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AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES
GPO Box 553, Canberra, A.C.T. 2601

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT

ISLANDER YOUTH CONFERENCE

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ELEANOR A BOURKE
Director
Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Services
Department of Social Security

BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENTS TO ABORIGINALS

Up until the mid 1960's the law allowing payments under the Social Security Act discriminated against Aborigines. They did not have the same entitlements to pensions, benefits and allowances as other Australians..

The original Invalid and Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 specifically excluded Aboriginal natives of Australia, Africa and the islands of the Pacific or New Zealand from pensions. This continued until 1942 when the Act was amended to provide that a pension could be paid to an Aboriginal native of Australia who was exempt, from the provisions of the law of the State in which he/she resided according to the control of Aboriginal natives.

At that time most States provided for the granting of Certificates of Exemption to those Aborigines who "has reached a certain standard of character, intelligence and social development". Certificates of Exemption were, however, not generally granted to Aborigines who resided on Church missions or Government reserves set apart exclusively for the use of Aborigines.

Child Endowment was introduced in 1941. It could be paid to an Aboriginal native who was not nomadic or wholly dependant on the Commonwealth or the State. This payment is now known as Family Allowance.

Unemployment and Sickness Benefits were introduced in 1944 and were payable to Aborigines, but the Director-General had to be satisfied on the basis of character, standard of intelligence and development that an Aboriginal should receive the benefit; It was also necessary that the recipient was not nomadic or wholly dependant on the Commonwealth or the State.

The Act (now the Social Services Act) was further amended in 1959 and all disqualifications were removed except for those Aborigines who were regarded as nomadic or primitive. In practice an Aboriginal was not regarded as nomadic or primitive if he was in contact with a white community, even if he/she continued to follow tribal laws and customs.

At the time, people working in the then Department of Social Services were concerned that there might be problems associated with the injection of comparatively large sums of money into Aboriginal communities. In particular, the payment of pensions to individual Aborigines who, up to that time, had had little or no experience in handling money.

The Department, accordingly, found itself in somewhat of a dilemma. If it did not pay the pensions and benefits which were now freely available to Aborigines, it would leave itself open to charges of discrimination. On the other hand, if it did pay, there could be some serious social implications for which the Department would be criticised. The view was taken that these problems would have to be faced by the State Governments which were then responsible for Aboriginal welfare

The States had been pressing the Australian Government to remove from the Social Services Act these provisions which discriminated against Aborigines.

Due to the awareness of the social problems and the consequent advice of the state Departments responsible for Aboriginal welfare including Missions authorities, as an interim measure, Aboriginal pensioners were paid a small portion of their pensions. The balance was paid to the Mission authorities, State Departments and owners or managers of cattle stations willing to cooperate. This position was to be applied to the general welfare of the Aboriginal pensioners.

This procedure had overtones of paternalism and discrimination which the Government was anxious to dispel. As Aborigines became more accustomed to handling money, the portion of the pension which they would receive would be increased until gradually they would receive a full pension paid direct as in the case of other members of the community.

In 1966, all references to Aborigines were withdrawn in the Social Security Act.

1967 REFERENDUM

Progress towards full direct payment of pensions was well on the way when Mr Wentworth became Minister for Social Services in 1968. He authorised that this policy be speeded up and all Aborigines who desired to receive their social security payments direct did so.

In the case of the Torres Strait Islanders the majority of whom, after having been granted direct payment, asked to revert to the former procedure whereby a bulk cheque is forwarded to the Deputy Director of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs on Thursday Island. the amount was radioed to the credit of each pensioner care of the store on each outlying island. It was found that, under the direct payment method, there were long delays in the cheques reaching the recipients on the outlying islands mainly due to irregular postal services especially in the cyclone season.

This procedure was changed back to individual payments from Cairns Region in 198_. In 1984 DSS established an office on Thursday Island and a Thursday Islander is District Officer.

Payment of Unemployment Benefits

The policy of apportioning the payments between the recipients and some other person or authority was not applied to unemployment benefits. Prior to May 1973, unemployment benefit was rarely paid to Aborigines on church missions or Government settlements and then only if they were taking active steps to obtain such work and werewilling to accept work outside the mission or settlement. In the Northern Territory, Aborigines who were capable and willing to undertake work were in receipt of a training allowance paid by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Aborigines are now entitled to the full range of benefits under the provisions of the Social Security Act (1947): eg, Age Pensions, Invalid Pensions, Wives and Widows Pensions, Supporting Parents Benefits, Unemployment, Sickness and Special Benefits, Health Care Benefits.

SUMMARY OF DSS PAYMENTS AS THEY AFFECTED ABORIGINALS

- 1908 The Original Invalid and Old Age Pensions Act
Aboriginals excluded.
- 1941 Child Endowment - could be paid to an Aboriginal who
was not nomadic or wholly dependent on the
Commonwealth or the State.
- 1942 The Act was amended to provide that a pension could be
paid to an Aboriginal native of Australia who was
exempt from the provision of the Law of the State
relating to the control of Aboriginals.
- 1944 Unemployment and Sickness Benefits - could be paid to
Aboriginals who had to be assessed on his character,
intelligence and development, also that he was not
nomadic or wholly dependent on the Commonwealth /State.
- 1959 The Act (changed to Social Services Act) was amended
and all disqualifications were removed except for
those Aboriginals who were regarded as nomadic or
primitive.
- 1966 All references to Aboriginals were withdrawn.
- 1967 Referendum: Aboriginals became recognised as citizens
of Australia; all exemptions removed.
- 1968 Minister of Social Services, Mr Wentworth, directed
that his policy be speeded up and all Aboriginals be
paid direct.
- Pre May 1973 Unemployment Benefit was rarely paid to Aboriginals on
Church Missions or Government Settlements.
- 1977 Aboriginals living on Missions, Reserves or Government
settlements had to show 18 months work experience
before becoming eligible for Unemployment Benefit.



Department of Social Security

PO BOX 1, WODEN, ACT, 2606

Please Quote:
Telephone Ext:

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SERVICES IN DSS

Staffing in Central Office

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services Section comprises five (5) officers - Director, three Project Officers and a Research Assistant. The Section provides advice to the Minister and senior management on the policy and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

State Headquarters, Aboriginal Units in Capital Cities

Each State, except Tasmania, has an Aboriginal Services Manager, some States have a Project Officer and a Clerical Assistant which form an Aboriginal Unit in State Headquarters.

Tasmania has one Aboriginal Liaison officer.

Presently there are some 65 Aboriginal Liaison Officers positions throughout Australia. At 25 February 58 ALO positions were occupied

In Queensland there are also Aboriginal welfare officers.

In NT, NSW, QLD at some Regional Officers Aboriginal Counter Officers are employed.

Other Aboriginal Staff

Aboriginal people work in other areas of the Department all around Australia. At 31 October 1985 there were 238 Aboriginal officers in DSS comprising 1.53% of all staff.

DSS employs approximately 15,500 staff who in addition to Central Office and State Headquarters work in 200 Regional Offices throughout Australia.

ELEANOR A BOURKE
Director
Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Service Section