

Churches resist NSW moves on Aboriginal affairs

As it moves to implement what many see as a retrogressive policy on Aboriginal affairs, the Coalition government under Premier Nick Greiner in New South Wales is facing concerted opposition from churches. The situation is summed up here by PETER BENTLEY.

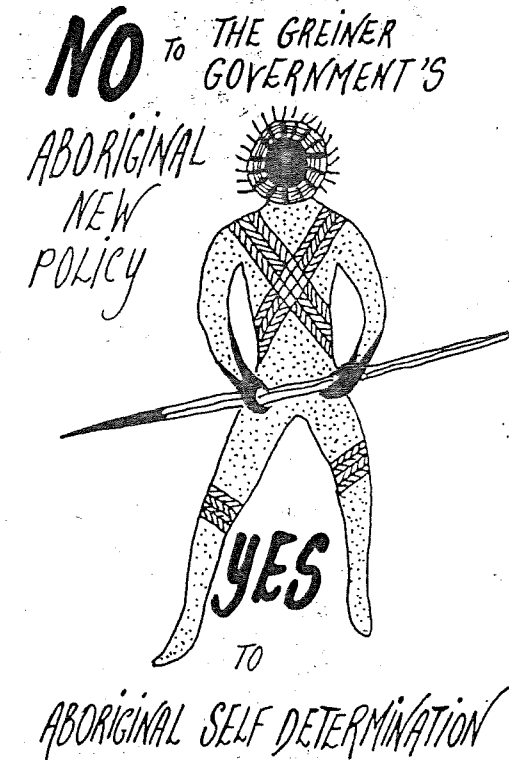
Far-reaching proposals on legislation, affecting Aboriginal people were first outlined by the NSW Coalition government in a White Paper published in late 1988. When this was followed by the publication of a Green Paper in February 1989, churches immediately began work on appropriate responses to the policy implications.

In March the NSW Ecumenical Council and the Catholic Church sponsored a conference of Aboriginal people and other interested people to examine and respond to the Green Paper. Extracts from the statement issued by that conference give an idea of its content and thrust.

The statement noted that "basic to the Green Paper was a declaration of dissatisfaction with the way monies allocated for the administration of Aboriginal affairs and for Aboriginal Land Councils have been spent."

The NSW government was proposing "to introduce legislation into the 1989 budget session which will establish an Aboriginal Affairs Commission to operate within the Premier's Department and an Aboriginal Land and Development Council."

This proposal would take from the



existing NSW Aboriginal Land Councils their role and functions.

The conference rejected the contention that this would enhance Aboriginal self-determination. "The Conference believes that if this paper becomes legislation in its present form it will remove the present mechanism afforded by the 1983 Aboriginal Land Rights Act which provides Aborigines a degree of self-management."

The conference noted that the "proposal that specialist Aboriginal units

in the Public Sector be abolished, appears to be an attempt to convince the NSW voting public that Aborigines have no special needs.

"It is a fact that Aborigines as a discernible people represent the single most disadvantaged group in NSW.

"In the four basic areas of health, housing, education and employment the situation remains critical. The life expectancy of Aboriginal people is 52, compared with 72 for non-Aboriginals. Aboriginal infant mortality is 52 per 1,000 compared with 12.2 for the general population.

"Alcoholism, blindness, hearing disabilities and denial problems are a continuing

tragedy for Aboriginal people.

"There is a continuing shortage of adequate housing for Aboriginal people. The educational standard of Aboriginal people remains poor and high unemployment contributes to the massive problem of disaffected people.

"To incorporate these bodies under the one Department is a backward move and an insult to the NSW Aboriginal Land Council and Aboriginal people generally, as it simply takes away the



A representative of an oil-drilling company negotiates with Aborigines — why can't the NSW Government?

independence Aboriginal people may have gained through the Land Councils.

"The only changes such a move will make is to enable the government to rigidly control all aspects of Aboriginal Affairs and gain access to the 7.5 percent of Land Tax revenue allocated to the NSW Aboriginal Land Councils.

"Contrary to government belief the work of the Aboriginal Land Councils is being recognised and accepted as a totally owned and operated Aboriginal organisation which is gaining the confidence and trust of the Aboriginal communities in carrying out its total role and functions."

Besides providing a platform for this specifically Aboriginal response to the Green paper, churches have themselves produced several important responses. Of particular interest are those produced by the relevant social issues committees of the Uniting and Anglican churches.

One major point of difference between the approach of churches and of the NSW government revolves around the question of consultation with Aboriginal people. While the churches submitted their own responses to the government after more consultation with Aboriginal people, no such attempts at consultation were made by government.

This aspect is one in which the churches believe that the government has shown its true colours.

The government Green Paper did not emerge from a consultative process; rather it was the culmination of Coalition pre-governmental policy outlines which were based on a fundamental opposition to the 1983 Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

Church responses have questioned the process of discussion and consultation. The NSW Ecumenical Council response asked "whether the process ... has been little more than an example of the waste of money of which the government accuses the Aboriginal people."

