



ETHNICITY AND DIVERSITY: POLITICS AND THE ABORIGINAL
COMMUNITY

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ERRATA

p. 80, 394 for Keynes read Keyes.

p. 191, 395 for McCorquondale read McCorquodale.

p. 394 for Keen, I. (1988) read Keen. I. (ed.). (1988)

For Keen (1988) read Keen (ed.).

MATTERS OF CLARIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION

P.9 *Quantification* here refers to the measurement of significance, particularly in regard to such areas as political influence and authority which may be continuing or short-term phenomena. It is not to be confused with the enumeration of a spatially defined population. The data, or more precisely the analysis it suggests, may become obsolete where they no longer reflect the dynamics of a phenomenon being studied.

P.12 Previous knowledge of individuals, communities and events had shaped an understanding which, during the course of the study, at times conflicted with information and interpretation being presented by informants. Consequently it was felt that analyses should be constructed primarily from contemporary sources.

P.20 Direct questioning often results in spontaneous, 'knee jerk' responses, whereas a more considered reply can result from an approach that requires some consideration on the part of the interviewee. As an example, when asked what they thought of Aborigines many people have responded in such terms as 'They are drunken bludgers' or 'They won't work or do anything for themselves'. If asked if they have worked with Aboriginal people, or if they personally know any Aborigines, the response is often more reasoned and less aggressive. Similarly, people involved with Aborigines may respond favourably to direct questioning of how they like working with these people. Further indirect questioning may reveal an actual dislike for their job and an earnest desire for change.

P.34 *Validity*, as used here refers to a defensible ascription of the nature of a structure or function. It seeks to highlight the difference between what is desirable and what is workable.

P.57 *Enforced socialisation* is the process through which diverse groups of Aboriginal people were placed together on reserves and mission stations regardless of cultural or social differences.

P.72 *Self-determination*. The inference in the quotation is that many Aboriginal people do not understand what the term means and so, in this context, its pursuit is a pointless exercise.

Pp.118-119 Hay is here speaking for the *Free Enterprise Foundation*, while Morgan is director of *Western Mining* and a spokesperson for the *Mining Industry Council*. (Both listed in bibliography)

P.211 The Menindee apprenticeship scheme did, in fact, succeed in training one Aboriginal person who, in 1991, was working in the town as a carpenter. However, to many, the scheme failed to provide the expected benefits. Its termination was said to be due to lack of continuing funding, injury to one apprentice (see p.227, f.n.9), loss of interest on the part of other participants and various other factors.

P.212 and p.227 Despite the similarity of conditions, such as the of unemployment and the failure of training schemes, in both Menindee and Wilcannia the people in these communities appear to interpret environments differently. These conditions tend often to reinforce negative perceptions of Wilcannia as a depressed town offering little for the future. In contrast, Menindee is still seen as a 'good pla

live'. This analysis is supported by the evidence of the level of migration of Aboriginal people from Wilcannia to Broken Hill during the period of this study and the absence of such a phenomenon in regard to Menindee.

P.240 The relatively low level of reported violent crime in Broken Hill cannot be explained definitively. It might be assumed to be influenced by the much lower level of unemployment and by the generally peaceable character of the community. Nevertheless, the level of reported violence in Menindee is much greater than expected, although much of this is of a minor nature. The level of violence in Wilcannia can, in large part, be attributed to the alcohol problem and to the general atmosphere of aimlessness and, often, hopelessness.

Pp.250-251 Coombs' statement implies an acknowledged obligation to offer hospitality to distant kin. Gale suggests less an acknowledged obligation than a practical, economically-motivated decision to accept distant relatives into the household because of the financial benefits that would ensure.

P.262 The Aboriginal community invariably lacks a political system in the form of an organisation with legitimate authority to act on behalf of, and make decision for, its population.

P.282 The failure of so many Aboriginal organisations and projects might suggest some inability on the part of these people successfully to manage an enterprise. Such an analysis frequently ignores the underlying conditions that often act as disincentives to Aboriginal people. The Nyampa Housing Company is only one example of competent management, and is evidence that, given the opportunity and with sound leadership, Aboriginal people can be successful.

P.307 The power relations that were, or are thought to have been, features of traditional Aboriginal social and political life do not appear to be relevant to many Aboriginal people in urban and rural environments. Age and knowledge of traditional life and values are mostly respected but are not always acknowledged as prerequisites for positions of authority and decision-making.

P.312 Aboriginal needs and policies to address these have frequently been established with little consideration of the views of Aboriginal people themselves. Nor has there always been an awareness of the conflicts within Aboriginal populations in regards to the priority of needs. These conditions have led to decisions being made on the basis of subjective perceptions of what Aboriginal people lack and what needs to be done to redress these deficits.

P.313 *Democratic participation* suggests the involvement of individuals in the political process and, by extension, their acceptance of the results of such processes. This is not always the case with Aboriginal people, particularly where organisations, groups and communities are considered to involve a limited section of a population.

P.357 An acknowledged choice can be accepted as valid if it is the result of, and supported by, Aboriginal people acting collectively. It is valid also if it results from an agreed-upon democratic process. It cannot be accepted as a valid choice if it is made on behalf of people who do not accept as legitimate the decision-making of a few on behalf of the many.

ABSTRACT

Aboriginal politics is frequently identified in a context which assumes a set of ideals and an agenda expressed on behalf of a national population sharing a common ethnic identity. This, however, ignores or underestimates the importance of social structures and spatial location in shaping Aboriginal identity. As such, it fails to reflect the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal society or of the various dimensions of its politics.

This thesis examines the questions of social and spatial diversity within the Australian Aboriginal population and their influence on Aboriginal identity and politics. It explores how diversity influences the shape and direction of politics, and engenders tension, at times conflict, between the political expression of an ethnic collective and that influenced by the intense localism that characterises much of the Aboriginal population. It aims to illustrate to some extent the difficulties presented by the nature of Aboriginal society in microcosm to the adoption of macro politics and policies as relevant to the resolution of the issues confronting the Aboriginal population, individually and collectively.

Traditionally, Aborigines existed as spatially and culturally distinct groups. Over much of Australia these traditional links between location and identity were broken and Aboriginal people were forced into new spatial and social configurations. They became a racially-constructed group through the process of exclusion from the general society. Although this largely ignores the reality of their traditional or contemporary social structures, it encouraged Aboriginal people

generally to see themselves as a separate and distinct people, a primary factor in their assumption of an ethnic identity. At the same time reinterpretations of their environments has, in many instances, provided or maintained a sense of social identity within a specific spatial location, one that frequently inspires a strong sense of place.

Aboriginal politics, then, is seen as a function of the particular dimension of identity that is being considered, which in turn is influenced by the way individuals and groups interpret their environments and their place within them in the context of specific criteria. The ethnic dimension of Aboriginal identity is important, indeed necessary if Aboriginal people as a political entity are to interact effectively with governments. Many Aborigines, individually and as groups or communities, endorse the objectives of this national or ethnic expression, but interpret them according to local perspectives. Aboriginal politics is further complicated by the fact that Aboriginal people exist in a diverse range of relationships with other Aboriginal people and with various levels of the general Australian society.

Initially, the thesis explores the theoretical and historical factors involved in this conceptualisation of Aboriginal politics. It then focuses on one region in western New South Wales and on three separate and distinct communities within this region. In this way it is possible to study and compare the backgrounds, social and spatial environments and political behaviours of specific communities. An attempt is then made to explore the interaction of these communities with wider dimensions of Aboriginal politics. It is considered that through the development and expansion of these interactions it might be possible that the strength and diversity could be mobilised to provide the basis for a significant national political collective.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I consent to this thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if it^{is} accepted for the award of the degree.

Signed.

E.R. Davis

February 1991

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I thank Vanda Rounsefell for her proofreading of the thesis and for her valuable comments. Finally, I thank my wife and family for their understanding and encouragement.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADC	Aboriginal Development Commission
AFEF	Australian Free Enterprise Foundation
AIAS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
ALS	Aboriginal Legal Service
AMIC	Australian Mining Industry Council
ANU	Australian National University
APB	Aborigines Protection Board
A PD	Australian Government <i>Parliamentary Debates</i>
A PD(S)	Australian Senate <i>Parliamentary Debates</i>
A PP	Australian Government <i>Parliamentary Papers</i>
AWB	Aborigines Welfare Board
BDT	<i>Barrier Daily Truth</i> , Broken Hill
DAA	Department Of Aboriginal Affairs
FCAA	Federal Council For Aboriginal Advancement
FCAATSI	Federal Council For The Advancement Of Aborigines And Torres Strait Islanders
LLC	Local Land Council
NAC	National Aboriginal Conference
NACC	National Aboriginal Consultative Committee
NAILM	National Aboriginal And Islander Liberation Movement
NSW	New South Wales
NSW PD	New South Wales <i>Parliamentary Debates</i>
NSW PP	New South Wales <i>Parliamentary Papers</i>
NTC	National Tribal Council

PSB	Public Service Board
RLC	Regional Land Council
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
SSRC	Social Science Research Council
WALC	Western Aboriginal Land Council
WALS	Western Aboriginal Legal Service

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PART 1



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Thematic Outline

The questions that motivate this study are those that explore the nature scope and relevance of Aboriginal politics and its correlation with the social identity of the spatially defined units that comprise the Australian Aboriginal population. Central to the study is the apprehension of a population that is collectivised by the assumption and public expression of a common national, or ethnic, identity, yet fragmented by a range of spatial, cultural, social and political configurations which have been individualised by the particular set of variables influencing their formation and development. The study, then, is one of identity within diversity and the significance of this to social structures and to political expressions.

There is a tension in Australian Aboriginal politics between the past and the present, between philosophical ideals and practical needs. Largely, this tension is a consequence of differing interpretations of the Aboriginal social, spatial and cultural environments. These environments, whether considered in national, state or regional perspectives, are neither uniform nor unchanging. Collectively, they create a complex and variable set of interactions which makes for intense diversity within the Aboriginal population. Interpretations of Aboriginal politics which do not take account of this diversity lead to questionable, often conflicting, assumptions about the nature of the Aboriginal community and of the appropriate collective goals.

To the extent that a collection of Aboriginal people can be considered as a community, each can be seen as a distinct entity shaped by the particular experiences of its members and by the strategies they have utilised to survive as an identifiable social and cultural unit. In each case a degree of adaptation has been necessary, individually and collectively, in response to the challenges of changing environments. It is not possible to identify the Aboriginal community other than through a quantitative assessment of a spatially defined population. Aboriginal people themselves face a conflict between identification as members of a national Aboriginal population and identification with a particular location, group or other socio-spatial unit which may be exclusively Aboriginal or may include elements of the general Australian society. Aboriginal Australia, then, is a national population and also an aggregation of disparate groups and individuals; Aboriginal politics is shaped within this diversity.

Diversity within the Aboriginal population reflects the specific patterns of past and present relationships, the variability of the cultural experience and the particularity of the Aboriginal response to these and other factors which affect their lives. The result is that no Aboriginal community is a homogeneous and harmonious entity; perceptions of Aboriginal identity, interactions with different levels of community and expressions of Aboriginal politics can be expected to reflect this heterogeneity.

Aboriginal politics is, in each instance, influenced strongly by two primary factors. Firstly, there is the level of incorporation as a community, that is, the extent to which identity defines the particular group. Secondly, there is the level of association with, or alienation from, non-Aboriginal society. As these are not fixed but are subject to

a range of continuing pressures, so too Aboriginal politics is essentially a dynamic process.

During the past several decades the politicisation of Aboriginal people has been marked by an increased assertiveness on the part of individuals, mostly urban Aborigines, who claim to represent, and who define a political agenda for, an assumed national Aboriginal population. The apparent contradiction between this notion of pan-Aboriginal politics and the conspicuous localism that differentiates groups of Aboriginal people, inspired the inquiry discussed in this study. The national expression of Aboriginal politics cannot be ignored; but neither can it be taken to represent an unqualified, general Aboriginal position. In many respects it is in conflict with the primary level of social and political identification which is located in the local community. However, neither localism nor nationalism can of itself ensure a cohesive and enduring social or political unit, or a unity of purpose; there is no *one* Aboriginal group either in a local community or at any other level of association. Different motivational forces, the complexity of the population and the variety of structures within which Aboriginal people function as social and political units are only some of the factors influencing the patterns of these associations. Aboriginal politics, then, is functional at several or many levels, each reflecting the particular nature of the community involved and each an integral part of a protean Aboriginal political process.

It is apparent that the nature and politics of each level of association are mediated by both national and local issues which foster varying attitudes towards the appropriate forms of incorporation or disjunction. There are contrasting and often conflicting pressures in Aboriginal

politics between the stimulus for a broad sense of community and the constraints of a more limited consciousness of identity and purpose. Aboriginal identity establishes the political community; it can also limit its scope and its ability to negotiate with the sources of power in Australian society.

To facilitate the exploration of these dimensions of Aboriginal politics this study is located in specific spatial and social settings, adopting a case study method as the appropriate way to pursue its objectives. It could be expected that the factors which shape a particular concept of community and influence its levels of adaptation and incorporation would influence also that community's response to various levels of political mobilisation. A comparison of communities should provide a framework within which these questions can be addressed.

The imperfections of the case study approach are acknowledged, particularly in regard to the inability of the restricted methodology to reflect fully the wide and disparate range of cultural, social and behavioural patterns that characterise the Aboriginal population. Yet it is the fragmented nature of this population and the consequent diversity of continuing phenomena which make generalisations from macro-level analyses difficult to sustain. Studies of communities, on the other hand, might be replicated on a wider scale to develop general, and empirically testable, propositions.

In examining the diversity of Aboriginal society through a comparative study of local communities, the intention is to isolate the variables which influence the social shape and political expression of these communities. This is, in effect, an attempt to establish the frames of reference within which Aboriginal people interpret their particular environments. Locality, and the forms of interactions within it, are

substantive influences in the construction of an environment. Moreover, there are general aspects of Aboriginal life and history that are also important factors in shaping Aboriginal attitudes. It is the interaction of environment, culture and identity which gives a community its distinctive profile and provides a basis for interpreting adaptive behaviour. This is not to suggest that a study of several communities will provide a typology of Aboriginal association, adaptation and political expression; some communities may be similar to these, others quite different and all are subject to change. What is proposed is the establishment of the analytical tools which could be used to interpret other communities in other locations.

The central theme of the study is conflict, specifically the conflict engendered by various dimensions of Aboriginal politics, which are themselves shaped by various constructions of identity. People construct their identity according to how they interpret the particular environment and their place within it. Conflict occurs in the social space created by an Aboriginal concept of identity that separates them as a people from the general non-Aboriginal population and promotes the ethno-politics of this assumed national collective. Conflict occurs also within and between the discrete groups comprising the Aboriginal population. The particular environments involved here are socially and spatially limited, and are interpreted according to individual perceptions and experience.

Diversity, then, shapes Aboriginal politics. But a discussion of diversity is a discussion of the 'fact' of difference, not an elaboration of the way this is constituted; it will identify the environments which reflect diversity, it will not in itself explain fully the relationship between environment and political behaviour.

What is needed is an understanding of how Aboriginal people interpret their environments. It is suggested that interpretations and reinterpretations of environments are the determinants both of social and political structures and of their associated behavioural patterns.

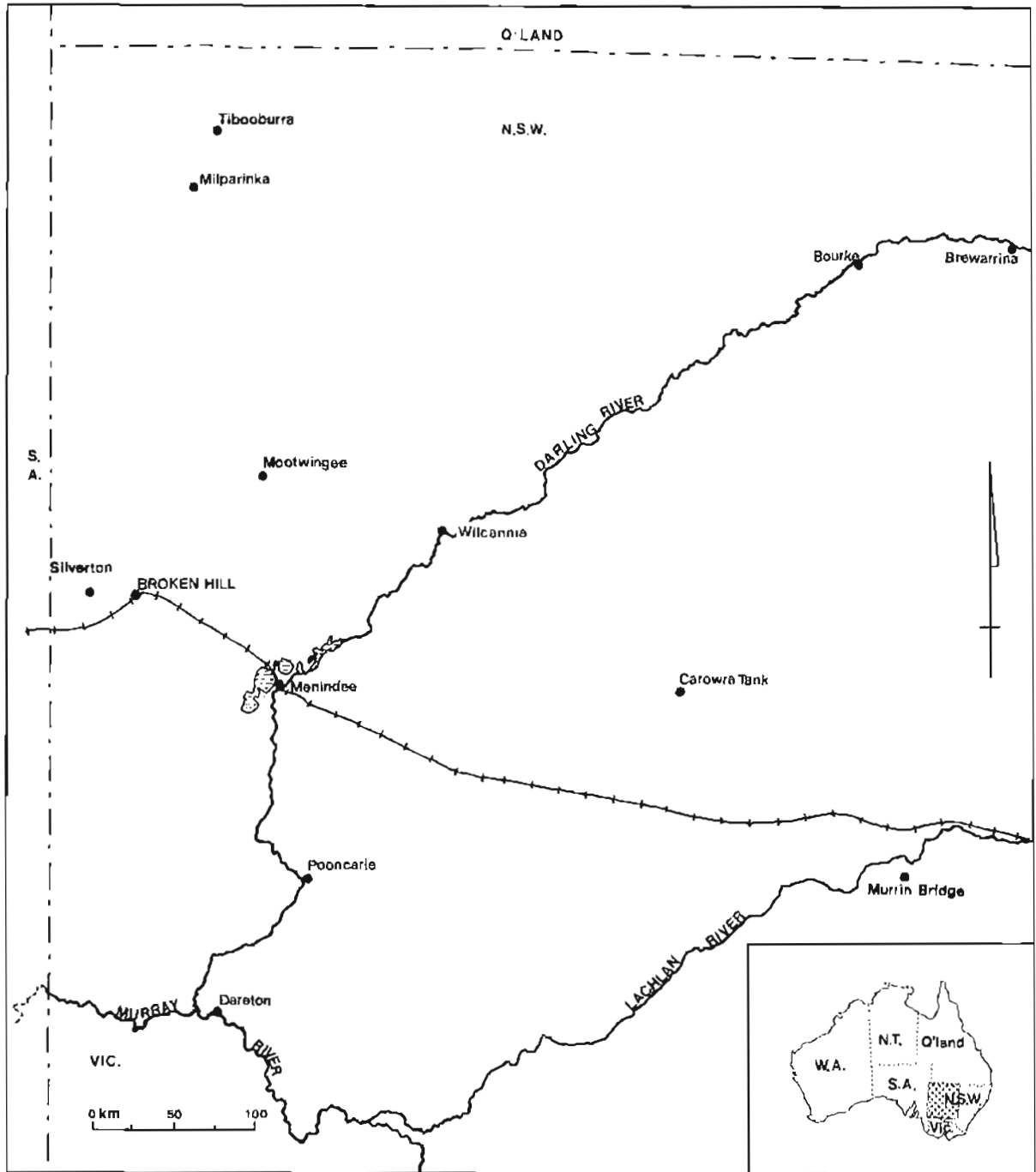
1.2 The Criteria For Selection

Initially a comparative study of communities in two states was considered, but the range of influencing variables, although having certain common factors, was thought to be so diverse as to distort any analysis. For example, the differing strategies of the respective governments' policies over time, and the various interpretations of these by government agencies and officials, would have been significantly different influences on communities and community attitudes. The alternative was a study of communities with generally similar backgrounds where dissimilarities could be more closely related to local specificities.

Close scrutiny of a region in far-western New South Wales (NSW) revealed an ideal setting (see Figure 1.1). This comprised three contiguous communities which shared a range of historical, geographical and social influences, yet were sharply differentiated in the characteristics of their social and political dynamics. The region reflects in microcosm the diversity that characterises the national Aboriginal population.

Wilcannia and Menindee are situated approximately 150 km. apart on the Darling River. Geographically they form a triangle with the much larger urban centre of Broken Hill, approximately 200 km. and 120 km. distant respectively (see Figure 1.1). They are neighbourhood communities with no population centres in the areas between them.

Figure 1.1: The study region



The Wilcannia Aboriginal community is a continuation of the groups who became established in a camp - later declared an Aboriginal reserve - on the fringe of the town after being dislodged from traditional areas of association. Some of the Aboriginal people trace their origins to the Darling River region, others to more distant areas. To the non-Aboriginal residents they were originally, and long remained, an unwelcome presence in the vicinity. Socially and spatially they are contained in groups either within the town itself or in two Aboriginal enclaves on its outskirts.

Menindee Aboriginal people reflect the experience of the large scale geographical relocation and enforced association in mission stations that shaped many Aboriginal communities in NSW. In the main they are, or are the descendants of, people who were placed on the Menindee mission and later moved to central NSW, from where they eventually returned to the Darling River town.

In Broken Hill the Aboriginal community is of relatively recent origin and is the result of urban migration, mostly from other towns in the region. Taken together the three towns form a composite picture of an Aboriginal population representative of the key issues confronting Aboriginal people and addressed in the study. It provides a perspective that has, at one extreme, Aboriginal people living as separate and socially marginal groups and, at the other, people enmeshed in the processes of urbanisation and social incorporation.

What the communities reveal is the diversity that conflicts with notions of Aboriginal nationalism. They show also how the enormous variety and complexity of the Aboriginal population and the different motivational forces lead to differences in cultural expression and in social and political structures. Given the appropriate conditions, some Aboriginal

people can construct a successful community. For others, history and the contemporary environment are against them. The community they construct is, in each case, representative of an interpretation of the particular environment, an interpretation that is the product of a particular set of influencing variables.

Assumed influences, however, need to be spatially and temporally qualified. Environments themselves are not constant, nor are the responses they condition. Aboriginal communities cannot be regarded as static entities socially or politically. During the course of the study the rapidity of change on a number of occasions rendered obsolete the collected data and the assumptions they had generated. Qualification, rather than quantification, appears to be the most relevant concern within this study of Aboriginal people.

1.3 The Structure Of The Thesis

In order to present this study in an appropriate form that takes account of the background necessary to an understanding of contemporary communities and their behavioural patterns, it appeared desirable to divide the work into three main parts. Basically these are intended to provide, first, a necessary background, then the case studies and, finally, the political analysis.

Part 1 provides the thematic, theoretical and environmental backgrounds of the study. It addresses the questions of identity and community and looks briefly at how these have influenced the development and expression of Aboriginal politics. It provides also an environmental perspective which illustrates the constraining field within which Aboriginal politics has been forced to operate.

Part II is introduced by an overview of the general and specific historical processes that influenced the establishment and development of the subject communities. These communities are then studied and compared, and an attempt made to analyse their individuality with reference to Aboriginal interpretations of specific environments.

Part III explores and analyses the political dynamics of the communities and their interaction with wider dimensions of Aboriginal politics. It considers the questions of diversity and of Aboriginal involvement, and argues that the particularity of localism and the non-specificity of an Aboriginal political agenda inhibits the creation of national structures and the setting of achievable goals. It further argues that Aboriginal concepts of authority and representation would need to change, that diversity would need to be reconciled and mobilised, if Aboriginal people were to be able to have significance as a national, political collective in their own right. These changes could come about in a climate that made possible the reinterpretation of environments and allowed the reconstruction of individual and collective identities in more positive and meaningful dimensions than have previously been possible.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Field work

The major field work for this study was undertaken during a period of continuous residence in the area from the latter part of 1984 until the end of 1987. Subsequently, the towns were revisited in 1988 and 1989 to explore the extent of social and political change, and contact was maintained with informants in each town throughout 1990.

This period, however, was not the initial contact with the region and its Aboriginal people. Much earlier, social and working relationships had been established with many Aboriginal people both in the towns and throughout a wide area of NSW, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Prior to the contraction of employment opportunities in the pastoral industries, Aboriginal people from the Far West¹ had employment mobility throughout this general area. Whatever the official policies for Aborigines might have been, this was a time that could, for many Aboriginal people, be referred to as a period of Aboriginal cultural adaptation and social and economic involvement; something less than full integration, but more than isolation. The loss of these employment opportunities resulted in a movement back to the main centres of Aboriginal population and the assumption of a basically sedentary life. To a considerable extent, the social interaction of

¹ The towns studied are contained within a region usually referred to as the 'Far West' or 'West Darling'.

Aborigines and non-Aborigines in the stock camps and rural communities was replaced by a degree of social isolation in the larger towns.

Although long-term personal contact and association with many Aboriginal people was a valuable source of background knowledge, it was not used to gain access to individuals or to influence the design of the study. In a number of instances politically active individuals were close relatives of former acquaintances, many no longer alive. These former relationships were not alluded to and all interviews were conducted on the basis of the interviewer's academic association, rather than knowledge of the interviewee's father, mother, uncle or other relatives. On the other hand, these associations were never denied if questions were asked, which happened on a number of occasions when past events and the people associated with them were being discussed. Although prior knowledge of the communities made it difficult to maintain the necessary degree of objectivity, every attempt was made to construct understandings of current social, cultural and political environments from contemporary sources and not through expectations generated by previous experience.

The initial move to establish contact for the specific purpose of the study was through an approach to the officers of the Western Regional Aboriginal Land Council, with the intention of seeking cooperation, an essential academic requirement. This proved to be a somewhat lengthy process, not as a result of objections to the projected study, but simply because the mobility of the principal officer, who was the dominant political figure in the region, caused him to miss or to cancel a number of appointments. Three months elapsed before a requested letter agreeing to cooperate was obtained. At no time was a meeting refused, other than on the basis of absence from the town, and when

meetings did take place no objections were raised in regard to the proposed study, nor was there any unwillingness to discuss any aspect of contentious issues. When, at later stages of the study, this particular person was interviewed on a number of occasions, he made every effort to assist, even to the extent of providing material that was critical of himself and his alleged monopolisation of local and regional politics. This cooperation was not exceptional, however, it being invariably the response of Aboriginal people who were approached.

From initial contacts, respondents identified individuals, families and groups whom they considered to be in positions of authority, were influential, politically involved or simply 'good people to talk to'. In turn, these would suggest others. In this way prominent individuals and networks of political and social influence were followed up, and interviews sought. At the same time random interviews were sought with Aboriginal people who had no known involvement with the community structures. These people were approached whenever and wherever an opportunity presented itself. During these 'grass roots' interviews people were asked to identify those whom they considered to be the influential people, or leaders, in the community, and to whom they would go if they needed help. Through this it was possible to delineate both the nominal and real avenues of power and influence in each community. At the same time, the interviews provided information on a wide range of social, material and attitudinal factors. The overall objective was the concurrent construction of political, social and economic profiles.

Follow-up interviews were conducted periodically with the principal community figures and with other key informants, intervals between these being determined by availability of the people concerned and the nature of observed or advised conflict. Over time, it was possible to chart

the patterns of social and political authority and decision-making, the volatility of many associations, the changing coalitions of interest and, in the latter stages of the study, the significant changes in leadership.

All initial and most follow-up interviews with the principal informants and with many others were taped on a small, unobtrusive recorder. In every case permission was sought to record the interview and assurances given that no person would be identified by name and no confidential information disclosed. No Aboriginal person refused to be recorded and none appeared to be inhibited by the process.

On those occasions when interviews were not taped - mostly when the form of contact or the particular environment made it impracticable - notes were taken and subsequently expanded while details could still be recalled accurately. Additionally, a survey was carried out in Broken Hill during which every known Aboriginal residence was visited and, where contact was made, a structured interview conducted according to a questionnaire. This questionnaire and the relevant responses are included as Appendix A.

Interviews were catalogued according to date, place and a serial number. As cited in the thesis these are identified by **Tape:**, followed by the last two digits of the year of recording, the initial of the community, **W** (Wilcannia), **M** (Menindee) and **B** (Broken Hill) and the designated number of the interview, viz. **Tape: 85 W1**. Two interviews were conducted in Adelaide in 1988 and catalogued as **88 A1** and **88 A2**. These involved non-Aboriginal people who had lived in Wilcannia for considerable periods and were able to provide valuable historical insights.

Another opportunity to interview people outside the region occurred in Sydney in 1988. In this instance it involved prominent Aboriginal political actors who, it was believed, could provide a worthwhile perspective on national politics in the heady political climate of Australia's Bicentennial celebration. Attempts were made to interview some of these people on the site of the 'embassy' set up by Aboriginal protesters in January, 1988 at Mrs Macquarie's Chair overlooking Sydney Harbour. Requests were met with a decided lack of interest, an understandable reaction at a time when Aboriginal people were the focus of considerable national and international media attention. The arrival of a television camera would inevitably spark a competition for attention and an outburst of denunciatory rhetoric.

Although the exercise proved futile in the context of its original intentions, it provided a valuable perspective on differing political expressions. The importance of the public 'image' at the national level contrasts with the quieter, less visible presence but more obvious commitment of the involved individual in the local community. A perceived need to foster a public 'image' is a significant factor in the distancing of the individual from his or her local community when he or she seeks to extend the horizon of political involvement.

Initially, most interviews recorded in the study area lasted one hour, although some were longer. The interviews were unstructured and the interviewee was given every opportunity and encouragement to speak over as wide a range of topics as he or she desired. Information on personal histories, perceptions of individual and community deficits and needs, on housing, health, education and employment was sought in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. An attempt was also made to elicit assessments of interactions within the Aboriginal community and between

it and non-Aboriginal society. Subsequent interviews could be more specifically directed where a particular subject area needed to be explored further. The information was used to construct social and political profiles of the interviewees and of their communities. It also provided the means to address the question of how the various factors relate or interact in creating the particular environment.

Almost without exception, Aboriginal people were extremely cooperative, forthcoming with information and willing to discuss any matter raised. Invariably they suggested other sources, on a number of occasions making plain the fact that the person or persons named would present an opposing point of view or an alternate interpretation of events. 'You should talk to [particular person]', '[he/she] would be a good one to talk to about that' and '[he/she] knows all about that' are typical examples of this form of referral, often qualified with statements such as 'but they won't agree with what I said', or 'they will tell you a different story'. On the few occasions where there was some reluctance this appeared to be due to a lack of interest in community affairs rather than to hostility towards the interviewer. Even in this situation the early reluctance dissipated when interviewees were encouraged to speak on matters of personal interest or concern, such as their own past or their family.

Although an invaluable source, tapes, for a number of reasons, were not considered to be, in themselves, a sufficient record and were augmented by written notes where these were considered to be necessary. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, some ideal, others particularly unfavourable. Settings included private homes, offices, motor vehicles, hotels, various meeting places for groups and a range of outdoor locations. Background noise, interruptions and interjections

were frequent problems, at times making tapes indecipherable in parts. Notwithstanding these problems, no attempt was made to create a particular environment; the objective was to work within a setting that was as natural to the interviewees as possible.

One particularly unfortunate aspect of contact with the Aboriginal people in these communities was the death, during the period of the study, of several key informants who had provided a great deal of valuable information. While these deaths did not directly affect this study, they will make much more difficult the continuing research that needs to be done in this region.

Interviews and discussions provided the Aboriginal perspectives of community functioning, albeit perspectives that were often from conflicting standpoints. But when these were reinforced by observations of individual and group behaviour it was possible to identify particular social and political patterns. This, however, is only one part of the complex picture. Both an historical and a wider contemporary perspective is necessary to place Aboriginal people, their cultural, social and political structures and the associated patterns of behaviour, in the appropriate context for interpretation.

2.2. Constructing The Environments

Concurrent with the exploration of the contemporary communities the study was expanded to include a survey of the historical background to their establishment and the processes that are considered to have influenced their individuality. It was necessary also to assess the general environments within which Aboriginal people have to shape their relationships with the general society, in particular, the factors involved in Aboriginal interpretations of their specific environments.

Perceptions of Aborigines by non-Aborigines, and the reverse, are primary determinants of the forms of interaction between the groups and can significantly influence behavioural patterns.

Environments were explored through both archival and oral sources. The historical perspective was constructed from local knowledge, oral histories where these were available, published and otherwise recorded material and the meagre resources of local libraries and historical societies. Searches were undertaken also in the Mitchell Library in Sydney and the library of the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. Newspapers, particularly those published in Wilcannia and Broken Hill, provided considerable detail of particular events and situations that had involved Aboriginal people. These are events and situations that it would have been hard for the particular medium to disregard. Otherwise Aboriginal people are mostly ignored in newspapers and other local publications until relatively recent times. An example of this is the history of Wilcannia compiled from the files of the local newspaper, the *Western Grazier*, and published in 1939. The one mention of an Aboriginal person in this publication refers to a 'black-tracker' who had been involved in a search party in 1881.

Contemporary general environments were explored through observation, through interviews with prominent individuals and public officials in each community and through surveys of general public attitudes. Individual interviews were conducted with federal and state politicians, federal, state and local government officers, police officers, school principals, teachers and ancillary staff, religious and welfare workers and others who had some contact with Aboriginal people or who were influential in the communities.

In contrast to the willingness of Aborigines to be recorded, a number of non-Aborigines declined, while others at times requested the recording to be stopped so they could speak 'off the record'. This can be understood to some extent by the need for caution in areas where injudicious or incautious statements can generate hostility and, possibly, conflict. Many individuals who have close contact with Aboriginal people are aware of the need for sensitivity in their dealings with these people, and this was reflected in interviews, particularly with police and, to a lesser extent, with those in education and other fields of service provision.

No police interviews were recorded, although there was no reluctance on the part of any officer to be interviewed, and no attempt to limit the scope of the interview. Full cooperation was received from officers in each community, their superiors in Wilcannia and Broken Hill, the Inspector for the district and personnel at police headquarters in Sydney. Notwithstanding the fact that police are understandably cautious in discussing such sensitive issues as police - Aboriginal relations, it is noteworthy that there was much less overt racism and discrimination in the expressed attitudes of most police interviewed than was the case with sections of the general public, many of whom had little or no direct contact with Aboriginal people.

A community attitude survey was conducted in Broken Hill in two stages. In the first, informal discussions were held with a large number of people in a range of social settings over the total period of the study. In the second, a questionnaire was administered, in 1988, to subjects randomly selected in the central business area, at a large suburban shopping centre and at households in various parts of the town. Details are included as Appendix B.

This questionnaire was constructed in such a way as to lessen the impression that it was designed solely to elicit information on attitudes to Aborigines. It was expected that this would result in a more reasoned, less emotionally based response. Questions on economic perceptions, with which the questionnaire began, were appropriate at this time when Broken Hill was experiencing an economic recession and undergoing considerable industrial reorganisation. General awareness of a declining population also facilitated the change of focus from an assessment of total local population to that of Aboriginal residents and eventually to attitudes towards Aboriginal people.

This type of survey was considered for the other towns, but was abandoned when it appeared that interviewees anticipated or, as is more likely, were aware of questions before they were asked. Forewarned, respondents are likely to be more cautious than would otherwise be the case. In a small community the presence of an interviewer and the content of the interview become known in a very short time. It is reasonable to attribute this to natural curiosity and, more importantly in areas where there is high unemployment and a high level of informal relationships, to suspicion of anyone asking questions, particularly when responses are being recorded. An informal interview is much more likely to dissipate suspicion and to encourage participation. These conditions, of course, apply to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in these particular environments and, in fact, are possibly more likely with the latter than with the former. Some Aboriginal people, on becoming aware of the nature of the information being sought, were eager to be interviewed. During one period of interviewing in one of the smaller towns an Aboriginal woman, anxious to explain the local situation as she saw it, drove around the town until she contacted the interviewer and insisted she be interviewed in her home.

Wilcannia in particular was considered to be an inappropriate place for a formal survey because of the tensions that have been generated in recent years from the public reporting of statements made by non-Aborigines. In one instance, a media account of unguarded comments made during an interview with a group of school teachers, inflamed an already tense situation between the staff of the local school and Aboriginal people. A subsequent period of open hostility and conflict - described by some media as a period of lawlessness - shook the town and might well be seen as a significant influence in the now guarded response of many people to questions that relate to Aboriginal people.

To test the belief that it is, at times, the expression of attitude, rather than the attitude itself that has changed, non-Aboriginal people were interviewed, some in a group, others individually, in diverse settings. Initially, formal interviews were conducted and responses recorded. Questions were centred on attitudes to living in a community with a majority Aboriginal population, working with Aborigines and general attitudes towards Aboriginal people. Later, similar issues were raised with the same people during general conversation in an informal social setting. In a number of instances the guarded, non-controversial responses in the formal setting were replaced by a much more outspoken and unfavourable attitude in the latter.

It needs to be emphasised that attitude surveys were not designed to produce an index of racism, hostility, discrimination or any other factor. The intention was to gain a very general overview of the environments within which Aboriginal populations have had to construct their social and political institutions and expressions.

2.3 A Note On Terminology

There are conflicting opinions of the suitability or otherwise of particular terms used in describing the descendants of Australia's indigenous population and their contemporary associations. In this thesis the terms used are those considered to be the most appropriate and least likely to offend in the particular social, spatial and temporal settings described. It is not suggested these terms would necessarily be appropriate in other settings. Wherever possible the term used is that in common use by the people concerned. There are, however, several deliberate omissions because of alternate, pejorative uses.

'Aboriginal people', 'Aboriginal', both as singular noun and adjective, and 'Aborigines' as plural noun are, unless otherwise stated, used in referring to those people in the study area who self identify as descendants of the indigenous people. Few if any are of other than mixed descent, although, in this context, this is unimportant as the outdated and objectionable classification according to percentage of 'Aboriginal blood' is seldom if ever used in these communities.

'Aboriginal' is not, however, the most common term used by these people to describe themselves and others they include in their collective identification. 'Black' and 'Blackfeller' are more often used both as noun and adjective. They are not used in this thesis, other than within a direct quote, because of their alternate use by some non-Aboriginal people as deprecating metaphors. 'Carrying on like a Black', 'Blacks' camp', 'Blackfeller's tucker' and others have been, and continue to be, used in the context of an unsavoury or odious representation.

An alternative in the word 'Koorie', as used by some Aborigines in NSW, particularly in political expression, and suggested by some non-Aborigines as a more suitable descriptive term, is also rejected because of its inappropriateness in this particular region. The word is rarely heard other than when used by some younger, politically active individuals. To some extent it reflects a radicalisation of Aboriginal politics that is not a prominent factor within these communities. On the contrary, several Aboriginal people expressed considerable hostility to their being described by the word. One young Aboriginal female asserted that 'Abo' or 'Boong' didn't worry her, but that she 'hated to be called a Koorie'.

Before its relatively recent adoption as a form of common identification in some areas of NSW, 'Koorie', with a sometimes slightly different pronunciation, had been used in the western part of the state both as a 'fun' or 'teasing' word, or as an abusive one. Use of, and response to, the word varied according to the specific context and the implicit meaning. It was part of the vocabulary of a well-developed Aboriginal sense of racial humour, and also a disparaging appellative. Used by possibly well-meaning but unaware non-Aborigines, it might well be counterproductive, particularly among older Aboriginal people.

Also omitted from the thesis are the terms 'White' and 'European' other than where they have a specific reference. In a contemporary sense neither is considered accurately to reflect the majority Australian society. As this study is primarily one concerned with Aboriginal people, 'non-Aboriginal' is used in reference to those included in the general Australian population in contradistinction to its Aboriginal component.

Because of the complex patterns of Aboriginal cultural, social and political associations, terms such as 'group', 'community' and 'society' are used in a somewhat loose way that may not align with common sociological concepts. 'Group' is used to define collections of individuals with a common interest or other common association. These may be directly-interacting family, kin or otherwise related collections, or they may refer to larger collectivities who may share a common identity that distinguishes them from others outside this identification. Usually, however, group is used in the context of a specific body of people contained within a larger community.

'Community', as used here, refers generally to a collection of people in a geographical area. Thus there are local, regional, state and national communities, each of which consists of people with a common interest and a common sense of belonging, or which may comprise several or many groups with diverse, even conflicting, interests. But in each case they can be distinguished from others who are outside the particular perception of community.

'Aboriginal society' is a more abstract term which in general refers here to an assumed relationship of people within an ideologically or culturally bounded aggregation. Mostly it is used, in this abstract sense, to distinguish Aborigines as social entities from non-Aborigines as social entities. The Aboriginal society so conceptualised may or may not contain the institutions, forms of authority and the common values, often considered to distinguish a society.

CHAPTER 3

POLITICS AND IDENTITY: AN OVERVIEW

3.1 Identity As Political Source

In considering Aboriginal politics one needs firstly to define the actual social group being discussed, that is, to establish the expression of Aboriginal identity which constitutes the particular community or political unit. Group identity is the basis of Dahl's observation that 'the starting point for all political theory is the fact that members of the human species live together' (1976:100). But living together is only the first step in a process of constructing a corporate entity. From living together individuals are able to assume the common identity of a community within which they are able to determine the boundaries of their unity and of their isolation. As Lane observes, 'the first task of political man, the definition of community, here draws a line around 'we' and 'they' (1972:203).

Hence, the central process in the transformation of a group of people into a political entity involves the adoption of a common frame of reference. This frame of reference is incorporated in an identity system manifested in the form of a collective, even though the perception of the collective may differ among its members. Du Preez makes this point when he claims that 'each one in the collective has some myth about what the collective is and how it appears to certain others' (1980:13). In this way both the boundaries locating the scale of a collective and the apprehension of its functional scope are subjectively determined.

in addition to its being central to the development of political consciousness and the creation of a sense of political unity, a common identity provides, through its collectivisation of a discrete population, the dynamic for a belief in group survival as an ethnic¹ entity. This is a belief that involves conscious and unconscious processes that fulfill a deep psychological need for identity and historical continuity (Giardano and Giardano 1977).

However incomplete and tenuous it might appear to be in some environments, the assumption of a common identity is an essential factor involved at all levels of Aboriginal politics. But questions concerning the social, spatial and functional limits of any particular level of community and its associated level of identity, need to be addressed in any attempt to interpret political behaviour. Political analysis in this study is concerned primarily with the relationship between social identity and political behaviour. In this context, identity is seen as a variable whose expression is a function of a relationship, or set of relationships, within a specific environment. This is not to deny the existence, generally, of a constant factor sustaining an overall Aboriginal identification, one that is involved with a national dimension.

