the unemployed workers in Queensland ^{should} not receive Commonwealth unemployment benefit.

DR. NOBLE.- If they did not, not one federal Liberal member would be returned.

MR. HASLUCK.- As chairman of this conference, I am concerned about confining the discussion to the relevant matter. These island people are coloured and Dr. Noble suggests that one of the reasons for their disqualification is the fact that they are coloured.

MR. ROBERTON.- That could never be a reason.

DR. NOBLE.- One case is dealt with in the following letter from the Office of the Director of Native Affairs at Thursday Island to the Director of Native Affairs in Brisbane.

The letter is dated 17th January, 1959, and states -

Re Unemployment Benefit - Your file IF/369

The following copy of communication addressed to Islander [REDACTED] Island, C/- Deputy Director of Native Affairs, Thursday Island, has been forwarded to this office by the Registrar, Social Services Department, Cairns:

" Re Unemployment Benefit

I wish to advise that you have been granted unemployment benefit from 22nd December, 1958, whilst you reside at [REDACTED] Island or Thursday Island, and subject to the requirements as shown on the attached notice of grant.

It is necessary that you report personally each week at the Court House, Thursday Island.

When completing your weekly statement please list on the back of the statement the name and address of each employer contacted by you in your search for work.

Payment of benefit will be suspended or cancelled if a list of employers contacted is not given. "

Dr. NOBLE. - Where are we going in this country?

Mr. HASLUCK. - If this man were a white man living on one of these islands, would he suffer the same disqualification?

Dr. NOBLE. - No. He would get the benefit. Only one white man lives on the island. He is the school teacher. Would you bring a white man in to Thursday Island every week?

Mr. HASLUCK. - We must discuss this matter in an orderly fashion. Assuming that there is a case here, it does not relate to the fact that these people are coloured. It relates to the fact that they live in an isolated place.

Dr. NOBLE. - What about the man who lives at Marble Bar and who receives unemployment benefit?

Mr. HASLUCK. - As I understand the matter, it is not a question of colour. I suggest that unless other Ministers wish to pursue this matter, it is a matter of argument between the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government. The question primarily concerns not the colour of the applicant but his location. That being so, I suggest that we pass on to the next phase of the

matter.

MR. PERKINS.- Before we leave this matter of social services, I should like to emphasise to Mr. Robertson that although he is able to pay benefits direct in three States, it will be a long time before that can safely be done in Western Australia. We have a large number of primitive natives and are likely to have them for a long time. You, Mr. Chairman, know Western Australia well, of course. You know the small centre of Laverton, for instance. A few old pensioners are camped on the reserve there, and we are using our warrantee there to make sure that whatever payment is made on their behalf passes into their hands. There are hundreds of natives behind Laverton, and you can imagine what would happen if the money were passed over to these old pensioners. The other natives know the pension day, even though they are pretty primitive. They will hang round and you will find that the person whom the Social Services Act is designed to help - the age or invalid pensioner - will not have the money, which will pass into other hands. I am grateful for the discussions that officers of the Department of Social Services have had with our officers. It was as a result of those discussions and the guarantee that we gave that the money would be spent on those for whom the pension is meant that this thing has been made possible.

MR. ROBERTON.- That is so.

MR. PERKINS.- I think you place too much emphasis, Mr. Robertson, on the point that you aim at paying it to the individuals concerned. I think your anxiety should be to see that the pensioner gets the benefit of the pension. The only way to do that when we are dealing with some of these primitive types which we will have for quite a long time in some of the remote areas of Western Australia in particular, and elsewhere, is to use the warrantee system. You may make any check you like in Western Australia, and I am sure you will find that that system is not being abused. We are being very, very careful. Mr. Middleton can tell you of cases in which we have had to use country store-keepers for a short time and we have made very strenuous efforts

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and have eventually found someone who was an entirely independent party with no interest whatever in the expenditure of the money other than for the benefit of the particular pensioner concerned.

I feel that I should emphasise this, because without this system, we could have something of a scandal develop, and perhaps charges would be made that the payment of the pension to some of these people really was not justified.

DR. NOBLE.- We see just how hay-wire these things can get. As I have said, these Torres Strait islanders are doing a mighty job. They are producing pearl shell. This is very difficult to sell on the world market, but we are able to sell it. The Commonwealth Government charges 50 per cent. duty on imported pearl-shell, making the difficulty all the greater. One just cannot believe some of these things.

MR. HASLUCK.- I wonder whether the point made by Mr. Perkins should be taken up by any other Minister. On our experience in the Northern Territory, we would certainly endorse the picture, because we have similar difficulties.

MR. PEARSON.- I am glad that Mr. Perkins raised the point. I did not develop it deliberately. Mr. Robertson made reference to various aspects of the matter, and I am glad that Mr. Perkins raised it, because it was a real problem. I am sure that Mr. Robertson's remark that perfection had been achieved in three States was not meant as a reflection on the administration of any other State, because that would be merely a matter of the circumstances in the particular States.

MR. ROBERTON.- That is so.