It must be understood that the NSW government is firmly committed to the idea that governments make policy and not interest groups. The debate over education provides a classic example of this conflict.

Thus, while the government may indeed request responses and even consult, its determined political stance almost precludes any alteration in what are essentially policy documents.

The responses from the Uniting Church (NSW Synod) Board for Social Responsibility (BSR), the Social Issues Committee (SIC) of the Anglican

Diocese of Sydney and also from the NSW Ecumenical Council (NSWEC), have all rejected the proposed New Direction in Aboriginal Affairs.

The Uniting response is the most detailed and is roundly critical of the Green paper and the government. "In short, the 1989 Green Paper seems to be incompetent and to be the result of an inadequate and secretive process." (BSR, p10.)

The other responses, while more restrained, still follow consistent and soundly outlined arguments. The main area of conflict with the government is over how to achieve progress in improving the conditions of the Aboriginal people. The government neglects to incorporate the need for justice in the New Directions. Instead, it concentrates on short policy changes which may be changed again and again.

The policy of "mainstreaming" is condemned by the churches, precisely because it does not recognise the need for justice.

"The present provision of special services and programmes for Aboriginal people is a recognition of the need for positive discrimination in favour of Aborigines because of the enormous socio-economic deprivation they have

suffered over 200 years, and in the interests of justice the termination of those services should certainly not be contemplated after only 5 years and not even suggested as an objective to be achieved within the next few years.

"Also, the immediate absorbing of these services into functional departments means that their provision will be taken out of Aboriginal hands, thus reducing their independence and self-determination.

"Most importantly, the policy of 'mainstreaming' is to be rejected because it has many overtones of assimilation, and it would mean that the justice issues could much more easily be lost sight of and ignored." (NSW EC Document)

The SIC response reports a meeting which members of the SIC had with the Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Paul Zammit, in which the issue of "mainstreaming" was clarified. "The

parliamentary secretary made it clear that mainstreaming was a policy to be adopted when the Aboriginal people had established themselves as an independent group who were no longer suffering the injustices of the past ... it was not possible to state a time from which this would take place. He suggested that it could be even several generations before this would be possible."

All the responses examine specific proposals, especially in the area of land rights. The proposed re-direction of the 7.5 percent Land Tax Revenue allocation and dropping of the inalienability of land are rejected by the BSR and NSWEC for failing to understand the importance which land has for the Aboriginal people.

"It is because land is so essential to the identity and dignity of Aboriginal people that it is unjust to create the situation in which they could be open to the indignity of being pressured and possibly exploited, by developers and other groups or individuals in the

interest of short-term gains. ... In making this submission, the NSW EC would like to state that it takes seriously the words of an Aboriginal Anglican priest who said 'there can be no healing without the land'."

The proposed establishment of a Commission of Aboriginal Affairs is queried by the churches. In April 1988 the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs was abolished and replaced with the Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

The BSR concluded that "the intention to review the Commission and legislation in 1994 is actually an intention to remove all special Aboriginal structures by 1994. We see this as an attack on Aboriginal self-determination. It is an attempt to return

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to the policy of assimilation, which Aboriginal people of NSW generally reject."

A major general criticism of the Green paper is the fact that it highlights failure, particularly with the Land Councils, while neglecting to outline any positive features of the Council system and successful Aboriginal ventures.

The SIC reports a variety of successes. "... the greatest success for the Aboriginal people has been the very experience of learning - taking initiatives and seeing that they can succeed. Their taste of self-determination has brought confidence and dignity; things that cannot be measured in economic terms. It is indeed a great shame that Mr Zammit's review did not allow recognition of successes such as these in either economic or self-worth terms."

The NSW EC emphasised that "The tragedy of any dismantling of the present system of Land Councils is that

it would be the removal of a system that is democratic and participatory for all Aboriginal people in NSW".

Though there has not been an official response from the Bishop's Committee for Justice, Development and Peace, several individual bishops and Catholic organisations have sent in responses.

Fr Frank Fletcher of the Redfern parish in South Sydney, which has a heavy concentration of Aboriginal members, has been actively involved in providing information and resource documents to enable people to make an informed response. Fr Fletcher said they were supporting the Aborigines in their response to the Green Paper. Like the

other churches, "we listen to the Aboriginal people in order to present informed Catholic opinion."

A letter being sent by individual Catholics to Paul Zammit reads in part:

"... at Werribee, 1973, Aboriginal Catholics expressed the

wish to establish a national Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council. It was not until this year that the first National Conference took place in Cairns. Patience is an essential demand of justice.

"I would ask you to reflect upon this statement of the NSW State Conference of the Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Conference held at Canberra, April 14-16, 1989:

"This meeting unanimously rejects the Greiner/Zammit Green Paper of February, 1989 on the grounds that a) it is unAboriginal b) Its aims and objectives from where we stand as Aboriginals, are designed to return our Aboriginal people back to the old NSW Protection Board days and seeks to leave us in a perpetual state of the 'handout' dependency mentality. Furthermore, it denies NSW living Aborigines their recognition of land, language, their totems and their belonging - in a word, their Aboriginality."

"This is a cry of anguish."