A national identity subsumes a range of more socially and spatially specific identities which may be complementary or antagonistic and which may similarly generate either reinforcing or conflicting political expressions. The reconciliation of national and local politics is possible where there can be a reconciliation of national and local

¹ 'Ethnic', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity', which are discussed more fully in the next chapter, are used in this study as convenient terms in respect of a reference group within a specific environment wherein diversity can be submerged through a common interest that promotes a common sense of identification. It is not intended to imply a racial classification but to relate to what might be termed an 'Aboriginalised' group.

identities. At the same time, however, the contrast between national and local identities presents a complex pattern of relationships which must be accommodated within any understanding of Aboriginal politics. It is argued that apparent contradictions can be explained in terms of the shifting boundaries of identification within the processes of transcultural and transitional adaptation.

To become politically relevant, Aborigines need to transform themselves into a corporate entity to do business with the dominant state within which they remain, to a significant extent, an alienated people. But attitudes towards the appropriate scale of political incorporation are influenced by the processes which shape the patterns of contemporary social identity. The social and political dynamics of groups of people are determined by the boundaries of their identification and their interaction with other units of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society. Processes both of identification and of adaptation are therefore involved where political mobilisation is undertaken.

Aborigines are located in particular social and cultural configurations that have been shaped by an overwhelmingly disadvantageous experience. While not denying ambivalence in the apprehension of these particular aspects of culture, one can, with some qualification,² agree with Cowlishaw (1988:89b) who, following Wolf (1982), Asad (1979) and Genovese (1974), identifies culture in the wider sense as 'a creative response to the conditions of existence experienced by a group'. If the collective identification of the group is a prerequisite for political relevance, it must be located within this cultural response. Equally,

² Cowlishaw's use of the adjective 'creative' implies a culture that is constructed as a tendentious response to experience. This, no doubt, has validity in respect of certain aspects of an Aboriginal culture, but it tends to understate the influence of imposed and enforced behavioural patterns.

any understanding of the dynamics of the community needs to be sought within the interpretive framework of the specific elaboration of identity.

3.2 Identity And Community

As with all political enquiry, this study is concerned with the actions and relations between units of greatly varying size and complexity (Euleau 1969:1). It is apparent, then, that levels of identity must be correlated with the units or levels of community being considered. In one sense the Aboriginal population is comprised of many communities; in another sense it is contained within one. It has been considered in terms of a racially and culturally distinct group which intends to survive as such (Carter 1988; Coombs, Brandl & Snowden 1983; Jennett 1979; Morris 1988; Nettheim 1986; Perkins 1973; Schwab 1988; Suter & Stearman 1982). At the same time it is described as being intensely local-oriented and fragmented (Anderson 1985; Senate Select Committee 1976; Thiele 1984). It is clear that Aboriginal politics is formed within a social field that is characterised primarily by its diversity (Berndt 1977; Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982; Pollard 1988; Rowley 1971a; von Sturmer 1973). The acknowledgement of this diversity highlights the need to explore the shape and the dynamics of the fundamental unit of Aboriginal community and its interaction with the other dimensions of identity within this diversity. This fundamental unit is located within the local level of association.

Prior to European settlement Aborigines existed in local communities with locally relevant cultures. The elements of communality between aspects of these cultures and their associated social structures ensured patterns of interaction between groups while not intruding on their individuality. More important to an understanding of Aboriginal

concepts of identity, there was no essentially Aboriginal consciousness or notion of themselves as a people. To the extent that this has developed subsequently, it has been as a response to the non-Aboriginal treatment of Aboriginal people according to an ascribed, common racial identity.

European invasion and its consequent legacy of social and cultural subversion broke up many of the existing communities, sometimes forcibly, sometimes through a process that included inducement and economic pressure. Over time, communities evolved that were now characterised significantly by the effects of dispersal and by interaction with non-Aborigines and non-Aboriginal culture. But it was still possible for them to be influenced in their particular social and cultural orientations by a sense of localism. The fundamental level of group identification continues to be influenced by this localism, and Aboriginal politics needs to be considered in this context if any systematic exploration of political behaviour and any assessment of problems and of their possible resolution is to be attempted. It is not, however, the only level of identity that influences Aboriginal political behaviour.

Although some Aboriginal people identify solely with a local community or group, it is possible for individuals and groups to see themselves and to be seen by others as being simultaneously members of several or many levels of community. They may be members of a national community and a local community and, possibly, of other social and political configurations wherein identification implies membership. These may be influenced by kin relationships, by historical associations with particular missions, reserves or other spatially distinct settings, or by contemporary associations which may or may not include non-Aboriginal

components. Patterns of alignment and of disorientation within these configurations shape the locus of individual and group identity for Aborigines.

To some observers Aboriginal identity is little more than a statement of their 'otherness'. In a broad sense, it is considered to be that which separates them from non-Aborigines, a set of distinguishing characteristics peculiar to these people (Coombs et al 1983; Tatz 1982, 1979). This somewhat tautological concept sees Aborigines as being other than non-Aborigines. Others consider 'Aboriginal' as a 'label of self-definition' (C.H. Berndt 1961:30), '[marking] off those so identified' (R.M. Berndt 1977:8) or an 'expression of faith' representing an 'ideological position' (von Sturmer 1973:16-17). But identity is neither formed nor maintained in isolation; it occurs within a system of social, political and spatial relations.

3.3 The Conflicts Of Identity And Community

In the study area Aboriginal life-styles and status levels range from those living in the geographic separation of peripheral communities, to those living among, and in a style corresponding to, that of their non-Aboriginal neighbours. Many are unemployed, a few are in relatively well-paid, high-status positions. According to the report of a NSW Government Select Committee in 1983, which was focused on this region, Aborigines do not see themselves as part of the community as a whole, but as a beleaguered, particularly disadvantaged and discriminated-against group.

Notwithstanding the generalisation contained in such a statement, which does not differentiate between communities where there are fairly rigid social divisions and others where there is a degree of homogeneity,

Aborigines frequently do apprehend their exclusion from the general community other than on terms that are a denial of a valid, separate identity. Their situation is summarised in the statement of a member of the NSW Legislative Council who claims that:

However dispossessed the white man is in isolated circumstances, there remains to him his sense of identity, of belonging to the dominant group in his society. The Aborigine, however, still awaits recognition of equal status within the community (*NSW PD* vol.150, No.1, 1979:2418).

Mostly, equal status is accorded on an individual basis, if at all, and only when he or she ceases to be an Aboriginal, socially, if not biologically. Where this is not possible, or acceptable, Aborigines are forced into a collective identity that subsumes the social and cultural diversity of its constituent components.

At the other extreme there are, in each community, individuals and families who avoid contact with the general Aboriginal community and whose identification is specific to the particular situation. Where visible evidence provides no obvious contradiction, that is, where they do not appear to be Aboriginal, and where there is no material disadvantage in identifying as non-Aboriginal, they deny any Aboriginal origins. However, where benefits are available on the basis of Aboriginal identity, as in housing, education and welfare, many affirm such an identity. This apparent identity ambivalence has been the cause of conflict within communities, both between self-proclaimed Aborigines and others whose identification is considered to be selective, and between the latter and non-Aborigines who resent the provision of benefits to those they see as neighbours, no more worthy of special treatment than themselves.

An Aboriginal perspective on this form of subjective and situation-specific identification is provided by one who is involved in the provision of welfare services in the study area:

Even when I went to school there were some like that. There was one Aboriginal family that didn't accept themselves as Aboriginal. They actually returned their secondary allowances. Said 'We don't want it'. But that only makes it hard on the kids then...But then the housing loan comes up...You get people who are obviously Aboriginal standing up for their rights or marching in the streets for land rights. Then you get...Aboriginal people married to white people standing on the side of the road condemning them, or saying 'What do they want?' Yet they're the people who have reaped all the benefits or got their children through school...A lot of conflict there...You get people saying 'I'm not Aboriginal', and they're not Aboriginal on the school rolls, but they're Aboriginal when it comes to the money (Tape:87 B19).

Material benefits associated with government policies affecting Aborigines might well be a factor influencing a change in self-identification, but Aboriginal politics appears to be a more significant determinant. Political resources now available to Aborigines have encouraged them to identify Aboriginal objectives. The higher profile of Aboriginal organisations has drawn some of the more articulate and ambitious into the political field, in many cases moving them from a former alignment that was much closer to non-Aboriginal, than to Aboriginal, expectations. And, for the mass of Aborigines, ethnicity has provided them with the possibility of a valid political identity as a distinct group.

Aboriginal survival *as a group* is the objective outlined by many representations of the Aboriginal political agenda. Neville Perkins affirms

the continuing will of Aboriginal Australians, whether they are in tribal or non-tribal situations, to survive as a distinct and viable ethnic group (1973:5-6).

This survival, according to Bruce McGuinness, cannot be achieved without a collective identification:

We cannot possibly exist as a nation of individuals...if we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and not as individuals (1985:49-50).

Aboriginal author, Colin Johnson, also argues the destructiveness of individuality, obviously sensing the necessity for the Aboriginal to identify less as an individual than as a member of a collective:

In fact the individual is too much emphasised in the so-called free world. The individual is really nothing. But as it is we are being corrupted by the American view of freedom of the individual. Unless he's a collective whole he's nothing and possibly this is why the Aboriginal situation is such a mess. Because there is no collectivity and you will be destroyed sooner or later. Because there is no centre and no philosophy (1975:36).

When the individual is denied a collective identity there is a separation from an authentic unity which could provide a meaningful existence. The individual is socially and psychologically incomplete and politically irrelevant when there is no sense of belonging. The manifestation of a sense of isolation, of unbelonging, may take the form of an embittered surrender to the awareness of the condition, or at the other extreme, the angry denial of the need for any other existence. Symptomatic of these varying attitudes are the statements by Aborigines Ted Fields and Kevin Gilbert. Fields, who considers that to be born an Aboriginal is to be born with a handicap that must be lived with throughout life, finds no pride in his identity:

...I accept the fact that I am classified as an Aborigine, without pride or shame. I have no living functional group with which to identify...There is nothing in Aboriginal society with which to identify or with which to realise security (1975:105).

Gilbert's awareness of isolation causes him to withdraw into a sense of self which is evocative of solipsism and its destructive correlate, anomie:

Today the only bearable reality is self and the confirmation, the groping and fighting to assert self in a dynamic proportion that allows no image superior to one's own to emerge for fear that a comparison may reveal or undermine the very basis of the infrastructure (1983:6).

These are the attitudes that illustrate the varying self-perceptions influencing Aboriginal social patterns. The collectivity of Perkins, McGuinness and Johnson is the prerequisite for valid social and political functioning of Aboriginal people *as* Aborigines within an Aboriginal frame of reference. Field and Gilbert reflect the psychological conditions underlying apathy and alienation, which, with anomie, are the fundamental characteristics of many apprehensions of Aboriginal existence.

Despite the social, cultural, geographical and attitudinal distances separating Aborigines, an ethnic identification offers a possibility for a political community and a psychological shelter within which the individual and the group may find a place. Although self-identification and identification by others may not always align, this does not negate the subjective reality of such an identification. Social and spatial diversity does not prevent the possibility of a common consciousness of sameness, and Aboriginality is the constant embraced by most Aborigines whatever their social condition or geographical location. In claiming Aboriginal identity or the possession of Aboriginality the individual is placing himself or herself within an ethnic collective. The claim is a political statement even though the initial motivation may be due more to a desire to escape the cultural sterility of marginality than to a sense of common political and social purpose.

3.4 Aboriginality

Aborigines invariably identify with a community group because they are part of its common experience; they can also identify with a national collective through a common notion of Aboriginality which is considered to be the distinguishing characteristic of all Aboriginal people.

Whatever the perception of Aboriginality it has a distinct relevance in relation to political activity at the national level.

Rowse suggests a political validity, or at least a political purpose, even though the concept may be sociologically unsound: 'The formation of social identities is a political aspect of social practice' (1985:45). Aboriginality, he infers, may not be an empirically discernible civilisation in its own right, but he sees 'the doctrine of Aboriginality' as having a rationale in a particular practice of political mobilization in the two decades after the referendum of 1967. He makes his point against the background of the Commonwealth Government's action to create a national level voice for Aborigines. A national political voice implies both a national political community and a national political perspective, the foundations for ethno-politics. What can be called Aboriginal ethno-politics is sustained by Aboriginality which may or may not similarly influence the character of politics in the local community. Aboriginal political identity is neither unidimensional nor static. Nor does it overcome the social and cultural distance that separates Aborigines.

Aborigines do not share absolute social, political and economic imperatives, and the coincidence of their priorities is only at the general level. In this they appear not to differ from other populations whose heterogeneity does not prevent a common identification and a common - if qualified - sense of purpose. A collective identity and a diversity of priorities are not mutually exclusive. What is important is the extent to which a form of identification - structural or psychological - can promote political mobilisation. Aboriginality can provide this function because it is the affirmation of a national consciousness and national culture from those elements of communality

that are considered to have shaped traditional Aboriginal life. It is a national consciousness that was initiated as a response to non-Aboriginal treatment of Aboriginal people, and so, although non-Aboriginal influence does not constitute Aboriginality, it was the catalyst for its development.

Despite the controversy it arouses among non-Aborigines, Aboriginality is readily affirmed by Aboriginal people. They invariably proclaim their possession but have difficulty defining the concept. To many, the term equates with the awareness of an inheritance that is more biological than cultural: 'It's the colour of my skin', or 'It's because I'm black'. In this tautologous expression, they are Aboriginal, and being Aboriginal means having Aboriginality. Their apprehension frequently goes no further than this. For others, it is a psychological condition involved in their celebration of cultural values which unite all Aborigines in a common identity and common purpose, which are, however, not always shown to have relevance beyond the point of rhetoric. It has been described as 'the way we as Aborigines think, live and operate' (Cavanagh *NSW LA Select Committee Report* 1981:874), while Marcia Langton (1981:17) refers to the 'Aboriginality of adjustments to city life', and suggests Aborigines have formed 'diverse, unique urban communities with one thing in common, their Aboriginality' (1981:21). Another comment from within an Aboriginal community dismisses the need to explain the phenomena: 'People have a feeling of what they're on about - identity...To me it just exists. Aboriginality is not interesting at all, it just exists' (Tape:85 W5). In any case, Aborigines frequently proclaim their Aboriginality and then proceed to act politically within the boundaries of their particular social or spatial orientation.

Seen outside the Aboriginal consciousness, Aboriginality has no commonly apprehended form. Considered more in terms of its utility, Eckermann (1977:318) identifies

...the whole nexus of folklore, in-group identity and emphasis on 'Aboriginality' [which] provides the individual with a screen through which he can identify himself positively as 'coloured', possessing qualities no white man has.

In a similar analysis of a functional relationship with identity, Creamer (1988:56) considers the 'strategic uses of Aboriginality' in a multicultural state to be 'an internal dynamic in the process of constructing identity'. Von Sturmer (1973:16) disposes of it as 'a fiction which takes on meaning only in terms of white ethnocentrism'. In contrast, Tatz (1982:20) discusses 'the collectivity and continuity of Aboriginality', although he earlier implies that Aboriginality needs to be built (1979:88). Thiele (1982:20) considers it an artificial construct and suggests that, 'If Aboriginality is what Aborigines do and think there must be many different and contradictory kinds of Aboriginality'. But these non-Aboriginal analyses can only be considered in the context of what Guillemin (1975:18) terms 'at best the rough translations of other peoples' realities'. It is these subjective realities Anderson (1985:42) appears to embrace when he observes that, in regard to the existence or otherwise of Aboriginality, 'people think that it does, argue that it does and act as though it does', and he goes on to emphasise that 'to assert the existence of Aboriginality is not to assume that Aborigines form a wholly coherent, unified body'. It may not be a social reality but it is a significant part of the political environment, sustaining an accessible political identity.

3.5 The Scope Of Political Identity

A political identity provides the base from which Aboriginal people collectively might challenge the existing structures of the Australian

society and its polity. The challenge is one that seeks fundamental changes in society and a greater share of resources. Change is sought because many Aborigines do not believe the existing structures are responsive to them as people or to their aspirations, and in this context a separate political identity is an expression of their alienation. An observation from an individual living within an Aboriginal rural community encapsulates the Aboriginal experience, albeit in the context of a sweeping generalisation that is not fully supported by evidence:

It's definitely alienation. They hate white society from the word 'go'. People hate school; they hate being there ten years. They hate the cops and they hate the town. Some go through their life being polite about it; and other people go through their lives belting each other up about it; and other people occasionally lash out against the object of hate. That's the desperate side of it (Tape:85 W3).

Another informant, also acknowledging alienation as a factor, goes beyond this to define Aboriginal politics in terms of a reaction to social exclusion, which influences a desire for freedom from non-Aboriginal control:

The main part...is the hostility of white society...at the local level that is the overwhelming factor in peoples' lives. That's alienation [but] it's hostility too. They're powerless and oppressed, and they want to be free from this oppression. They want to live their own lives with their terms of reference totally within the Aboriginal community (Tape:85 W5).

A similar perspective on Aboriginal thinking is provided by a non-Aboriginal person with close personal and professional contact with a number of communities:

Many Aboriginal people do not regard themselves as being a free people because to many of them Australia is not the free country it purports itself to be (Personal communication).

Political expression reflects more than an ideological prescription for a particular way of life. It is more than emotional rhetoric to define the political collectivisation of a minority group as the avenue to the

freedom they feel has been denied them. A number of writers, in fact, stress the expression of politics as being the articulation of this desire for freedom. Hannah Arendt considers the *raison d'être* of politics to be freedom and its field of experience to be action. As Kateb (1984:8) comments:

Arendt believes that freedom develops fully only when it is not hidden but appears in political action in a visible space. The prevailing idea in Arendt's work is that the only vehicle of freedom is political action.

In similar vein, Paulo Freire (1972) talks of educating the oppressed, an education he makes clear will politicise them. The human vocation, he claims, is humanisation, and, 'it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity' (1972:20). DuPreez (1980), who sees politics in terms of the consolidation and elaboration of an identity system, argues for the reduction of the enforced authority of the 'imperatively coordinated systems' of vast bureaucracies which direct most personal human activities and devalue individual identity. He suggests the creation of the conditions of liberty and choice for individuals, and cites John Stuart Mills' distinction: 'The social constitution of liberty will make achievement of individual freedom possible' (1980:8).

Aboriginal political expression can be understood in this context of a desire for freedom. To people who, until comparatively recent times, had almost every aspect of their lives structured and directed, the idea of freedom and the assumed mechanism for its achievement, self-determination, would be particularly important in their apprehension of the need for political relevance and of their priorities for political action. However, it is necessary to consider individual behaviour as well as that of the collective with which he or she may have an ambivalent or marginal relationship. Individuals cannot be placed in

fixed relationships with the social and political structures, nor can it be assumed there will always be a commonality of purpose. The Aboriginal is in a continuous process of adaptation which is driven by the changing focus of identification and the variability of relationships.

Individual Aborigines mostly identify strongly with their local community or community group and often only vaguely with that assumed at the national, ethnic level. Whatever the dominant subjective identification, social life places him or her in certain relationships with other Aborigines and with other elements of the non-Aboriginal society. When an improvement in social or material life is placed ahead of the supposed collective interests of the community there can be a social distancing of the individual from the community either directly because of self-interest or indirectly as the result of a real or imagined closer alignment with non-Aboriginal values and aspirations. This can lead to a more general, that is, less Aboriginal, identity, or to a reactive strengthening of a more militant expression of Aboriginal identification.

When Aboriginal people are not fully accepted within their local community they are impelled towards a broader level of Aboriginal identification. The local unit becomes less important because it is less accessible, whereas the national identification allows a greater degree of flexibility because it accommodates such diversity. Whatever the reason for the individual's exclusion from the local community, he or she finds within the broader fields of Aboriginality and national politics many others who are similarly placed. It is often a more militant expression of identification because it does not focus on the limited dimensions of local issues. At the same time it allows for a more radical agenda as a compensatory agent for local exclusion.

For many Aboriginal people the expression of a national identification may fulfill either or both of two purposes: it facilitates the reassertion of a subjective Aboriginal identity; and it illustrates the primacy of that identity in the face of a real or alleged dilution because of a perceived lack of Aboriginality, because of individual material advancement, or through cooptation into an alien bureaucratic structure. It thus allows the individual to see himself or herself and to present to others as one who is still demonstrably Aboriginal. Aboriginal political behaviour incorporates a range of transcultural, adaptive strategies that help Aborigines to find their 'place', to define and to redefine their identity. A need to define the Aboriginal place is fundamental to contemporary Aboriginal politics, but equally it has influenced Aboriginal political behaviour throughout its recorded history.

3.6 History, Myth And Ideology

Contemporary Aboriginal politics could be considered to have had its genesis in the mobilisation and protest of the late 1960s. Alternately, it might be seen to have begun with the period of activity and change in the 1930s or even as far back as the era of conflict that followed the interaction of Aborigines and European settlers from the beginnings of colonisation. But any restriction of the generation of Aboriginal politics to a post-contact period presupposes the absence of political institutions in the pre-contact societies, something that cannot be asserted without some degree of qualification (see e.g. Balandier 1970:23ff; Hiatt 1987; Howard 1982a:2; Kolig 1982; Maddock 1982; Myers 1982).

It becomes necessary to have regard to the particular interpretation of political society relevant to the framework of the questions raised. In

the context of the ideological basis of the contemporary politics of Aboriginal identity there are, according to some spokespersons, elements of the traditional. Thus, Rob Riley can talk of 'sovereignty' being exercised by 'tribal governments', of 'self-governing unit(s)' with 'a defined territory', and developing 'laws governing the relations between tribes and other peoples' (NAC *Background Paper* n.d.), surely elements of political institutions and processes as generally understood. McGuinness (1975:2) sees traditional life as being part of 'a nation without a state [where] all people were equal within that society'. With a somewhat different interpretation, one which, nevertheless, stresses the idea of a traditional and continuing national political community, Paul Coe (1987:11) claims 'We always have been, always will be a state', and Pat Dodson (1988:3) defines Aborigines as 'not just another minority but a people with our own laws, rights, cultures and religion; which we have never ceded'.

These Aboriginal perceptions of the traditional society are, of course, no more than constructs, but equally so are those of non-Aborigines who similarly see the society from a considerable temporal distance. Berndt (1977:5) comments that the 'reality' of traditional Aboriginal life cannot be assumed by someone, Aboriginal or otherwise, outside the system. Nevertheless, he says:

...it is possible to have a particular perspective based on what is assumed to be an Aboriginal way of life - that is, to have an idea or vision of it. Whether we think of this as a 'mirage' or not is really beside the point.

Consequently, whatever the sources or presumptions of the mirage or myth of contemporary Aborigines, their concepts derive from a perceived need to legitimise the ideological foundations of an ethnic identity and its concomitant politics. The use of myth to inform an emergent political ideology has been noted in other groups who have been largely cut off

from their past and its traditions. In his study of the American Negro, Fullinwider (1965:VII) observes that 'myth grows out of psychological need; when it is tested against reality, ideology results'. This is illustrated more specifically by Nursey-Bray (1983) who sees the significance of the conceptualisation of an ideal pre-colonial society as the basis in the foundation of modern African political philosophies, something that has close parallels in contemporary Aboriginal political expression:

Drawing on these historical sources African traditional society is envisaged as an ideal communal society where equality and care for others is the norm...(1983:98).

A vision of the past becomes part of the mythology and makes possible a transition that has both psycho-social and psycho-political dimensions:

The project of African political theory as it emerged from this quest for a new identity was the reconstruction of an idealized past as the basis for present and future political activity (Nursey-Bray 1983:98).

Aboriginal political actors, whose focus is on the national level of political expression, define an ideology in which an abstract solidarity unites all those who consider themselves to be Aboriginal irrespective of their individual history or present social and economic position. This contemporary unity celebrates the traditional cultural values they insist characterised the ideal Aboriginal society. In this perspective the Aboriginal national polity is a *mimesis*, a representation, however remote, of a believed pre-existing reality. It depends on the continuation of a pan-national, political and social consciousness or, in the absence of this, in the creation of such a dynamic to drive the Aboriginal polity.

3.7 National Identity And Macro Politics

Since the 1960s, the expression of Aboriginal politics has been influenced considerably by the national-level view of Aboriginal people and their needs and demands. Articulated particularly by political actors in the southern states, this expression seeks to have Aborigines recognised as a group whose assumed common history and contemporary social conditions demand policies to redress injustice and deprivation and to restore the autonomy, cultural integrity and self-esteem largely destroyed through the colonising experience. It promotes a national political voice and a political agenda at a level from which it can be communicated to governments. In turn, governments have found it more convenient to deal with a single Aboriginal position even though this tends to be an artificial concept which largely ignores the significance of local and regional issues. Notwithstanding its limited validity, the perception of a common identity is advantageous both to governments and to those Aborigines whose ideological commitment is posited on such a concept. Because this identification is endorsed to some extent in most expressions of Aboriginal politics it creates an impression of political cohesion and uniformity that is not consistent with the diversity of Aboriginal society, the variability of its expectations and the moderating influence of local identity.

Aboriginal politics, then, functions at two general levels with two corresponding areas of demand. Nationally, macro policies are expressed as being the avenues to advance the position of Aborigines *qua* Aborigines. They promote a form of Aboriginal nationalism with objectives of autonomy, territorial sovereignty and the regeneration of a conceived cultural heritage. Macro politics makes possible a degree of ethnic solidarity over a broad spectrum, but while its expression is

invariably militant and the issues frequently extreme, it is not always clearly defined or directed. Goals are often vaguely represented or unrealistic, with little reference to the priorities of Aborigines in regional and local communities. This is not to deny the possible coincidence of local and national aspirations, but it cannot be assumed that this will always be the case. It is only by understanding the specifics of each local community, its needs and its expectations, and the interaction between local and national identities, that the forms of Aboriginal politics can be reconciled. There is, in fact, no structural reality underlying the notion of a cohesive national cultural or social entity. The assumption of a national identification is a political statement, and the mobilisation of nationalist sentiment is a political resource.

Whatever their social or cultural background - and here culture refers not to the apprehension of a mythologised and often idealised past, but to the individual and group experience and the way these are interpreted - people who identify as Aboriginal can be part of a national community. They have access to a psychological sense of place that is less circumscribed and, in some ways, more meaningful than the social and geographical space in which many of them have lived a limiting existence. Although the individual's first social and political links are invariably with the local community, few deny their alignment with this ethnic-inspired, national identity. Conflict, or at least identity ambivalence, disturbs this alignment when the political focus of the national collective is at variance with that of the fundamental level of social functioning. Individuals are drawn to that unit of community of which they feel essentially a part, that is, to which there are structural as well as emotional ties. In each case, however, it is not so much the environment *per se* as it is the interpretation of the

particular environment that determines the individual's orientation. To many Aboriginal people the environment of national Aboriginal politics is as alien as that of the general Australian society.

3.8 The Hierarchical Structure Of Aboriginal Politics

If a national political agenda promotes a single position as relevant to the Aboriginal population it, and government responses to it, ignore the particular local and regional significance of issues facing Aborigines. While ethnicity has an important role in Aboriginal broad level interaction with governments, the primary identification of Aboriginal people is more sharply focused. The significant issues are determined at local or regional levels and are not addressed within an abstract, cultural nationalism which articulates a pan-Aboriginal demand for power without reference to the essential differences within the population. Aborigines are generally supportive of a broadly-based identity structure as the medium for the expression of their alienation from the dominant society or from its historical representation. But their fundamental localised identification ensures that their active concerns are with local issues.

Regardless of the extent to which altruism might be the motivation of actors at the national level of Aboriginal politics, their possibility of success is limited by the structures of Aboriginal society. Moreover, the criteria of success themselves need to be defined if they are to be seen in other than platitudinous terms. The basic national polemic, with which many Aboriginal people identify, is often non-specific and reduced to generalisations such as rights and self-determination. Both terms have emotive connotations but are meaningless

unless their positive dimensions are clear, the advantages they promise apparent and their contribution to the resolution of a problem clearly perceived. A concept of self-determination posited on an Aboriginal authority model breaks down when the community is the result of generations of tribal, clan or 'mob'³ disintegration. To the extent that it exists, authority in urban and rural communities is, in most cases, limited, no longer related to traditional cultural patterns but part of the contemporary political process.

Self-determination is of little benefit to a community lacking basic essentials for an acceptable standard of living, and rights have no value without the mechanisms to turn them to advantage. Commenting on the political attractiveness of the creation of rights, Sowell (1983:165) notes that it is often a very low cost way to 'do something' about a social 'problem'. Where such rights include equality the effect of their realisation would undercut the basis of Aboriginal demands for special treatment. In pursuing these abstract goals the political rhetoric that is supposed to represent the view of all Aborigines serves often to generate tensions and divisions within groups at the local level, and may indeed lead to the breakup of community cohesion. This follows the attempt to impose a rigidity on Aboriginal politics through macro policies wherein the individual is asked to shift allegiance from the local to the national unit.

The forms and expressions of Aboriginal politics at the national level have also a vertical continuity that reaches the regional and often, but

³ The term is used here in the context of groups of Aborigines who, in the first instance, were associated with certain areas or with pastoral properties in the early part of the twentieth century following their dispersal from traditional lands. Later, the term was applied to populations of reserves, missions and settlements near towns, and even to sub-units within these communities.

not always, the local level. It is carried by political actors and by individuals within the organisations that are set up by or for Aborigines. Many of these appear to support the nationalist polemic because of their assumed role as members of political and bureaucratic elites whose function is to guide all Aborigines in the appropriate directions. But the national level rhetoric may alienate local-oriented Aborigines from that expression of politics and may lead them to question what they see as the imposed leadership and authority structures. The important question raised here is whether such alienation redirects or reinforces the alienation from the general society, which is strongly felt by many Aboriginal people and is the basis for much of the fundamental Aboriginal politics. Alternately it might be asked if the divisions created within groups impel them inevitably towards a greater incorporation into the general society.

Solutions to many of the problems that exist at the local level are not always provided for, or at times even addressed, by macro politics and its advocates. There is a possibility that such problems might be exacerbated by an attempt to enforce objectives that run counter to the expressed wishes or expectations of the local community or a significant group within that community. The creation of national structures and a national political voice, self-determination and even land rights - despite their widespread endorsement - have little relevance for those who may be seeking basic material gains from a society with which they are inexorably linked. Housing, an improvement in economic status through employment, better health and educational facilities with Aboriginal participation in their provision are frequently the primary objectives expressed by Aboriginal people.

It is not unusual to hear older Aborigines refer to the articulated priorities of macro politics in terms of 'rubbish' the young people have 'had their heads filled with'. The expression of these objectives creates further conflict through its tendency to create the impression of a self-perceived, political elite which may or may not have the support of a significant number in the local community because it lacks a recognised and legitimised authority. An authority clash ensues between a younger, politically militant and upwardly mobile elite, and the structure that may be more aligned with a concept of traditional authority carried by the older and more respected members of the community. In the contemporary community the traditional authority structures may not be replicated, but they are often acknowledged at least to the extent that those individuals considered to command respect because of age and social status are consulted before major decisions affecting the community are made. For their part, the younger actors, while expressing respect for their elders, often do not consider the traditional - or quasi-traditional - authority to fit well with contemporary political realities. A form of gerontocracy is not believed, by these younger people, to be an acceptable alternative to a politically informed leadership.

It is a commonly expressed opinion of Aboriginal people interviewed during this study, that the Aboriginal political organisation rarely touches the ordinary people in the community; that organisations go nowhere; that they become talk-shops, excuses for meetings which achieve nothing but dissension. Their formal role is, to substantial numbers of Aborigines, subverted by self-interest, nepotism and, not infrequently, corruption. The formation of committees with only vaguely understood functions has little relevance in the development of effective political activity and may lead instead to frustration, apathy and increased

alienation. Political mobilisation is possible if factionalism is not the overriding feature of local politics, or where the issue is such as to inspire a common stance. Such mobilisation appears invariably to be short term, and dissipates rapidly in the face of Aboriginal loss of interest.

Those Aborigines who see nationally directed activity as the basis of Aboriginal politics, and its objectives as the appropriate directions for the population to secure a relevant identity and independent way of life, typically believe they represent all Aborigines whatever their association with the general society. The progress they assume is towards an independence that has its roots in some form of symbolic or psychological return to the past, the mythologised and idealised past that was free of non-Aboriginal influence and direction. In attempting to recreate in some form this image of the past, Aborigines may be seen, in Arendt's terms (Kateb 1984), as manifesting political action as the vehicle for the recovery of freedom. A search for freedom is an understandable reaction to the generations of social and political control or, if more emotive language is used, oppression.

Aboriginal politics, however, must function within the overall Australian polity. Even if some form of separatist approach could be adopted as an administrative expedient it is doubtful whether the majority of Aboriginal people would opt for this; many who call for separatist-inspired policies do not see these as functioning in geographical isolation. The demands of Aborigines living in relatively remote areas are different in significant respects from those of the Aboriginal community living in close association with non-Aboriginal society. Strategies for the former may not be relevant for the latter, nor is a collective identity likely to extend beyond the bounds of

political or psychological utility. An awareness of the limitation of cultural identity in contemporary Aboriginal society could well be seen to echo the description of the culture of Canadian Indians provided by Guillemin (1975:293): 'To be on a constant journey and yet never really leave familiar faces behind...'. The importance of an understanding of this limitation in respect of the development of policies is detailed by von Sturmer (1973:25):

To say that a successful Aboriginal movement is remote under present conditions is to make a number of assumptions. If we recognise that each community develops a different solution to a number of local problems, we must also acknowledge that unilateral policies for Aborigines cannot but be unworkable. This has been accepted in so far as the gross differences are concerned, that is, between urban and non-urban Aborigines. But it is often overlooked in the case of rural groups.

Another dimension of the separatist approach comes from people, not all of whom are elderly, whose search for freedom inclines them to seek a return to a more recent past. Spanning the era of the concentration of Aborigines on reserves and mission stations, this past is anathema to those who see it as the embodiment of the policies that sought to destroy Aboriginal culture and identity. But it is presented in a different perspective when the gaining of equality and citizenship rights is considered to have been destructive of Aboriginal social and cultural life and to have led to a life of indolence and alcoholism. To these people, the devastation of communities through alcohol abuse, increased violence and lawlessness and the lack of respect for traditional authority and values, are attributed to the new way of life that has followed citizenship rights, the availability of welfare payments and a greater exposure to non-Aboriginal society generally. A closer association with non-Aboriginal society deprived many of the psychological protection of communal living even though the actual living standards - as measured by non-Aboriginal criteria - improved.

Some claim they cannot cope with the pressures generated by their new environment.

Seen in retrospect as some form of 'golden age', the protection and welfare era is recalled with nostalgia and regret for what is believed to have been lost:

We had a pretty good life then (Tape:85 B9).

Everyone was good then. There was some decent black people. No woman ever drank, hardly. And since they're been given these rights the men's been in the pub and the women followed them in. Once they went in that seemed to be it (Tape:86 B8).

There is a questioning of the value of what has been gained:

Sometimes I wonder too - if it's right if they get some white man's education, or would it have been better if they'd stayed like we was at their age. There is no way in the world you spoke out against what an Elder said, you know. Or even go to a place where we shouldn't - Now they do it all, and all we do is sit and shake our head (Tape:86 B15).

To some, the return is in actual physical terms, although the expression has not been matched by a willingness to act even where this has been possible:⁴ 'Lot of them saying to me now, they want to go back - where they were happy. We willing to go back and live in tents on the old mission' (Tape:85 M7). An obvious paradox exists in the idealising of an era in which freedom, social, cultural and political, was circumscribed, and where the non-Aboriginal authority figures of the old reserves and missions are still represented as the manifestations of an oppressive and alienating society.

Although a commonly expressed attitude, a retreat to the past is not sought by all Aborigines. Many question how far they could, or should want to, go back. Resigned to what they consider the inevitable direction of the future and the impossibility of a return to the past,

⁴ An example of this in respect of the area of the former Menindee mission station is discussed in chapter 8.

they seek to develop the skills needed to cope with life in the non-Aboriginal-dominated society: 'What people got to realise, we in the modern age today... The old way of life is gone forever' (Tape:85 B9). Awareness of what is seen as the reality of the Aboriginal condition prompts the call for a purposeful approach rather than a concentration on what cannot be restored:

I don't like to say this, but that's sort of in the past; that's changed. I think you've got to look to the future...You have to have a goal or your finished. It's no good looking into the past, you can't change that (Tape: 88 W14).

This is the attitude expressed by Ryan's (1986:50) informant who reflects an apparent Aboriginal awareness of the need for adaptation to ensure survival in conditions that are rarely of their own making: 'Today, race has been mixed. The life has changed...So our choice is mixed background and forward step together'. Whether the future is seen in terms of a step forward or of a return to the past, the varying extent of individual and group adaptation influences the boundaries of possible future social and political associations.

3.9 Defining The Boundaries

Those involved in Aboriginal politics and the policies it seeks to influence need to be aware of the boundaries of Aboriginal identity and, from these, the appropriate shape of social and political structures. In this way they may be able to chart the details of Aboriginal aspirations. Despite the commissions, committees of enquiry and policy reviews that litter the post-contact history of Australian Aborigines, no definitive plan has been formulated and no agreed place determined for them in Australian society. The discredited and discarded policies of dispersal, protection, segregation, assimilation and integration have been replaced by various interpretations of autonomy. These, however,

are vague and do not establish the actual shape of the specific Aboriginal community as a self-determining social and political entity.

The dimensions of the problems in defining social and political boundaries are evident in the expressions of Aboriginal people themselves. Some acknowledge the diversity of the population, others ignore this in their demands for an autonomous, culturally distinct people. One, who is himself part of the bureaucratic structure, recognises the difficulties presented by the nature of Aboriginal society to the resolution of the problems they confront:

Local, regional, state issues are different in Australia, and so are the people. The issues in NSW are different to those in, say, the Northern Territory and Queensland. They're just so different that it's difficult to get that united thing. Because the Territory people see the NSW people as 'yellow' people...I suppose the main push everybody has is equality (Tape:87 B5).

To some Aborigines the structure of Aboriginal society does not influence the debate. Solutions are presented as clear-cut alternatives to existing policies and attitudes:

The way out of the conundrum is, however, in essence simple. It simply requires the recognition of Aboriginal rights, our status as the indigenous people of this continent, and the guarantee of Aboriginal survival (Houston 1985:18).

In contrast, an alternate Aboriginal viewpoint considers assimilation not as an abandoned policy but as an existing reality:

I think the way Australia is going now with migration and that, it's going to go multicultural. You going to get dark people and white people marrying - girls and guys marrying white people, pretty soon. When you're talking about small towns...you probably wouldn't have Aboriginal communities...Pretty soon, say 50 years or so, in small places...[With] intermarriage and people related, there's not going to be any black people in towns like that (Tape:87 B9).

In still another analysis the future of Aborigines, at least in Southern Australia, is influenced less by the people themselves than by the attitudes that shape governments' perceptions of appropriate directions:

Government policy and the way it's implemented is based on a racist policy...denying a valid separate existence of an Aboriginal view of the world. Aborigines are either up there in the Northern Territory or down there under the ground, but there's none down here. That's government policy in Aboriginal Affairs in southern Australia...they're not going to capitalise aboriginal society because they believe it doesn't exist now, and if it does it shouldn't exist in another 50 years time. Unwritten, although you occasionally hear it spoken. I've heard it spoken from people in DAA: Aborigines won't exist in NSW in 50 years time (Tape:85 W5).

The study of communities will not, of itself, reconcile these conflicting perceptions, nor will it provide a general theory of Aboriginal political and social behaviour. It can, however, provide a focus within which it may be possible to suggest that the interpretation of the social environment, influenced as it is by the particular cultural experience, reflects the extent to which the community is, or sees itself as being, incorporated into or distanced from the general society and other levels of Aboriginal association. This can be interpreted as a measure of its perceived alienation and can be usefully employed in interpreting the subsequent social and political behaviour. From this it might be possible to assess the extent that a nationalist, pan-Aboriginal or ethnic political expression will dominate or be limited by local perspectives.

CHAPTER 4

ABORIGINAL POLICY AND THE ORGANISATION OF IDENTITY

4.1 Creating The Conditions

This chapter explores the processes through which policies have been adopted as responses to the Aboriginal condition, itself largely the result of earlier policies and practices. It illustrates how the concepts of identity that informed non-Aboriginal thinking and policy formation influenced also the Aboriginal response and provided a vehicle for an Aboriginal political expression. At the same time it suggests these factors significantly influenced the establishment of the conditions that inspire much of the conflict that besets the social and political lives of contemporary Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people comprise a diverse, generally disadvantaged and largely unintegrated population whose condition is the result of physical and cultural dispossession, material deprivation and social exclusion. It is also a population characterised by spatial, cultural, social and economic diversity. But it is possible within this diversity to create a consciousness of common identity from the resources available to these people. It is what, in this study, is referred to as Aboriginal ethnicity: a political identity with psychological significance.

From the beginnings of European settlement Aboriginal diversity has been largely ignored when it conflicted with non-Aboriginal perceptions of the Aboriginal place in Australian society. Their social and cultural

identities were reconstructed to accord with the demands of the hegemonic colonial process. Aborigines as the subject of both perception and policy became a presumed 'people' with a collective, racial identity.

Because they were identified collectively, Aboriginal people were forced into the assumption of a socially and culturally unrealistic, largely symbolic identity. It is, however, an identity which became psychologically and politically important for Aboriginal people in their dealings with the society which had so constructed them. Despite its fragility and its social and ideological limitations, it can at times be mobilised as a political resource because it assumes a common condition and allows - at least theoretically - a common expression of a socially and culturally alienated people. There is, then, a reciprocity between the way Aborigines were, and to some extent still are, constructed by non-Aboriginal society, and the Aboriginal response in ethnic identification.