MR. PEARSON.- We agree that wherever primitive natives or a wide range of types reside the problem is not easy to solve and will need careful handling on a developmental basis from time to time. We agree with the point of view put by Mr. Perkins. We are concerned that the matter be put right. That is why I said in passing that our problems are not illusory and imagined. They are very real. I believe that the experience of our State

officers, together with that of the Commonwealth's officers, will help us to evolve a satisfactory means of overcoming the problem.

Mr. HASLUCK. - I take it that the meaning of that is that in States which have special problems because of large numbers of tribalized or partly-tribalized natives in remote areas, we as administrations take on ourselves the duty of inspection and taking other steps through our own officers in co-operation with the Department of Social Services in order to see that abuses do not occur and that the benefit goes to those who we intend should receive it.

Mr. PERKINS. - We accept the responsibilities of the warrantee system. I think that is the right way to put it. We realise that this is a great responsibility. Our officers appreciate that very well. On the other hand, it is a responsibility that somebody has to accept, and we are very happy to do so as the native welfare authorities in the interests of the natives.

Mr. ROBERTON. - I think I may be permitted to say two important things on the points raised by Mr. Perkins and Mr. Pearson. The first is in respect of the problem of paying social service benefits of any kind to people who for any reason are incapable of managing their own affairs. The situation is not peculiar to the aboriginal natives of Australia, it is common to all people in similar circumstances. That is the most important thing I have to say. The same restrictions and variations are applicable to people of other races. Where someone in authority in the Department of Social Services is advised that a person is incapable of handling a social service benefit, other arrangements are made for the payment of the benefit to a warrantee or some other authority. These are my specific instructions, and they will be carried out. We want to work as closely as is physically possible with the welfare officers in all the States, and this applies also to the Northern Territory, because, so far as the Department of Social Services is concerned - and, I am quite certain, so far as the Commonwealth Government is concerned - there is no difference between the people of any race and the aboriginal natives who qualify for social service benefits of any kind.

M.R. HASLUCK.- I take it that the first of the two conclusions on page 4 is acceptable to the South Australian Government, and I assume that if that is so, the rest of us also can accept it.

(Continued on page 124.).

The second point envisages direct consultation between certain State departments and the Department of Social Services separately from this conference. From the discussion that has just taken place, I should like to know whether you would wish to add a third statement that you are satisfied with the position as put forward by Mr. Perkins, Mr. Pearson and myself regarding the need for continued consultation and co-operation between State and territorial administrations and the Department of Social Services to ensure that the benefits paid are dispensed for the benefit of the individual concerned. The point I want to bring out is that this applies to those States and Territories which have natives who are still living a nomadic or semi-nomadic life and does not apply to those States where the natives are living a more settled life.

MR. PERKINS. - I think it applies in other places because we have instances in which the pensioners have male relatives who are rather poor types and are wasting the beneficiary's pension. If our officers at any of these places advise the Social Services Department that in a particular case the pension is being wasted or not being spent for the benefit of the pensioner, that should justify some action. As Mr. Robertson has said, it is no different from any other case in the community. Do not restrict it to remote areas because it is likely to happen anywhere.

MR. HASLUCK. - Perhaps we can make a general statement that we recognise the necessity for officers of the State and territorial administrations to keep in close consultation and co-operate with officers of the Department of Social Services to ensure that the benefits paid go into and remain in the hands of the people they are intended to benefit. Then, if Dr. Noble will accept it, I suggest that we note the points he has raised about the Torres Strait islanders and suggest that it is a matter for direct discussion between the Queensland and Commonwealth governments.

MR. HILLS. - If we have reached a conclusion that it is a matter for the two governments I think it should be recorded because, if something does come up later on and it is stated that it was discussed here there will be a record that this conference felt that it was a matter between the two governments.

MR. HASLUCK. - I think it should be noted that Dr. Noble raised the matter of the Torres Strait islanders and it was agreed that this was a matter which the Queensland Government should raise with the Commonwealth Government separately from this conference.

Conference agreed.

Item 6.

CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN RESERVES.

Administrative arrangements necessary to provide welfare services and training programmes for those semi-nomadic natives in the contiguous Western Australian, South Australian and Northern Territory reserves particularly in the Long-Range Weapons Research Establishment area.

reads - MR. SWIFT. - The report of the Committee of Officers

1. In these Reserves are some 1,500 nomadic and semi-nomadic aborigines of common culture, language and society. In the main they are often migratory within this Reserve area, the main settling points being the Ernabella Mission in South Australia, Warburton Mission in Western Australia, and the Areyonga and Papunya Government Settlements in the Northern Territory.

2. They present a problem because they tend to drift occasionally to slums on the outskirts of towns such as Oodnadatta and Finke, and also to congregate at times at the Giles Weather Station and Ayers Rock. It is difficult to help them with nutrition, health and hygiene and to give them the first training towards assimilation. The chief need at present is to encourage them to settle in one place and accept employment.

3. The Committee considers that proposals which have been made for a combined pastoral training project in the area should not be proceeded with, but that the following principles should be adopted -

(a) There should be no revocation of any of the Reserves in this area,