Excerpts from Les Foster – Treatment of Aborigines on Palm Island

Excerpt 1: pages 6­–9

Les Foster letter (19 December 1961)

19-12-61

The Secretary

Of the House of Representatives,

Canberra

Australia

Dear Sir

It gives me great pleasure, of writing to you, to let you know that my people are anxiously waiting for the day when all the Australian Aborigines will come under one Government.

When that day comes then we’ll have a voice in the affairs of our Settlements.

Sir the things that goes in Aboriginal Settlement if it gets to the papers it will open every body eyes who reads the papers.

Palm Island is my home town and the things that happens today on Palm Island.

Sir if we could have a Representative from Canberra to come up and stay for a few days we’d like him to meet the people. (I mean the native people) and then you will get a clear picture of how we are getting treated up here. Our girls are like caged up animals. Where ever they go a black tracker are told to follow them they can’t talk to their boyfriends even at the pictures. They can’t sit together, if they ask for permission to sit or talk with their girlfriends they get knock back or be ordered to jail. Which it isn’t right. On the Island we have far too many whites. Palm Island is a place where colour [illegible] is we have two schools one for the whites and one for our native children. Wages on the Island is very very low. You would have to be the boss’s pet before you can get a good pay. I myself. I get 4/- day. I am not very well liked by the whites and some of the natives.

These natives come from Torres Strait. I think they should be sent back to their homes because they are not our people and we don’t want them on a Australian Aboriginal Settlements.

The only thing I know that will make Palm Island a happy home for us is to change the white staff because now we have four Superintendents and the people don’t know who to listen to. The other thing did to support to you it that mother’s on Palm Island who are receiving Child Endowment money is taken out of each pay to pay for four case of fruit (and no receipts are given to mother) over 1200 mothers received Child Endowment. I think and we all think that the money is being used some other way which we do not know that is why we would like a Representatives from Canberra to come up to Palm Island and spend a few days with us and you’ll find out what really goes on at Palm Island.

Here’s hoping my letter will received your favourable consideration.

I remain yours faithfully

Les Foster

Palm Island  
Native Leader

Palm Island  
Townsville N.Q

P.S. Wishing you all a Merry Xmas and a bright & happy new year. And may God bless you all.

Excerpt 2: page 5­

Receipt of received letter (23 December 1961)

Mr. A. L. Moore,

Private Secretary to the Prime Minister.

I am not sure to whom the attached letter should be referred. Do you think the P.M.’s Dept. would deal with it.

V.J. Parkes

Clerk Assistant.

22/12/61.

Excerpt 3: page 4

E.J. Bunting letter (5 January 1962)

WNW:RK

5 Jan 1962

61/7655

Dear Mr. Foster,

Your letter to the Secretary of the House of Representatives regarding conditions at Palm Island has been passed to me.

I am having enquiries made and will write to you again as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

(E.J. Bunting)

Secretary

Mr. Les Foster,

Palm Island,

Townsville,

NORTH QUEENSLAND.

Copy Soc. Services. (Melb) [illegible]

Soc. Services. (Bris) [illegible]

[illegible] Info

Excerpt 4: page 3

H.J. Goodes letter (31 January 1962)

37/PW

A.55/3302

The Secretary,

Prime Minister’s Department,

CANBERRA. A.C.T.

Subject: Representations by Mr. Les FOSTER of Palm Island, Townsville.

Reference: Your memorandum of 4th January, 1962 No. 61/7655.

In his letter Mr. Foster refers to a number of aspects which do not come within the province of this Department. However a report has been forwarded by the Director of Social Services, Brisbane, concerning the disbursement of child endowment and is as follows:-

“All child endowment payments in respect of children residing on the aboriginal settlement at Palm Island are arranged through the Director of Native Affairs. In the case of those children who live in dormitories and are clothed and fed by the Department of Native Affairs the endowment is paid to the Department on a normal institutional basis. This money is used to provide fruit, sweets, ice creams and other extras not covered by the prepared scale of rations. It is assumed that the complaint made by Mr. Foster does not relate to the child endowment payments made in this manner.

With regard to the children who are in the full custody, care and control of their parents a schedule is forwarded to the Director of Native Affairs each four weeks setting forth the individual amounts payable to each endowee. A cheque for the total amount shown on the schedule is also forwarded.

A copy of this schedule is forwarded by the Director of Native Affairs to the Superintendent at the Palm Island settlement who credits the various amounts due, to the individual trust accounts of the respective endowees.

In order to ensure that the children receive an adequate supply of fresh fruit at a reasonable price the Department of Native Affairs makes a daily issue of fresh fruit (chiefly apples and oranges which cannot be grown locally) to each child attending school. A deduction of 4d. per day is made from the trust account of each endowee to meet the cost of supplying this fruit.

In his letter Mr. Foster mentions that there are more than 1200 mothers in receipt of child endowment. It is not known how this figure was arrived at. The records of this Department show that there are some 140 endowees to whose trust accounts endowment is individually credited and approximately 360 children in respect of whom endowment is paid to the Department of Native Affairs on an institutional basis.”

(H.J. Goodes)

Director-General.

Excerpt 5: page 2

E.J. Bunting letter (13 February 1962)

WH:RK

61/7655

Dear Mr. Foster,

I have had the Social Services Department report to me on the payments of child endowment to the mothers of the Palm Island Settlement – the matter you raised in your letter of 19th December.

There are about 140 mothers at Palm Island who look after their own children, and the child endowment in respect of these children is paid into their individual trust accounts by the Superintendent.

To make sure that the children get enough fresh fruit, the Superintendent issues some fresh fruit daily, and he does make a deduction of 4d per day from every trust account to pay for the fruit. I am sure you would agree that it is a good thing to provide in this way for a cheap and regular supply of fresh fruit for the children.

The other matters you raised in your letter are not dealt with by the Commonwealth Government.

Yours sincerely,

(E.J. Bunting)

Secretary

Mr. Les Foster,

Palm Island,

Townsville,

NORTH QUEENSLAND.