When initial attempts to absorb Aboriginal people into the general society were unsuccessful and the effects of colonialism could no longer be ignored, groups were merged and segregated from the general society for what was considered to be their own protection. Losing their known local affinity they were placed in alien structures with an ascribed common identity. Their group individuality was not considered, nor were the consequences of this enforced socialisation. But the process created even greater problems which in turn inspired a return to considerations of incorporation. Policies were predicated on the belief that the difficulties would be resolved by absorbing these people into the general society. Having constructed an Aboriginal identity, it was now

assumed that this would become extinct through its exposure to a stronger and more meaningful culture.

Until comparatively recent times the general society was not overly accommodating and little was done to facilitate such a change. Aborigines were afforded little encouragement and were largely left to find their own way in developing the attributes thought necessary to fit them for incorporation. These policies failed because of the implicit criteria for acceptance into the society, because little attempt was made to facilitate Aboriginal adaptation and because of unexpected Aboriginal resilience.

Aboriginal people were left in various stages of cultural fragmentation and identity ambivalence. Unless people so affected develop the necessary social and economic skills to enable them to function in the wider society according to that society's criteria, or unless they become politically active and effective, they cannot improve their conditions other than through the agency of the dominant group's benevolence and sense of justice. Social and economic advancement by individuals invariably isolates them from their group identity if a prerequisite for such advancement is the adoption of new values in a new form of socialisation. Similarly, the politics of the individual is frequently the representation of personal interests, or those of the group as he or she defines them. Where this allows social or economic mobility it may lead to successful 'passing', to merging with the dominant society. Alternately, it may engender emotional and psychological insecurity and an increase in the sense of isolation or marginality.

4.2 Identifying The Aboriginal 'Problem'

The collective identification of Aborigines has been invariably associated with the description of a common social and psychological condition. A reflection of what is commonly called the 'Aboriginal problem' is a feature of much, if not most, of the literature that has focused on these people. The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Aborigines Project, an ambitious undertaking commissioned in 1963, resulted in a series of works published between 1970 and 1980 which comprehensively explored the dimensions of the problems of Aborigines in Australian society (Jones 1970; Long 1970; Rowley 1970, 1971a, 1971b; Schapper 1970; Taft, Dawson and Beasley 1970; Gale 1972; Broom and Jones 1973; Moodie 1973; Stevens 1974; Smith and Biddle 1975; Eggleston 1976; Smith 1980). But the term 'problem' itself is not universally accepted even if the social, political and economic conditions it subsumes cannot be denied. On one side of the debate, Howard (1982b:84) sees the problem in terms of concerns with the access to, and utilisation of, resources. Tatz, among others, rejects it and the analysis it implies and refers instead to the 'White problem' (1979:1). Straddling the polemic, Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982:219) are more specific in defining the view from both sides of the interaction:

While the Aborigines constitute a problem for the government, defined in terms of a set of economic, social and health issues, the government constitutes a problem for Aborigines defined in terms of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation.

Beckett (1988b:3), who sees the problem in the sense of being 'something that requires the state to find a *resolution*', suggests that Australia has been trying to 'solve' this problem over a long period. He claims the media construct Aborigines as a problem with a particular orientation:

whether of ill-health, poor housing, unemployment, denial of civil rights, discrimination; or of parasitism, alcoholism, unacceptable conduct, vulnerability to agitators.

The problem, he says, is laid at the door of the government, 'which is required to 'do something'' (1988b:4).

Whatever the assessment of the situation, it is the manifestation of its visual dimensions that has dominated much of the writing and influenced the emotive tone it displays. Aboriginal communities are frequently so obviously impoverished, materially and psychologically, that a random selection of comments presents a depressing similarity over a long period of observation. Lippmann (1970:9) describes a people without either a sense of purpose in the present or faith in the future:

Even a cursory acquaintance with an Aboriginal community gives the onlooker the impression of an all-pervasive hopelessness, powerlessness, and unease in the face of the unknown. The feeling of futility apparent on the Aboriginal side from the earliest days of settlement - is and has been a realistic one.

Noting similar characteristics in his view of Aboriginal society, Rowley sees alcoholism, personal violence and aggression as being symptomatic of group deprivation. Withdrawal into apathy denies any expectation of relief: 'Their aspirations are restricted, not by the limits of need, but by the limits of their hopes' (1971a:183). The negative image is constantly reinforced by the pejorative terminology in both academic and political reportage. Eckermann (1977:2) outlines a view that sees the Aboriginal as 'unresponsive' and 'leaderless', suffering 'disorientation', 'hopelessness' and 'addiction to alcohol'; a Senate Standing Committee's report (1974:25) describes 'despair', 'frustration' and 'alcoholic haze'; and a NSW Legislative Assembly Select Committee (1981:X) referred to the conditions of the people in unequivocal terms:

The Aboriginal citizens of this State mainly exist in conditions of abject poverty. Their housing is substandard and overcrowded. Their health and education, abysmal. Their employment, negligible. Their welfare and culture, ignored or deprecated.

From a range of sources, impressions of the issue reveal the persistence of the deleterious conditions of life for much of the Aboriginal population. This is acknowledged in a more recent statement of the NSW Government's position on Aboriginal affairs:

That many Aboriginal people continue to exist as the most disadvantaged and dispossessed citizens of our state is an indictment of past policies and programs (*Discussion Paper*, 1988:1).

In remote, rural and urban Australia there are clusters of unintegrated people who appear as outsiders in their own country; whose participation in the social, political and economic structures is minimal; and whose style and standard of living deny the expectations of the general society. They are 'fringe dwellers' socially, if not geographically. The widespread apathy and anomie reported by many observers is generally considered in relation to those involved and not in the context of their possible effects on the social and political stability of the nation. Yet the possibility exists for disruption, confrontation and even violence as these people increasingly become urbanised and politicised. It is a possibility that has been expressed by outspoken Aboriginal people. It has also raised questions from other, non-Aboriginal, observers of the likely consequences of Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal interaction as more Aborigines move into towns and cities and find eventually that their expectations are not fulfilled. Considering their re-entry into the general life of the community after periods, initially of conflict, then of isolation, Gale (1972:36) adumbrated the problems of confrontation that could occur:

Whether direct contact between Aborigines and other Australians will again lead to a period of overt conflict is one of the most important issues in Australia today.

Much later than Gale's observations, Tatz (*Age* June 3, 1989) warned of 'anger and frustration [boiling] over into violence' if something 'was

not done to help Aboriginal people'. Conflict which has led to outbreaks of violence and even, on occasion, to loss of life are stark testimony to the validity of these evaluations.

However, while the general Aboriginal condition is starkly visible, the most appropriate way to resolve this is much less obvious. Neither Aborigines nor non-Aborigines appear to have an unambiguous view of the Aboriginal place in Australian society. Imposed policies have sought to place them geographically and socially in particular relationships with the wider society. Against this, prejudice and discrimination and even outright rejection impel them towards some form of common identity in adversity. Even in those stable communities where Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal relationships are generally free from racial tensions, the conflict between a social identity as members of a total community and a political identity as an Aboriginal is present, even if subdued. Such a confusion of identity is understandable in light of the confusion of policies that have been designed supposedly to address the Aboriginal question.

4.3 Assimilation And Integration

Since administrations came to realise that Aborigines were not going to die out and that enforced segregation could no longer be supported on moral, ethical, political or economic grounds, policies have been influenced by various assessments of the need for Aborigines to be absorbed into the general Australian society. It was, and generally still is, believed that while Aborigines were in some way excluded from the general society they would continue to be exposed to a self-perpetuating cycle of inequality and poverty. Equally obvious was the fact that the visibility of this would cause considerable national and international embarrassment to governments. Notwithstanding notions

that Aborigines are themselves best suited to decide the way in which they should live, their inclusion was considered to be a necessary part of the solution of the Aboriginal dilemma. For those who lived in close proximity to white society in rural and urban Australia, the transition was expected as a normal development. Bell (1965:396) provides an observer's analysis of these anticipated norms of social incorporation:

Because they are racially partly, and in some cases predominantly, European, because they live within the territorial boundaries of a European society, and because almost nothing of the traditional Aboriginal culture and social life remains, it might be expected by some that over the years they would have merged socially with the general European community.

More pertinent than the comments of observers is the statement of policy addressed directly to Aborigines in NSW at an earlier stage of the process by the Superintendent of Aborigines Welfare. As a reflection of official thinking in the assimilation era it is worth reporting at length:

You Aboriginal people of New South Wales are now a very long way removed from your old tribal, primitive ancestors. They had their customs, traditions and beliefs which were of a high order, and it is a great pity that they are gradually being lost. The present generation, however, is embracing the habits, customs and beliefs of the whites, and it is inevitable that your race must, in due time, become assimilated into the white race of this country. That being so, we want you to absorb only the best of those qualities that the white race have to offer. We want you to be noble, proud, independent and courageous. We would like to see you as a self-reliant, industrious and thrifty people, proud of your heritage, and determined that your children should compare most favourably with their white brothers and sisters (Lipscomb *Aboriginal News* 1952:2).

In official terms, Aborigines were expected to 'live like white Australians do'. This would be achieved by the process of *assimilation*.

A definition by Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1984:22) claims the word 'assimilation' was first used to describe the process by which immigrant groups in the USA were *integrated* into the dominant culture. Their

contention that 'recent research regards assimilation as reciprocal, invoking mutual adjustments with host and migrant communities', supports the interchangeable use of assimilation and integration. An earlier interpretation sees assimilation as implying an unchanging host society absorbing the minority group, while integration would create a society which included cultural and social elements of each group. Bierstedt (1963) equates assimilation with acculturation, while Parenti (1967) makes a conceptual distinction between these two processes. Parenti argues that minority groups accommodate to styles and customs (acculturation), but despite increased occupational and geographic mobility it is not clear that they become assimilated:

...a group can maintain ethnic social cohesion and identity, while lacking an ecological basis... growing acculturation often leads to **more** rather than less ethnic political awareness (1967:721)

Sommerlad and Berry (1973), following Gordon (1964), discuss an analysis of assimilation which distinguishes seven variables or sub-processes. These include *behavioural* assimilation which is largely acculturation, and *structural* assimilation which refers to the process of inclusion of individuals in the minority group into the political, social and cultural organisation of the dominant society, and from which the other sub-processes follow automatically: amalgamation, identification, absence of prejudice and of discrimination and finally, civic assimilation (1973:236). But Sommerlad and Berry depart from Gordon's analysis to the extent that they suggest significant differences between integration and assimilation, principally on the basis of the retention or loss of identity by the minority group.

In her discussion of the concepts, Gale (1972:67) puts the argument into a perspective provided by an appreciation of the reality of policies affecting Aborigines when she states:

In practice, the actual social difference between the two policies might be difficult to distinguish but, in theory, 'integration' implies a recognition of Aboriginal identity and retention of some elements of traditional culture and customs, whereas 'assimilation' could mean the total replacement of these by acquired European traits.

However particular policies might be defined, the emphasis in NSW has been on the absorption of the Aborigines into the dominant group, albeit on terms defined by that group. In common with the other states, this absorption offered a conditional equality, one dependent on adaptation to standards, attitudes and values to which most Aborigines were not prepared to conform (Pittock 1975:259).

In considerations of the incorporation of Aborigines into the general community, the concepts of assimilation, integration and absorption have been used both independently and interchangeably, depending on the orientation of the user. A common understanding of the supposed changes in official attitudes is that the early policy of segregation was replaced by one of assimilation which, in turn, gave way to integration. A chronology provided by Altman and Niewenhuysen (1979) sees assimilation being replaced in 1965 by a policy of integration which, they observe, seemed little different, and which, in turn, gave way in 1972 to self-determination. Each state espoused policies which basically followed similar lines, but interpretation and implementation had distinctly individual features. In NSW the sequence - if it is a valid reading of that state's policy directions - had a different time frame. A 1967 report of a Joint Committee on Aborigines appeared not to have noted the change from the earlier discredited and supposedly abandoned concepts:

...it appears to be the consensus of opinion of those best qualified to speak, that the only satisfactory resolution of the problem is so to mould the administration as to ensure, as early as possible, that *assimilation* of these people into the social and economic life of the general community (*NSW PP.* vol.5, 1967-68: emphasis added).

In southern Australia, where complete geographical isolation of Aborigines is rare, many individuals and groups of Aborigines have become part of the social structure of local communities. Despite the offensiveness of the term, assimilation as a reality, if not as an ideal, needs to be considered in relation to those Aborigines who have adapted to life in a predominantly non-Aboriginal society. Policies posited on an understanding of the term have had an effect on Aborigines; it is the efficacy and morality of the policies rather than their existence that can be denied. Similarly, other policies, such as those which stress some form of self-determination or self-management, have an impact on the way Aborigines define themselves and their place in society. All policies designed to address problems confronting Aborigines, or the problems perceived as part of Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal interaction, whatever their philosophical or ideological bias, have had some influence on the contemporary structures of Aboriginal life.

Until the 1967 referendum approved the necessary constitutional amendments, the Federal Government had no constitutional power to control Aboriginal policy in the states. All states had endorsed assimilation as the desired policy, although each had its own idea what the term meant and determined its own strategy to accomplish this. Introduced by Elkin, the term was meant to imply no more than a positive move away from the idea of segregation. But, it has been argued, assimilation is a vague term which denotes a general attitude rather than a specific policy (Wilson 1961:50). If **policy** is defined as 'a course of action' (OED), Hausfeld (1963:33) insists that assimilation is an unreal statement of policy. For a government, it is

an *ideal* to which it subscribes but not as a policy, since there is no "course of action" it can carry out which will bring about assimilation.

Such apparent contradictions did not prevent assimilation being adopted as government policy in the 1960s.

Outlined at the Aboriginal Welfare conference in Darwin in July, 1963, it was reaffirmed by the Conference of State Ministers concerned with Aboriginal Welfare and representatives of the Commonwealth, held in Adelaide in July, 1965. But between these conferences some degree of reassessment is evident. Its first expression was somewhat emphatic in terms of expectations:

The policy of assimilation *means* that all Aborigines and part Aborigines *will* attain the *same* manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians (A PP. vol.3, 1962-1963:65) emphasis added).

This interpretation was changed, or at least somewhat modified, in 1965 to remove some of the more directive language. The Policy as described from this conference *seeks* rather than *means*; it *will choose to attain* rather than *will attain* a *similar* rather than the *same manner and standard* (word added). Omitted were the words *observing the same customs* and reference to *same beliefs*. A contemporary newspaper interpreted the policy as one involving total change:

Assimilation involves not only changing the environment of Aborigines. It involves changing, over a period, the whole pattern of their existence. It means for them adopting a new set of values, a new individualism that to most of them is an alien concept (*Australian*, January 11, 1965).

The same source also reported that an 'Assimilation Association' in one NSW town suggested that Aborigines should not be put in town houses immediately but 'through education and involvement [persuaded] to demand for themselves a town house when they are ready for one.'

Commenting on the official definition, Strehlow (1964:3) restated his earlier conviction that the term 'assimilation' meant:

a process of education which will enable the aboriginals and part-aboriginals of this country to acquire those skills and those ways of behaviour which will equip them to take their place with dignity and on a basis of full equality in mixed groups of dark and white Australian citizens.

But he found it impossible to advocate a concept which, he believed, involved the cultural and physical annihilation of Aborigines:

...the Australian aboriginal deserves to be given a chance to work out his destiny within the general framework of Australian society without being forced to give up completely every element of his cultural and racial identity (1964:3).

Hasluck (1965), who considered the term 'Aboriginal' to refer only to those who did not live like Europeans, and who used terms such as 'fringe-dwellers', 'part-coloured' and 'detrribalized' to refer to other non-Europeans, had earlier denied that assimilation cancelled out the fact of race or obliterated survival of the Aboriginal culture. Rather, it was a process of cultural adjustment over generations. Eventually Aborigines would 'grow into the society' in which they were historically 'bound to live'. Expanding on this theme he asserted:

What it does do is to shape practical administrative measures intended to serve the objective of enabling the Australian citizens of Aboriginal race to exercise to the full their rights as citizens, to live among and on the same terms as all other members of the Australian community, and to take their part as Australians in shaping and developing human society in Australia (1965:451).

Hasluck's reference to Aboriginal rights as citizens was undercut to some extent by his insistence that Aborigines have had these rights from the commencement of settlement, but that the exercise of the rights of citizenship had from time to time been limited by legislation. Their position, he claimed, was analogous to that of other 'special classes of citizens' such as bankrupts, the mentally afflicted and habitual drunkards (1965:445).

Reflecting on the policy of assimilation many years later, Hasluck commented that it had implied Aboriginal equality with other minority groups. He expressed doubts that, when the policy was discarded, enough thought had been given to the 'broader problems set by all the social and racial disparities in our population' (1988:145).

In the 1970s, principles informing official expressions of intent were redefined and the policy was rephrased in terms of the possible involvement of Aborigines in decision-making regarding their future. At a conference, in April 1971, of Ministers responsible for Aboriginal affairs, the Prime Minister, Mr (later Sir William) McMahon detailed this new approach:

We believe that Aboriginal Australians should be assisted as individuals and, if they wish, as groups to hold effective and respected places within one Australian society with equal access to the rights and opportunities it provides and accepting responsibility towards it. At the same time they should be encouraged and assisted to preserve and develop their own culture...so they can become living elements in the diverse culture of Australian society (quoted in Forward 1974:60).

His successor as Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, reiterated the policy of having Aborigines manage their own affairs:

The basic object of my Government's policy is to restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs (1973:2).

Whatever the principles invoked in articulating policies affecting Aborigines, or in the semantics used in their rationalisation, where Aborigines lived in close association with non-Aboriginal communities, the practice had been to **absorb** them into the dominant population. As a consequence, some Aborigines no longer saw themselves as part of an Aboriginal community. Although still visibly Aboriginal, they redefined their identity from the collective to the individual and it is as individuals that they moved into, and became members of, a town community.

Semantic rationalisations do not provide a sufficient basis for the adoption of either assimilation or integration as a precise term to describe Aborigines in the study communities of far-western NSW. If a biological qualification is added, Gale (1964:200) can again provide an appropriate definition of the more apposite term at least for those in communities where no social or cultural divisions are apparent between Aborigines and non-Aborigines:

[absorption] suggests that eventually the minority group (the Aborigines) by equal conditions of housing, education, employment, intermarriage, etc., will disappear and become an unrecognisable part of the white community.

The stability of this form of absorption is dependent on the maintenance by the members of the minority group of a sense of involvement in, and identification with, the dominant society. This can be quite fragile, particularly where it has relevance only in limited geographical and social spheres. It is put at risk by movement to another geographical location, by the embracing of a sense of ethnic identification that has a wider application than the local community, and by the political agenda expressed through this identification. A feature of this agenda is the demand for self-determination or self-management, concepts which have - at times with some qualification - already been acknowledged by governments as desirable policies.

4.4 Self-Determination And Self-Management

As with other ideals which have influenced policies affecting Aborigines, self-determination and self-management do not readily lend themselves to an unqualified, objective analysis. An official, if generalised, interpretation of self-determination is provided where it is considered as:

...the scope for an Aboriginal group or community to make its own decisions about the directions in which it can develop or can and

does implement these decisions, not necessarily to implement the decisions with its own hands, but employs the means necessary to implement the decisions which it comes to itself...We leave it very much to themselves where they wish to live and how they wish to develop. We do not set limits, though. We would say this self-determination has to be within the economic, social and other norms and limitations of the community as a whole. In other words it is not a licence, it is freedom to operate within the community in a *reasonably independent way* (Barrie Dexter, Secretary DAA in *Commission of Inquiry into Poverty*, first Main Report, 1975:258-259).

Self-management is described from official sources somewhat differently:

This policy seeks to ensure that Aborigines as individuals and communities, are in a position to make the same kinds of decisions about their future as other Australians customarily make, and to accept responsibility for the results flowing from their decisions. Self-sufficiency is the economic face of self-management (DAA *Annual Report* 1978-1979).

Noting the composition of Aboriginal society as being of many substantially separate communities 'which do not readily work together', Coombs (1984:31) considers the self-management or self-determination sought by Aborigines to be primarily local in its form and purpose. Von Sturmer provides a rather pessimistic view of, and projection for, self-management even at this level because of what he sees as internal division, self-interest, indifference and lack of necessary planning and management skills within the Aboriginal community. He questions whether self-management is, in effect, 'handing over to Aborigines problems which the white man not only largely created but was unable to resolve, government of the weak by the weak (1982:75). Differentiating the terms and their use by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, Pollard (1988:38) claims Aborigines tend to regard self-management as a preliminary to 'the real business of self determination which is total control and minimum accountability to whites'.

Again, these definitions or descriptions are from non-Aboriginal sources. Some Aboriginal people see things in a different, possibly more sharply focused light, although there is no common attitude that,

reflects the thinking of all, nationally, regionally or even locally. Faith Bandler, the General Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), outlined that organisation's objectives as including a concept of self-management which encompassed a particular Aboriginal perspective:

All matters affecting Aborigines (Mineral Deposits on Tribal land, administration of Missions and Reserves etc.), throughout Australia, full opportunities to be given to Aborigines to manage their own affairs through properly elected committees of the Aboriginal people concerned (1968:12).

Other Aborigines have expressed varying attitudes which reflect the lack of a common, consensual position or even understanding. One wrote of 'the persistent irresponsible attitude of self-management' DAA was forcing on Aborigines in NSW who, it was claimed, lacked the maturity and responsibility to succeed in self-management ventures (*Paddlewheel* December 13, 1978). In another forum, an Aboriginal inferred that Aboriginal people did not know what self-determination was:

There is no point talking about self-determination if you cannot determine what you want to determine...we are not able to determine it (*Second Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly upon Aborigines*, 1981:884).

Another Aboriginal witness before the same Select Committee saw the concept in terms of self-reliance, of breaking out of the dependency that characterised many Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities:

It means that you stand on your own two feet. It means that you do things for yourself and do not depend on other people to give you what you want...[Aborigines] must be taught not to depend on others all the time (1981:835).

A more radical point of view defines self-determination as 'the right of Aboriginal people to determine our political status nationally and internationally' (Cronin 1988:35). According to this expression, it could mean territorial security, political autonomy as Aboriginal self-government or Aboriginal nationhood and economic, cultural and social

independence. Once again the terms used are those which imply a national community. They reveal an attitude that does not come to grips with questions of the extent of Aboriginal endorsement of any such collective identity and common purpose. Social diversity engenders the conflict that seriously limits the scale and scope of enduring political incorporation.

4.5 Diversity And Commonalty In Aboriginal Society

Often ignored, or considered irrelevant in discussions of the Aboriginal people, are such differentiating factors as the diversity of the population; the kin-centred and localised orientation of group structures; the specific nature of their acculturation; and the differing aspirations and expectation of individuals and groups who find themselves in varying relationships with other Aborigines and with elements of the non-Aboriginal society. It has been suggested that because local conditions are so varied, not only from one state to another but even within cities, phenomena related to Aborigines need to be studied on an intensive rather than an extensive basis (Barnes 1963:436). More than a decade later, in its evidence to the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, the Kanangra Society (the ACT Aboriginal society) also stressed this point of diversity:

...there is no single way of looking at Aborigines, there is no single solution because the Aboriginal people represent a whole spectrum of different needs on different priorities (1975:258).

A report of a Senate Select Committee on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (1976:24) identifies the differences as being produced by:

the nature of the physical environment, the degree of attachment to the traditional culture, the period of contact, the nature of the industries in the particular region and the employment opportunities available.

Thiele (1984:166) also draws attention to Aboriginal diversity when, in questioning the nature of Aboriginality, he considers the lack of attempt to assess comprehensively

the different kinds of character, personality, ideologies, activities and structural locations of Aborigines [and] the different kinds of ethos exhibited by Aboriginal communities and groups.

But diversity does not preclude the creation of a consciousness of common identity. Whatever their background and their contemporary social configurations, rural and urban Aborigines in southern Australia are able to identify with a national population, notwithstanding caveats on the social, cultural and structural realities of such a population. Because of this subjective identification and because of a presumed greater understanding of the political process, some claim a political expression representative of this population.

This expression has been observed over a long period of Aboriginal political activity. One viewpoint from within the Federal bureaucracy suggests a political movement that had its genesis in the 1930s:

During the past thirty years, a sense of solidarity has been growing among part-Aborigines, especially in the south-east of the continent...Behind this attitude is a feeling that all Aborigines, irrespective of degree of Aboriginal blood, have something in common, and also a tradition of a common experience different from the white man's: an experience that includes the white man's attitude towards, and treatment of them. Thus a minority group is appearing, of which part-Aborigines are the focus and mouthpiece, and Aborigines the symbol (Department of Territories 1967:108).

Earlier Catherine Berndt had seen the redefining of identity in a context of pressure politics. In this analysis, group identity is created from a reference point that lacks a traditional cultural base, by urban Aborigines who feel alienated from non-Aboriginal society but who have no meaningful contact with a traditional past:

Some [pressures] come from people of part-Aboriginal descent who themselves have no first-hand knowledge of Aboriginal traditions,

but whose own search for identity takes the form of a second or third generation "reversion" to a broader, non-tribal Aboriginal identification and this impels them to present themselves as spokesmen for the less fortunate or less articulate (1961:30).

This phenomenon, suggested one observer, might be called 'neo-Aboriginalism', a development from people who have a vested interest in remaining Aboriginal even though their lives and attitudes may be identical with their white neighbours (Barnes 1963:436). It is this desire to remain Aboriginal, or to reaffirm an Aboriginal identity, which makes possible an ethnic identity even though Aboriginal people themselves might not see it in such terms.

Because of the singularity of the Aboriginal experience, the structural or psychological conditions of their existence cannot be equated directly with others who have a similar background. Yet there are those who have experienced a state of cultural ambivalence who can reflect the view from within. Of these, it is the urban dwellers who, furthest removed from contact with traditional culture while exposed more directly to an alternative, if alien one, are most in need of a valid identity. In his novel, *Native Son*, Richard Wright (1940:XIX), the black American author, presents in the depiction of his protagonist a synthesis of the collective experience:

...the civilisation which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, the hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchanalized impulses.

Wright's urban Negro youth has his counterpart in the Australian society. Aboriginal writer, Archie Weller (1982:44), portrays his urban Aborigines in a pointed parody of the traditional cultural conditioning:

No one owns them. They are their own bosses. They have cobwebs in their hair and minds and, spiderlike, they dream up new dastardly deeds for their initiation. They paint on lies and blood from fights, to make themselves look elegant with patterns

from their new dreaming. They dance to their god of flashing lights and hopes. The city, squatting like elders around a campfire, has cut off their childhood, imparted the legends from the alleys and parks and the third-rate slum houses and the police stations and the jails, as the elders of the past imparted the legends of the land and the law to the ancestors of these youths. So they are truly men in their new country.

In each case the language is that of the literary experience, but the sentiments expressed can be accepted as a valid reflection of the alien existence of living within a state of cultural ambivalence or social exclusion.

People so described are denied the norms and values necessary for them to function as members of a valid society, and their only sense of unity or social cohesion is frequently little more than a form of shared alienation. A meaningful life is possible only if essential values are common both to the individual and to the society in which he or she exists. This would apply whether society represented the overall population or an ethnic group existing within a plural society. In either case a group identity is possible within which the individual can find the norms whose moral and social values give meaning and purpose to life. The importance of this social identity is affirmed by Castles (1971:97) when he comments that:

The individual who has no normative concepts whatsoever cannot be a meaningful participant in the society in which he lives, nor can he be the creator of a new society.

In a similar vein, Schacht (1971:178-179) cites Merton (1957:155), who observes that those who do not share 'the common frame of values of a society are said to be in the society but not of it. Sociologically, these constitute the true aliens'. Alienation, in this socio-political sense, can be defined as a manifestation of a sense of unbelonging that isolates the individual and denies access to the social and political structures and functions that he or she could share. Aboriginal people,

no less than any others, need a sense of belonging. They are able to find this, symbolically if not structurally, within a group or ethnic identity.

4.6 Identity And Ethnicity

4.6.1 The Search For Identity

In their search for a valid identity or some form of collective alignment, Aborigines have been forced to look inward, seeking within the remnants of the past to create a culture that could be shared by a widely diversified population. In this context, it could be said that ethnicity has been forced upon them because, as Rowley (1971a:183) points out, 'Denied a common Australian identity, they seek an Aboriginal one'. Although ethnicity, like politics, has been defined in many ways, the definition most apposite is that which is most helpful in the analysis of the particular theoretical problem. In Brass' (1976:225) words, 'Any good definition must both conform to empirical reality and serve the analytical purpose'. But, he warns, all definition begins with some assumptions.

Within the politics of Aboriginal identity, ethnicity has a theoretical structure that is determined by an assumption of a cultural basis for the collectivisation of those who seek and accept it. The culture so perceived is not, nor could it be, the set of beliefs and customs as they existed in the distant past, but rather an idea or apprehension from a temporal distance of what these may have been, seen now in terms of contemporary imperatives. A retreat to a dimly perceived past, even in the imagination, can only be a psychological placebo; change is a feature of human existence. Aborigines need a psychological and

political identity and these have their origins in the past; but not in an imagined retrieval of the elements of a way of life that is irretrievable in total for all, and only in part for some.

4.6.2 The Concept Of Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a complex phenomenon, particularly where its psychological and cultural dimensions are organised as a political resource in a plural social system. There are major conceptual difficulties in defining precisely the term 'ethnicity' and in differentiating it in respect of similarly used forms of group exposition such as 'race', 'caste' and 'class'. In each case what is being considered is a collection of individuals who share some common characteristics which unites them in at least one aspect of a common identity, whether self or other-ascribed.

In one sense, although specific criteria might be used to distinguish various groups, any analyses are abstractions from reality in that the group comprises individuals who have varying orientations towards it and its assumed values. This denies the existence of any form of collective consciousness which would encompass all its members. As Baker (1983:5) affirms:

A 'group mind' does not exist, be it racial, ethnic or class, marxist assumptions notwithstanding ...individuals respond to situations as individuals, not because of a group mind. To the extent that individuals *appear* to respond together as a group, they may do so because they hold similar values or perceive a similar situation alike.

Nonetheless, while accepting that groups are not monolithic, it is possible to explore the dynamics which are the uniting forces within specific groups and which distinguish them from other similar collections of individuals. Although each may share certain characteristics with others, and a degree of synonymity may be apparent

within a specific context, there are inherent orientations distinguishing the terms 'ethnicity', 'race', 'class' and 'caste' in both abstract and operational senses. In each case, social, cultural, political and psychological factors are involved, both in relation to the area of group relations and at collective and individual levels of identity. The relationship between groups within a society influences the distribution and exercise of power and authority, but it is through identification that the individual and the group acquire the attitudes and values which shape their lives and bring meaning and purpose to them.

Stated briefly, caste and class are forms of social and/or economic stratification which may or may not align with race or ethnic ascriptions. However, race and ethnicity need to be located conceptually if a particular definition is to have relevance. McConnochie (1973) distinguishes three uses of race, these involving cultural, biological and social definitions. He considers the cultural definition to pose significant anthropological and social problems to its acceptance as a valid use of race, and because of this, and because of the lack of emphasis on the biological characteristics which distinguish racial groups, he uses the term ethnic group to refer to those distinguished and classified on the basis of cultural traits. Similarly, van den Berghe (1978) considers that race may share many of the characteristics of ethnicity and class, but he identifies the differences that isolate the term in a cultural context. He sees race as a term used to refer to a group that is *socially* defined but on the basis of *physical* criteria, and ethnic groups to be socially defined on the basis of *cultural* criteria (1978:9-10).

More recent interpretations stress the process of race construction rather than any supposed inherent features of a social entity. Torodov (1986:171), in fact, goes so far as to deny the existence of race, while Cowlshaw (1988a:105) sees it as a culturally constructed category and denies the automatic consequences of genetic or cultural characteristics. Kay Anderson talks of 'a culture of race' (1988a:354) and 'the social construction of a racial category' (1988b:127). She argues convincingly for 'the processes by which powerful institutions, such as the state, confer arbitrary racial identities' (1988b:127). It is clear that there are no objective criteria of race which could be used to classify Aboriginal people. Ethnicity becomes a more relevant term to describe their constructed common identity.

4.6.3 Ethnicity And Culture

Silverman (1976) refers to ethnicity as 'a cultural identity without a culture'(628), Staiano (1980) sees it in terms of process, while others place more weight on economic factors (Hechter 1976; Trosper 1976), or political factors (Brass and van den Berghe 1976). The idea of shared descent is, to Keynes (1976:205), **the** basis of ethnicity and Smith (1981) considers the concept in terms of group separatism, which basically aligns with the definition of interacting bounded groups (Barth 1969), of the 'in' and 'out' or 'us' and 'them' differentiation (Patterson 1983; Wallman 1983).

Noting the variety of ways in which ethnicity has been defined, Cohen (1974:IX) comments that 'the question is not what definition is most valid, but which is most helpful in the analysis of certain theoretical problems'. He makes a valid point in that ethnicity should not be extended to denote cultural differences between territorially distinct populations. It does not refer to national characteristics, but to what

is 'essentially a form of interaction between cultural groups operating within common social contexts' (1974:XI).

But culture itself needs to be contextually defined if it is to have any meaning. As Paine (1977:249) observes, 'the meaning we give to ethnicity depends very much on our approach to the more general notion of culture'. What is referred to is not some form of inherited culture but one shaped by history and experience. Traditional culture cannot survive intact the trauma of social dislocation that results from the intervention of a colonial power. According to Freire (1972:122), colonial intrusion is an act of cultural violence:

Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders...

Culture thus lost cannot be restored, contemporary Aboriginal claims notwithstanding, but is replaced by one shaped by the processes that determine the way a people think, live and behave. A common culture derives from a common experience and, in large part, is structured within the forms of adaptation needed to cope with that experience. If there is an experience common to all Aborigines in Australia it lies in the knowledge that they are descendants of people whose lives and cultures were dislocated by colonial intrusion and who were forced to adapt to that intrusion. It is the *fact* of the intrusion, and not the forms of adaptation that have created the contemporary diversity of the Aboriginal population, that is relevant in this instance. Despite the difficulties inherent in any specific definition of culture,¹ the sense in which it is understood here follows that suggested by Cowlshaw

¹ Raymond Williams, in his book *Keywords*, suggests culture is 'one of the two or three most difficult words in the English Language' (1976:80).

(above) or Fisk's (1985:114) use of the term to refer to the totality of a group of people's adjustment to its whole environment which includes:

...not only the geographical, physical and climatic characteristics of the region where they live, but also the demographic, social, political and economic circumstances in which their society is set.

Aboriginal society, if it is considered as a national entity, is set in a diverse range of such characteristics and circumstances. The totality of its adjustments makes for a very general interpretation of common contemporary culture.

In an analysis of the supposed collectivisation into an ethnic whole of the discrete units which comprise the Australian Aboriginal population, it is relevant to consider ethnicity in terms of how it can present an assumed common culture despite the differences in traditional orientation, contemporary values and life style. What is significant is the extent to which an assumed common culture provides the medium for this common identity, even though not all Aborigines would identify to the same extent or for the same reasons. Ethnicity is, after all, neither a given nor a constant (van den Berghe 1981:251), but a variable and, as DeVos (1975:3) points out, like any other form of social identity, ethnic identity is essentially subjective.

4.6.4 Ethnicity As Identity Source

At the individual level, identity is a status determinant that places the individual in relationships with other individuals or groups. It involves a sense of personal continuity, personal resources and purposes (Swanson 1980:191). But with ethnicity, identity assumes also a collective dimension which Bostock (1981:18) defines as 'the object of the closeness felt by a group of people sharing culture and language, and possibly race, religion and homeland'. Noting the lack of agreement

in definition among those who have studied identity, he suggests the only conclusion reached is that identity is 'a subjective state or awareness of consciousness of *who one is*, either as an individual or, in the case of ethnic identity, as a group (1981:18). If identity is the awareness of *who one is*, ethnicity is the awareness of *what one could or should be* in terms of group aspirations. This appears to be the basis of Rothschild's (1981:5) description of the inner frontier of ethnicity as 'a need or quest by individuals to find meaning and understanding in their lives'. Moreover, it is through this consciousness of ethnicity that apathy and alienation can be redirected into positive political directions. The politicisation of ethnicity 'translates a personal quest for meaning and belonging into a group demand for respect and power' (Rothschild 1981:6).

Throughout the literature on ethnicity one discerns the duality of form and function that is used to explain the phenomenon: the abstract, which is the sense of common identity unifying the collectivity, and the operational, the use of this identification as a political resource. To members of a minority group who are culturally displaced and socially isolated, possibly the most important aspect of this duality is the way its elements complement each other in providing a protective shelter within which such people may take refuge as they seek their directions. This is the overall understanding of ethnicity which gives point to Rothschild's (1981:5) statement that 'the ethnic group is analogous to Robert Frost's definition of home "...the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in"'. A psychological shelter for Aborigines is an important aspect of a sense of ethnic identification, but it does not address the question of the political dimensions of ethnicity. For Australian Aborigines, ethnicity rationalises their separateness and their alienation from the general society and

legitimizes the demands for political autonomy. This linking of ethnicity with politics is referred to by Ronen (1986:1) who suggests that although ethnicity is a matter of ascription, it

becomes politicised into the ethnic factor when an ethnic group is in conflict with the political elite over such issues as the use of limited resources or the allocation of benefits...

4.6.5 Cultural Or Structural Determinants

The assumption of an ethnic identity is a phenomenon that is seen to characterise other minority groups in similar social and political environments, but one where the determinants are more structural than cultural. Yancey, Ericksen and Juliani (1976) do not agree with the cultural theory of causation and consider urban pressures create the need for protective collectivisation. They suggest that, in the American setting at least, it is the structural conditions of the relevant groups that influence the development and persistence of ethnicity. Marger and Obermiller (1983) also see it as a variable and emergent phenomenon influenced by the social setting, while Taylor (1979) considers it in a structural framework that stresses the importance of migration, urbanisation and intergroup conflict in promoting a distinctive black ethnicity.

Considering the Aborigines within these structural criteria without reference to their past presents major difficulties. The structural conditions of life for many of these people certainly influences the extent that alienation acts as a collectivising agent. But the past cannot be ignored in the process of ethnic identification. Because of this, it is possible to accept, in regard to the Aboriginal people, the cultural assumptions of Weber's classic definition of an ethnic group as a 'human collectivity based on an assumption of a common origin, *real or imagined*' (cited in Pettigrew 1976:14, emphasis added), or

Patterson's (1983:31) 'community of memory', the myth of 'a common ancestry, a common history, and sometimes a common fate'.

For the Aboriginal, ethnicity is past oriented and requires an appreciation of a cultural heritage, or at least, of what this is considered to have been. It is not the actual elements of the past that are relevant - much of which cannot realistically be apprehended but the idea or perspective of an Aboriginal way of life. Lacking a recorded history and culture, other than in an oral mode, and with social disruption affecting the continuity even of this, the Aboriginal past has become subject to a mythification in both pre and post-contact eras. The effect of this on the cultural basis of ethnicity has been to provide or to offer an Aboriginal identity based on what is conceived of as the distinctive characteristics and traits, the history and common experience of all Aborigines. This concept of a common Aboriginal identity, whether seen as Aboriginality, Aboriginalism (Lippmann 1970) or some other form of national or continental identity, has certain parallels with Uchendu's (1975:269) citation of Nkrumah's *African personality* and Senghor's *negritude* as 'identity labels which are pan-African, trans-national and trans-territorial. Rowley (1973b:183) also sees some relatedness with such subjective determinants of identification, reflecting that Aboriginal bitterness comes from the same roots as negritude and American Black Power.

The literary expression of collective identity consciousness that marked negritude and, to a lesser extent, the Afro-American experience, is less advanced and less coordinated in Australia. Aboriginal literature is more exploratory and individualised, lacking the unity of the literature of negritude because the Aboriginal experience works against this. Although Aboriginal writers have attempted to record the Aboriginal

condition and to celebrate their inheritance, culture and supposed common destiny, they have yet to produce a literature that reflects the search for identity to the extent that Senghor and Césaire did with negritude. With a few notable exceptions (see e.g. Miller 1985; Morgan 1987), Aboriginal writers still present a bleak landscape:

The dominant theme informing [Aboriginal] literature is the sense of powerlessness and alienation, with the associated processes of demoralisation and degradation resulting from the lack of a valid cultural base (Davis 1984:25).

Although Stanner (1979:358) did predict that they would 'soon have their Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ali Masrui,' the Aboriginal expression of identity has been carried principally by political actors rather than literary figures.

But the Aboriginal themes of dispossession, alienation, the mystique of a cultural heritage and a common future, have correspondences with the self-interpretation of the 'traditions, anxieties, angers, aspirations and visions of the world' (Jeanpierre 1962:34) expressed through what Shelton (1964:119) terms the 'colour pride or *negritude* and cultural pride or "Africanism"'. As with Aboriginality or some otherwise-described dimension of Aboriginal identity, negritude was the search for an authentic African identity (Nurse-Bray 1983:96). Although cast in a literary mode, it has been suggested it should not be confined to the literary domain (Jeanpierre 1962:49). Negritude has been seen as a cultural movement, a political movement, an expression of racism - or anti-racist racism (Sartre in Jeanpierre:1962:49) - or as 'a moment of negation which finds satisfaction in the ecstatic contemplation of a lost paradise' (Diakhate 1965:76). Even more pertinent to a suggested symmetry with the philosophical or psychological basis of Aboriginal cultural identity is the observation that Negritude 'was essentially a celebration of black African cultural value by blacks who had little or

no first-hand knowledge of Africa' (McCulloch 1983:51). In the context of alienation, McCulloch's thesis is also an accurate reflection of the ideological basis of a pan-Aboriginal political identity:

By treating alienation as a purely personal experience on the one hand and as the experience characteristic of a race on the other, negritude foreshadowed an abstract solidarity joining all members of the Negro race irrespective of the social or economic realities governing the interests of individuals (McCulloch 1983:8).

An expression of Negro values, attributed to Senghor, corresponds closely with those expressed by Aborigines and by some non-Aboriginal observers as characteristic of Aborigines as a people, and which differentiate them from non-Aborigines. These include 'anti materialism, communalism, mutual responsibility and concern with the community over and above the individual'(McCulloch 1983:38). But Fanon (1970a:162) disputes this belief in inherent characteristics, and protests, 'My black skin is not the wrapping of specific values'. He opposes the notion of a Negro people, which he believes implies a racist assumption that all blacks are alike. Conceding that Negro people may share common cultural influences, he nevertheless claims that they, like all other peoples, are subject to a vast range of social, historical and geographical experience: 'The truth is that there is nothing, *a priori* to warrant the assumption that such a thing as a negro people exists'(1970b:28). Whether such an assumption can be made in regard to the Australian population of Aboriginal people is subject to the same doubts. What can be acknowledged in each case, however, is a *belief* in such a concept, evolving from a response to, and a rejection of, an ascribed and distorted image of identification.

4.7 Ethnicity As A Political Resource

Ethnicity, then, provides a shelter; a sense of belonging and a normative patterning to a life which might otherwise remain in a state

of apathy and alienation, or drift into anomie and despair. But it is more than a convenient identity shelter. It provides an alternative to those who seek a positive dimension in their lives, but who cannot, or believe they cannot, embrace fully the culture of the general society, especially when this implies the denial of a believed or imagined heritage. It is a shelter that is accessible to the extent the individual needs or desires it, and not one that submerges the individuality that distinguishes the members of a population that has such varying orientations towards both the Aboriginal past and the contemporary society with which they interact. As Uchendu (1975:265) explains it, 'The background of ethnic identity...lies in contrasting value systems, contrasting social categories, and the dynamics of history'. But this is ethnicity in its abstract terms; it becomes operational with its use as a political resource.

It is axiomatic that the emergence of ethnicity in the form of an assumed cultural collectivity will lead to the politicisation of the group, although the expression and shape of political action cannot readily be predicted. Cohen (1974) argues that political ethnicity results from the use of whatever cultural mechanisms are available to the members of an interest group who cannot organise themselves formally. Without formal organisational structures the dynamics of ethnicity provide the means for political socialisation. In fact, the emergence of an ethnic identity can be seen as an expression of political action as people recognise the need for some form of valid collectivisation in pursuit of political objectives. According to Scruton (1983:213):

...the emergence of a 'national identity' involves a growing sense among people that they belong naturally together, that they share common interests, a common history, and a common destiny. The search for an 'identity' in this sense is a major political motive.

Individual Aborigines have objected to the use of 'ethnic group' or 'ethnicity' to describe either their social structure or the process of group identification.² Yet, as descriptions of a political, if not a social identity, they denote a form of Aboriginal nationalism that can be mobilised as a political resource.

In demanding recognition as a corporate entity, the political group is using ethnicity as a political resource to reinforce its sense of separateness. Rothschild (1981:3) makes this point when he talks of the transformation of people through the politicisation of ethnicity which is

a dialectical process that preserves ethnic groups by emphasising their singularity and yet also engineers and lubricates their modernisation by transforming them into political conflict groups for the modern political arena, where they must display cosmopolitan modern skills and resources.

The singularity of the ethnic group as a political entity is interpreted more on the basis of its alienation from the general society than on the internalised values of the group itself. Ethnicity used in this way is both a response and an alternative to the policies that have been designed to place Aborigines arbitrarily in the Australian society, or, in other words, to deal with the Aboriginal problem. A national agenda and a political expression can be articulated on behalf of the Aboriginal population, irrespective of the qualifications that obscure the boundaries of such an entity.

But when we talk of Aboriginal politics as an ethnic expression, we are invariably talking of the politics expressed by representatives of Aborigines who are either self-appointed or appointed by a community or

² Aborigines are frequently inclined to see 'ethnic' as referring to non-indigenous groups who have become part of the Australian population but retain distinctive characteristics. In a sense it has a more pejorative connotation to which Aborigines object.

even a small section of one community. The national collective is one in which a majority, or even a significant number, is unlikely to have had other than a remote involvement. In most cases the actors are urban Aborigines from the southern states, although the notion of a national collective is not confined to these people. The title page of the Northern Territory Land Councils' publication, *Land Rights News*, for example, carries the slogan 'One mob one voice - one land.' If suspect in terms of political reality and in its largely ignoring the specificity of local issues, ethnic identity and its political voice, does, at least, have symbolic and psychological significance. And, as Banton (1986:14) asserts, a sense of shared identity creates a potential constituency, an essential factor in establishing and maintaining political relevance.

The pressures that promote a symbolic or assumed regeneration of culture in an ethnic identity are instrumental also in the struggle for a better life; for better housing, health care and education, if the group seeks a greater share in the benefits of the society, or for the authority and resources to establish a way of life that may involve a degree of separation from, and independence of, the dominant society. Although the priorities may differ between and within groups comprising the Aboriginal population, this does not negate the fundamental ideals of a common ethnic identity and sense of collective purpose. While the incidentals may differ, the common purpose is for a better deal for Aborigines, however individuals or particular groups might perceive this. The politicisation of Aborigines has largely been the politicisation of their ethnicity. It is the sense of common origins that is the unifying element, although for some these common origins are somewhat distant and only dimly perceived. If people identify as Aborigines they are defining themselves in terms of their belief in what

an Aboriginal is. However the individual might behave or be seen to behave, his or her ethnic identity can survive if he or she believes in it.

CHAPTER 5

POLITICS IN TRANSITION

5.1 Shaping The Political Field

Diversity within the Aboriginal population does not invalidate the notion of a national political voice, but neither does this national expression ensure an Aboriginal ideology. Locating the essence of Aboriginal politics involves the identification of Aborigines within a specific political community. If considered as a national expression it presupposes the effective mobilisation of ethnic identity, or at least the reconciliation of the diverse interests within the population. Aboriginal identity expands or contracts according to the interpretation of the social or political environment being considered and the extent to which common purpose is acknowledged within this environment. Consequently, both the perception of Aboriginal politics and the assessment of its relevance have to be considered in relation to the degree of mobilisation of Aboriginal identity that has been achieved within a specific environment at a specific time.

In the early manifestations of political activity by Aboriginal people in conflict with the general society, a common identity was invoked in the pursuit of limited objectives of equality of treatment and inclusion into the general society. But the conflict between policies of incorporation, the minimal attempts by non-Aboriginal society to facilitate this, and the continuation of a racially-based perception of Aboriginal identity decreased the attractiveness of these objectives. It seems inevitable that an increase in political resources would

inspire a change in the Aboriginal agenda, one that reflected Aboriginal, rather than non-Aboriginal, priorities.

A changing political climate and increased Aboriginal urbanisation, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, promoted the need and provided the opportunity for change. Urban Aborigines who had become distant from local group associations were most in need of an identity that would provide a sense of community. This inclined them to embrace the notion of a common Aboriginal identity within a separate and distinct national community. As these people were often the most prominent political actors and those with the closest association with the general Australian polity, Aboriginal politics at this level came to reflect an urban Aboriginal orientation.

Increased access to political resources led to the 'Aboriginalisation' of the organisations that sought to represent Aboriginal people. A more militant expression became possible and, in the context of a collective identity, necessary. It could not endorse the absorption of the Aboriginal people into the general society because its generation had been inspired by difference; difference became the *raison d'être* for its existence.

Identification with this supposed national community is accessible to all Aboriginal people, however, the specificities of local identity and aspirations impose severe constraints on any representative structure and on its function as the expression of a national consciousness. It is used as a general reference point but usually in pursuing local objectives.

To represent the social, cultural and spatial diversity of Aboriginal people the national organisation has to be separate from any specific

local or regional association. Yet this very separation constrains both its acceptability and its efficacy. Diversity is both a strength and a weakness of the Aboriginal population. While it maintains the individuality of social and cultural groups, it inhibits the Aboriginal political consciousness and severely circumscribes the potential for collective political activity.

5.2 A National - Local Dichotomy

Any survey of Aboriginal political development is inevitably a selective presentation and interpretation of a multi-faceted phenomenon. There has been a tendency to see Aboriginal politics as a movement within which are incorporated all those associations, demands, protests and expressions of Aboriginal Australia as part of a single, chronologically defined agenda. Considered at a national or ethnic level such an analysis has validity. A discernible progressive development has been identified and charted by a number of writers (see e.g. Bandler 1989; Bandler and Fox 1983; Bennett 1989; Bostock 1981; Broome 1982; Coombs 1978; Franklin 1976; Horner 1974; Lippmann 1970, 1979, 1981; Pittock 1975; Sykes 1989), and this might well be considered as the mainstream of Aboriginal politics which, in certain respects at least, has involved most Aborigines. It is the identifiable national voice. But generalisations ignore or undervalue the specific dynamics of local politics and often fail to emphasise the extent to which national political expressions are modified, and even transformed, by local influences. National politics involves the assumed mobilisation of the people at a national level. Yet, the overall effect of mainstream organisations has largely been to emphasise the fundamental role of the local community as the focus of Aboriginal politics.

Many organisations designed to assist Aborigines socially and politically have been, and remain, remote from much of the Aboriginal population. In this, they are possibly little different from other organisations that supposedly represent the interests of the general society, without any significant involvement by much of that society in establishing the criteria for its representation. However, discriminatory policies, the nature and isolation of many Aboriginal communities and, at least until relatively recent times, their lack of mobility and effective communications, inhibited their knowledge of, and participation in, their representative organisations to a far greater extent than was the case with other sections of Australian society.

National political developments such as the land rights campaigns and the establishment of bodies like the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) and the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), and the more locally significant land councils have generated, if not a uniform degree of political consciousness, at least an awareness of Aboriginal politics wider than the local community and its collective experience. No Aboriginal community has remained untouched by national politics even if the influence has been minimal in some instances. Aboriginal politics has increasingly defined a national population at the same time as the units of this population have continued to emphasise their particularity.

National Aboriginal organisations have sought to speak for, or on behalf of, Aboriginal people collectively, without being, in any real sense, representative of such a collective. What they have represented has been a position considered to be fair and reasonable, or an agenda thought to be that which Aborigines would or should support. Many Aborigines were as unaware of, or unconcerned about, the activities of

organisations such as FCAATSI, as they were later of government-sponsored, supposedly Aboriginal-controlled bodies. In each case the organisation was remote from the majority of Aborigines and reflected what was essentially a self-appointed, imposed or, as was frequently the case, a minority representation. Imposing or attempting to impose structures and processes on people who have little experience or understanding of them is neither reasonable nor justifiable.

Structurally, national organisations have provided for representation on the basis of a political acculturation that was not part of Aboriginal community life in most of its manifestations. Notwithstanding artifacts of traditional Aboriginal society which might influence their predispositions, particularly in regard to leadership and authority, the social and cultural experience of many Aborigines has not prepared them for participatory democracy on a national level. Yet the government sponsored organisations were constructed on the basis of democratically elected representatives. As Hiatt (1976:62) observes, the real difficulty with a system of elected representatives is not that it ignores leaders but rather that it creates them. Consequently they may well be leaders without followers.

The inevitable result of this form of representation in a national structure has been the social and political, as well as the physical, distancing of the representative from his or her constituency. Influenced by the nature of the political environment of a national forum, the Aboriginal representative is under pressure to acknowledge a national or general interest which may, and invariably does, conflict with the specificity of the wants and needs of his or her local community.

Aboriginal politics, particularly since the 1960s, has been characterised by the expression, in various forms, of a national or ethnic Aboriginal consciousness. At the same time the individuality of local communities has been maintained and even reinforced as political resources became available. These factors have ensured a constant tension within the relationships between forms of organisation and forms of consciousness. This is born out by the findings of the inquiries into both the NACC and the NAC.¹ It is useful, then, to consider the principal factors that have influenced the contemporary expressions of Aboriginal politics before assessing the extent to which they have influenced the success or failure of transforming a diverse population into a corporate entity.

5.3 An Era Of Change

Attitudinal and structural changes have significantly altered the shape of Aboriginal politics since the 1960s, a period which has been described as one during which the Aboriginal interest was given 'something of the "special aura" enjoyed by others' (Bennett 1989:6). The enfranchisement of Aborigines, the constitutional reforms of 1967, the increased urbanisation of this population and a more receptive general society provided the opportunities for a more direct participation in the political processes. In regard to a more vocal, militant and often aggressive political stance that has evolved subsequently, it is arguable whether this has resulted from the reforms themselves, from raised expectations or from frustration with the apparent lack of real change. A group that has been isolated politically and socially cannot be expected to adapt readily to the changed circumstances when their conditioning has been lengthy and

¹ Both these bodies and the inquiries into them are discussed later in this chapter.

comprehensive, and where the reality is that their newly acquired participation is largely symbolic.

Irrespective of their origins and initial objectives, the structures for the political involvement of Aborigines have had some effect in the mobilisation of the fragmented communities and led to a degree of political, if not of social, collectivisation through accession to an ethnic identity. It is ironic that the political initiatives of 1967, intended to include Aborigines in the general society, have played a significant part in the development of this collective identification with its implications of separateness and distinctiveness. Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982:238) see the initiatives as seeming to 'form a watershed for the possibility of political organisation and mobilisation of pan-ethnic consciousness around a common identity'. This, however, stresses the national and macro-political level and may emphasise an expression that does not have the same relevance at the local level.

To imply that Aboriginal politics was static or even non-existent before the 1960s is to ignore the continuity of some form of political expression within elements of Aboriginal society from, and even before, European settlement. Nevertheless, it was during the 1960s that some aspects of Aboriginal politics appeared to undergo a transformation both in its expression and in its perception by non-Aborigines. This was the time when, as described by Langton (1981:19), Aborigines were demanding 'equal but different access to material wealth and social, legal and political status'. Aborigines were taking over the organisations that supposedly represented them but which had long been dominated by non-Aborigines. Reacting to an environment created from a new sense of moral and social responsibility in the general society, Aborigines

became involved in determining their own priorities within new parameters defined by an increased acquisition of political resources.

From an earlier emphasis on equality of treatment with the rest of society, on simple justice and civil rights, the dynamics of political expression changed radically to a concern with issues and goals more directly related to Aboriginal perceptions of their own social and economic interests. A Senate Standing Committee observed the 1960s as an era

characterised by the beginnings of a real and purposeful effort by Aborigines to indicate with some definiteness what they want, and to work out practical and effective measures to attain these wants (1974:5).

Of the urban and fringe dwelling Aborigines in areas where, it suggests, little remains of tribal culture, a regeneration of identity was taking place:

Though not now living according to traditional culture, they have nevertheless in recent years begun to assert an Aboriginal identity from the rest of the community and have begun to search for the lost culture (1974:13).

The committee's observations reflect a belief held both by non-Aborigines and by the Aborigines involved in the political arena that what was being heard was the authentic Aboriginal voice. However, relatively few Aborigines were active participants, those who were being mostly the better educated, urban dwellers who were well-placed to take advantage of the opportunities being provided. In this way they were continuing what had long been the Aboriginal politics of response. For much of the period of Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal interaction this response had taken the shape of protest.

5.4 The Politics Of Protest

5.4.1 Background

From the time of contact with European civilisation, Aboriginal politics has taken a form that has been dictated by the demands and opportunities of the particular period. It has usually been the politics of opportunity, of reaction to externally directed events. But opportunity was not always afforded nor was reaction always allowed unrestricted expression. Aborigines in most areas had been denied legal status as a people from the time of European settlement. Their civil rights were not guaranteed, they were politically disenfranchised and they were subject to discriminatory policies. In complete disregard of any traditional code of behaviour, Anglo-Australian law was applied to Aborigines and its legality upheld by the NSW Supreme Court in 1836 and the Privy Council in England in 1889. Aborigines were virtually ignored in the constitutional conventions of the 1890s and the discriminatory provisions in the Federal Constitution were not removed until 1967.

Initial politics of Aboriginal resistance and conflict gave way to a period of political passivity during which Aborigines had to accommodate to the control and direction of an overwhelmingly stronger and frequently ruthless society. Lacking opportunities to direct their aspirations in positive directions, they were dependent on the benevolence of non-Aborigines. Politics then became, in the words of Rowley, 'the politics of the asylum, hospital, camp, or other institution: of inmates against the manager' (1971a:190). Under such conditions identification was with the local group in a particular area or with the mission and reserve communities. There was little opportunity, or really a need, to develop any sense of collective identity, other than through a biological and generally pejorative



ascription. It was not until the 1930s that Aborigines began to mobilise politically in a manner appropriate to their changing social position, and to articulate their particular view of social and political freedom. From this point protest became more specifically directed.

5.4.2 Analysis Of Protest

In a general sense protest has been conceived of as 'a strategy utilized by relatively powerless groups in order to increase their bargaining ability' (Lipsky 1968:1157), although Lipsky warns of the difficulty to success inherent in such a conception. By definition, such groups lack the organisational resources needed even to create bargaining resources through activating third parties. To be politically relevant protest must be organised, and the attempted political organisation of Aborigines on a broad scale has been beset by the problems expected in a diverse population lacking clearly defined common objectives and effective leadership. Aboriginal organisation and leadership have been, and continue to be, largely limited to their specific local areas of association. This is born out by evidence of the underlying weakness and inefficacy of early forms of Aboriginal protest. It was the powerlessness of Aborigines collectively because of their relatively small population with its social and spatial diversity, and because of the technological superiority of the non-Aboriginal society which severely restricted their bargaining position and, consequently, their chance of success.

Protest in the form of active resistance to European encroachment had occurred from the beginnings of contact between Aborigines and settlers (see e.g. Grassby and Hill 1988; Green 1984; Lippmann 1981; Loos 1982; Read 1988; Reece 1974; Reynolds 1981, 1987; Roberts 1978; Robinson and

York 1977). Although mostly sporadic and uncoordinated, it at times displayed evidence of organisation and on many occasions was able to halt, and even reverse for a time, the advance of non-Aboriginal settlement. It was in many respects a guerilla war, but one the Aborigines could not hope to win. Confrontation and conflict gave way to localised forms of protest usually concerned with the matters of immediate significance.

One analysis of the change in Aboriginal demands in the 1960s indicates a move from 'social' to 'political' protest as demands for reform became demands for political change (Kukathas 1978). Here, Kukathas argues for a dichotomised conception of passive/social and active/political protest, with the latter being a *conscious* expression of dissent or grievance, coupled with demands for fundamental change in the social order. The conscious expression is, according to Kukathas, 'characterised by an awareness of the reasons for the undesirable condition or situation and a consciousness of the need for fundamental change' (1978:5).

Social protest, however, cannot without a degree of semantic juxtaposition be linked solely with passivity. Some commentators on Aboriginal behaviour see protest in many forms including those considered as anti-social tendencies. Beckett (1958a, 1964, 1965b) for example, argues that the use of alcohol by Aborigines is a form of defiant protest, and Rowley (1971a:352ff) also includes drunkenness, along with stealing and violence. Cowlshaw (1988a) considers much Aboriginal behaviour to be part of an 'oppositional culture', a form of protest in defiance. These could, in some circumstances, be considered as passive, perhaps unpremeditated forms of action. They can also be considered as stages of a process that is instigated by a conflict

between, on the one hand, individuals and groups, and on the other hand the society from which they become increasingly alienated. Retreat into aberrant behaviour can follow the conscious disassociation from the dominant culture and joining of a counter culture, the non-acceptance of the society and rejection of its values and norms, all of which are involved in alienation (Schacht 1971:189). Alienation, then, can be the result of an active and determined, rather than a passive, process.

Disregarding the active - non-active debate, Duncan (1975:58) considers protest as virtually any activity carried out by Aborigines including, in addition to the obvious marches, demonstrations and 'the fiery speeches of radical spokesmen', Aboriginal legal and medical services, Black Theatre and Black Studies. Thus any expression of ethnic individuality or any response to alienation might, in this analysis, be seen as protest. It argues for recognition as forms of protest the many deviations from the dominant culture that have characterised Aboriginal groups throughout the period of non-Aboriginal settlement.

5.4.3 Organisation And The Changing Focus Of Protest

There has been Aboriginal protest action in various forms throughout most of the history of Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal contact. Invariably these were initiated from within specific communities, although attempts to broaden the political base were evident in the 1930s (see Horner 1974). The precursors of the contemporary Aboriginal political activists in south-eastern Australia were those who, like William Ferguson, William Cooper and John Patten, sought to organise Aborigines on more than a local basis. Their political expression was, however, constrained by the restricted avenues open to them. Consequently, the limited social and spatial mobility, the restrictions imposed on Aborigines generally and the narrowness of their political horizons

directed the political activities of the 1930s into demands for a 'fair go', for equality and for citizenship rights.

This analysis, although widespread, is not always acknowledged as a valid interpretation of Aboriginal political expression. Goodall considers Aboriginal politics to have had distinctly Aboriginal purposes over a much greater period than is acknowledged in much of the literature. From near the beginning of the century Aboriginal demands, according to Goodall, consistently included more than equal rights:

Aborigines wanted equality with white citizens in economic, social and legal spheres. They also wanted, however, recognition to their prior and separate rights to land, demanding secure tenure over land of significance and the opportunity to establish an independent economic base (1982:Vi).

Although the differing perceptions of the dynamics of Aboriginal politics in any temporal framework are acknowledged, the evidence is of a relatively unambiguous expression of basic objectives. Although it was not the first use by Aboriginal people of this form of protest action, Cooper's petition to the King in 1937 was a landmark in the progression of Aboriginal political protest. Yet it mildly appealed for measures to prevent the extinction of Aborigines as a people, for improved conditions and for parliamentary representation. The first Aboriginal political manifesto, published in 1938, was more brash and demanding, calling for the repeal of all existing legislation dealing with Aborigines. But again it sought freedom in terms of inclusion into society on equal terms with non-Aborigines: 'We ask to be accorded full citizen rights, and to be *accepted* into the Australian community on the basis of equal opportunity' (Horner 1974:59; emphasis added).

Long-term Aboriginal political figure, Pearl Gibbs, in describing the process as it was during her involvement declared, 'We had the same policy right through: Full Citizenship Rights' (Goodall 1983:21). Also

emphasising this objective, a leaflet publicising the first meeting organised by the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in Sydney in April, 1957, advised the intention 'to discuss ways and means of raising the living standards of Aborigines and their *integration* into the Australian community' (Bandler and Fox 1983:5, emphasis added).

Demands for equality led to scattered strike action in northern Australia in the 1940s and early 1950s, most notably among the Pilbara cattlemen in 1946 and Aboriginal workers in Darwin in 1947 and 1951. Even more significant was the earlier mutiny of Aboriginal servicemen over rates of pay in January 1944 (Hall 1980:31). The importance of the mutiny is in its being an instance of direct, and successful², confrontation with the power of the state, not by Aborigines excluded from the general society, but by those who were incorporated into an instrument of the state.

During the 1960s protest centred on three distinct issues: mining on Aboriginal reserves, land rights and civil rights including wage discrimination. These protests were still mainly localised in origin and, although they can be included in a broad identification of Aboriginal issues, were not in all cases part of a concerted, nationally directed, protest movement. They did, however, provide a platform for politically-aware southern Aborigines who, in endorsing them, made them into national issues. In this way, individuals were able to include themselves in this expression of Aboriginal politics.

² In effect the success was only partial. A conference held in Melbourne in February 1944 recognised that the cause of the mutiny, paying Aboriginal and Islander troops who were in a racially segregated unit at a lesser rate than non-Aboriginal troops or Aborigines in integrated units, was illegal. It was estimated that the amount of under-payment, together with repatriation, was 30 million pounds. However, it was considered that the sum involved was too large, and that paying Aborigines their legal entitlement would put into their hands more money than they could have earned in civilian life, possibly causing trouble when they were eventually discharged. The Aborigines and Islanders gained a pay rise, but at a level still short of the regulation scales (Hall 1980:31-32).

A similarly expressed demand for equality within the general society has been voiced by other Aborigines in other forums over a considerable period, and remains the objective of many individuals living in close association with non-Aboriginal communities. In a moderate and reasoned argument for basic rights and benefits, Charles Perkins (1968, 1975) called for a national, Canberra-based, Federal Aboriginal Affairs Bureau to be the main instrument of social change, formulating and implementing programmes, providing 'the basic organisation for the rehabilitation of Aborigines in Australia'. His proposal, addressed initially to the Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt, included sober considerations of Aboriginal deficiencies and suggested strategies in the fields of employment, education, housing, health, and land ownership with the emphasis on the cause of 'the hesitancy with which the Aboriginal has *entered the mainstream* of Australian Society' (1968:10;1975:165-166, emphasis added).

Similar attitudes indicating a desire to become part of the general Australian society had been, and continued to be, expressed by other Aborigines, particularly those in urban areas. During consultations in Adelaide in 1966, Aborigines in the metropolitan area and from reserves were asked to express their opinions on the general concerns of Aborigines in the community. Younger people, it was noted, disagreed with the idea of special Aboriginal schools and said that the children had to attend 'ordinary schools if they were to benefit from the best education available'. They also said that:

unless [the Aboriginal children] learnt to mix with other members of the community when they were young they would never be able to take a place of equality in the white community (*Consultation: Aborigines In The Community* 1966:19).

In addressing the 1969 annual conference of FCAATSI, Kath Walker declared that, 'Aborigines, believe it or not, are ambitious enough to

want to live with the European Australian in the main stream of Australian society.' In the same setting in 1975, another Aboriginal woman, Ruby Hammond, spoke to her audience of mothers who, she said, 'want to go out to work...to help your children go to school in order to be educated to move out into the majority community' (FCAATSI 1975).

Demands for acceptance, for citizenship and for equality are valid political objectives. Moreover, they reflect an awareness of existing political possibilities. But they represent a limited political perspective that can be destructive in terms of a collective Aboriginal identity structure, a point that was apparent to those Aborigines whose politics developed an ethnic orientation. This awareness is instanced in an observation reported in the Aboriginal Advancement League's *Newsletter* of March 1962:

We quote one remark of Mr (David) Daniels which should be thought on by all policy planners - "When we accept citizenship we take a step to isolate ourselves from our people, and we advance only individually".

Daniels' comment manifests a philosophical concept that had increasing pertinence as Aboriginal national politics graduated from its 'fair go' objectives to an increasingly militant, radical and more inwardly looking pursuit of a distinctly Aboriginal influenced agenda.

Equality, or a 'fair go', are basic demands from people taking their first steps towards political significance. For many, success in these basic areas leads to a reassessment of their position in the general society. Recognition of their demands may be interpreted as recognition of themselves as a people with a distinct identity which separates them from others within the society. Citizenship may include them in a society within which they feel isolated, while at the same time isolating them from their Aboriginal identity. In this way, the notion of a national identity gains increased significance at the same time as

incorporation into the general society becomes easier. A national identity becomes not only a political resource but also a valid objective in itself; ethnicity becomes both a means and an end as change in one area inspires change in another. The coincidence of changing Aboriginal expectations and the greater receptivity on the part of the general Australian society set the scene for a reordering of Aboriginal priorities.

5.5 The Precipitants Of Change

It is difficult to determine accurately the motivation that leads to political initiatives, and the ascribing of motives may be neither accurate nor fair. The expressed concern for a depressed minority must be accepted *prima facie* as evidence at least of awareness of the problem if not of the desire to act on it. Acknowledging these qualifications, it is possible to view the transformation of policies and of politics in the context of the social and political environments of the time.

Historically, official policy on Aborigines in Australia can accurately be described as a complete and abject failure (Stevens 1972:4). For any improvement to be affected in the overall situation of Aborigines, initiatives needed to be posited on conceptualisations of the Aboriginal place in society that differed markedly from existing attitudes. In the 1960s an awareness was growing of Aborigines as a depressed people with particular problems and special needs. It was also being increasingly accepted within non-Aboriginal society that Aborigines were victims of deliberately discriminatory policies and practices. Aborigines were themselves becoming more vocal and more articulate, protesting their conditions and demanding change. They were also becoming more visible as increasing numbers drifted into cities and towns where the increasing affluence of the general society provided a stark contrast to the

poverty and wretchedness of the great majority of Aborigines. The urban drift of Aborigines had provided, for many non-Aboriginal Australians, their first exposure to the remnants of Australia's indigenous population. An awareness of injustice and a desire - possibly inspired by a sense of guilt - to redress the obvious wrongs were pervasive influences.

It is apparent, then, that a climate of change was being generated from two sources: Governments and the Australian people generally were becoming more aware of the Aboriginal condition and more amenable to policies which would address the negative dimensions of this condition; Aborigines, themselves and with non-Aboriginal assistance, were both responding to, and helping create the changed attitude in official thinking.

Lippmann (1970) suggests a number of reasons for the changed attitudes within sections of non-Aboriginal society. Post-war migration, especially the increase in the number of Asians entering the country, helped break down the White Australia policy and its associated attitudes and led to the notion - if not the reality - of cultural pluralism or *multiculturalism*, even if at this stage such a notion did not include Aborigines or others seen as 'blacks'. Other factors include the world focus on the colour question in countries such as South Africa, Great Britain and the U.S.A., and the apparent similarities with aspects of the Australian situation; the perception of Australia as the land of the 'fair go', or the land whose ideal is the 'fair go'; and the decrease in isolation of the 'outback' areas due to the growth of the mining industry and to the improvements in transport and communications.

Erosion of the White Australia policy, with the subsequent repudiation of its racist overtones, forced many non-Aborigines to look realistically for the first time at Australia's own racist problem. The hypocrisy was inescapable. Following the referendum of 1967, in which almost 91 per cent of voters agreed to the proposal that the Commonwealth should have power to legislate in respect of Aborigines, the Federal Government had not only the constitutional right, but also a moral obligation to effect an improvement in the conditions of Aborigines. The clamour for change was widespread. In his analysis of the forces behind this in one area, that of Aboriginal health, Tatz (1972:6) states:

[It] has come mainly from outside the bureaucratic structure: from Aborigines, from academics, respected medical researchers, a representative parliamentary institution, some Federal politicians, the professional medical and nursing journals, newspaper editors, advancement organisations and disaffected former civil servants.

While not denying the possibility, and in some cases the probability, of genuine concern among politicians and others involved in the planning and implementation of Aboriginal policy, the demands of Aborigines, the clamour of professionals, the media and public opinion would have been persuasive influences in changing attitudes and policy directions.

At a time when official policies and general attitudes were undergoing change, certain Aborigines began to articulate, on behalf of a national population, political directions which emphasised Aboriginal imperatives. This form of Aboriginal nationalism was, and is, beset by problems inherent in attempts to reconcile the considerable differences existing within the Aboriginal population: the range and complexity of issues; the geographical spread and variety of locations; and the diversity of individuals, groups, communities and associations. A Senate Standing Committee in 1975 described three broad categories of

Aboriginal communities, comprising tribal groups living a more or less traditional life, groups living in shanty encampments on the fringes of country towns or in government or other institutions and those living in major urban areas (1974:12).

Commenting on this report, a subsequent Select Committee identified common basic social needs such as food, shelter, means of communication, education and a source of income, but acknowledged much variation in detail and community aspiration. Differences in needs and aspirations it attributed to:

the nature of the physical environment, the degree of attachment to the traditional culture, the period of contact with Europeans and the closeness of that contact, the nature of the industries in the particular region and the employment opportunities available (1976:24).

Nonetheless, Aboriginal goals included the regeneration of those very cultural artifacts lacking in the lives of the urban and rural dwellers. Although cast in the rhetoric of 'Black Power' politics, Coe's (1975:105) statement accurately reflects this mood of ethnic revival:

...[it] is a policy of self-assertion, of self-identity. It is a policy, at least as far as we in the city are concerned, which is trying to encourage black culture -- the re-learning, the re-instating of black culture whenever it is possible. This means, as far as we are concerned, the bringing in of the people...We are looking for, pushing for, the revitalisation of Aboriginal culture.

At odds with this belief is the awareness that Aboriginal culture was not in some form of arrested development from which it could be restored as a need was felt. The cultural experience was being lived by Aborigines, its particular shape determined by variables within a diverse range of relationships. A radicalisation of Aboriginal politics with an ethnic philosophy and with an emphasis on cultural identity and self-determination, provides the unifying force necessary for a

perceived commonalty of purpose. It does not, however, assure either the cultural or the political unity itself.

5.6 Towards A National Voice In Aboriginal Politics

By the 1960s significant changes had taken place in state and federal policies towards Aborigines. Some legal restrictions on their civil rights had been removed or modified in most states, they had gained the federal franchise, became entitled to welfare benefits on the same basis as other Australians and, in most places, had gained the legal right to drink alcohol. A changing political landscape provided the opportunity Aborigines needed to make themselves politically relevant.

Many organisations, some Aboriginal, but most with non Aboriginal involvement or even direction, had from the 1930s provided vehicles for protest campaigns and for the advocacy of programmes of social and economic reform demanded by the Aboriginal condition. Most were limited in their influence, if not in their determination, to define the goals of Aborigines as a state or national population. If there had been little contact with the great majority of Aborigines or Aboriginal communities by these organisations there was an assumption that their objectives would benefit all they claimed to speak for. A number of these organisations had come together in 1958 with other non-Aboriginal groups to create a loose federation which sought to represent Aborigines at the national level (see e.g. Bandler 1989). To a considerable extent the same people were involved but were now moving into a broader field of Aboriginal representation. In this way the Advancement Associations and similar organisations became the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement (FCAA), later the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). Its aims as adopted in 1957 were:

Equal citizenship rights, better standards of living, equal pay for equal work, education to be free and compulsory among detribalised people, and retention of reserves for all residents.

The dominance in FCAA and later in FCAATSI of non-Aborigines³ was to persist for the greater part of its active life, and was a continuing source of conflict within the organisation. In fact, it was not until the 14th Annual Conference in 1971 that Aborigines outnumbered non-Aborigines. Constrained possibly by its non Aboriginal members, by the limited representation of the diverse Aboriginal population and by the limited financial and political resources available to Aborigines, FCAATSI was a moderate organisation, its philosophy reflected in Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights, which it carried on its letterheads:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

By 1967, principles underlying FCAATSI policy were adumbrating the concept of self-determination that was not to be adopted officially until 1972. Aborigines and Islanders, declared the principles,

should be recognised as distinct cultural groups - subject to the same rights, privileges and responsibilities as other Australians; guaranteed to retain their own customs, language and institutions; enabled to share in the formulation of any programme...to change the existing structure of their communities; guaranteed ownership rights, collective or individual, over the land which they traditionally occupy; entitled, as dispossessed and underprivileged groups, to special assistance in promoting their economic, social and educational development (*FCAATSI* 1967).

Inevitably the access to political resources and the accompanying increased political awareness influenced a more militant expression and radical agenda by some Aborigines. Social and economic gains were not, in themselves, sufficient to satisfy the demands of a growing

³ At the Adelaide conference in 1958 only 3 of the 30 delegates were Aboriginal.

nationalist movement. Such movements generate a political momentum which often leads to a reassessment of goals. As Brass (1976:236-237) describes this process:

Once launched, they may not be modified by economic policies that leave ethnic group members out of power politically. Consequently, some combination of both economic and political concession is usually required to achieve either the assimilation of the aspirant ethnic group or even some form of pluralist accommodation with it.

An increased awareness of political realities is evident in an address to FCAATSI in 1969 by Aboriginal poet, Kath Walker. Walker argued that Aborigines should determine their own policies of advancement, instead of accepting those determined by whites. Aborigines needed to become more politically involved, she told the Council:

The indigenous people must interest themselves in politics...Politics is a dirty game and Aborigines will have to learn that game if they are to hold on to what little they have achieved...Learn politics and learn it fast!...Don't wait or leave it to the white man to do your protesting for you (FCAATSI 1969).

Debate over Aboriginal self-determination split FCAATSI, and in late 1969 a number of the more militant members formed the all-Aboriginal National Tribal Council (NTC), the only Aboriginal group to affiliate with the international Black Power Movement. Its *Policy Manifesto* included, in addition to references to the issues of health, education and employment, demands for an elected, indigenous, national administration to administer all funding for Aboriginal affairs, for land and mineral rights and cultural pluralism. But even the NTC was not considered to be revolutionary enough for several young Aborigines who broke away to form the radical and more confrontationalist Black Panther Party of Australia.

The NTC had been formed soon after the visit to Australia of Roosevelt Browne, a black Bermudan Member of Parliament and chairman of the Latin

American Black Power Movement, who told the media he had come to Australia to help organise a Black Power Movement. Commenting on the visit, the outspoken Aboriginal, Bruce McGuinness, claimed Browne had introduced Black power into Australia:

The results of Dr Brown's visit are not yet fully realised, but the initial moves towards Black Power in Australia are being made by a few Aboriginal leaders.⁴ The rest of the Black population will be carried along by the impetus (1972:154).

The term *Black Power* was first popularised by Stokely Carmichael who demanded that American Blacks should organise themselves independently of Whites in order to speak from a position of strength in American political, social and economic life: 'We have to move to control the economics and politics of our community' (Draper 1970:119). As Australian Aborigines were similarly to assert, Carmichael and Hamilton, in their book *Black Power* (1967), spoke of the need to 'reclaim our history and our identity' (49), to develop 'an awareness of cultural heritage' (52) and they defined goals of 'black self-determination and black self-identity' (61). This consciousness of identity, although lacking in specifics, was to become the driving force for national-level Aboriginal politics in Australia, outlasting the extremist rhetoric that often accompanied its early expression.

In contrast to its invective, and attempts to identify it with an international movement (see e.g. Pearson and Cocks 1982; Turner 1975), the emphasis Black Power placed on identity-consciousness as the basis for political development aligned more closely with Aboriginal political thought as expressed by actors at the national level. An Aboriginal

⁴ In 1970, five young, mostly urban, Aborigines visited the USA where they attended a Black Power conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Here they met Black Power representatives including members of the Black Panther and Black Muslim Movements. On their return to Australia an Australian Black Power Movement was established modelled very much on that existing in the USA. During its short life it served as little more than a medium for inflammatory rhetoric which appears to have been largely a response to media attention.

identity had to be established and accessible if an agenda stressing Aboriginal autonomy was to have any validity, and self-determination was the descriptive catchphrase of this autonomy.

FCAATSU survived the disruption of the Black Power era, but it too had to adapt to keep pace with the changes in attitudes and expectations. As many Aborigines, particularly those in the south and east, became more politically involved and influenced by experience both in Australia and, in some instances, in overseas countries, their politics underwent a transformation. It became more concerned with *defining* issues and goals rather than reacting to official initiatives.

FCAATSU was reformed in 1978 as a wholly Aboriginal organisation with a new title, the National Aboriginal and Islander Liberation Movement (NAILM). While not as aggressively confrontationist as the earlier radical organisations, the new body was, nevertheless, evidence of a more assertive manifestation of political awareness. Its *Fundamental Principles* stressed cultural values, 'the common and collective heritage' and 'spiritual communalism and unity' (NAILM n.d.).

Despite the intended 'Aboriginalisation' of the organisation and its goals, it was virtually stillborn. The influence of federal structures had declined as opportunities became available to Aborigines to participate in more potentially powerful local and regional organisations. Housing, legal and medical services became political power centres and, on the national level, the government-sponsored representative body became, for a time, the dominant focus of national politics.

5.7 National Political Organisations

5.7.1 The Political Environment Of The Early 1970s

Two events in 1972 introduced into the Aboriginal debate new elements which were to influence major changes in the shape of Aboriginal politics and in Aboriginal policy development. These were the Aboriginal tent 'Embassy' erected on the lawns in front of Parliament House, Canberra, in February, and the election, in October, of the reformist Whitlam Labor Government.

The story of the Aboriginal 'Embassy' (see e.g. Harris 1972; Nowfong 1972; Pittock and Lippmann 1974) is one of an *ad hoc*, symbolic and apparently spontaneous action becoming a successful political strategy and an acute and lasting embarrassment to the government. Unlike earlier protests which had been mounted by particular groups of Aborigines and had been concerned mostly with local situations, the Canberra action involved urban Aborigines expressing political demands on behalf of all Aborigines and receiving widespread support for the Aboriginal 'cause'. One analysis of this political action sees it as 'constitutive of a new Aboriginality' (Beckett 1988a:204). The political consciousness of Aborigines generally was certainly raised by national and international media attention, which also disturbed the conscience of non-Aborigines. Something needed to be done for Aborigines and increased expenditure was the official response at federal Government level.

If measured in money terms, Federal Government involvement in Aboriginal affairs increased significantly during the years of the Whitlam Labor

Government.⁵ A real need for increased spending in most areas of Aboriginal welfare could not be denied, but the largesse of the Whitlam Governments had other effects less welcomed by some Aborigines and non-Aborigines.⁶ The ready availability of funds without consideration of the long term social and economic impact on Aborigines reinforced or even increased the sense of dependency that had long characterised the Aboriginal community. Self determination and the self-responsibility it entails are difficult to achieve where people are conditioned to a 'hand-out' mentality.⁷

Other effects of the flow of funds was the moderation of much of the more militant expression of Aboriginal politics and the disarming of many of the more radical political actors. Many Aborigines became part of what Gary Foley termed 'the black bourgeoisie' (Deacon 1981:30), which he implied consisted largely of opportunists who 'came out of the woodwork', discovering their Aboriginal identity only when the money became available. Jones and Hill-Burnett in 1976 could not identify a single, visible, national Aboriginal leader who had no connection with government or a government funded organisation (1982:224). A year earlier, Charles Perkins had berated the national conference of FCAAITS!

⁵ Commonwealth expenditure on Aborigines which had totalled around \$24 million in 1970-71 increased to \$173 million in the last Labor budget in 1975-76.

⁶ According to one critic, '[Whitlam] saw authorities in the [1967] referendum which in fact were non-existent. [He] opened a Pandora's Box of racially oriented expectations which have seriously damaged the image of Aborigines and retarded their development as productive Australian citizens' (Hay 1988:2).

⁷ Although the rate of increase in spending did not continue under the subsequent Fraser governments it remained at a high level. Of the total spending on Aborigines of the Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke administrations, Hay comments 'The programs of assistance to Aborigines approved by this political trio total more than \$2.5 billion at the federal level alone. This figure excludes welfare payments and individual state allocations. The mood of Aborigines today and the corresponding concern in the community proves conclusively that these programs have neither benefited the Aborigines nor contributed to the production of a harmonious multi-cultural society' (Hay 1988:2).

following a suggestion that public servants should not be acceptable to the meeting:

You are all on quarterly grants, everyone of you. That is controlled. Every organisation is paid by the Federal Government. There is not one organisation here today which is not paid by the Federal Government, so all that hassle about we won't have public servants up here - you are all public servants but you just get paid a different way (FCAATSI 1975).

The national organisations that were designed by non Aborigines and assumed to be representative structures continued this fiction that appointed public servants were, in fact, the legitimate leaders of the Aboriginal people.

There is continuing debate on the value of changes set in train by the events of 1972. What is clear is that a precedent of national government involvement was established with the setting up of the first Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and that land rights was accepted as a legitimate, if circumscribed, Aboriginal objective. More important in terms of Aboriginal ethno-politics, the creation of a national representative body introduced the notion of the political involvement of all Aboriginal people as a national population; an ethnic political community became a theoretical possibility. Whatever the evaluation of the success or otherwise of the body, its establishment marked the recognition of Aborigines as a distinct and separate political society.⁸ The criterion for participation in the election of this body was Aboriginal identity. For possibly the first time since European settlement Aboriginal identity was recognised in a national context as having a positive political purpose. An adjunct of this

⁸ The recognition of an Aboriginal political society does not resolve the question of who does or should constitute such a society. Debate continues on who is entitled to establish the criteria for Aboriginal identification, with self-definition being strongly opposed by some outspoken critics particularly in regard to the possible advantages accruing from land rights and mining royalties (see e.g. Morgan 1984: 9-10; Hay 1988:2).

recognition is the potential for it to reinforce the awareness of Aboriginal difference from the general society and, from this, to promote alienation as the basis for political separation.

5.7.2 The National Aboriginal Consultative Committee

Both the NACC and its successor, the NAC, were established supposedly on the basis of providing representation for all Aborigines in the political process. Their failure effectively to do this reflects as much on governments' inability to acknowledge the reality of Aboriginal society as it does on the inexperience and uncertainty as to their role of the erstwhile Aboriginal 'politicians'. Aborigines involved in the organisations became part of the political structures they were supposedly alienated from; from a radical viewpoint, the oppressed became part of the institutions of oppression. Weaver (1983a:2) illustrates in her analysis of the policy formation in regard to the NACC and NAC how Aborigines lacked the resources to create their own national organisation which could act as a pressure group to articulate their views to government. The Government encouraged, and even assisted in, the organisation of pressure groups 'with the intent of enhancing the public's capacity to articulate their demands and bring them to government in a more organised and "usable" way' (Weaver 1983a:4).

This hopefully provides a 'united voice' which makes it easier for governments to assess needs, develop policies and establish a working relationship with that section of the population represented by the pressure group. It is also an effective means by which subtle pressure can be applied to dilute militancy and reduce radical tendencies. But, as Weaver notes, it requires in a pressure group, a capacity to resolve internal differences and reach agreement on a common stand. Aborigines were not able to do this.

In setting up the NACC the Government raised expectations among the Aboriginal participants that they would be involved in the determination of policies appropriate to their goal of self determination. Unfortunately for these expectations the Government's conception of participatory democracy, even if presented as a form of self-determination, did not include self-government. The reality was that the organisation was set up as an advisory body, its proposed role as seen by the then Minister for Aboriginal affairs, J.L. Cavanagh, being

to provide a forum for the expression of Aboriginal opinion on all matters and a channel through which the Government might receive representative advice on the direction in which the Aboriginal people wished to move in matters specifically affecting them (1976:262).

Whatever the official intentions, the NACC saw its role quite differently. Rather than having merely an advisory capacity it considered itself to be an executive body with power to control and distribute funds, and with the right and power to formulate and express National Aboriginal policy. To this end it became increasingly confrontational in its relations with government, eventually adopting in principle a constitution drafted for a proposed National Aboriginal Congress. Neither the Labor Government nor its Liberal/National coalition successor would accept the proposed constitution, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the latter, R.I. Viner, expressing his government's view that rather than it being representative of the Aboriginal people, the proposed body was seen as one placed between the Government and the Aboriginal people (*Senate Select Committee* 1976:267).

5.7.3 Evaluations Of The National Organisations

Considered by the Senate Select Committee on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as not having been a success, the NACC was, on the

other hand, credited with having increased Aborigines' awareness of their national standing:

They now take even more pride in their identity as Aborigines and many now realise that as a race they can form an effective pressure group which can influence government policy (*Senate Select Committee* 1976:274).

The potential of such a pressure group strategy can be questioned, at least in regard to its value to the Aboriginal people as distinct from a constructed national Aboriginal political organisation. At the time of conflict between the NACC and the Government, an editorial in the *Canberra Times* newspaper questioned the nationalist strategy in regard to the diversity of Aboriginal Australia. Reflecting the thinking of many people who were aware of the reality of Aboriginal society, it commented, 'the Aboriginal people itself is not a homogeneous entity...There cannot be one overall Aboriginal policy'. Alluding also to the perpetuation of the welfare approach, it commented:

The salvation of the Aboriginal people will come from their own efforts to master their destinies much more than from a tantalising pot of gold held out by the Federal Government (*Canberra Times* February 7, 1974).

Unless they had some involvement or had links with others who did, Aboriginal people tended to be indifferent or even hostile towards the national organisations. Many of those questioned in the study communities had little knowledge of the bodies and were unconcerned about their fate. Of those who expressed an opinion, the overwhelming majority had a negative impression. Typical of these is the Aboriginal woman who dismissed the organisation in terms of its being too remote and too self-centred to be relevant to the Aboriginal people:

They don't care about us. They don't know what we want, they don't come and ask us. They just interested in themselves. If it was run properly - but they just [say], 'Ah, we'll have a meeting in Perth' or somewhere, and they have big drinkup, big fight (Tape:85 B9).

Within the same community another respondent, himself active in local politics, shared this viewpoint:

If they said, 'let's get out and do what we're elected to do', but no. I was one pleased man when they disbanded it. If they'd worked as a collective there wouldn't be any Black begging now (Tape:85 B8).

Fault was not attributed solely to the Aboriginal members. Although critical of the Aborigines who were active at this level of political activity, the hand of government was seen also to be involved in the failures:

It's the same with government departments. You get a Black speaking up for Aborigines at grassroots level, they set up a position [for him or her] and [he or she] gets cut off from the people. It happens so often (Tape:86 M10).

Such negative attitudes are understandable in communities where the lack of, or an inability to mobilise and use, available resources in local organisation, maintains a dependency on external agencies. When expectations are unfulfilled it provokes hostility, or it adds to disillusionment and reinforces apathy. On the other hand, where the community displays a degree of confidence and competence in local organisation, the dismissive attitude towards national bodies appears to be informed as much by belief in local autonomy as scepticism about the alternate possibilities:

We don't have much to do with any of the organisations. When they sent those leaflets around to say whether the NAC should continue and that, well no one was interested here. They asked if we wanted a meeting and we said 'no, because you done nothing for us'. We never ever seen [the elected regional representative]. Every organisation got the same letter and there wouldn't be too many that had a good word for it (Tape:86 M10).

Representation cannot be expected to be accepted where those supposedly represented believe they have not been consulted and are therefore not involved. Neither the national organisations themselves nor their individual members were acceptable to many Aboriginal people. Equally,

their behaviour was unacceptable to the governments which set up enquiries into their activities.

5.7.4 The Hiatt Report

Commissioned by the Fraser Government in 1975, the Committee of Enquiry into the NACC, under the chairmanship of Dr L.H. Hiatt, had terms of reference which made particular mention of the need to take account of arrangements for the involvement of Aborigines at local, regional, state and national levels in respect of 'the management of their own affairs, the setting of their own goals, the shaping of programmes and the determination of priorities for expenditure...' (Hiatt 1976:1V). In its subsequent report, the Hiatt Committee referred to the continuing conflict between NACC members and DAA officials, and within NACC between the representatives of tribal, rural and urban interests. Of the failure to establish the grassroots contact envisaged in its charter, the Committee reported that the great majority of Aborigines knew practically nothing of the formal activities of the NACC and were in no position to judge whether it has represented their opinions adequately to the Government or not (1976:VIII).

As Weaver (1983a) concludes, the NACC could not succeed as a pressure group because it had neither the resources - human and material - nor the legitimacy of such an institutionalised body. Unable adequately to function as expected by the government, or to gain legitimacy from its Aboriginal constituents, it is not surprising that its primary focus would be directed inwards. Yet, despite the assumed safeguards built into the structure of the government-funded advisory body that replaced the NACC, the subsequent report of its functions and operations (Coombs 1984) is unfortunately, if not unexpectedly, similar.

5.7.5 The NAC And The Coombs Report

Set up in 1977 and terminated in June 1985, following the report of inquiry headed by Dr H.C. Coombs, the NAC was even less acceptable to Aborigines than its predecessor. Its creation was influenced by a policy that was more conservative and conventional than that obtaining at the time the NACC was set up. In contrasting these policies, Weaver (1983b:101) provides a perspective of policy considerations that suggests the failure of NAC was inevitable. If an organisation designed to encourage Aboriginal participation could fail, the possibility of success for one imposed on them was even more unlikely:

In contrast to the NACC, which had been born of an unorthodox policy *process*, in an innovative political era, as a ministerial initiative to encourage Aborigines to create their own national pressure group, the NAC was born of a policy process that was conventional in mode and purpose: to create a government-structured advisory mechanism.

A 62 per cent increase in the number of candidates at the 1981 NAC elections was accompanied by a 19 per cent drop in voter participation (Weaver:1983b:102-103). In no case did an elected representative gain the support of 50 per cent of the eligible voters, the range being from a high of 42.8 per cent to a low of a mere 2.9 per cent (see Table 5.1). The virtual impossibility of people with a limited support base to be acknowledged individually by their regional communities or collectively by the Aboriginal population as representative, is obvious. Commenting on the widespread view in Aboriginal communities that the NAC had been largely irrelevant to their affairs and had no effective power in relation to Government, Coombs suggested that:

These communities tend to judge leaders or representatives by their capacity to deliver benefits felt by them to be needed: in other words by how far they effectively 'work for' and 'look after' their communities and their needs (1984:16).

Table 5.1: ASSESSMENT OF 1981 NAC ELECTION FIGURES BASED ON DAA STATISTICS

NAC Member	NAC Area	Estimate of Eligible Voters	Turnout	Turnout as % of Total Eligible Voters	Percentage of Votes to successful candidate	No. of Votes of successful candidate	Candidates Votes as % of Total Voting Population	No. of Contestants
Mrs Merle Jackamos	VCA	1,410	443	31.4	39.2	173	12.3	4
Mrs Nessie Skuta	VCB	1,740	662	38.0	36.5	241	13.9	4
Mr William Smith	NSA	5,440	852	15.6	18.7	159	2.9	14
Mr Ossie Cruse	NSB	1,780	669	37.5	32.2	215	12.1	9
Mrs Val Mackay	NSC	1,690	754	44.6	19.2	144	8.5	11
Mr E. Simpson	NSD	1,320	745	56.4	41.6	309	23.4	4
Mr J. Stanley	NSE	2,090	628	30.0	25.8	162	7.7	10
Mr Lyle Munro	NSF	2,510	924	36.8	39.0	360	14.3	7
Mr Frank Roberts	NSG	2,650	1,175	44.3	39.8	467	17.6	5
Mr Steve Mam	QEA	3,600	978	27.1	21.9	214	5.9	12
Mr Ray Robinson	QEB	2,000	721	36.0	40.0	288	14.4	5
Mr P. Malone	QEC	2,290	968	42.2	22.7	219	9.5	13
Mrs E. Geia	QED	3,570	1,389	38.9	36.0	500	14.0	11
Mr Phillip Yanner	QEE	2,290	1,286	56.1	42. -	540	23.5	5
Mr W. Hollingsworth	QEF	3,710	1,880	50.6	23.4	439	11.8	11
Mr H. Daphney	QEG	1,700	1,481	87.1	19.2	284	16.7	13
Mr R. Laifoo	QEH	1,450	1,356	93.5	33.0	447	30.8	6
Mr G. Mye*	QEI	980	1,083	-	58.8	636	-	3
Mr Garnet Wilson	SAA	2,300	686	29.8	30.1	206	8.9	6
Mr D. Colson	SAB	1,121	752	67.0	27.4	206	18.3	7
Mr P. Thompson	SAC	1,325	681	51.3	60.4	411	31.0	2
Mr Roy Nichols	TAS	1,300	558	42.9	78.8	439	33.8	2
Mr Rob Riley	WAA	4,240	1,569	37.0	15.2	238	5.6	12
Mr G. Colbung	WAB	1,619	794	49.0	24.8	196	12.1	9
Mr A. Lyncy	WAC	1,533	988	64.4	27.9	275	17.9	7
Mrs M. Mallard	WAD	1,991	765	38.4	26.6	203	10.2	10
Mr H. Parker	WAE	1,898	669	35.2	54.1	361	19.0	5
Mr Peter Yu	WAF	2,289	1,275	55.7	54.8	698	30.5	4
Mr Frank Chulung	WAG	1,575	1,008	64.0	56.0	564	35.8	3
Mr Willie Clayton	NTA	4,347	1,334	30.6	21.9	292	6.7	8
Mr Wiebenang*	NTB	594	725	-	55.4	401	-	3
Mr M. Dhamarrandji	NTC	1,958		Uncontested				
Mr W. Martin	NTD	2,079	1,196	57.5	31.3	374	18.0	5
Mr R. Williams*	NTE	873	1,849	-	28.2	521	-	7
Mr M. Jambajimba	NTF	2,777	1,533	55.2	56.8	870	31.3	4
Mr V. Forrester	NTG	1,395	1,130	81.0	52.9	597	42.8	9

* NAC Contestants in Electorates where the actual turnout was more than the estimated eligible voting population.

Source: Coombs (1984)

Not surprisingly, Coombs, in summary, reported that the NAC was not adequately representative of the Aboriginal community opinion and aspirations and that there was almost unanimous agreement among Aborigines that it was ineffective as an instrument of Aboriginal political influence or action. It was out of touch with Aboriginal communities and their organisations, it failed to present effectively their needs and aspirations and failed to provide feedback. It was also extravagant and wasteful in expenditure. Coombs acknowledged as contributory causes of poor performance, the inadequacy of resources and the failure to deal with differences in the knowledge and experience of some of the NAC members.

Coombs' comments support the notion of local relevance, the awareness that the important issues are local and, because of this, representatives need to satisfy these if they are to gain or retain legitimacy. It is obvious, however, that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve satisfaction of more than a small proportion of the innumerable and often conflicting needs of the total represented population.

It is understandable that, in what is possibly the most important observations in the context of Aboriginal politics, Coombs notes a reluctance of Aborigines to see their political future in official advisory, consultative or representative bodies. He refers also to the factionalism and segmentation that characterises contemporary Aboriginal politics, and the propensity of 'activists' to seek to mobilise Aboriginal controlled service organisations into personal or family 'empires'. This clearly defines the competition for power within the Aboriginal population that works against the concept of a national or ethnic political collective:

To the extent that factionalism has a recognised political and social value the leaders of factionally or family controlled organisations are unlikely to be attracted to proposals which would bring their 'empires' under official control or influence even if that control is apparently exercised by Aborigines or if they have a constitutional right to share in it (1984:24).

The potential for conflict is obvious, yet little appears to have changed in official attitudes towards Aboriginal representative bodies.

In a statement following the termination of the NAC, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs reiterated the ideal that had often been expressed but never achieved. The new organisation to replace the NAC, he said, 'will be more closely based on Aboriginal community aspirations' (Holding A PD. vol.141,1985:1266). In its report, the task force set up to consult Aborigines - once again - in regard to the sort of body they wished to represent them at the national level, established two fundamental requirements which, it claimed, Aboriginal peoples see as essential in a national consultative body:

...it should be answerable to the Aboriginal community at 'grass roots' level and [be] capable of providing an independent Aboriginal voice (*O'Donoghue* 1986:34).

When, eventually, legislation was introduced to establish a new national Aboriginal organisation, the Minister told the House the legislation would, for the first time, 'ensure the place of the indigenous peoples of this country in the decision making processes of Government'. The proposed body, he said, 'represents a significant and major step towards the achievements of self-determination for the indigenous peoples of Australia' (Hand 1988:2-3). Again, the specific characteristics of the Aboriginal community and the extent they shape political activity are underestimated or disregarded. Self-determination as a national collective would require significant political development.

5.8 National Organisations And The Influence On Local Politics

If one accepts that political development involves a widening of horizons as people move away from narrow parochial views and become more concerned with the entire political system (Pye and Verba 1965:23), it can be argued that, to a significant extent, Aborigines remain politically underdeveloped. National bodies have either had little impact on local communities or they have, ironically, strengthened the individuality of local organisation. In most instances local involvement in national or state level politics has been minimal, inhibited by disassociation or limited to participation in the election of a regional representative. Where this representative is not a member of the local community there is a real possibility of his or her representation being denied legitimacy. In addition, the lack of continuing interaction with the community leads possibly to the loss of any real sense of local identification with the national body other than through a vague ethnic identification or the endorsement of general macro policies. Political mobilisation for national, collective goals is, in these communities, a potential rather than a reality.

In other communities there may be individuals or groups who actively seek a political role, or who define goals that are difficult to attain without outside support. Because of the limited political potential of the individual Aboriginal community, there is a gravitation to a wider representation of the Aboriginal voice even though this may submerge the specificity of local aspirations and goals. If localised political action can be incorporated into a national, collective movement,⁹ there

⁹ Duncan (1975-76) argues for a single Aboriginal protest movement incorporating all the diverse activities of individuals and groups in a unity of purpose. This is supportive of the view of Aboriginal politics as the politics of alienation. His claim that 'the processes of factionalism,

is a potential for an effective ethnic voice, even though local communities may be isolated from the expression of this supposedly representative voice. However, it is possible that success achieved by the national or state organisation creates the possibility of an extension of resources to the local community.¹⁰ Often unwilling to acknowledge the validity of the organisation, the local community will, nevertheless, demand its rightful share of any benefits.

There is, in this context, a certain circularity in Aboriginal political development that produces the paradox of collectivisation reinforcing community individuality: the local community is drawn into a wider political collective to gain access to its capacity to negotiate with and influence governments. If successful, this collective action produces resources which are desired by the communities functioning as separate entities which may not welcome the continued involvement of the collective organisation. The individual who has direct involvement in the collective body and who seeks to maintain a power base in the local community may face a conflict of interest, or be perceived to do so. The alternative is a strengthening of a local power base which becomes protective of its autonomy and, while possibly acknowledging its alignment with the ethnic movement, is primarily concerned with local imperatives.

In a community which has been politically unorganised and inactive, the acquisition of resources may well initiate a search for purely Aboriginal goals where these previously were not considered. An Aboriginal political organisation creates a need to justify its

clashing ideologies, divergent goals and strategies have generated effective leadership'(67) is less convincing.

¹⁰ An example of this is the local land councils provided for in the NSW Land Rights Act of 1983. Each community of Aborigines in the state was entitled to set up its local land council and receive some funding.

existence by defining Aboriginal objectives. Resulting political activity may induce a reassessment of the local situation *vis à vis* the general society, and promote alienation and Aboriginal non Aboriginal conflict where previously these had not been part of the local social environment. Self-determination, even if it be represented in a practical form only by a basic political structure such as a land council, housing company or Aboriginal cooperative, presents considerable difficulties to Aborigines who have regarded themselves as part of a general community. To exercise the power, symbolic or otherwise, represented by this structure, they must establish and maintain a degree of social and political separation from the other units of the society. In this way their social identity as members of a community is in conflict with their Aboriginal or ethnic identity.

Where Aborigines have been absorbed into the general community of a town or city the concept of self-determination has often created confusion, and those who express this and other national goals are often received with suspicion or even hostility. Local Aborigines invariably acknowledge and endorse the idea of an Aboriginal identity which includes all who self identify, but many have difficulty in conceiving of this as a political resource. Remote from the field of national politics, their analysis is constrained by the limitations of their own political and social horizons. Expressed by one Aboriginal woman, the objectives remain clear and the transformation of politics is a contrived return to the unwanted past:

Now, they screamed and moaned they wanted equal opportunities and equal rights. When they had to get a bloody exempt to go into pubs and things like that, they were screaming about it, didn't they? They wanted to be equal. So they were made equal, weren't they? So now they made equal they want to bloody go back to what they were (Tape:86 M10).

Where the processes of transcultural adaptation and social incorporation have distanced the individual from an appreciation of the significance of an historical background, the Aboriginal past is diminished by a perception of the possibilities of the future. An example is the comment of the community figure who sees the future in terms of progressive material development:

I don't think we should go backwards. We should go forward. We need assimilation. One people, that's what I'd like to see, black and white. It's too late to go back (Tape:86 B15).

The past cannot so easily be dismissed as having no part in the construction of identity and, consequently, of the political collective. The past, writes Lowenthal, 'is integral to our sense of identity' (1985:41). Expanding this viewpoint, he suggests the 'Awareness of history...enhances communal and national identity, legitimating a people in their own eyes' (1985:44). It is the diversity of this history and the way it is interpreted that informs much of the social and political fabric of contemporary Aboriginal society and makes difficult, collective political behaviour.

PART 11

CHAPTER 6

THE CONSTRUCTION OF COMMUNITIES: ORIGINS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN THE STUDY AREA.

6.1 Interpretations Of The Past

The geographical and social spaces occupied by Aboriginal people in far-western NSW, as in much of southern Australia, have been determined largely by influences over which they, themselves, had little control. For much of their post-contact history, Aborigines could only react to the events and forces that directed their lives, seeking some form of accommodation within the limited options open to them. They became, in effect, confined to environments they had minimal say in choosing.

Removed from traditional areas of association, Aborigines largely lost the individuality of their social and cultural environments and were forced into new configurations. It was within these that they had to establish an Aboriginal identity in place of the sense of group belonging that had been located in their earlier spatial associations. The Aboriginal notion of community, which informs the contemporary local identity, is a function of the interpretation of the historical experience; overwhelmingly it is a history of cultural, spatial, social and economic adaptation. Although the processes that influenced the historical experience and the Aboriginal responses to these may be similar to those of other people in other areas, they refer here specifically to the study area and not to any general Australian situation.

An exploration of the Aboriginal past in Western NSW reveals both a general experience and also a set of variables which establishes the basis for group individuality. These variables include the extent to which some continuity of traditional association has been maintained; the actual processes of community creation and development and the particular Aboriginal responses to these; and the particular forms of interaction between individuals and groups of Aborigines and elements of the non-Aboriginal society. Such a study helps in an understanding of the perceptions of identity that allow people to see themselves as part of a collectivity comprising all Aborigines and at the same time identify primarily with a local community or group.

A climate of mutual respect and cooperation that was shown to be possible in some early interactions between Aborigines and non-Aborigines was lost through the exigencies of settlement. These resulted in the exploitation both of Aboriginal land and of the people themselves as an inexpensive source of labour. Forced from their land and later from the pastoral properties to which many had attached themselves, groups of displaced Aborigines drifted or were moved to places where their presence was at times tolerated, if largely unwelcomed; at other times actively opposed. Official perceptions of their unsupervised presence and the general conditions of their existence inspired an authoritative concern for their protection which became the justification for policies which allowed wholesale social and spatial dislocation and entrenched a climate of dependency in place of self-responsibility.

Because they were treated as a common population they became, in this sense, Aboriginal people. At the same time they were members of a community which was spatially related and had an individual history. To

some extent these communities provided a sense of place which became the reference point for their identity, although it was often a retrospective identification which ignored the actual conditions that had affected the community. Aboriginal identity, whether local or that relative to a wider sense of community, is a construct of interpretation of history. This has led both to a mythification of history and to the ambivalence which characterises the Aboriginal sense of who they are.

Any attempt to interpret the social or political environments of Aborigines in the study area without reference to the particularity of their history would be to ignore the significance of their experience in the shaping of the present. It may not be possible to establish causal relationships from a study of this past, but it does provide an interpretive framework of understanding. Considered in this relationship, the past is composed of more than a linear structure of historical narrative. It includes not only the incidents and processes of history, but also the attitudes and emotions that influenced or were themselves influenced by these.

The past is not a form of absolute reality. It structures, and is itself largely structured by, the perceptions of its inheritance. Physical and social environments may be influenced directly, but another, more discrete, influence evolves from the transformation of the past through a process of mythification which in turn influences the contemporary psychology and ideology of Aboriginal identity. Individual, group and community histories are thus major factors in a consideration of the development and expression of Aboriginal politics, particularly in regard to the importance of its local dimensions.

One apprehension of the Aboriginal past is informed by a sense of pride in a people of value and a life of meaning and purpose. Inspired by an

awareness of the need to possess a heritage of worth, it is a past that offers a positive dimension to identification as an Aboriginal by those people who have largely lost touch with this heritage. Responding to his own rhetorical question of what the Aboriginal could care or want from such a past, Bob Maza (1969:3-4) asserts:

I will tell you what you *need* of that culture and civilization. You need the knowledge of the wonderful way of life that the old Aborigines had. You need to know the height of his honour, integrity and unique self-discipline. You need to know of his high moral code and religious ethics, so that in some small way you begin to build within yourself a national pride. You can then look back with dignity and know you come from an honourable people.

In another dimension the Aboriginal past is the experience of European intrusion and dispossession. This is the past of physical dislocation and of social and cultural disintegration; of discrimination and exploitation; of the shame and hate of having been cast as 'the most degenerate, despicable and brutal race in existence' (Hartwig 1972:12). Aboriginal author, Kevin Gilbert (1973:2), describes it in terms of a history which destroyed a people, a view that is, nevertheless, denied by many Aboriginal people:

Concurrently, we suffered the destruction of our entire way of life - spiritual, emotional, social and economic. The result is the Aboriginal of twentieth century Australia - a man without hope or happiness, without a land, without an identity, a culture or a future.

It is interpretations of this latter past that have determined the physical and social characteristics of Aboriginal communities in much of Australia. In little more than half a century after the first European had moved through the Far West of NSW the social and cultural dislocation of its Aboriginal population was such as to provoke concerned comment:

...we cannot but admit that our happy prosperous lot in these bright colonies is purchased at the cost of the welfare, nay, even the lives of the possessors of the soil. It is pathetic to be

thrown among the aboriginals and note how they wither away when brought into contact with the people of our race...A few years ago the aboriginals of the upper Darling were comparatively numerous; now they, in common with other tribes wherever the European has settled, have nearly passed away (Newland 1889:3).

Aboriginal communities exist in geographical and social environments that reflect the cultural experience shaped by the dimensions of their individual and collective pasts. Their responses to opportunities and initiatives would inevitably be influenced significantly by this inheritance.

6.2 The Contact Experience

The Aboriginal population of the Far West of NSW has become established as communities in particular places because of post-contact, in most cases twentieth century, developments. From being a people whose culture had shaped their environments, they became the often reluctant occupiers of environments which were at times alien and hostile.

Many of the Aboriginal people in these communities acknowledge a tribal association. These are often subjective identifications which depend more on structural location and on the contemporary Aboriginal perception of identity, than on the continuity of traditional links with a land owning or language group. In a particular community, Aborigines from quite varying backgrounds may similarly identify because the community itself has an ascribed identity.

Social and physical dislocation distort an existing identity, but in turn generate a need for a redefined sense of belonging which is sought within new relationships. This need can overcome environmental deficits and create a benign sense of place within which a collective identity can be established. The Aboriginal writer, Colin Johnson, makes this point in his novel, *Wild Cat Falling* (1979), where his protagonist, an

alienated Aboriginal youth, finds in the jail community his first sense of belonging. It is this sense of belonging to an identifiable collectivity, even in an apparently alien environment, which, with the history of continuous existence it provides, affords social stability and makes political mobilisation possible.

Initially, when the settlement of western NSW by Europeans deprived the Aborigines of their traditional areas of association, their utility as a readily available and cheap labour source provided them with some degree of residential permanence on the large station properties, a pattern that was repeated over much of Australia. This exploitation of underprivileged indigenous people has seen the term 'internal colonialism' applied in the Australian context (Beckett 1978:6; Hartwig 1979). With these more or less permanent concentrations of Aborigines, group identification was with the properties; they were the 'station blacks' or the 'station mob' who, although they might move about visiting kin or fulfilling traditional obligations, would invariably return to their station 'home'. Goodall (1982) suggests an ulterior motive in the attachment of Aborigines to stations in this way. She sees coercion or encouragement being used to get Aborigines to settle permanently where their labour could be used as needed, but where the 'hunter and gatherer' tag could be applied as an excuse to ignore them when they were not needed.¹

A number of precipitating factors led to the breakup of these concentrations of Aborigines in western NSW and moved them into that phrase Elkin (1951), in his analysis of the processes of cultural interaction, termed 'pauperism'. Poor economic conditions, periods of

¹ While the arrangement was no doubt beneficial to the employers of Aboriginal labour, oral evidence indicates that Aborigines themselves welcomed a break away from the station environment. Older Aborigines talk of a need to 'go bush for a bit' or 'to live like a blackfeller for a while'.

drought and the trend to smaller holdings, often designed to support one family and so needing little outside labour, deprived the Aborigines of much of their economic value to the settlers. No longer encouraged to remain on the properties or free to collect food in the traditional manner, they were forced to move to the vicinity of towns where, ultimately, it became necessary for administrations to extend to the area a system of allocating food rations, usually dispensed by local police. When work was available Aborigines travelled throughout the western region and became associated with particular areas. There were, thus, 'Corner' or 'Paroo' or 'River',² people who returned to a central community when work was unavailable, often leaving their families at such centres when they were working at a distance. Some moved away from areas where they had, through parents or grandparents, a traditional association; others appear to have settled in communities which were as near as possible to such traditional areas.

In NSW the policy of 'dispersal' and 'mergence' of Aborigines had been introduced by the Aborigines Protection Board (APB) in the early 1900s. In implementing the policy use was made of the supply of rations, a provision that became an effective method of social control. Many Aborigines were coerced into moving to mission stations and reserves initially by the promise of rations, and subsequently by the threat of the withdrawal of this allocation.

Goodall (1982) cites the years from 1910 to 1921 as being the period of the most aggressive implementation of the APB's policy. But the practice of moving Aborigines according to what was considered to be best for them - generally without meaningful consultation with the

² These particular terms refer to the country in the vicinity of the junction of the borders of NSW, SA and Queensland, the Paroo River and the Darling River respectively.

people themselves - continued long past this period. In the 1930s and 1940s communities were shuttled across the state without consideration of their traditional tribal links or area associations. As a consequence, while the majority of Aborigines in the contemporary Far West communities might profess a common tribal identification, they constitute, in many cases, the remnants of groups whose social and territorial links stretched from the north-western corner of NSW and the south-west of Queensland, to the central-west of NSW and along the entire length of the Darling River (see Figure 6.1, Figure 6.2).

Adding to the social and spatial dislocation wrought by earlier policies was the removal in 1938 of almost the entire Aboriginal population of Tibooburra,³ in the north-west of NSW, to Brewarrina, on the Darling River upstream from Bourke. The forced mergence of the people there and, subsequently, in missions, reserves and camps throughout the west, accelerated the breakdown of the formal tribal or locality based structures. For some far-western Aborigines, tribal identification is possible where a continuity of association has been maintained; for many others, their identification has predominantly psychological and political relevance. It provides the essential element in a positive Aboriginal identification, without which any ethnic orientation could be submerged by a European-influenced cultural experience. To be a *Bakandji* or a *Nyampa Aboriginal* has an identity significance that is not necessarily present when one's identification is simply *Aboriginal*.

³ The Tibooburra population was itself the result of the inflow of Aborigines from a wide area of south-western Queensland through to the far north-east of south Australia.

Figure 6.1: Patterns of Aboriginal migration 1920s-1980s

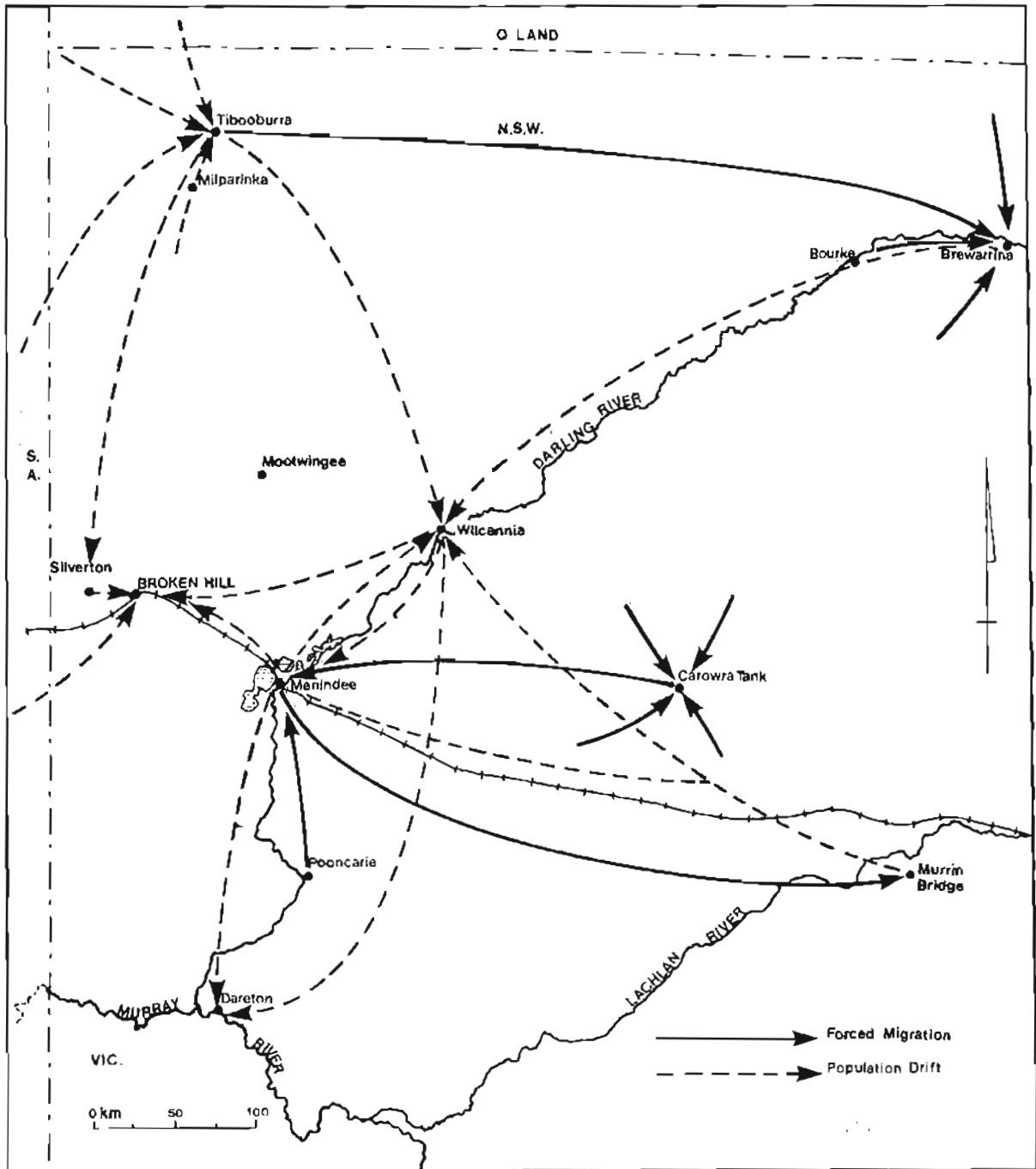
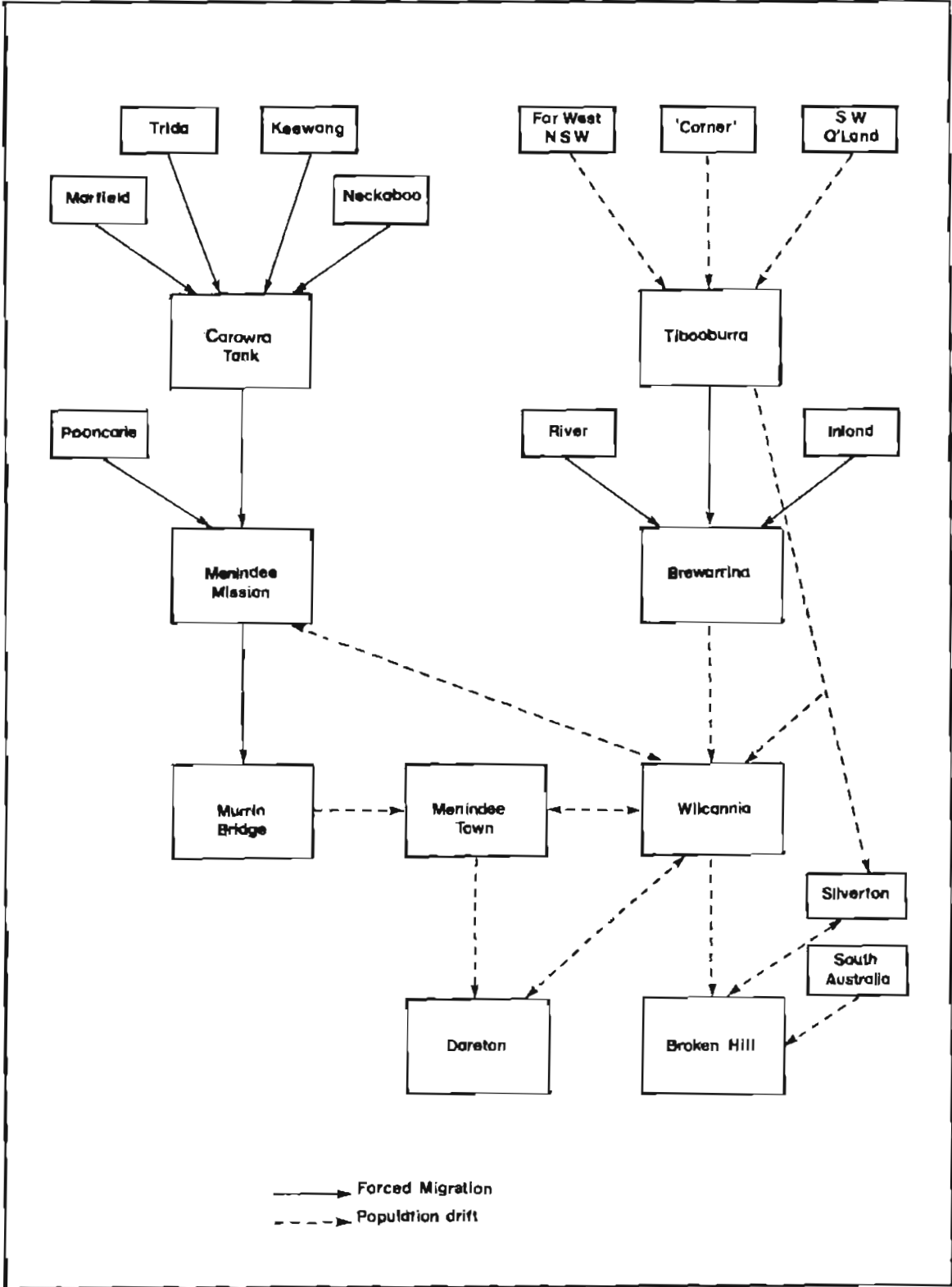


Figure 6.2: Diagram of migratory influences in Aboriginal community formation in Western NSW



6.3 The Darling River Aborigines

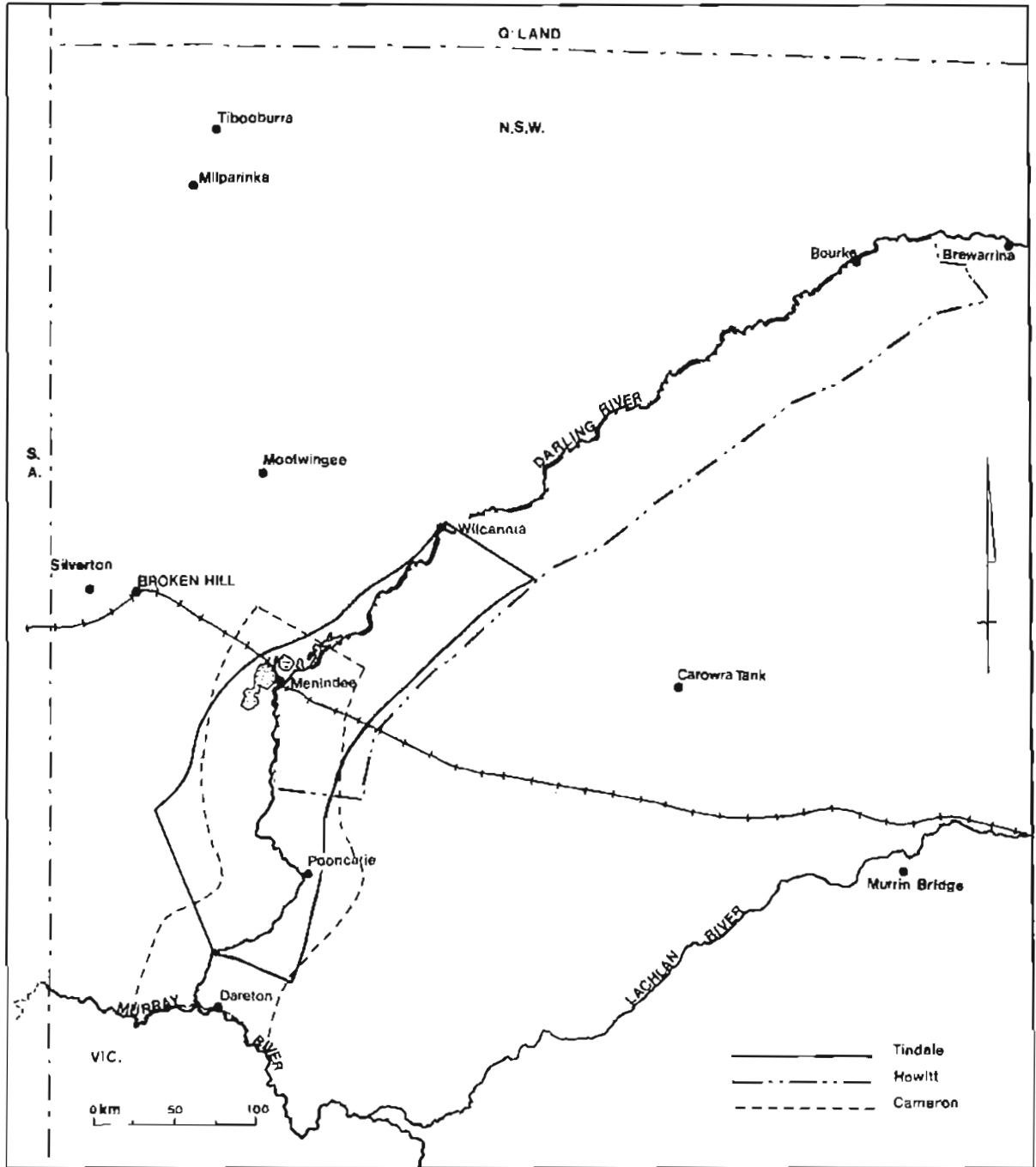
In the research area the dominant tribal orientation is Bakandji⁴ although a number of Aborigines in the Menindee community consider themselves, and the community generally, to be Nyampa.⁵ Other noticeable influences are traceable to the Wonggumarra and Maliangaba,⁶ originally from further north and west, and to others from more distant parts of NSW, Queensland and South Australia. Newland (1889), considered Darling River 'blacks' generally to be 'Parkengees', from 'Parka', the local word for river, and Bonney (1883:1) wrote of the 'Parkungi...by the river above and below Wilcannia'. Cameron (1885:346) places the 'Barkinji' from about the junction of the Darling with the Murray as far upstream 'at least as Menindee, and east and west of the river for perhaps a mean breath of eighty miles' (see Figure 6.3). The adjoining area to the east was that of the 'Wonghibon' or 'Ngemba' who were to make up the majority of the original Menindee Mission Station following their removal from Carowra Tank. According to Howitt (1904), the 'Barkindji' occupied the south-eastern side of the Darling River, between its junction with the Bogan and a point about half-way between Menindee and Pooncarie, and extending about 50 miles distant from the river. Tindale (1974) places them on both sides of the Darling from near Wilcannia to a point between Pooncarie and the junction with the

⁴ The spelling Bakandji is that most commonly used in the contemporary community. Variations include Barkindji, Bakanji, Bakandi, Bagandji, Bagunji, Parkengee, Parkundji and Paakantji.

⁵ Alternately Ngemba, Ngiyampaa, Ngiamba, Ngaiamba, Gai-Amba and others. This identification does not represent a traditional or historic association with the Menindee area prior to the establishment of the mission station in 1933. Although difficult to measure accurately, indications are that a significant number, possibly a majority, of Menindee Aborigines are in fact descendants of Bakandji people. However, because the dominant political figures identify themselves as Nyampa the community is similarly identified. This has been a continuing, if usually subdued, cause of resentment and antagonism within the community.

⁶ There has been a suggested association of the socio-spatial division of the Wilcannia community with the three tribal groups of Bakandji, Nyampa and Maliangaba people. The evidence is inconclusive.

Figure 6.3: Assumed Bakandji boundaries



Murray. The Ngemba he places on the south-eastern side of the river from near Brewarrina to Louth.

There is little available history of the Far West prior to European settlement. In that recorded by non-Aboriginal people after settlement the Aborigines are given scant attention. The first record of contact between Europeans and Aborigines in the Bakandji neighbourhood was that of the exploration party led by Major Thomas Mitchell in 1835. Mitchell's impression was of a hostile group, and members of his party became involved in an incident in which at least two of the Bakandji were killed. A member of Sturt's later expedition, who was acquainted with both Mitchell's version of the incident and that told by Bakandji Aborigines⁷ wrote:

Mitchell's account of these tribes was that they were "fire eaters", the fact is he used them badly, and he had cause to dread them - so much so that had he proceeded further down the river, instead of turning back when he did, he would have never returned (Brock 1975:43).

When Captain Charles Sturt travelled through the area in 1844 he encountered significant numbers of Aborigines in the region of where the town of Menindee now stands. Encountering one group, recorded as numbering 66, he commented: 'These people could not have shewn a greater mark of confidence in us than by this visit' (Sturt 1965, vol.1:137). It is evident that Sturt was more considerate - and more cautious - with the Aborigines and encountered no real difficulties with them. In fact he acknowledges the considerable assistance they rendered to him and to his party:

There can be no doubt but that the Australian aboriginal is strongly susceptible to kindness as has been abundantly proved to

⁷ One young Aboriginal named Topar, who accompanied Sturt when he left the river to head north-west, had, as a boy of eight, witnessed the killing of an Aboriginal woman and child by members of Mitchell's party. He showed Sturt and his men where the incident had taken place and pointed out the tree within which were still lodged the balls fired at the woman's husband.

me and to the influence of such feeling I owe my life (Sturt 1965, vol.1:140).

Following the explorers and, after them, the overlanders, settlers in the 1850s pushed up the Darling River from the Murray districts and down from the Bourke district. A head station was established at Tintinallogy, on the river a few miles above Menindee, but this was abandoned in 1852 following clashes with the Bakandji (Hardy 1969:68-69). However, by 1863 open resistance had been nullified and settlers were spreading rapidly over the former Aboriginal lands.

One of the early European settlers in the area, and one of the few who recorded the period, was Frederic Bonney who, between the years 1865 and 1890, had 'the opportunity of knowing the aborigines...before they were spoilt by civilisation' (Bonney 1883:1). Estimating the Aboriginal population of the area at the time Europeans first settled in it, he considered it would not have averaged more than 100 on an area of 2000 square miles in any part of the territory:

The country, in its natural state, could not support a large population, being subject to protracted droughts, during which both food and water must have been scarce⁸(2).

Another contemporary source (Toulon, quoted in Cowlshaw 1988a:18) estimated the Bakandji, occupying 100 miles of the Darling River, numbered 3000 before European intrusion in 1845. This had fallen to 1000 by 1863 and to 80 by 1884.

An epidemic, around 1850, is reported by Bonney as having killed about one third of the Aborigines, no doubt adding to the devastation being wrought by settlement. He wrote prophetically of the 'sad end' to which the Aborigines come 'as civilisation creeps towards them':

8

Although he was influenced by the apparent desolation of much of the area during periods of drought, Bonney may well have underestimated the Aborigines' ability to survive in an arid environment.

The country having been occupied by Europeans and laid out in runs stocked with sheep and cattle, the habits of the aborigines have much changed; this probably is the cause of the rapid decrease in their numbers by death...Before long the only representatives of these tribes will be some living about settler's homes and townships in a half-civilised state (1883:2).

Bonney's prediction indicates an awareness that became also a part of official thinking and influenced subsequent Aboriginal policy. It was obvious that a situation existed that demanded some form of control if the remnants of the Aboriginal population were to survive.

6.4 Policies And Practices In Aboriginal Control In NSW

The history of Aboriginal control in NSW is the history of both the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society and of the creation of the contemporary communities. It is a history in which 'protection' and 'welfare' were the operative words underlying policies designed to place Aborigines where they could best be looked after with regard to their survival, but without consideration of their own preferences. Aborigines could not be allowed to make their own decisions; the assumed responsibility made them 'Government Property'.⁹ To a large extent the protection of Aborigines was a policy forced on the state by the actions and demands of settlers who found themselves in conflict with the people whose lands they had expropriated.

At the time the Far West was experiencing the first wave of settlement, Aborigines and settlers in the north-east of the state were in what was described as a state of warfare. In an official letter to the Colonial Secretary in 1852, the Commandant of the Native Police spoke of settlers' concerns about their rights to shoot 'Blacks' and of their belief that the Native Police had been formed to do this. There was an

⁹ The term has been used by Aborigines themselves, and was taken as the title for a series of radio programmes on the Darling River people made in 1984 by Ros Bowden for the ABC.

attitude that it was necessary, and a duty of Government 'to evince a certain amount of vindictiveness against the Blacks'. Some settlers believed 'that a system of warfare ought to be authorised by Government'. The letter instanced one district where, it claimed, 'after nine years' warfare, the Blacks were as far from subdued as ever', but the Commandant acknowledged the fact of dispossession in the generation of Aboriginal intransigence:

...the Blacks...were in a manner outlawed in their own country, being hunted from the river and creek frontages, and thus deprived of means of lawfully obtaining food. Driven to desperation, they carried on a constant war of retaliation with the Whites, and lived solely on cattle (*NSW LC Journal*, vol.1 1852).

Although such conflict was repeated in one form or another in other parts of the State, in the long term, Aborigines could not hope to succeed. Their defeat and subjugation became the basis upon which were founded the contemporary issues confronting Aborigines in Australian society.

Because of the deteriorating conditions of the NSW Aborigines the state government in 1881 appointed a Protector of Aborigines who was accommodated in the Chief Secretary's Department. A few hundred pounds were placed at his disposal for distribution as necessary aid where needed. This was the commencement of the policy of protection, in practice a form of segregation and paternalistic control, at least until such time as individual Aborigines could be considered to be fit for citizenship. Segregation was justified on the grounds that Aborigines needed special treatment to prepare them to live in white society. But at the same time they needed protection from what were considered the 'evils' of white society to which they might become victims.

• Protection replaced the unofficial practices of ignorance and neglect and led to the institutionalisation of the dependency which had begun

with the appropriation of Aboriginal land, and would eventually characterise Aboriginal mission and reserve life in the state. With this policy began the final stage in the destruction of Aboriginal tribal and cultural integrity, and its replacement by alienation and apathy as Aborigines lost control of their environments and, as a result of this, lost also much of their initiative and self-esteem.

In 1882, the Inspector-General of Police and a Member of the Legislative Council conducted an inquiry into the workings of the two Aboriginal mission stations at Warangesda and Maloga. These stations had been established by concerned white individuals and supported by the Aborigines Progress Association (APA), an organisation formed by a group of concerned and influential men in Sydney. The inquiry resulted in the decision by the Government to appoint a Board of Protection, which was gazetted in 1883. In its 1883-84 report, the Board recommended a Bill which, among other objectives, would vest in a Minister or a Board:

the custody and control of aborigines of all ages and sexes (with certain exemptions...) in like manner as a parent has the right to the control and custody of his children of tender years (*APB* 1884:2).

The APB functioned without statutory power until 1909, when the Aborigines Protection Act was passed. In addition to specifying the powers and duties of the Board in respect of reserves set aside for Aborigines, the Act was a document of control. As detailed in the Public Service Board report, it

places certain restrictions upon the movements of Aborigines; prohibits the sale of liquor to aborigines; provides for the apprenticeship of aborigines and their subsequent control; permits of the regulation of the employment of aborigines generally; provides for the medical examination and treatment of aborigines (*PSB*. 1940:8).

Throughout this period the chairmanship of the Board was in the hands of the Inspector-General of Police, other members being Members of the

Legislative Council or private citizens. Local committees set up after 1909 were not a success, their inability to function expeditiously leading to long delays in administration (*NSW PP*. vol.5, 1967-68). The committees were abandoned in 1915 and two Inspectors of Aborigines appointed. Until 1916, the Board comprised the chairman and eleven members, but was reconstituted in that year by a board comprising the Under Secretary, Chief Secretary's Department, the Director-General of Public Health, the Chief Inspector of Schools, a Member of the Legislative Assembly and the ex President of the State Children's Relief Department.

According to its 1883 report, the APB believed Aborigines would be better served by being separated from the white community and isolated in small - and, no doubt, easily handled - communities:

Except for the necessity of their children receiving some education and discipline, the Aborigines are, as a rule, in a far better condition when living in small communities, comparatively isolated, and removed from intimate contact with Europeans, than when concentrated in large camps (*APB* 1883:3).

It also considered Aboriginal children, where 'decently clad and sufficiently fed', should be admitted to public schools, but this should not be enforced where 'a variety of circumstances might make this undesirable'.

Following a period of considerable dissatisfaction with, and complaints about, the APB (still called by many older Aborigines the 'Aboriginal Persecution Board') a Select Committee was appointed in 1937 to inquire into its administration. By this time it was obvious that the policies it sought to administer had failed. Moreover, there was no common ground among those who would influence the shape of future policy. During debate on the motion to set up the Select Committee, members expressed attitudes covering a wide range of proposed policy directions.

In moving the motion, the Member for Cobar, in whose electorate a number of Aboriginal communities existed in deplorable conditions, expounded the principle of a 'fair go' and 'equality', of a new deal for Aborigines:

The time has come when the Government should consider whether it is prepared to look after the remaining members of this fast-disappearing race...The aborigines have had their conditions interfered with too much by white people. I think it would be better if they were allowed more freedom than has been extended to them in the past...Whatever is done, some better method than exists to-day for the protection of aborigines is needed. Socially, politically and economically they are entitled to equal rights with the white people of the State (*NSW PD.* vol.152, 1937-38: 1510).

A party colleague saw the problem more in terms of a people who were facing extinction and who should be left alone in their remaining years:

...I believe we are giving too much civilisation to the aborigines. I honestly believe that if we had left the aborigines in their native state there would have been many more of them in NSW today, and the pampering that has been referred to is to some extent, a violation of their nature...in ten or twenty years' time not one full-blooded blackfellow will be left in New South Wales, and in fifty years time, except in the uncivilised parts of Central Australia and in the Northern Territory, no blacks at all will survive...the black race will gradually become extinct (*NSW PD.* vol.152, 1937-38:1510).

A Government member, who was also a member of the APB, claimed he was trying to take the middle ground. Aborigines, he believed, needed to be raised to a level from which they could advance to citizenship. They had to be helped out of the 'dirt and squalor' in which they were living before they could be ready for the benefits and obligations of equality; they had to be helped to help themselves:

It is the aim of the board, to try to make the lot of these people better and to instill into them the idea of personal effort so that they themselves will have some pride in their surroundings, and some pride in their homes, so that they will not merely be the recipients of charity...That is what the board wishes to instill into them so that they will be citizens worthy of the name (1514).

In each case what is considered is a subjective assessment of Aboriginal needs. There is no indication of consultation to determine Aboriginal

wants, and the overall impression is of the continuation and reinforcement of dependency.

After holding a number of meetings, the Select Committee lapsed without presenting a report. The Government then requested the Public Service Board (PSB) to investigate all aspects of the Protection Board's administration and furnish a report and recommendations for the government's consideration (*PSB Report*, 1940). In the subsequent report, which was the basis of the *Aboriginal Protection (Amendment) Act, 1940*, the PSB outlined the action that had to be taken by the Protection Board to 'ensure the assimilation of Aborigines into the general economic and social life of the community'. However desirable this might be, the Board warned of the outstanding difficulties that had to be contended with in the antipathy of the fully white population, which was evidenced by:

...agitations from time to time against the admission of aborigine children to the ordinary public schools; by the difficulties said to have been experienced, and agitations...in connection with the admission of aborigines to public hospitals; by the lack of interest shown by the general public generally in assisting in their uplift (*PSB* 1940:21).

It recommended the reconstitution of the APB, the reorganisation of staffing arrangements on the mission stations and the incorporation of a policy which would result in the assimilation of Aborigines into the general and social life of the general community. In dealing with the question of citizen rights for Aborigines, the principal demand being made by the embryonic Aboriginal political movement, the report considered that the majority of Aborigines, as defined in the Act, had all citizen rights apart from a few exceptions. These included being denied the right to exercise the franchise in federal elections, being prohibited from obtaining liquor, from receiving maternity allowance or old-age or invalid pensions, from receiving relief work from the state

government, from receiving family endowment in cash and by way of 'certain restrictions (which) may be imposed on aborigines in accord with the provisions of the Act' (*PSB* 1940:20). Whatever it saw as the failings of the Protection Board, the PSB report recommended what was virtually a continuation of a policy based on what it considered proper education and training of Aborigines and adequate supervision and control by persons best qualified to provide such education and training. But the report noted the general air of apathy among residents of Aboriginal stations, and warned:

Any administration must fail...until general antipathy to the aborigines [of the white population] has been overcome, the inferiority of the aborigines has been removed, and proper means of education and training have been involved (*PSB* 1940:21).

After functioning for 28 years the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB), which replaced the APB, was abolished following the report from a joint committee of the Parliament in 1967. This Committee recommended the abolition of the AWB and its replacement by a Director of Aboriginal Affairs to work with an Aboriginal Advisory Council. It supported the assimilation policy of the AWB which had been accepted by all states and by the Commonwealth in July 1965. AWB supervision of mission stations, reserves and town settlements throughout the state ceased at a time when changing circumstances were combining to present Aborigines with an opportunity to exert some influence on the shape and direction of their social and political existence.

In the Far West, the Aboriginal population had undergone the experience of severe physical and social dislocation. This was followed by a degree of consolidation into what was to be the basis of the contemporary communities. The history of their structural development during the twentieth century reflects the influences of both mission and reserve, of the policies and practices of governments and their

administrative agents and of the reception of the Aboriginal groups by the local, non-Aboriginal populations.

6.5 The Study Area Population

European settlement of the Far West had been virtually completed by 1880 (Hardy 1976) and Aboriginal communities were mostly confined to town or station camps. A report of the Protector of Aborigines providing details of communities to 31 December, 1882, includes data of Aboriginal populations in the general research area (see Figure 6.2, Table 6.1). Although a number of the centres no longer have significant populations - for example, Mt Gipps, which was close to the site where the mining centre of Broken Hill was later established, Milparinka and Tibooburra - they were at that time major areas of Aboriginal concentration, and, with Wilcannia, accounted for the majority of Aborigines in the district. An attached appendix provides details of the conditions under which the communities lived. Apart from Wilcannia, where it was claimed the Aborigines were not in need 'this year', the communities were considered as requiring assistance, with Tibooburra's being 'in a wretched condition.' In no case was education provided, and medical attention was stated as being provided by 'the Aborigines', by 'themselves' or as being 'seldom needed'. Of Wilcannia, the report noted that, 'The natives are getting less each year, especially where more civilized; probably through exposure when they are intoxicated' (*NSW LC Journal*. vol. 34, Part 2, 1883).

Concern about the living conditions of Aborigines, and of the effect these had on adjacent white populations, led to the removal and attempted resettlement of whole communities in the Western District in the period from the 1920s until 1949. A ration station had been set up in 1923 at Carowra Tank, the site of the only permanent water in this

area, and on the border between the 'beats'¹⁰ of two groups of Nyampa people, the Keewong and Trida mobs. These mobs were named after respective stations which had become established in the territory of the groups. Aborigines became increasingly dependent on the Carowra Tank station as the collection point for the government rations.

In the drought year of 1923 the Trida Aborigines were forced into Carowra Tank for survival and by 1926 a permanent APB Mission station had been established there. Following this, other mobs were coerced into moving there. Although this appears to have institutionalised a movement already taking place among Keewong and Trida people it also affected people from around Marfield and Neckarbo. These latter groups had originally come from much further west and their inclusion in the Carowra Tank population appears to have been an unwanted and unwelcomed association:

I reckon they ruined the people, putting them all together. Before that they battled alright, although I don't suppose they'd've survived because there'd been no rain (Kennedy and Donaldson 1982:15)

Enforced resettlement was also the policy adopted in relation to Aboriginal people in other parts of western NSW. In the early 1930s, a large concentration of Aborigines in Tibooburra, an isolated Far West town that had a short-lived boom following the discovery of gold there in the 1880s, led to friction with the white population and, in 1934 the admission of Aboriginal children to the public school was queried (Hardy 1976:219-221; Beckett 1978:20). A petition was taken up in 1935 requesting the removal of the Aboriginal children from the school. The petition was successful and the school master was instructed by the Minister for Education to deny attendance to all children considered to

¹⁰ The term is used to describe the more or less regular mobility patterns of Aboriginal groups (see e.g. Beckett 1965a).

be Aboriginal. This he did, but his identification of Aboriginal children included a number who appeared to be Aboriginal but whose parents had signed the petition. A subsequent meeting of parents asked for the readmission of all children until the Protection Board could provide alternative facilities (Beckett 1978:21).

The Tibooburra Aboriginal population, with very few exceptions, was forcibly removed 300 miles east to the Brewarrina station¹¹ in April 1938. A few families who managed to miss the mass transfer moved away from the district, some wandering into South Australia and into the small township of Silverton, a few miles from Broken Hill. Although the Brewarrina station was to continue to have an extremely bad reputation among Aborigines and concerned non-Aborigines, few of the Aborigines returned to Tibooburra. Many left Brewarrina and drifted along the Darling River, their influence being particularly apparent within the contemporary Wilcannia community.

6.6 Menindee Mission Station

A few years earlier than the Tibooburra exodus, the 30 Aborigines camped at Pooncarie were moved to Menindee where they were added to a number of local and Wilcannia people and to the entire population of the Carowra Tank station. A critical water shortage at Carowra Tank in 1933 had forced the Welfare Board to take urgent action, and the selection of a site at Menindee under such conditions did not allow for the preparation necessary for reasonable living conditions. Aborigines who were part of the contingents moved to Menindee tell of being dumped with their few

¹¹ In its 1940 report on the enquiry into Aborigines, the PSB lists the Tibooburra Aboriginal population as 148. However, as a figure of 8 is given later in the report, the first is assumed to refer to the pre-exodus population.

possessions on the sand hills and left to make whatever shelter they could:

They treated us like stock. We were just dumped there, like a lot of dogs. There was no huts or anything there, we just slept on the ground or made a bit of shelter with what we could find (Tape 85 B9).

Of the River people who had been added to those from Carowra Tank, the Aboriginal political figure William Ferguson alleged:

The people have been gathered in from the surrounding bush where they were living in freedom and comparative happiness, and the fear of the protector apparently forces them to stay on the settlement against their will to fret and die of neglect and semi-starvation (*Select Committee on Administration of Aborigines Protection Board*, Minutes of Evidence, Dec.2,1937:57).

Commenting in parliament on the move, the local Member spoke of the Aborigines being 'bundled' down to Menindee and placed in accommodation 'unfit for anyone':

...they were dumped in a place such as Menindee where the temperatures reaches [sic] to 110 or 112 degrees in the shade and asked to live in tin huts like sardines in a tin. It is no wonder that they are a rapidly diminishing race (*NSW PD*. vol.152, 2nd Series, 1937-38 :1497).

In response, a member of the APB contrasted their condition at Carowra tank where they were settled on 40 acres, with the Menindee site of 1000 acres situated on the banks of the river. 'It was an excellent place for them' he claimed, adding the patronising and paternalistic observation that seemed to characterise the attitude of the APB, 'they could disport themselves on the river bank' (1504).

Following what is still referred to by Aborigines as 'The Move', the Menindee mission station population was comprised of people from Carowra Tank, from the camp at Menindee itself and from Wilcannia and Pooncarie. When it was claimed that the Darling River Aborigines had come voluntarily and had wished to take up residence at the station, Ferguson alleged that, in the case of the Pooncarie people, 'They were asked to

leave, they were told that they would not get any more rations until they moved' (*Select Committee* 1937:63). He claimed that the Aborigines were dissatisfied and were gradually going away, many back to Carowra Tank.

Apart from the generally unsatisfactory conditions of housing and food, two principal areas of concern and tension arose from the composition of the station's population and from its site. In the composition of the station's population, the Board has overwhelmed the Bakindji people of the river with the numerically superior Wongaibon or Nyampa, and evidence of former inmates indicates that while there was no open conflict, the groups remained apart. Language and differences in their way of life separated the groups and added a deal of suspicion. One woman who had been in the move from Carowra Tank reflected that, 'Only lot we were frightened of was the Darling [River] mob, supposed to have been a mob of clever people' (Kennedy and Donaldson 1982:17). A non-Aboriginal observation is provided by the station manager's wife who had come with the Aborigines from Carowra Tank:

Of course, we have two tribes there, and they do not mix. They do not blend too well...They do not quarrel, but they do not mix (*Select Committee* 1937:104).

One Aboriginal, interviewed during the study, had been sent to Menindee from Kinsela Boys Home. He told of being met on arrival by an old Aboriginal and instructed on who he could associate with and who he had to avoid. Although having no traditional connection with any Aborigines at the station, he was 'adopted' into one group and isolated from the other.

If the social composition of the station was a matter of concern the geographical location was even more of a problem. Bones found in the vicinity of the station convinced the Aborigines they were camped on an

Aboriginal burial ground and the large number of deaths reported was attributed to this. According to Ferguson's evidence:

[Bones] are all over the place. We know that bone dust is a dangerous poison. The bones are there in hundreds, and the dust is continually floating about, and it is that that is hastening the death of the inmates...The sand has blown away and the skeletons are lying about there right against the station (*Select Committee* 1937:60).

In later evidence the station manager's wife, a trained nurse, said, 'They find a few bones, and the superstition arises that the dust from them makes the people sick' (*Select Committee* 1937:105). Board officials who had been responsible for the selection of the site denied at the time that Aborigines had not been consulted; however, the lack of consultation was later acknowledged by the person who had been Colonial Secretary at the time (*NSW PD*. vol.6, 1942-43:1612).

Ferguson claimed the conditions of the children at Menindee were the worst of any station he had visited, and official reports are generally critical of the station. The PSB report in 1940 said of Menindee:

...this is one of the Board's most unsatisfactory Stations, from the point of view of position and facilities...it has been decided to close the Station at the earliest possible date (*PSB* 1940:2).

The Welfare Board itself was no less critical of the conditions of the Aborigines:

At Menindee the aborigines are existing under unsatisfactory conditions, and steps are being taken in an endeavour to move the station to a better location in a less remote district (*AWB* 1941:2).

The Menindee mission station continued until 1949, despite the decision made by the Board as early as 1939 that the station would be closed as soon as a better site was found. An initial population of 310 in 1933 had fallen to a reported 224 in 1939 and to 210 in 1940 (see Table 6.3). Other sources provide significantly different figures. In her evidence at the Select Committee hearings in 1938, the station manager's wife,

who had been at the station since its establishment, estimated the population at around 150, and the PSB report of 1940 publishes a figure of 151. Both a relatively heavy death rate and the movement away from the station of Aborigines appear to have contributed to the decline in population. Apart from that provided by the manager's wife, no medical attention was available at the station. There was no direct communication with the town of Menindee, about 6 miles from the station, and the nearest Doctor was 80 miles distant in Broken Hill. Protection Board figures for Aboriginal deaths at the station were refuted by Ferguson before the Select Committee. In response to the Board's claim of 6 deaths in the period from the establishment of the station until April 1937, Ferguson provided a comprehensive list of names, ages and the situations of death. The Board's figures, however, applied to deaths *on* the station, whereas Ferguson listed all deaths of the station's Aborigines, many of whom had died away from the community:

...the people that died here and in Broken Hill Hospital and in Wilcannia Hospital in just four years...is thirty-two all told of the old Corowa [*sic*] tribe, and seven of the river mob...(*Select Committee* 1937:59).

Although ample evidence exists of the unsatisfactory conditions that existed, many Aborigines reflect on their life on 'The Mission' with considerable nostalgic affection. 'We was happy there', and 'We had a good life on the old Mission' are typical of contemporary attitudes. Aborigines resented being herded onto stations, but when relocated, their resentment was much greater. One can assume their identification with a community overcoming the negative dimensions of the actual physical environment.

There is an obvious note of resentment, even bitterness, when the actual moves from stations are recalled. Reluctance to move appears to be less an attachment to the Menindee station itself than to the community, and

to the sense of helplessness in the face of bureaucratic decision-making. The trauma of dislocation overcomes the dissatisfaction with station conditions, and, in particular, the lack of consideration or consultation is a frequently expressed source of complaint. A sense of having been without control over their lives, of being in a real sense, *Government Property*, is evident in contemporary discussion. It is a factor that has a significant influence in contemporary expressions of Aboriginal political objectives. A strongly felt need for 'self-determination' is an understandable reaction to the long history of control.

Alienation, which influences much of the contemporary Aboriginal political expression, is essentially past orientated and might be traced to this era of control and direction. Aborigines talk of 'what they did to us' or, with the younger people, 'what they did to my people':

They were moving us from place to place like we was stock. It didn't seem like we was free people. But we couldn't say anything. Blackfellas couldn't say anything in them days. The white fellas had all the say (Tape:85 B9).

Some Aborigines still become distressed when relating their experience of the period. One woman who had lived on the Menindee mission station records the emotional reaction to the continuing dislocation in the metaphor of poetry:

From water-holes, caves, mountains, outstations galore,
The Government mustered my people to old Cowra Bore -
To settle them there where they never more roamed,
Housed in tin and log humpies they only knew as home.

In sadness and despair they tried to settle down,
But their hearts were heavy and in circles went round and round -
Their language confused their culture on the wane,
Then came the terrible news, moving again on account of no rain.

They packed up and moved once more on the road,
This time to the river, with a right heavy load -
With heads bowed in sorrow for a home far away,
They were pushed into cattle trucks with never a word to say.

On reaching the Darling, their gear all scattered They knew not
 comfort, nothing else mattered-
 Loved ones all broken, hearts heavy with sorrow,
 Huddled on Shamrock Hill in awe of tomorrow...
 (Philp-Carmichael 1986:15).

A sense of community, possibly associated with a temporally defined sense of place, can be seen in the frequently expressed desire to return to a former living area. Politically conscious Aborigines have organised and conducted 'culture camps' on the site of the old Menindee mission station, despite the reality that the mission station was probably a major factor in the destruction of much of what remained of their cultural heritage.

6.7 Closure Of Menindee Mission Station And The Move To Murrin Bridge

Whatever the conditions on the Menindee station, there was a reluctance on the part of its inhabitants to consider the move to a new station planned for Murrin Bridge. In its report of 1947, the AWB commented that a contract had been let and work commenced on the 'new model station'. It proposed to transfer the Menindee Aborigines when the settlement was completed, and anticipated that other Aborigines from the Central Western Plains would also take up residence:.

When all these people are rehoused, it will be possible to continue their education for citizenship, and under these better conditions, they should, in due course, show marked progress in their way of life.(AWB 1947:5)

A subsequent fall in population from a reported 234 in 1947 to 162 in the following year is said by Aborigines to have been due to people leaving the station to avoid the transfer. Many went to Wilcannia, others to Pooncarie and other centres along the river. As one Aboriginal who was part of the community described it:

Once they started talking about moving them, they started rolling their swags and walking, down Pooncarie way, Coomealla. They just

rolled up their swags and away they went. Some walked up to Wilcannia, and some crossed the river and caught the mail truck... They didn't want to go [to Murrin Bridge] (Tape:85 M11).

While the Aborigines had not been welcomed to the site near Menindee in 1933, and, in fact, white residents of the district had made representation that they should not be brought there (*NSW PD.* vol.152, 1937-38:1504), their removal to Murrin Bridge was opposed by at least one property owner. The support of the Broken Hill branch of the Labor Party was sought to protest the movement of the camp (*Western Grazier* Jan.1,1949). It is not clear whether the opposition was based on an altruistic concern for the Aborigines or from a fear of the loss of a considerably-sized pool of skilled and valued bush workers and domestic servants.

A representative of the AWB visited the river district late in 1948 in connection with the proposed movement of the Aborigines. In its report of the visit, the Wilcannia newspaper commented that the local Aborigines had decided to remain at that town, but that most of the Menindee people would leave for their new home. Free choice, it stated, had been given the Aborigines, a claim strongly denied by an Aboriginal informant:

They never consulted anyone. I can remember. All they did, they came around and told the people 'You gotta be packed by such and such a time, you be moving', and that's all the consultation they had with them. And them poor buggers, I can remember looking at them packing up and crying. They didn't want to move (Tape:85 B11).

When the Menindee Aborigines were moved for the third time in 30 years, three families remained in the vicinity of the town and, with the one family in the town itself, were to be the nucleus of the contemporary community. In subsequent years many who had left drifted back to Menindee, camping on the fringe of the town on a site of 15 acres made

available to them across the river from the town. They came from along the river and from Murrin Bridge, but it is questionable whether the sense of community was restored. Menindee became a population of families and individuals. Those camping on the outskirts of the town were gradually absorbed into a general Menindee population mix of Aborigines and non-Aborigines which characterises the population today. As Aborigines move into a general population as individuals the likelihood is of a strengthening of individuality at the cost of the sense of community.

Menindee Aborigines adapted relatively well to their non-Aboriginal influenced environment and mostly became integrated into the general community. In common with other Aborigines in a similar social situation, the price they pay for inclusion is usually the loss, or at least the dilution, of their ethnic identification. On the other hand, an unwillingness or inability of Aborigines to adapt to the environment of the general society is not, of itself, an indication of a strong and positive sense of Aboriginal identification. There are people in many communities who are reluctant to adapt, yet are at the same time apathetic in regard to their social or political identity as Aborigines.

Although many Far West Aborigines have historical connections with both Menindee and Wilcannia and would have been influenced by the collective histories of both centres, the communities have developed quite distinct and often contrasting characteristics. The probable determining factors that have shaped the individual communities can only be assumed, but need to be examined if any assessment is to be made of the community's possible future development. Whatever the background to its establishment, prospects of the Menindee community are good relative to

those of its near neighbours. In contrast, predictions of Wilcannia's future remain bleak and unpromising.

6.8 The Wilcannia Community

6.8.1 White Town - Black Camp

Wilcannia was proclaimed as a town in 1866. It had been the site of a crossing point on the Darling River since the commencement of settlement of the country to the west following the Bourke and Wills expedition in 1860. A year earlier, paddlewheel steamboats had navigated the Darling River as far north as Bourke, opening up trade with South Australia and launching a period of rapid growth and prosperity for Wilcannia as a river port and service centre for a large and expanding pastoral district. By 1883 the population had grown to 2000 and it was described as the busiest town on the Darling (Proud 1883:21).

Hardy (1976:90) states that the tribal stronghold of Wilcannia had fallen to the Jamieson Brothers of Mildura in 1856, and the reportedly 'aggressive' Barkindji people came to be part of the population of station property Aborigines. An Aboriginal town camp became a more or less permanent feature of Wilcannia in subsequent years, with almost 200 people counted in 1889 (*APB* 1890).¹² At the turn of the century the reported Aboriginal population was only 20, but by 1928 it had grown to such an extent that the town council sought the establishment of a Protection Board station to house and supervise them. The Board declined the request, pointing out that the Carowra Tank station was available to any Wilcannia Aborigines who wished to go there (*Western Grazier* August 11, 1928). Attempts were made to have the Aborigines

¹² Available records display variations in the Aboriginal populations of the Far West as counted by the Aborigines protection Board on the one hand and the police patrol records on the other. The latter are often significantly higher.

move voluntarily to Carowra Tank, and later to Menindee and Murrin Bridge. A few made the move to Menindee but most of these appear eventually to have drifted back to Wilcannia.

The Aborigines remained in an area on the opposite side of the river to the town, their numbers fluctuating with the availability of work or with their movement around their beat. A Welfare Board description of the plight of fringe-dwelling Aborigines generally is a graphic depiction of the Wilcannia camp at the time:

On the outskirts of certain country towns throughout the State, aborigines exist in camps under unsatisfactory conditions, their dwellings usually being shacks of flattened kerosene tins and bagging...These aborigines always constitute a difficult problem to the Board for generally they resent any attempt to place them under control on Stations, and prefer to live under sordid conditions, whilst enjoying the proximity to the town and its amenities (**AWB** 1941:3).

6.8.2 Attitudes Influencing The Social Environment

Early histories of Wilcannia mostly ignore its Aboriginal population prior to the 1940s, and after that it is invariably mentioned only in the context of its unwelcomed presence. Oral reports indicate a tolerant attitude on the part of the non-Aboriginal community as long as the Aborigines did not intrude into their social and physical environments:

...they were docile people [but] they would thief anything they could get...I wouldn't say [the town's people] didn't resent them; they tolerated them. They discarded them if they were doing anything they didn't approve of. They were very restricted to their camps along the river and the mission when it came (Tape:88 W12).

They were kept in line by the elder ones; the elder ones were there and they were the bosses of the people...it isn't like that now. You only had to tell them you would tell the elders if they did something...if they were boisterous or didn't pay attention. And people did tell the elders and they were straightened out (Tape:88 W9).

One former resident who had left the town in 1939 was unimpressed by what she saw on her return many years later. In particular, the lack of segregation was disturbing. In 'the old days' the Aborigines had kept to themselves. It was better that way, she declared, 'they were accepted and would go their own way'; but things had changed:

[Now] you look over and you don't see a darky on the river bank, but you look around and you see them sitting around in the middle of the street. They perhaps might go back to their humpies in the night time but they more or less seem to be more in the street. And you recall when you see them there, and you look and you see the generation of now, and you don't see the old elders ... They're a different type now (Tape:88 A1).

In 1942, representations were made on behalf of the Wilcannia Parents and Citizens Association requesting the provision of a separate school for Aboriginal children. Following the denial of the request by the Minister for Education, who pointed out that only 11 Aboriginal children had, in fact, enrolled in the town's school, an unattributed article in the local newspaper sought to express the attitude of Wilcannia's general community. Denying any desire on the part of the Wilcannia residents to oust the Aboriginal children from proper educational facilities, the writer claimed the problem was due to a lack of understanding of the facts by the Education Department. In a mistaken policy, said the writer, an Aboriginal child was given the same education as a white child, but when he left school would not have the same employment opportunity as the white. 'He would return to an environment from which a benign Department had, by means of education, raised him'. The implication inherent in such an attitude is that Aborigines should not have their expectations raised; that inappropriate education helps perpetuate the dependency considered by many non-Aborigines to be the principal cause of the Aborigines lack of progress:

Afterwards, some other Department will take him under its wing to ensure he doesn't starve and in order that a country, through the

Aborigine Welfare Board, can salve its conscience with a few blankets and an issue of clothing and food (*Western Grazier* April 17, 1942)

Wilcannia's non-Aborigines have a history of opposition to the inclusion of Aborigines in the use of the town's facilities on an equal basis. It had long been demanded that provision for Aboriginal needs be made separate from those of the non-Aboriginal community, as had happened with the local hospital and was sought with the public school. Paradoxically, the provision of separate services for Aborigines was frequently attacked in the community because it was seen to be relieving Aboriginal people of the need for self-help:

Every honest citizen can see the disastrous effect the suffocating, mollycoddling policy of the Aborigine Welfare Board is having upon the aborigine. The system of providing without asking the recipient to help in the provision, has that derogatory effect that will eventually bring our natives to pitiful, useless dole-men of Australia (*Western Grazier* April 17, 1942).

6.8.3 The Aboriginal Reserve

Attempts to have the Wilcannia Aborigines move voluntarily or to have them moved by government action failed, and they continued to live opposite the town in conditions that were an affront to the non-Aborigines and an embarrassment to government administrations. The Wilcannia camp is listed as a reserve for the first time in the Welfare Board's report of 1943, when 140 Aborigines were said to occupy an area of 100 acres. By 1952 the reserve population, on a reduced area of 75 acres, had grown to 239, the largest in the state.

Conditions on the reserve gained national attention in 1948 when a Methodist clergyman wrote to regional and Sydney newspapers. In the letter he drew attention to what he considered to be the heartbreaking and tragic neglect of Australia's original inhabitants and their descendants. Of the local community he said:

The reserve at Wilcannia is uncared for, entirely without control or oversight. The people come, they live in half made huts made from old tins and possibly ten to twelve people shelter in this one roomed shanty, more often than not sleeping upon the bare ground...There is a complete lack of ethics and morality (*SMH* June 29,1948; *BDT* June 30, 1948).

Reacting to the publicity created by the letter, the Wilcannia council requested a visit by the Chief Health Inspector of the Broken Hill City Council. In his subsequent report the Health Inspector endorsed the remarks of the clergyman whom, he said, had not gone far enough 'in his castigation of those responsible for the case of the people in the Reserve'. Of the attitude of the non-Aborigines, he claimed:

The main contention of the people at Wilcannia is that the Reserve should be closed and the natives removed to a more distant part. This would relieve the dangers of disease to some extent from Wilcannia, but unless provisions are made for better housing and care of the Aborigines the same conditions will continue (*Western Grazier* July 2,1948).

Awareness of the conditions at the reserve, the continuing bad publicity these created and the representations of the local Member, who had become a member of the AWB, eventually succeeded in securing an undertaking to erect housing for the Aborigines. This had been proposed as early as 1944, but nothing was to eventuate until 14 cottages, which came to be known as the Mission houses¹³, were completed and occupied in 1954. In planning for the promised housing, the Board had considered building on a site nearer to, and on the same side of the river as, the town. This proposal met with considerable opposition from non-Aboriginal residents of Wilcannia, and a delegation headed by the Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy made representations to the government that Aboriginal housing be provided on the other side of the river (*Western Grazier* March 24, 1950; Beckett 1958:261). In

¹³ Although the Aboriginal residential area on the eastern side of the river was, and is, known as 'The Mission', no mission station was established at Wilcannia. The name originated from the association with an adjacent Catholic Mission School.

accepting this point of view, the government retained the long standing physical barrier between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Eventually the cottages were sited well away from the town and occupied by selected families.

6.8.4 The 'Mallee'

Despite the successful demands to restrict Aboriginal housing to the south eastern-side of the river, by the time the cottages had been completed the barrier had been breached and Aborigines had moved to the north-western, or town, side. When floodwaters threatened their tenuous existence on the reserve camp site in 1950, about 200 Aborigines were shifted to a site north of the town onto higher ground. Here they re-erected their makeshift dwellings and established what was to become, eventually, the Aboriginal area of the 'Mallee', a word that was to acquire pejorative connotations for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Far West.

A contemporary report of a meeting of the Wilcannia Council indicates concern for the comfort and welfare of the displaced Aborigines, tempered by an awareness of an impending problem posed by uncontrolled occupation of the area:

It was decided to act promptly with the Aborigine Protection Board to establish an encampment on the town side such encampment to be constructed on military lines with regard to discipline and sanitation (*Western Grazier* August 10, 1950).

Speaking on the plight of the Aborigines, the Mayor told the meeting he viewed the situation with apprehension because of the families and chattels scattered over a wide area, which he believed to be unsatisfactory from many angles. He was supported by an Alderman who stated that an ordinary sense of human dealing was obviously necessary, and he 'councelled [sic] the concentration of the Aborigines in a

restricted area for the purposes of discipline and sanitation' (*Western Grazier* August 10, 1950).

The temporary site was eventually to become a permanent feature of Wilcannia, although a camp was re-established on the old reserve site for a time when the floodwaters receded. Floods again in the mid-1970s brought the Aborigines back to the Mallee and this time they resolved to stay. It was the conditions on the Mallee, the obvious deterioration of the reserve cottages and the visible presence of the Aborigines who lounged about the town that were to give Wilcannia its adverse reputation in the 1960s and 1970s.

Older Aborigines who experienced the reserve conditions have varying reflections on the life. To some, the reserve was merely one of a series of camp-sites between which they were constantly moving. Others, now established in the town, blame the worst aspects on those Aborigines who would not help themselves, particularly where they were addicted to the forbidden, but invariably available, liquor. Recalled with a good deal of wry amusement, life to these was a continuing contest between them and police who sought out the secluded sites of their 'grog' parties. Lacking resources with which to confront the imposed authority, their political statement was one of defiance, an Aboriginal response that has been reported in a number of studies over a considerable period (see e.g. Beckett 1958, 1964, 1965a, 1965b; Cowlshaw 1988a; Fink 1957; Reay 1945; Wilson 1982). But many Aboriginal people retain the bitterness engendered by an awareness of being treated as a lesser form of humanity; by being made aware of the fact that they were an unwelcomed presence in Wilcannia.

6.9 The Legacy Of Dispossession And Isolation

Despite the permanence of the Wilcannia Aboriginal population and the conditions under which it existed, there is no evidence of political organisation or agitation from the time the town was established until comparatively recent times. This may be the result of apathy, or it may be a manifestation of what Friere (1972:10) called 'the culture of silence of the dispossessed'. Equally there is no indication of an authoritative leadership which might have engendered a sense of political purpose. Aborigines were conditioned to the imposed authority of non-Aboriginal society, usually represented by police, and their response to this would have made it difficult for an effective leadership to emerge in this isolated environment. In his study of the community in 1958, Beckett (1958:121) suggests the Aborigines were prepared to accept leadership and domination from Whites which they were not prepared to accept from their own.¹⁴

A legacy of this is, no doubt, the lack of an internal authority structure, other than one with a circumscribed relevance, which is a feature of the contemporary community. The vacuum created by the general withdrawal of the enforced authority, or at least by a moderation of its application as a consequence of the more enlightened attitudes and policies of the 1960s and subsequently, affects the development of the social and political cultures of the community; dependency, once established, is difficult to disperse. A newly-appointed Aboriginal Welfare Officer who arrived in Wilcannia in 1967

¹⁴ It is not suggested that Aborigines actively welcomed non-Aboriginal leadership but that divisions within the community made difficult the acceptance by all groups of any particular individuals. This is modified to some extent in relation to a few older and well-respected persons, although even here their authority is limited.

told the community the days of the hand-outs were over. Invoking a sense of pride, he outlined a policy of self-help:

[He] stated that he was prepared to help the Aboriginal if the Aboriginal was willing to take advantage of fair assistance to stand on his own feet so far as it was possible for him to do so (*Western Grazier*, May 1967).

Unfortunately, the Wilcannia Aborigines, like those in many other communities, faced a new era unprepared and ill-equipped for the political involvement demanded by new attitudes and policies.

CHAPTER 7

WILCANNIA: AN 'ABORIGINAL' TOWN

7.1 The Structure Of Community

A study of the social and political structures of the town of Wilcannia reveals a population that is divided racially, spatially and socially. It is divided between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups and, among the Aboriginal people themselves, there are further social and spatial divisions. To the extent that they can be considered collectively, the Aboriginal people form a community whose long-term exposure to racist attitudes and discriminatory local practices has reinforced a sense of alienation from the general society which could be, and at times is, the basis for political mobilisation. The extent and efficacy of this mobilisation is, however, diminished by social division, and by the overwhelming apathy and despair that is a feature of a significant proportion of the Aboriginal people. It is these negative human characteristics, together with the material conditions of existence for these people, which evoke images of Lewis' (1966) 'culture of poverty' (see Nurcombe 1976:113). The dimensions of the situation are obvious; the reasons for this less certain, although the historical and contemporary determinants of social and spatial environments, and the consequent interpretations of identity within the community must be considered as principal factors.

Together with the largest Aboriginal population in the Far West, Wilcannia also has the highest ratio of Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal

residents (see Table 7.1). If an accurate reflection of Aboriginal numbers,¹ Bureau of Statistics census data represent, in each case,

Table 7.1 Aboriginal populations in Far Western NSW

Year	Aboriginal Population	Total Population	Aboriginal % of total	Aboriginal % change
<u>Broken Hill</u>				
1976	166	27647	0.6	
1981	221	26913	0.8	+33.1
1986	333	24460	1.5	+50.7
<u>Menindee</u>				
1976	125	424	29.4	
1981	93	455	20.4	25.6
1986	127	406	30.0	+31.2
<u>Wilcannia</u>				
1976	378	1023	37.0	
1981	390	982	39.4	+3.2
1986	550	1048	52.5	+41.0

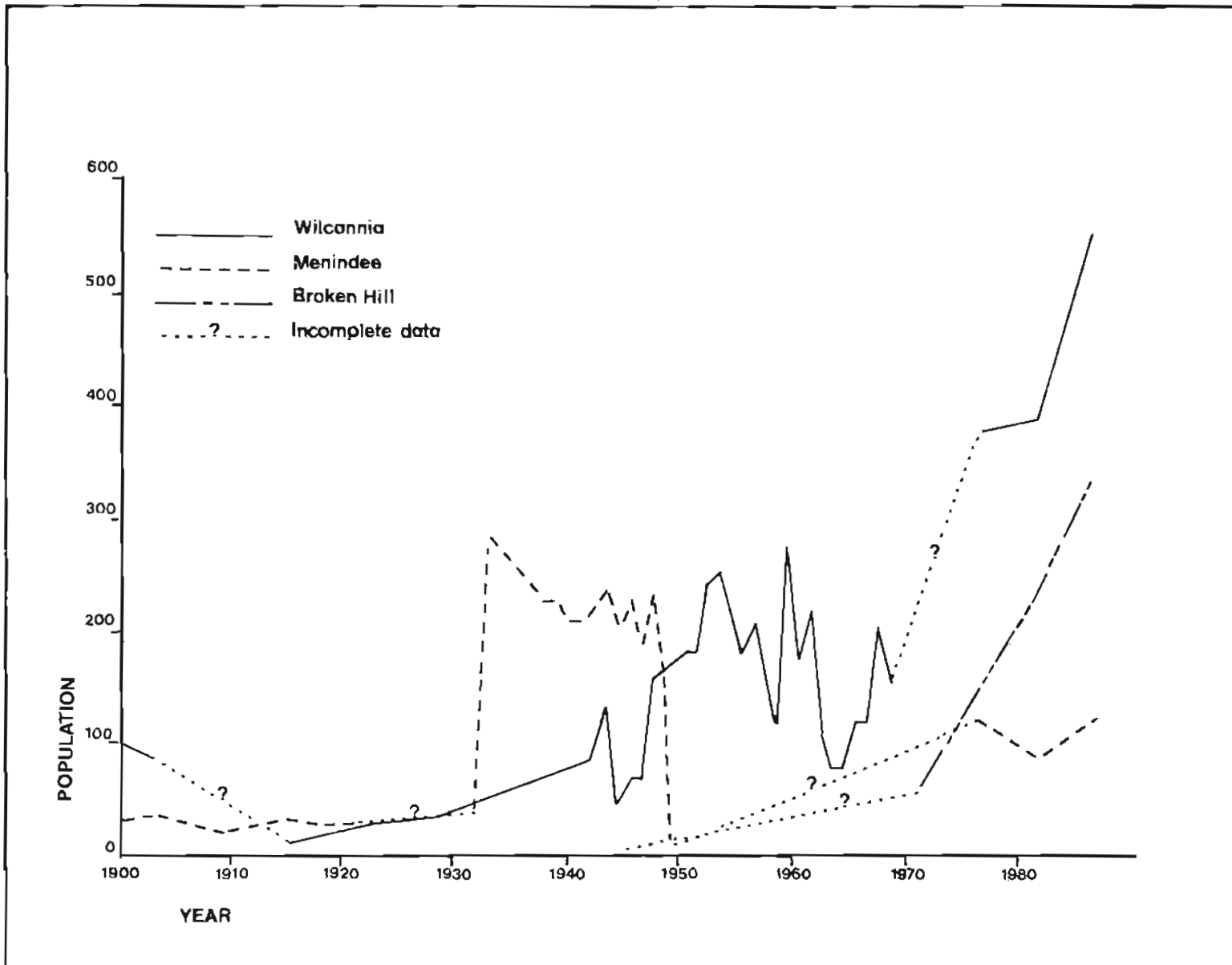
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

a significant increase either in actual population or in self-ascription of Aboriginal identity when compared with corresponding data for 1981. The Broken Hill figure of a 51 per cent increase continues a trend that has been evident since census figures have identified Aborigines as part of populations. From an insignificant base in the 1960s, Aboriginal numbers have risen sharply to their present level (see Figure 7.1). Statistical evidence is supported by research data and by the increased visibility of Aborigines in Broken Hill over this period. No such

¹ Bureau of Statistics census data are used, notwithstanding intercensal variations, questions relating to the efficacy of compilation and to the area of subjective identification.

Figure 7.1: Population graph of study communities

Source: Police Patrol Reports, Annual Reports of APB and AWB,
Bureau of Statistics



supportive evidence exists in relation to Wilcannia.² Indications are that the population of this town is relatively stable or, in fact, decreasing. There has been a drift into the town from Bourke, which may compensate to some extent for the number of Wilcannia Aborigines moving to Broken Hill over the past decade when major social problems have been a feature of the Wilcannia community. For many the move to Broken Hill has been long-term, if not permanent. For some, there is a pattern of alternate residence in the town and in the city, a situation that elicited the comment from one informant that Broken Hill was 'a dormitory suburb of Wilcannia'. The mobility of Aborigines, which sees a constant visiting pattern within a usually clearly definable area, and the question of self-identification, are continuing inhibitors of statistical accuracy. Organisations, agencies and government departmental offices cite population numbers which display significant variation from census data because of the specifics of identification.

Of the three communities included in this study, Wilcannia is the one that has had the greatest media exposure, having received considerable attention in the late 1940s and featuring frequently since then. It and its Aboriginal population have been subject to scrutiny in newspapers, magazines, in radio programmes and in several television presentations. During the past two decades the town has featured prominently - and invariably sensationally - in the national media as dimensions of extreme vandalism and violence were added to the evidence of unsatisfactory living conditions experienced by many of its population. To most residents of the region, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, it is a

² During the period 1976 - 1981, 55 per cent of the recorded Broken Hill Aboriginal population moved their residence between towns. The corresponding figure for Wilcannia is 14 per cent. Statistics for the 1981-1986 period are not directly comparable as Wilcannia is not listed separately but included as part of Central Darling Statistical Local Area.

place characterised by the worst features of an adverse Aboriginal existence: alienation and apathy, relieved by periodic outbursts of hostility and violence; institutionalised poverty through widespread unemployment and alcohol addiction; a high crime rate; poor housing; major health problems; and the hopelessness that derives from a lack of positive directions. (see Table 7.2; Figures 7.2, 7.3)

Described in 1965 as 'A black ghetto in the red desert' (*Australian*, Jan.4, 1965), in 1978 as 'A dying township ...which has a large Aboriginal population' (Gilbert, 1978:177), Wilcannia could still, in 1988, attract such media attention as that describing the 'Black days for a dying town' (*Bulletin*, November 8, 1988). It has for several decades been considered by many to reflect the extremes of Aboriginal social and economic distress. A number of interviewees involved in the provision of services to the Aboriginal community, as well as Aborigines themselves, readily declare it faces the worst situations and to have the least prospects for improvement of any Aboriginal centre in NSW. 'It's a hopeless situation; nothing you do seems to make any difference', 'There's no future there; definitely the worst problems in the state' and 'I really don't know why Wilcannia is like it is. It's different to anywhere else I've ever seen and it's not getting any better' are typical of the comments heard from Aborigines and others. On learning of her appointment to the town, a school teacher commented in a national newspaper that 'Wilcannia...had the worst reputation in the State. It's a standard joke' (*National Times*, March 2 to 8, 1980).

Wilcannia has long had an unenviable reputation, particularly since the issue of the Aboriginal condition has emerged from the background where it had long remained out of sight and largely out of consciousness of

Table 7.2 Employment of Aboriginal People 1986

Employer	Wilcannia	Menindee	Broken Hill
Australian Government	1	1	10
State Government	22	6	12
Local Government	8	-	8
Private sector	22	15	18
Unstated	-	1	2
Total employed	53	23	50

Areas of employment (percentages)

Public sector	58.5	30.4	60.0
Private sector	41.5	65.2	36.0
Unstated		4.4	4.0

Percentage of population

employed	9.6	18.8	15.0
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Occupation	Wilcannia	Menindee	Broken Hill
Managers/administrators	-	-	2
Professions	6	-	2
Para-professions	3	-	3
Trades persons	7	7	6
Clerks	9	2	10
Personal services and sales	-	2	4
Plant and machine operators	5	2	10
Labourers and associated workers	23	10	10
Inadequately described	-	-	2
Not stated	-	-	1
Total employed	53	23	50

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Figure 7.2: Crime rate, Wilcannia, Menindee and Broken Hill*

Source: NSW Police Statistician

* Figures for subsequent years not available

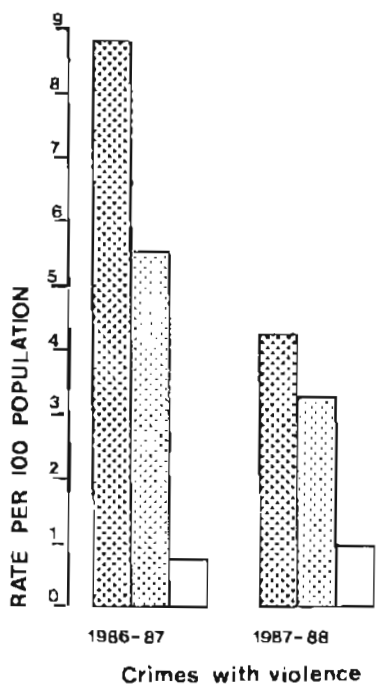
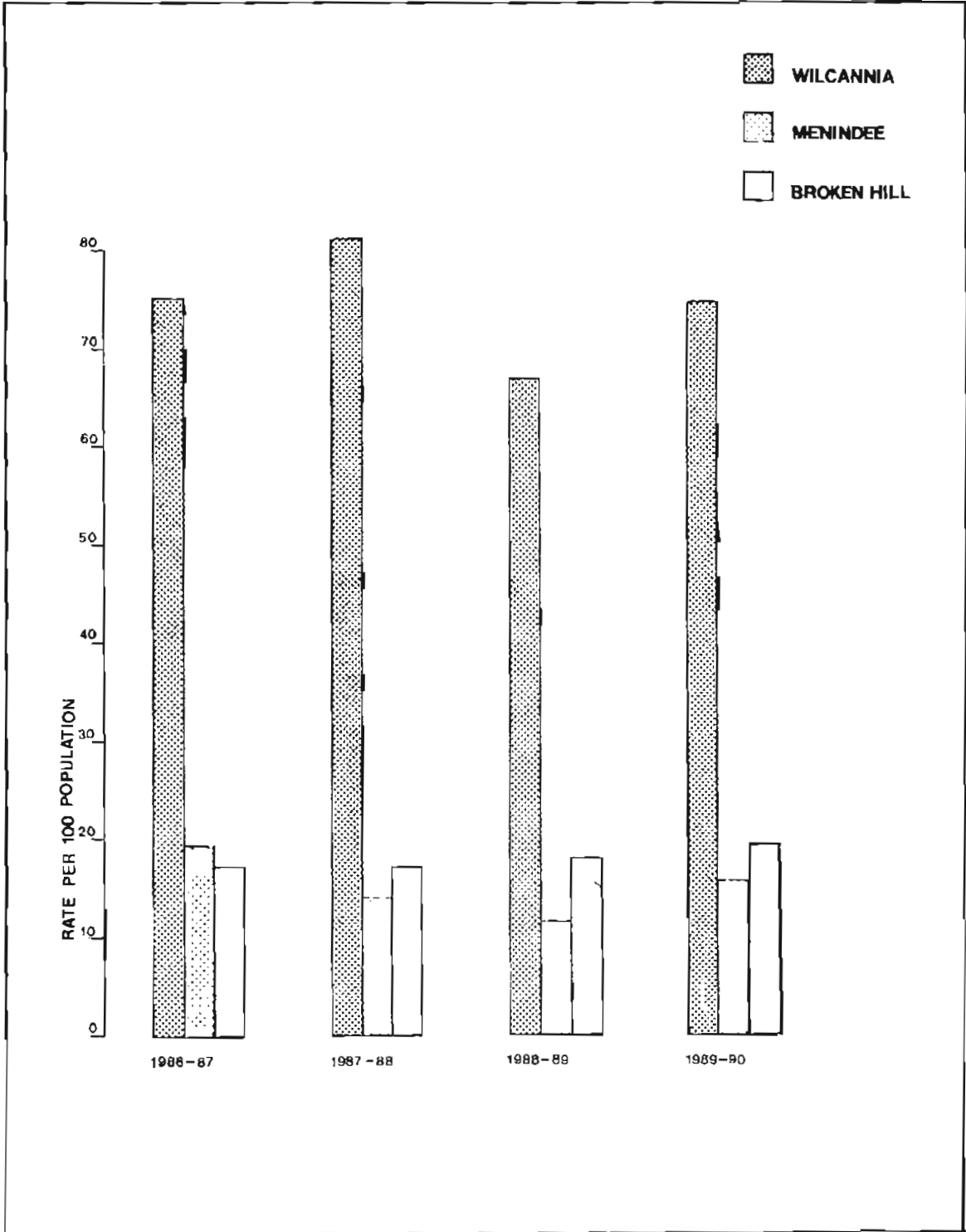


Figure 7.3: Hospital admissions, Wilcannia, Menindee* and Broken Hill

Source: Wilcannia and Broken Hill hospital statistics,
Menindee Nursing Service

* Figures for Menindee are not directly comparable with those of Wilcannia and Broken Hill. With no hospital in the town, Menindee figures represent patients conveyed to Broken Hill Hospital by Menindee Nursing Service or Broken Hill ambulances or by Flying Doctor Service aircraft. Other patients may utilise private transport and would not be represented in the data.



the local white community and the passing traveller. Prior to the changed social and political climate of the 1960s, Aborigines had been discouraged from congregating in the town. Now, with an Aboriginal residential area on both its southern and northern sides, as well as a significant number of Aboriginal residents in the town itself, the river is no longer a clearly defined, racial dividing line. Situated on the Barrier Highway which links Sydney, through Broken Hill, with South Australia and Western Australia, Wilcannia presents a depressing sight to the many travellers who pass through. The town itself, and the ever present evidence of alcohol-affected Aborigines around the hotel which is situated on the intersection of the highway and Wilcannia's main street, leave a lasting, negative impression on those who have had little or no previous contact with Aborigines. It is, visually and officially,³ an 'Aboriginal' town.

An informative commentary on the community's perceived functional and structural deficits is provided in the submission to the NSW Government's Select Committee on Aborigines in 1980. In a lengthy and comprehensive document and in comment by its presenters, Wilcannia Aboriginal people detailed the problems confronting the community and the resources needed to overcome these. An Aboriginal population of 600 was forced to live in 71 'places', many of them substandard; there was a severe alcohol problem and this was related to the lack of employment; education was deficient; Aborigines were denied access to land for hunting; sacred sites and sites of significance were not protected; and the legal system was an oppressive instrument which discriminated

³ Wilcannia was identified as an 'Aboriginal' town by the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research which bases its classification on the 1971 Census figures. Menindee was added to this classification after the 1976 Census.

against Aborigines. In regard to this last problem area a spokesman asserted that:

The law as it is does not work in Wilcannia. There are many unemployed people and a lot of police to watch everything they do...At the moment there are 12 Aboriginal men from Wilcannia in gaol...Nearly one third of the boys between the ages of 12 and 18 are in these ...homes...The magistrates, police and people from the government attack our way of life but never understand it or give us the support to control things our own way (*NSW PP.* vol.4, third session, 1980-1981 :993).

The Wilcannia submission requested funding for housing, access to land for hunting, the granting to Aborigines of areas of land, the appointment of Aboriginal teachers in areas such as language, culture and tradition and the protection of sacred sites and sites of significance. In each instance the objectives were those of the Aboriginal people as a separate component of the town's population; the division between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal was, as it had always been, obvious.

7.2 Aboriginal - Non-Aboriginal Relations

From the time of non-Aboriginal settlement of the district, the Wilcannia Aborigines were confined to a fairly rigidly enforced social and physical space. The attitudes engendered in both Aborigines and non-Aborigines by many generations of such a segregated existence cannot be eliminated in little more than two decades, whatever the expectations of a supposedly more enlightened and compassionate Australian society. As Aborigines have moved in increasing numbers into the town itself and have become the numerically superior component of its overall population, they have come to be an undeniable part of an identifiable general community rather than a parasitic adjunct to it. Yet the divisions remain; Wilcannia has not become a unified community. Little has changed since Beckett's comments in 1964 that: '[non-Aborigines]

consider 'the Abos' an unregenerately delinquent group on whom government assistance paid out of the taxpayer pocket is simply wasted' (1964:36).

In some cases divisions have been widened by a felt helplessness on the part of those who resent the encroachment of Aborigines into areas earlier denied them. Older non-Aboriginal residents who recall the time when the river was the physical barrier between the town population and the segregated Aboriginal reserve, speak of the town being 'taken over by Blacks'. They resent the challenge to their assumed sovereignty and social superiority, and the perceived threat to their sense of security. Others, many of them much younger, see little future in a town they believe is becoming increasingly an Aboriginal domain.⁴ Despite the more tolerant and enlightened attitude that underlies the expression, if not the reality, of social relationships, and despite the reiterated denial of racism as a factor in such relationships, every aspect of social and political life is structured on race or perceptions of race. Aborigines and non-Aborigines coexist in a mutually dependent but often antagonistic association. The town's economy is largely dependent on the Aboriginal welfare cheque and on the provision of services for an impoverished people. This has created a situation in which the survival of the non-Aboriginal population and the Aboriginal 'problem' are inexorably interdependent. It is reminiscent of Genovese's description of the Black-White interaction in the U.S.A. where an enforced relationships, in this instance slavery,

bound two people together in bitter antagonism while creating an organic relationship so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feelings without reference to the other (1974:3).

⁴ A persistent but unsubstantiated rumour identifies a strategy to turn Wilcannia into the first all-Aboriginal town in NSW.

The strength of the long-term antagonistic attitudes that have shaped relations in Wilcannia can be interpreted in the figures for the 1967 referendum on constitutional change. The National Government sought constitutional amendments which would give it concurrent powers with the States in Aboriginal affairs, and which would allow Aborigines to be counted in reckoning the population. Whether it is accepted that the overwhelming affirmative vote throughout Australia basically reflected widespread sympathy with Aboriginal aspirations (Nettheim 1986:71), or merely an awareness that something was seriously wrong and needed Commonwealth initiatives to remedy it (Rowley 1971a:384), the figures for Wilcannia can be interpreted as a continuing negative view of Aborigines and their needs, at least by many of the voters in that town. The Darling electorate, which included Wilcannia, Menindee and Broken Hill as well as such other centres with large Aboriginal populations as Bourke and Brewarrina, recorded a 'yes' vote of 86 per cent. In the individual centres, Broken Hill recorded a 94 per cent 'yes' vote, Menindee 76 per cent while Wilcannia had the lowest of the electorate with only 54 per cent affirming a need for Commonwealth intervention on behalf of Aborigines. (see Table 7.3)

Although now possibly less openly expressed, an antipathetic attitude has been evidenced often enough in the past for Aborigines to be affected. An awareness of this reinforces a state of marginality which is lessened only by a denial of Aboriginal identity or by the strengthening of a sense of ethnic identity. It is often stated that there is very little conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, particularly in regard to the situation in the public school. But many non-Aboriginal parents are reluctant to send their children to the local school, and within the school, the divisions, however muted, are nevertheless apparent. An Aboriginal child, writing in the local

Table 7.3. Results of 1967 Referendum in Western NSW Centres With Significant Aboriginal Populations

Centre	Yes	No	%Yes	%No
Bourke	799	392	67.1	32.9
Brewarrina	504	215	70.1	29.9
Broken Hill	12405	670	94.9	5.1
Cobar	1115	187	85.9	14.4
Condoblin	1314	398	76.8	27.2
Coonamble	1621	397	80.4	19.6
Euabalong	115	70	62.2	37.8
Ivanhoe	161	75	68.2	31.8
Menindee	233	73	76.1	23.9
Milperinka	62	26	70.5	29.5
Wilcannia	183	150	55.0	45.0
Total	26714	3743	87.7	12.3

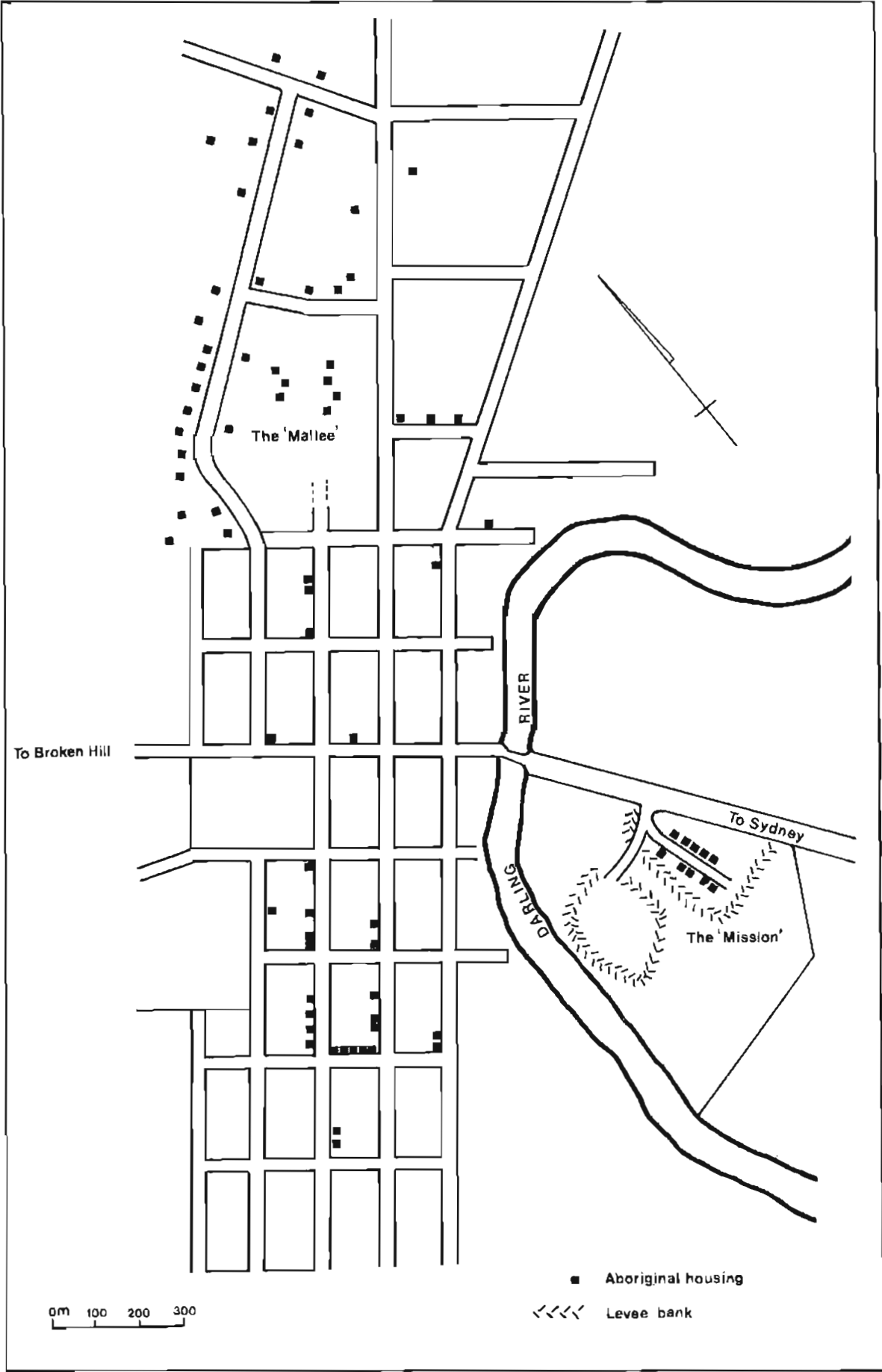
Source: Divisional Returning Officer's published figures

newsheet, reveals an awareness of this when, under the heading of, *The School I would like to See*, she comments: 'I would like a school that had kids that were not stuck up. Where black and white can mix together, not just every sports day or P.E.' (*Paddlewheel*, April 4, 1976).

7.3 Divisions Of Place, Perceptions Of Class

At a national or state level the issue of a negative perception of Aborigines by other Australians is addressed through a proposed strategy of political collectivisation. But a major difficulty in political mobilisation lies in the general diversity and the local social stratification of the Aboriginal people. Wilcannia's Aboriginal community is divided residentially and socially into three groups (see Figure 7.4). Given initial physical shape by the erection of 14 cottages on the site of the old reserve, the division created a new class of Aborigines who had been elected to reside in the new residences and distinguished them from those left to continue as fringe dwellers along the river bank. The reserve status of the Aboriginal living area had been little more than an acknowledgement of camping rights, and the new housing made available was the first serious attempt to provide some alternative to the improvised shelters that had been Aboriginal 'homes' for many years. When moved to the northern, or town, side of the river the reserve Aborigines recreated their camp of crude shelters in the 'Mallee'. Later, army tents, iron sheds and eventually basic brick housing were provided as widespread publicity stirred non-Aboriginal authorities into action. As houses were erected along the road leading to the Aboriginal area, the Mallee became an extension of the town itself. Nevertheless, the social and psychological divisions remain.

Figure 7.4: Map of Aboriginal dwellings, Wilcannia, 1988



Three separate communities were seen in a 1965 report as living 'in physical segregation, a segregation that reinforces and perpetuates barriers and prejudices built up over decades in the Deep West town' (*Australian*, Jan.4, 1965). Of the two Aboriginal groups which, with the town community of Aborigines and non-Aborigines, comprised the Wilcannia population, the report commented that their separation was total: 'The shanty and the reserve communities despise each other and never mix. The enmity is said to go back to tribal days'.

Little evidence exists to support the absolute nature of the separation or of its suggested tribal origin;⁵ the historical development of the community suggests tension between different groups, but not on a scale as to support such an extreme view. The contemporary situation of three distinct Aboriginal social groups was created by the gradual movement into the town itself of a growing number of Aborigines, some of whom sought to separate themselves from the 'poor type of blackfeller' who inhabited the camps. Some gained access to housing provided under a Welfare Board strategy to move Aborigines into the towns where their education and training were considered to have fitted them to live among non-Aborigines. Others later secured housing provided by various authorities or, in some cases, provided by their own efforts.

Rowley (1971a:281) refers to a single Aboriginal household in the town in 1964. Long-term residents of Wilcannia contradict this. One source refers to 'a few families' at that time, while another identifies six Aboriginal families living in the town in 1960, and a rapid influx in the early 1970s. At least two factors may help explain the apparent

⁵ A frequently mentioned tribal division is based on the Bakandji people who are considered to have been those with an original association with the Darling River, the Nyampa people who were, or are descendants of, the occupiers of the mission stations at Carowra Tank and Menindee and others from the Tibooburra or 'corner' country. Another interpretation of division concentrates on specific family groups.

contradictions. Several families were found to have lived for a long period in that part of the town which abuts the Mallee, and, more importantly, a number of individuals did not consider themselves to be Aborigines and had no connection with the Aboriginal community until ethnic identity became a feature of local Aboriginal politics. It is relevant to an understanding of contemporary local Aboriginal politics that several of these are now prominent in Aboriginal political and welfare organisations. Aboriginal identification became less of a handicap when a political identity was a promising possibility. In addition, for the ambitious, more articulate and better educated, it opened up possibilities for positions in service and welfare organisations (cf. Cowlshaw, 1988b:102-3).

Town-dwelling Aborigines consider themselves socially superior to either of the other two residential groups. Of these, the 'Mission' people are denigratory and often contemptuous of the 'Mallee mob', despite the improvement in the standard of accommodation in the latter area and the severely deteriorated condition of the remaining ten reserve cottages. A non-Aboriginal community official describes the social hierarchical structure as firm, but flexible: 'They come together occasionally, but basically they are very apart in their thinking. And in their actions, I might add' (Tape:86 W17). Another informant saw the situation as a subtle but distinct set of relationships:

There were definite things whether you lived in the Mallee or whether you lived in town. There were Mallee Aborigines and the town and the Mission. They'd always talk about 'she's in the Mallee as though it was meant to mean something' (Tape:87 B8).

Social flexibility exists because of cross-group relationships and because of situationally-specific political mobilisation. Aborigines from all groups will unite in support of a cause that affects the total population, or when a sense of injustice alienates them as Aborigines

against bureaucratic action or against a perceived threat to their ethnic identity. The unifying issues are those which can place bureaucratic structures or agents in an adversary position. But political unity is not confined to the sense of alienation in the face of white adversaries; opposition to perceived interference from higher level Aboriginal political organisations or from individuals seeking dominance may have the same effect. Such unity is invariably short-lived and, if it results in an advantage gained by one section of the community, may lead to antagonism between groups. The area of resource allocation is possibly the major source of Aboriginal inter communal conflict. Many Aborigines still express resentment at what they see as the preferential treatment afforded the Mallee evacuees at the time of the disruptive river floods:

You get the Mission people talking about, like everything for the Mallee people. Like in the last big flood they got tents and that, and they used to send fruit and vegies up from Sydney, and they started building houses and that, and it just all Mallee mob...worrying about the people in the Mallee and no one else (Tape:86 W15).

Aborigines involved in social and political organisations are not restricted to one residential area, but are represented throughout the community even though a majority resides in the town itself. This cross-sectional representation is an important factor in political mobilisation, and reduces, but does not eliminate, factional conflict in important political decision-making. The extent to which an individual can command respect from all sections of the population, and the maintenance of family relationships, particularly on a two generation basis, are two features of cross-sectional political mobilisation. Thus, a resident of the Mallee has a high political profile and is generally recognised and respected as a spokesperson by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. An elderly, highly respected and politically

involved woman resides on the Mission and refuses to move into the town. Two daughters, equally involved, reside in the town.

7.4 Perceptions Influencing Interaction

Non-Aboriginal residents are aware of the divisions within the Aboriginal community but classify the Aboriginal people quite differently. According to their criteria, Aboriginality is behaviourally determined. There are extremists who see all Aborigines as worthless, and readily cite the all-too-obvious evidence of unemployment, alcohol abuse, violence and squalor to support their assessment. Nonetheless, even here there is usually a somewhat reluctant admission that there are exceptions, albeit with the qualification that these are 'not really Aborigines'. Most non-Aborigines, however, place Aborigines in two broad classifications with pejorative terminology often used in describing them. 'Abos', 'Coons' or 'Gins' are 'good' or 'decent' according to the standards and values set by non-Aborigines. Those considered to be acceptable usually live in the town, have jobs or are respected pensioners, live very much as non-Aborigines do and are conservative in their political expression. Others are 'no-good Boongs', 'bloody Blacks', 'cheeky bastards', 'trouble makers', 'alcoholics', 'bludgers' or just plain 'bad'. The most frequent type of response follows the pattern of 'I know some good Abos, but most are bludgers. They've been spoilt; they don't want to work'. This attitude is not confined to the white community, but is a frequently expressed sentiment among Aborigines themselves. Many Aborigines blame the community itself for its shortcomings and insist that there are ample opportunities for the people to resolve most of their problems. As one Aboriginal critic described it:

Most of them are too bloody tired to get off their arse. They won't do anything for themselves. They want someone else to fix

everything up. That's the trouble with the Blacks, they've had it all done for them for too long and they think if they keep whingeing about it someone will fix it up (Tape:86 M10).

Despite the history of opposition to the presence of the Aboriginal community, the antipathetic attitude and outspokenness of many non-Aborigines and the behaviour of some Aborigines, racist expression tends to be muted in day-to-day life. Violence between individuals is much more likely between Aborigines than between Aborigines and others. Larger-scale violence is invariably directed against those identified as the agents of an imposed authority; the representatives of the alienating, oppressing, political system. Police, publicans and school teachers can readily be transformed into agents of discrimination or repression. A number of community leaders, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, claim there is no conflict between the two racial groups in the town. Most trouble, they say, is caused by alcohol or by 'stirrers' or 'trouble makers'. A reported riot, the third confrontation in three weeks between police and Aborigines, was blamed on 'a few hotheads': 'There are about two or three white agitators and some young Aborigines who have been to jail, know the ropes and have nothing to lose' (*BDT*, Feb.4,1987). When violence, including the throwing of petrol bombs, erupted the following night, a police spokesman claimed police would have the full support of the town should events 'blow out of proportion' (*BDT*, Feb.5,1987).

There is, in fact, a degree of cooperation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, in town, school and sporting activities. The golf club, the social centre of non-Aboriginal Wilcannia, accepts Aboriginal golfers and a few, selected drinkers. Vaguely-defined criteria, such as standards of dress and behaviour, are imposed to isolate the unacceptable. Aborigines seen drinking in the club arouse no obvious

animosity among white drinkers, but are of the 'good' type, invariably in high profile jobs in health, education or welfare. Beckett, writing of Wilcannia in 1965, claimed Aborigines had little intimate contact with Whites:

The police are the only white people with whom most of these Aborigines have any sort of intimacy. With the remaining townspeople there is a relation of avoidance, modified only sufficiently to permit the transfer of goods across counters (1965c:41).

Personal experience and interviews with present and past residents of the town indicate a more complex interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Age, occupation and area of residence were and are significant factors in determining relationships. There are, in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, people who have little or no contact across racial lines. Others maintain social relationships without regard to colour. Children in particular appear to have few inhibitions in forming relationships, some of which appear to persist into adulthood. But these appear to occur mainly within the relatively small percentage of non-Aboriginal children who remain in Wilcannia for their schooling.

In the past, relationships among adults were often restricted spatially and temporally. Aborigines and non-Aborigines often worked together in the bush, drank together and generally shared a way of life. The closeness of the relationship was not always maintained on return to the home town. Whether an artifact from the reserve days when non-Aborigines were not permitted in the Aboriginal camps without authorisation, from a sense of shame at the standard of housing or from some other inhibiting cause, relationships frequently did not extend to actual home visiting.

The loss of employment opportunities significantly reduced the opportunity for favourable interaction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. At the same time it diminished the possibilities for Aboriginal people to gain respect, acceptance and self esteem. An increase in the visible Aboriginal presence in the town is readily attributed by many non-Aborigines to an Aboriginal unwillingness to work, rather than to their inability to obtain employment. Aborigines, it is claimed, have spoiled the town, structurally and visually.

7.5 The Expression Of Frustration

Wilcannia is an unattractive town with its ever-present human and material evidence of alcohol abuse, and with steel bar or mesh-covered windows providing testimony to the vandalism. In a 1987 report of a 'riot' by an estimated 40 intoxicated Aborigines, a storekeeper claimed he could no longer put up with the trouble and would have to get out. Because of pilfering, thefts and vandalism, he had made no money for a couple of years and the latest damage caused during the 'riot' would have to be borne by the business because insurance companies would no longer provide cover. The problem, he claimed, was a continuing one. The deliberate breaking of windows had been a regular occurrence over 15 years and lately had been averaging one a month.⁶ He stated that Wilcannia had been a 'good little town' when he first arrived there 25 years ago but that soon 'only the bridge would be left' (*BDT*, Feb.4, 1987).

A Wilcannia newssheet, published since 1976 by the Central School, observed in its first issue editorial the experience of walking around Wilcannia seeing 'Bottles and flagons smashed, cans and papers

⁶ The three hotels in Wilcannia have subsequently replaced the glass in their windows with a plastic substitute.

everywhere' (*Paddle Wheel*, March 18, 1976). Later editions reported at regular intervals on extreme vandalism, and in a number of letters, children wrote of rubbish in the streets, of drunks and fights (see e.g. October 27, 1978; July 27, 1979). An adult correspondent asked:

What has happened to this town? Is there no respect anymore to a person's private property, to their private goods and their peace of mind...(Feb.9, 1979).

The Wilcannia situation again became the focus of national attention in 1976 following a television programme devoted to an examination of the conditions of its Aborigines (*Four Corners*, ABC, Sept.11, 1976). In July, 1979, The Wilcannia Central School Parents and Citizens Association had made a submission to the Minister for Education which dealt with community facilities, law and order, isolation, health, hygiene and medical services, and a number of matters relating to the school system at Wilcannia (*NSW PD*. vol.149,1979:2237). In debate, a member spoke of unemployment which was considered to be a dominant factor in the generation of the problems:

...many of the local people, both Aboriginal and European, have become frustrated or overcome by the apparent hopelessness of their situation and as a result have turned to drink and, to a lesser extent, drugs (*NSW PD*. vol.149,1979:2238).

Although recognising other facets of the situation such as the living conditions 'that would be totally unacceptable elsewhere', and of the 'Wilcannia syndrome manifesting itself in a lack of dignity and a sense of worthiness', the submission failed to identify meaningful initiatives. The action recommended demonstrated an apparent inability to understand the real needs of the community, and included such measures as an increase in the strength of the local police force, and 'increased leisure time activities' such as would be provided by the proposed provision of 'the domestic satellite network' (emphasis added).

National publicity failed to provoke a response that might lead to the provision of more than a temporary alleviation of the increasing difficulties, and the town continued to gain government and media attention. A petition presented to the NSW parliament in 1980 again evoked an image of a community in crisis:

...we are seriously alarmed at the apparent inability of the authorities, i.e. Police Force and local government, to control the indecent and violent behaviour, the breaking and entering of premises, the unseemly language, littering, loitering, bottle throwing, window breaking and defacing walls and buildings now taking place in Wilcannia (*NSW PD.* vol.152,1980:4676).

In the following year the situation was such that a public meeting was called to discuss the growing vandalism in the town. As reported locally:

Around 140 people signed a petition to the NSW Government, asking it to 'take such action as will make this town safe from violence and vandalism (*Paddlewheel*, Nov.6,1981).

One week later it was reported that teachers had given notice to strike unless the State Government acted to provide greater protection for the school and the Teacher Housing Authority properties in the town. Major newspapers carried stories with headlines that suggested a situation out of control: 'Outback town hit by terror' (*Sun News Pictorial*, Nov.19, 1981.), 'Violence tears at townspeople' (*Adelaide News*, Nov.19, 1981), 'Teen gang 'terror' hits town' (*Melbourne Herald*, Nov.18, 1981) were introductions to the story of teachers' threatened strike action. The remote outback town was, according to one report, 'being torn apart by vandalism, drunkenness and street violence' (*Adelaide News*, Nov.19, 1981) and a senior police officer was reported as having said that people feared walking down the main street and that motorists were passing through without stopping even for petrol. As though to place the situation in a 'law and order' perspective, he claimed that arrests for drunkenness the previous year had been more than 2500 (*Melbourne*

Herald, Nov.18, 1981). The local Teachers Association president was quoted as stating that Wilcannia had, for more than 10 years been a racially-tense town. Now, he claimed, 'it is a town of fear and violence. Even the Aborigines are frightened to walk down the streets at night' (*Melbourne Herald*, Nov.18, 1981). Although media reports did not always attribute the situation to Aboriginal behaviour, emphasis on the Aboriginal population suggests an implicit reference.

Newspapers again stressed 'terror' in headlines in 1982 when Wilcannia community leaders appealed to the NSW Attorney-General and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Frank Walker, to visit the town and witness the violence. (See e.g. *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney and *Daily Sun*, Brisbane, Oct.20, 1982). At the same time a local magistrate was quoted as saying that he doubted if there were any plateglass windows still intact in the town (*BDT*, Oct.22, 1982).

7.6 Police And The Administration Of Justice

The functioning of police and the courts during such periods of violence is difficult to assess accurately. Some Aborigines accuse police of harassment and of being insensitive to their life style, and there is ample evidence of police abuse of power in the past. These perceptions of police reinforce the residual fear and distrust which are, for many Aborigines, a legacy of the past when police were the direct agents for the Protection and Welfare boards.

Despite the history of violence and aggression that has kept Wilcannia in the media spotlight, police deny that the town suffers real difficulties with Aborigines as such, as opposed to the troubles caused by alcohol and with the vandalism and aggression of alienated children and youth. A number of prominent Aborigines are generally supportive of

the police in the town, and claim good relations with them. On their part, police are cooperative and willing to discuss all aspects of the Wilcannia situation. They claim they try to maintain a presence in community organisations and interact well with Aborigines who are also involved in these areas. When relations between police and the community are relatively good this is attributed to an approach which emphasises consultation and cooperation rather than confrontation. It was pointed out by one police officer that relations were much different in Menindee and Ivanhoe where previous heavy-handedness by police had left a lasting negative impression. A police spokesman attributed the major source of trouble in Wilcannia to the influx of Aborigines from Bourke. These were considered to be the worst type of agitators and trouble makers, and, wherever possible, police did not allow them to become established in the town. In another strategy designed to reduce the tension and violence allegedly instigated by 'troublemakers', a number of offenders have been exiled from the town through a parole provision which denies them local residence.

Police expressed an awareness of the need 'to tread a fine line between the rule book and common sense'. At one time, they say, it had been possible to head off trouble by arresting drunks and leaving them to 'sleep it off in the lockup'. The repeal, in 1979, of the *Summary Offences Act* abolished the offences of vagrancy and drunkenness and, according to police, prevents them from taking such pre-emptive action. Aboriginal women urge police to lock up intoxicated husbands to prevent them becoming violent, but police claim they are constrained by the law and by an ever alert Legal Service. One alleged result is a rise in the level of intra-family and intra-community violence. This is, however, difficult to substantiate. There is a high level of violence within the Aboriginal community and alcohol is a contributing factor in an

overwhelming number of cases. But increases in the level appear to correlate more closely to availability of liquor than to any alleged diminution of police powers. McCorquondale (1980:5) cites figures on information laid between January and March 1980 in five 'Aboriginal' towns in NSW, including Wilcannia, where charges were laid by one spouse against another:

In *not one* case of such an information was the factor of alcohol absent. The information alleged an assault... which in a significant number of cases invited or required a police visit to the scene of the alleged assault.

Police remain quite active in 'detaining' intoxicated persons, and McCorquondale did not discover a significant difference in comparing arrest rates under the *Summary Offences Act* of 1970 and detention rates under the *Intoxicated Persons Act* of 1979. In a five week period in 1980 the incidence of detention in Wilcannia was equal to 10 per cent of the Aboriginal population compared with a figure of 0.5 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population. Bureau of Crime Statistics figures show a detention rate of intoxicated persons of almost 50 per 100 Aboriginal population for 1986-87 and 88 per 100 for 1987-88. (See Figure 7.5). These figures tend to support McCorquondale's conclusion that:

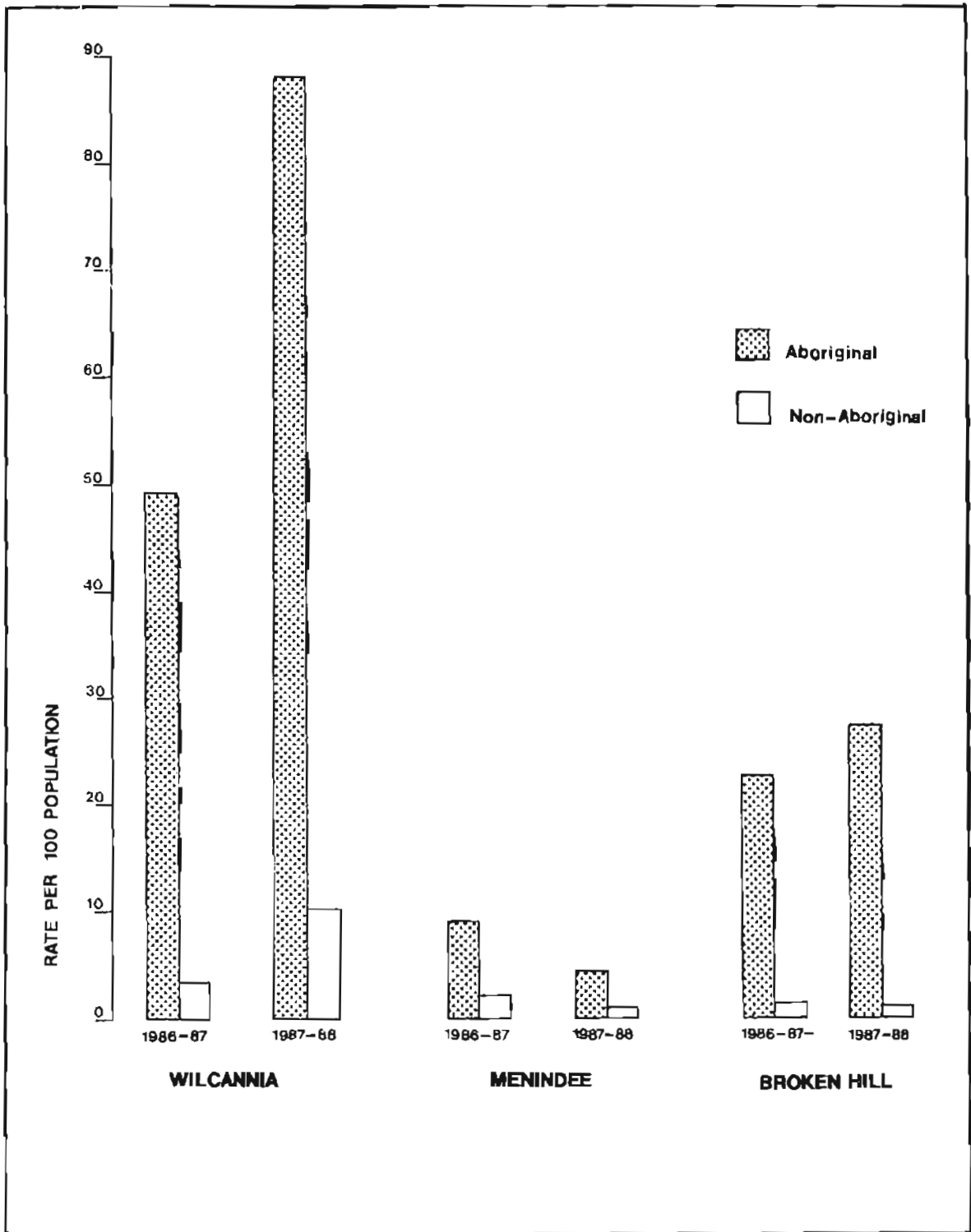
...whilst drunkenness *per se* has been decriminalized, the agent of its replacement - 'offence' and the sanctions attaching to it still repose in the police and in the other institutions of justice (1980:8)

Notwithstanding any efforts to maintain good relations with the Aboriginal community, police inevitably become involved as the targets of aggression when violence erupts, usually through alcohol-influenced incidents. An arrest, intervention to stop brawling or efforts to quieten irate Aborigines who have been evicted from, or refused service in, a hotel, can all lead to a clash in which police are readily seen as oppressors; as the agents of the alien authority. Amongst younger

Figure 7.5: Detention of intoxicated persons, Wilcannia,
Menindee and Broken Hill*

Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics

* Collection of these statistics by the Bureau ceased 1988



Aborigines it is not difficult to find individuals who tell of police prejudice, of injustice and discrimination. Senior police acknowledge a very real problem with young and inexperienced officers whose lack of exposure to Aborigines often leads to a prejudiced stance and, consequently to serious conflict. But other Aborigines are supportive of the efforts of police in an extremely difficult environment. Beckett (1965b) noted the intrusive presence of police when he visited Aboriginal friends in the 1960s, an intrusion that is considered by some to persist today. Here again, the perception is subjectively determined. As Beckett described it:

I found myself irked to have them drive slowly past, six or seven times a day, and disconcerted at the way they would unaccountably stop, stare and then move on again. One might be sitting outside someone's place at night, suddenly to be dazzled by the powerful headlights of the police truck until they were satisfied that we were not doing anything (41).

A different perspective is provided when the police presence is seen in another context. The efforts of a white 'adviser' to curtail police activities was resented by Aborigines who considered the police to be doing their job as they had always done it:

The police wanted to go around with the spotlight and that...[the 'adviser'] wasn't too happy about that, like, he had a talk to the sergeant, there was this other sergeant there. Like, he used to go to the Mission and he was told he couldn't go to the Mission. Like, he told him it was private property. The sergeant came and asked us at the Land Council. We told him it was alright to go to the Mission...He wanted to talk to us about this but [the 'adviser'] was carrying on. Like, 'We don't want the police to be driving around the Mallee', or 'We can stop them from driving around the Mallee now'. Like, they always used to go for a drive around the Mallee. Like, just doing their job patrolling the Mission and the Mallee. But [he] wanted to stop that too. But we said it was alright (Tape:86 W15).

Another Aboriginal, a resident of the Mallee, placed the relationship in more definite terms: 'I don't have no trouble with the police. The police don't give anyone any trouble, anyhow, unless they doing the wrong thing'. When asked whether relations had been bad in the past,

the response was similarly coloured by personal experience: 'They gave us a bit of trouble when we was on the grog. But I gave up drinking about 12 years ago. No trouble since then'(Tape:86 W19).

In a broader perspective, Aboriginal political activity has inhibited the relative freedom of action once enjoyed by police and other agents of law enforcement. No longer is it possible to ignore certain basic legal rights that have been accorded - even if somewhat reluctantly in rural areas⁷ - to Aborigines. This manifestation of Aboriginal political activity, however, invariably originates outside the local community or from non-Aboriginal advisers or sympathisers within the town. In one instance it was alleged that police had resorted to an unofficial 'strike' in protest at the restrictions forced on them. In any case, extra-legal action, believed by many police to be the best way to head off trouble without delay, has been curtailed. Courts themselves have been challenged where proceedings have been considered to be questionable at best and discriminatory at worst. In one case, a magistrate's outspoken comments in the courtroom gained national media attention and led to calls for him to disqualify himself from hearing further cases involving Aborigines in Wilcannia. Other demands were for his transfer from the Broken Hill circuit and for his dismissal and that of certain police in Wilcannia. The demands, however, were mostly expressed by Aborigines outside the Wilcannia community.

Stipendiary Magistrate Quinn had told an Aboriginal defendant that he was a member of a race of 'pests', and went on to give an opinion of the behaviour of Aboriginal people in the town generally:

⁷ An example of this is the reluctance, at times the refusal, to accept Aborigines' rights to drink alcohol. When this right was extended to Aborigines many publicans in the rural areas of NSW refused to serve them.

Your race of people must be [the] most interfering race of people I have heard of...You are becoming a pest race in Wilcannia wanting to interfere in [the] job of police. There is only one end to pests. Learn this time (*National Times*, week ending June 23, 1979).

The 'Quinn case' is important in at least two respects. It highlights the difficulties in maintaining law and order and dispensing justice in an environment where there is no acknowledgement of the inherent causes of disrespect for the law and the externalisation of resentment in the form of aggression. A perceived denial of full and equal participation in the general society conflicts with an expected respect for, and adherence to, the society's laws. Secondly, the subsequent events demonstrate the growing importance of Aboriginal political involvement. In an obvious reference to the Quinn case a report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs acknowledged that Aboriginal people had suffered from conscious or unconscious discrimination by law enforcement officers. Citing it as a case of prejudice, the report continued:

Only last year a circuit magistrate...was transferred from one area to another because of allegations that he made discriminatory comments about an Aboriginal before the Wilcannia Court (1980:11).

7.7 Aborigines And Education: A Conflict Of Values

Collective Aboriginal responses to perceived discrimination at the local level are mostly confined to outbursts against police, publicans or school teachers whose actions have been seen as racist inspired. The Wilcannia Central school has been the focus for a great deal of conflict within the community, particularly prior to the opening of a new school in 1986. Relations between Aborigines and teachers at the school had long been a major cause of tension, and it was teachers who were particularly vocal in protesting the conditions in Wilcannia in the

1980s. Aboriginal people accuse teachers of having been 'against our kids' at the time, and of 'causing all the trouble at the school', but teachers deny this. They emphasise the generally disadvantageous conditions they believed to be the principal cause of the situation. Arguing their case at the time through the local newssheet, the Teachers Federation organiser for the area denied a racist element in the controversy:

The problems at Wilcannia have been reported as a black white confrontation but this is not so. The teachers are working well with the school's Parents and Citizens Association. It is the lack of welfare agencies which is causing the problems (*Paddlewheel*, Dec. 4, 1981).

Difficulties associated with inexperienced teachers, conflict between teachers and parents, which invariably involved the whole Aboriginal community, vandalism, strikes by teachers and the withdrawal of pupils, and a general lack of achievement characterised the decade prior to 1986. A principal's report to the Minister for Education in 1979 gave the background to the situation facing education authorities:

The problems of one of the highest percentages of Aborigines and socially disadvantaged children in NSW...whole segments of the community surviving on widows' pensions and the dole, are the background to our school community (*National Times*, March 2 to 8, 1980).

The numerical superiority of Aboriginal children in the school population can be partly explained by the fact that Aboriginal families in the town are, in general, larger than white families. But more important sociologically - and politically - is the fact that many non-Aboriginal children are sent to schools away from Wilcannia, particularly in the final two years of secondary study which are not provided locally. Non-Aboriginal children who have attended secondary school in the town are sent to city schools and colleges to complete years 11 and 12, a situation said by many to be politically inspired.

Their parents, it is claimed, would not accept the provision of these grades at the local school. 'There would be a riot if I suggested it' claimed the principal. The explanation appears to lie in the expectation that social and financial pressure would be put on parents to have their children remain in the town to complete their secondary education. Aboriginal children have to enroll in correspondence school to complete these years and, although unofficial assistance is provided by local school staff, the system is a failure. Aboriginal children lack the level of literacy and the home support necessary to cope with correspondence education.

Teachers interviewed displayed an initial favourable response to questions of their reactions to the Wilcannia environment. As interviews progressed and responses became less guarded a much more negative attitude became apparent. One group was unanimous in expressing satisfaction with Wilcannia and the lifestyle it offered, but much less enthusiastic at the prospect of actually remaining in the town on weekends or vacation periods. Most spent their leisure time visiting nearby properties, on fishing or shooting trips or in Broken Hill. A respondent who had lived most of her life on the family property a few kilometres from Wilcannia recalled a constant stream of young teachers on weekends:

They hated staying in Wilcannia and liked to get away whenever they could. I think they needed the break from the town and the Aborigines, and we welcomed the company (Tape:87 B11).

Few teachers appear to have a significant involvement with the Aboriginal community, and most contact is made through the Aboriginal school-home coordinators employed in an endeavour to reduce conflict and aggression. Efforts to have parents involved in the actual classroom conditions have been met with mostly apathetic indifference or open

hostility. One Aboriginal teacher's aide saw the situation in a somewhat wider perspective, one that called for efforts from both sides:

There's a lot of parents never go to the big school⁸ unless there's some sort of trouble. We always try to get them to go to some of the outings, some of the good things, or just to visit to see how their kids are getting on at school and that...Even when the teachers -some of the teachers want the parents to come to the school - talk about their kids, well, a lot of parents say 'Why don't they come to us instead of us running to them all the time'. We told them we want the teachers to go out, to visit the parents, see what conditions they live in. Like, a lot of kids in good homes, and a lot of the kids not in good homes (Tape:86 W15).

invariably, teachers appointed have been inexperienced and have remained for as short a period as possible. Teachers themselves cite this as a major reason for difficulties. Aboriginal people are aware of teacher reluctance to accept appointments in Wilcannia

Up until a couple of years ago, teachers if they were appointed to Wilcannia they'd say 'No way', they'd resign straight away. We even had teacher here two days and he resigned (Tape:87 W20).

But even experienced teachers display a sense of frustration because of the inevitable dropout of promising students after year 10. They believe they are educating children to fill in their time until they are old enough to go on the dole queue. Apathy is endemic, forming part of the conditioning of the young. An Aboriginal who had spent his early years in the town and still has family ties there describes the chronology of apathy in terms of the stultifying effects of the welfare mentality:

In a place like Wilcannia, where you go from school to unemployment benefits, you go to sickness benefits and you go to invalid pension. Like, this happens all the time in Wilcannia. There's some pretty smart kids in Wilcannia, going to school. That's while they're going to school. Then they go into a lifestyle that their parents grew up in when they went from school

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The term 'big school' is used to distinguish the Central school from the Pre-school or 'mission' school which had, for many years been run by a Catholic order with Education Department assistance and with considerable Aboriginal involvement. In 1988 the teaching Sisters announced their impending departure and their replacement by Aborigines.

to unemployment benefits. That's where you fall down. Like a kid can't sit at home, and he can't study, he can't do things like that because he thinks, well everybody else around him are on unemployment benefits and he thinks 'what am I doing at school?' And so when he gets to fifteen they just end up dropping out anyway (Tape:87 B12).

Considerable effort has gone into attempts to make the school more attractive in those areas where entrenched local attitudes are not the dominating influences. Improvement has been effected in the general school environment and in the perception of the school by Aborigines. This corresponds closely with the opening of the new school with its extended facilities, with a reconstructed curriculum and with a principal who demonstrates an understanding of basic problems in the provision of education to a disadvantaged community. He made personal contact with all appointees before their arrival in Wilcannia, and most are supportive of his objectives. With a background of work in disadvantaged schools, he claims Wilcannia to be the worst educational problem in the state, if not in Australia. Teachers complain of the lack of authority and leadership within the Aboriginal community, but the principal acknowledges the authority wielded by the older and respected Aborigines. Of the dominant authority figure, an elderly resident of the Mission, he says:

[She] pulls a lot of strings. If I wanted to set something up I would need her approval. But I couldn't go to her directly. I would have to do it through one of the Aboriginal coordinators (Personal communication).

Improved educational facilities have raised the expectations of some of the Aboriginal youth, but the inability to complete the last, most important years of their education is a continuing source of disaffection and possibly alienation. Such youth leave school and, unless they leave the town, become demanding of change, questioning the values of a society that leaves them short of the goals it has

encouraged them to set. No alternatives are offered other than that they abandon the relative safety of their known environment or for them to join the ranks of the unemployed. A good deal of aggression⁹ is obvious among the youth of Wilcannia, particularly when, after leaving school, they drift into the familiar pattern of alcohol abuse.

7.8 Political Mobilisation

A somewhat sensationalised period of lawlessness has coincided with a period of developing political consciousness and involvement by Aborigines in the town. Although limited in number and having to face the extreme negativism of general apathy, Aboriginal political figures are contributing to efforts to develop strategies which might alleviate the specific local predicament. Wilcannia still presents a bleak, depressing picture of a community facing an uncertain future, without direction and with major factors of unemployment, alcoholism and sporadic outbursts of violence. Recent serious incidents have led to increased interaction between police, Shire and Aboriginal community representatives. The deaths, in 1987, of two politically active and generally respected Aborigines and the trauma of the death of a young man while in custodial care, were serious psychological blows to the community. In the words of one resident, 'the town is in a state of shock; they're demoralised; they feel they have had their guts kicked in' (Tape:88 W6).

Initiatives have been taken to address situations at the local level of assessment rather than as part of an overall Aboriginal condition. In some instances the focus on local issues has led to involvement of local Aborigines. Alternately, involvement by local politically-active

⁹ One respondent, who has had a long-term commitment to the Aboriginal people in Wilcannia described the aggression of the young people in 1988 as 'verging on anarchy'.

Aborigines has led to the concentration on a local perspective. The rhetoric from sources outside the community following outbreaks of trouble in Wilcannia invariably invokes macro-level prescriptions for the resolution of contentious issues, and its influence has, to some extent, filtered into local thinking. But at the local level, Aborigines see their problems principally in terms of their own community and its needs. Their political identity is shaped firstly by their own past, less by the limitless perspective of the national polemic. To the limited extent to which it does function, the practical politics of the community has this focus, despite the efforts of nationally-oriented individuals to broaden this. Nonetheless, most involved Aborigines agree that the social and psychological problems remain unresolved. Without an improvement in these areas political activity appears to be destined to remain limited and ineffective. The Aboriginal community of Wilcannia is neither fully isolated from, nor assimilated into, the general society. It struggles to find its identity in a bleak social and economic landscape. Condemned for its lack of positive dimensions, its accessible past reveals mostly negative influences which provide little upon which it might construct a more propitious future.

CHAPTER 8

MENINDEE: AN 'INTEGRATED' COMMUNITY.

8.1 A Positive Perception Of Community

The way in which the Aboriginal people of the town of Menindee have responded to their environments has led to their integration into the general town society on terms of basic social and economic equality. Within non-Aboriginal terms of reference - as well as those of many of its Aboriginal people - Menindee is a 'success' story. Its 'success' is not limited to the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, but includes also the extent to which its Aboriginal people have been transformed into a corporate entity. Although not without some community dissent, the Menindee people have had the leadership and the commitment to group goals that have enabled them to utilise effectively their available resources.

Menindee and its population are exposed to the same social and economic pressures and faces the same disadvantages as other isolated communities in western NSW. But unlike many of these, its conditions of existence are not exacerbated by intercommunal tension and conflict on the basis of ethnic difference; it does not suffer because of its having an Aboriginal component in its population. It differs markedly from Wilcannia and many other towns with significant numbers of Aborigines in that there are no obvious signs of social or spatial division, no evidence of the tensions generated by concepts of caste differences, nor do its Aboriginal people present a picture of an apathetic, alienated or anomic minority group. The despair and hostility that permeate

Wilcannia and need to be considered as being part of the background to the generation of delinquency, aggression and violence, are not apparent in Menindee. But whereas the presence of an Aboriginal population in Wilcannia has been, and with much of the non-Aboriginal community still is, resented, that of Menindee is accepted.

It could be posited that the Menindee community is one in which differing racial or ethnic characteristics have been successfully merged. In contrast, Wilcannia represents failure to achieve this, or at best, a community divided by various stages of the process. This is, however, a simplistic assessment which ignores the complexity both of Aboriginal populations and the process of incorporation. Nor does it provide answers to questions of why individual groups develop their own particular social and political dynamics.

Aborigines in each of these local populations have a similar historical background, so reasons for their differences must be sought in subtle variations within the historical experience, in the differing reactions to these and in a comparison of the environments they encounter and the way they interpret and respond to these. To this end the particular response to the conditions of existence, that is, the cultural expression (see Cowlshaw, above), and the influences that directed these, are the significant factors involved. Many characteristics can differentiate a community; however, prominent in these cultural expressions is the extent of individuality of the Menindee people in contrast to the more protective communal clustering of Wilcannia. If the isolation of the individual from the collective were a basic - if

unstated - tenet of assimilation, it appears to have been relatively successful in Menindee.¹

No single reason can be assumed to account for the conspicuous differences between the Aboriginal communities of the two Darling River towns. There are, however, enough subtle but significant factors apparent to support a hypothetical construction. A number of possibilities are suggested by Aborigines themselves and by non Aborigines who have had contact with the residents of both towns. These may all be relevant to an understanding of the issue, and they are discussed below. If a general prescription could be applied to these it is that the Menindee Aborigines are seen as being better able to take advantage of opportunities afforded them and more willing to help themselves achieve a life style they consider to be satisfactory. But there is little evidence of inherent differences other than those that have influenced their particular response to their cultural experience. It is relevant to explore the significance that lies in the particularity of incidental factors within an otherwise similar historical background to the establishment and development of each community.

Although the statement invokes outspoken objection from many opponents of the concept, Menindee Aborigines have been considered to represent a successfully integrated, even assimilated, community. Unemployment is a major problem, as it is in most small, country towns, but this has not resulted in the social disruption that characterises Wilcannia. Whatever the evidence might suggest, Menindee Aboriginal people say the town is a good place to live; because they interpret it this way, it is

¹ Evidence of incorporation of Aborigines into a general community on the basis of their individual adaptation is evident also in Broken Hill and is discussed in a later chapter.

a favourable environment for them. There is no residential segregation; Aboriginal housing is generally of a standard that is equal, and in some instances superior, to that of the non-Aboriginal population; there has been little friction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents; and alcohol abuse and violence do not produce the serious consequences that are evident in Wilcannia (see Figures 7.2, 7.3, Table 7.2). On the surface at least it is a stable community in which Aborigines are afforded social and political equality. More importantly, there are in the community, Aboriginal people who have the capacity and the authority to utilise available resources to influence favourably the style and quality of life of their own people and, to some extent, that of non-Aboriginal residents. In the words of an officer of DAA, himself an Aboriginal, Menindee is *the* strong community of western NSW:

If we look at Menindee, there's a very strong organisation there...they've got their act together, they know what their aims are, they know what they want (Tape:87 B19).

Indicative of this, and of the way in which Menindee Aboriginal people interpret their environment, is their submission to the Select Committee on Aborigines in 1980. In contrast to the lengthy Wilcannia submission which detailed the perceived problems of that community (see pp. 175-176), representatives of the Menindee Aboriginal community presented a single request. This sought assistance to obtain a water licence which would enable the Aboriginal people to develop land they already had and which they wished to develop in order to create additional employment. Asked if there were other matters relating to Aborigines on which they wished to speak, one representative replied, 'No, I think on the whole they are pretty good in Menindee.' In further questioning the Committee established a profile of this community as it was seen by these Aboriginal people:

Q: What is the situation with employment?

A: There is none, but that is the same with blacks and with whites...

Q: What is the health of the Aboriginal children in the Menindee area like?

A: Pretty good.

Q: You have no particular housing problems?

A: We could do with a couple more houses, but they are not just living anywhere.

Q: What is the situation with schooling?

A: Good.

Q: It seems to be a perfect town?

A: It is pretty good. I have not heard of any problems. Elizabeth [the other witness] has five children at school and I have had nine there at one stage and we have never had any problems - no more than what other kids have.

Q: What is the relationship between the whites and the blacks?

A: Good.

Q: What is the relationship between the police and the blacks?

A: Pretty good, the same as everywhere else.

Q: Is there a problem with alcohol?

A: Not really. There are a couple of alcoholics, but not many. Everyone goes to the hotel and has a drink, the same as they do everywhere else (1020).

The contrasting environments revealed by the submissions of Menindee and Wilcannia need to be related both to the specificities of the towns and of their populations. Clearly, there are differences in the social, economic and political structures of the respective towns which would influence the perceptions of community needs. There are also considerable differences in the patterns of interaction between sections of their residents and in the way the two communities and their aspirations are interpreted by their Aboriginal people.

8.2 Social and Spatial Incorporation In Menindee

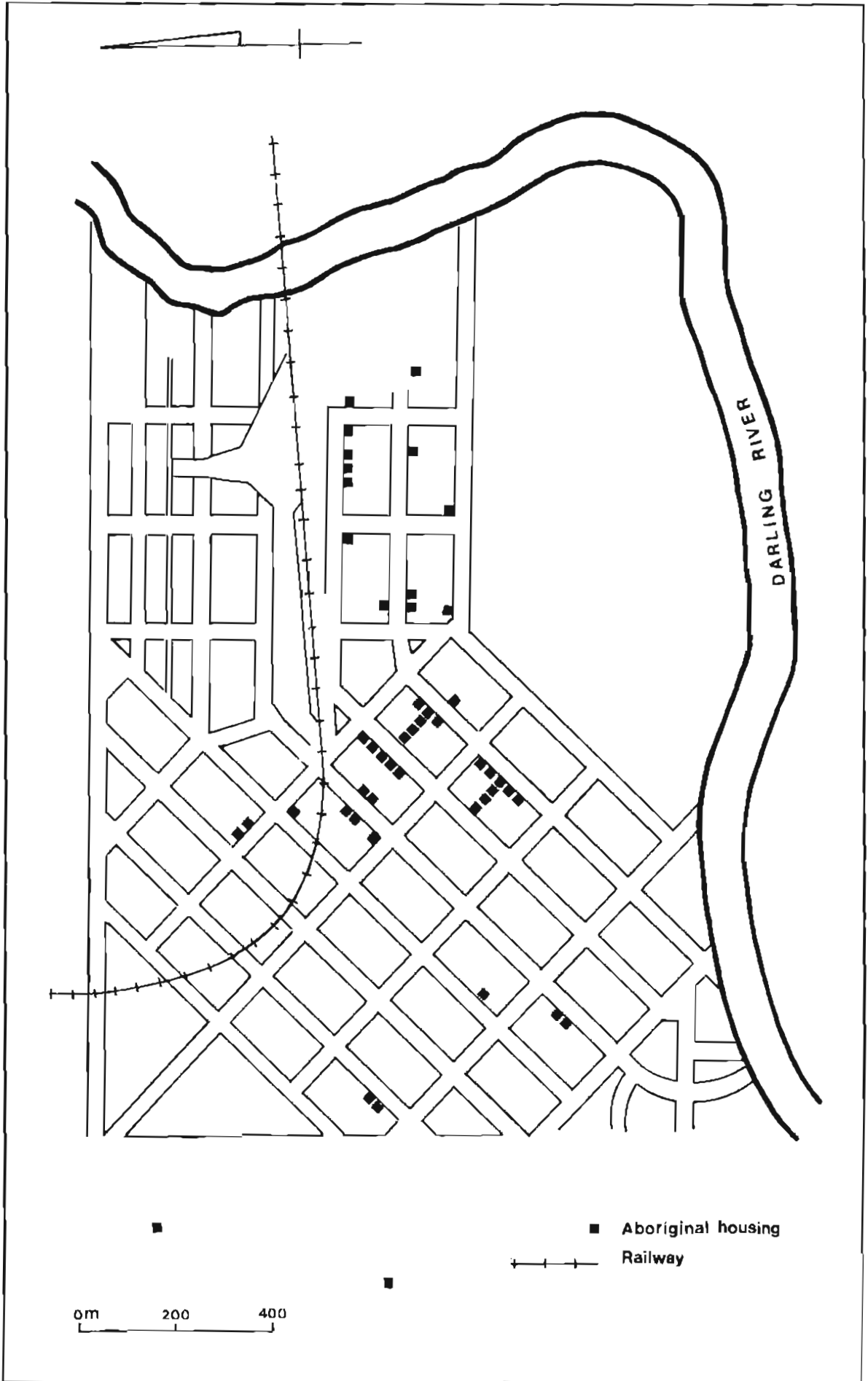
A social profile of the community reveals evidence that Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Menindee share most aspects of communal life. One area of possible conflict in the area of housing is revealed in the envy

amongst non-Aborigines of some of the newer houses built for Aborigines through the agency of the Aboriginal housing company. A degree of resentment that initially accompanied the provision of these has mostly dissipated as non-Aborigines have come to share both access to, and pride in, the facilities of the Nyampa Housing Company's premises. All but a few of the Menindee residents live in the town, the few exceptions living on market garden blocks on the outskirts, or, in one notable case, preferring the relative seclusion of a river bank site (see Figure 8.1).

After the closure of the mission station, Aborigines remaining in the vicinity were granted an area of 15 acres nearer the town. This became the camp site that was to be the home for the Aboriginal people until they were absorbed into the town's community. In 1975, when the Aboriginal housing company was formed, there were twenty families in the area, a significant increase from the three that had resisted the move to Murrin Bridge.

Initial funding provided to the housing company was used to purchase caravans and steel sheds as temporary dwellings for the most needy families, and later, to construct two lots of flats which provide eight units for both men and women. Eventually the Aborigines were accommodated in fifteen Housing Company homes, four provided by the Lands Trust through the Housing Commission and a couple by Aborigines who obtained loans and purchased their own. Rental collection is near 100 per cent, which contrasts sharply with the situation in Wilcannia where the dilapidated condition of many houses is given as a cause of, and alternately a reason for, the low level of collection. Some Wilcannia Aborigines claim they refuse to pay because of the condition of their homes. Others, involved in attempts to collect rents, agree

Figure 8.1: Map of Aboriginal dwellings, Menindee, 1988



that the condition of the houses is due to lack of maintenance, but attribute this to the fact that Aborigines will not pay their rent and consequently funds are not available for maintenance.

With rent collection, as with many other aspects of social life, the notions of individual responsibility and kin relationships are often in conflict. Menindee Aborigines, as individuals, acknowledge their responsibility to pay rent. In Wilcannia, where the kin networks are more extensive, there is a clash of authority when the Aboriginal charged with collecting rent approaches one of his or her own kin:

[There's] definitely a clash. When someone, like your uncle's got to pay rent and you go around to collect it, there's a clash of authority. In Wilcannia...they get a lot of abuse. I wouldn't like to do it (Tape:87 W9).²

The provision and siting of Aboriginal housing in towns and cities throughout Australia is another major area of social and political conflict. It reveals also the ambivalence that is often a feature of the subordinate group's political functioning. As Figure 8.1 illustrates, Aboriginal housing in Menindee is located throughout the small town in 'pepper pot' or 'scatteration' fashion that avoids ghetto concentrations and results in Aborigines and non-Aborigines being neighbours. The possible advantages of this in influencing Aboriginal behaviour to accord with non-Aboriginal-defined, but often Aboriginal-endorsed, standards is spelt out by a respected and politically-active Wilcannia woman who demonstrates an awareness of the need for Aboriginal adaptation if they are to be afforded acceptance. Speaking of the then proposed development of an Aboriginal housing area in Wilcannia which

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The long-running problem of rent collection in Wilcannia was considerably alleviated in 1988 when an Aboriginal woman from outside the community was pressured by the housing authority to undertake the task.

would continue their virtual physical separation from the non-Aboriginal population, she stated:

I don't agree with this idea of building houses for our people on the Mallee. I think it'd be better if they would've got blocks for the people in the town, here and there, maybe two in this street and a couple in that street. They're no good all together. They don't seem to agree like that. Putting them all together, it's really like a mission. They live on one another, relatives and that. And living together, they don't seem to be happy. They seem to have big brawls and that. In the town, scattered about here and there, I think that our people would see how white people live and bring up the family and perhaps they'd...(quoted in Gilbert,1978:121).

But a somewhat different perspective is provided from an awareness of the apprehension among Aborigines when faced with the loss of the protective psychological shelter of their camp site environment. A Menindee Aboriginal woman, equally active in the affairs of her community, emphasizes the inherent problems created by policies which, however well meaning, are adopted without consultation with the people affected. Although a driving force behind the establishment of the housing company, she deplored the element of compulsion that removed Aborigines from the camp site. She alleged that Aborigines were informed they could no longer reside on the camp site as houses had been provided for them in the town. One woman, she claimed, had been so apprehensive that she had not gone outside her door for five years:

She said to us she didn't know why they moved her. 'We was happy there, we had our homes'. I thought, why do our people still got to be pushed around, shoved around by the Government without being asked. All right if they want to move, give them all the support. But don't forget those who don't want to move into European society (Tape: 85 B7).

The underlying philosophy informing most policies affecting Aborigines appears to have been influenced by a conviction that non-Aborigines, having experienced a more favourable environment, were best fitted to decide the way Aborigines should live.

Whatever the initial problems faced by the Menindee Aborigines dispossessed of their collective identity, they have adapted well to the new environment. Contemporary Aboriginal lifestyle is largely indistinguishable from that of non-Aborigines. The favourable social interaction provided by the dispersal of Aborigines throughout the community is reinforced by their participation on equal terms in other dimensions of social functioning. Aborigines and non-Aborigines drink together in the town's hotels without friction. The Wilcannia experience of an 'Aboriginal pub', avoided by non-Aboriginal drinkers, is not replicated in Menindee. Nor does the town share the massive alcohol-induced problems that bedevil Wilcannia. The sight of a cluster of alcohol-affected Aborigines in the centre of the town is not characteristic of Menindee. An earlier fear³ that police would be waiting outside hotels to arrest Aborigines as they were leaving has largely dissipated as police have adopted a more reasoned approach, and the right of Aborigines to drink is no longer questioned. A non-Aboriginal, who had worked as a barmaid in Menindee, told of her experience of mixed drinking:

I have seen Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who live in this hot, dry place, melt together in the pub bar. It may sound trite - even romantic - but there are a lot of places where this does *not* happen (Personal communication).

Sporting activities are also shared, with 'mixed' teams a feature of competition. A similarly structured Rugby football team, in addition to one comprised solely of Aborigines, was also, for many years, a feature of Wilcannia sporting life. In a football competition that includes teams from Wilcannia, Menindee and Broken Hill, reciprocal visits provide stark evidence of the social distance between the Aborigines of the two river towns. On the occasions when the Menindee team travels to

³ A well founded fear that is supported by personal observations in Menindee in the 1970s.

Wilcannia it avoids other than sporting contact. A non-Aboriginal, who had played in the Wilcannia team, told of the Menindee players 'who had more Abos than white blokes' leaving immediately after their game, declining post-game socialisation. This social distance is maintained when both teams are on supposed 'neutral territory' in Broken Hill: '...they get in their own little mobs; they're different Abos altogether. There's been a lot of 'blues' between them. I don't know what it is' (Tape:87 B10).

8.3 Employment

There are no major avenues of employment in Menindee, but what jobs are available appear to be shared between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. The exceptions are the professional or skilled work areas, which are invariably occupied by non-Aborigines, usually from outside the community, and the jobs supplied by schemes set up specifically for the benefit of Aborigines. A group of Aborigines were, in 1987, serving apprenticeships as carpenters in the town, and the 7000 acre property of East Bootingee was being used both as a training station for Aboriginal youth and an expected generator of funds for the Nyampa Housing Company. This property, purchased in 1978, was obtained with funds secured when the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Development Commission mortgaged the Aboriginal houses in Menindee. Both schemes were working well⁴ and were a source of pride within the Aboriginal community. Sceptics in Broken Hill and elsewhere, who doubted the ability of Aborigines to acquire the skills of carpentry, and expressed sympathy to the non-Aboriginal in charge of their training for his misfortune in having to work with such people, were dismissed by him as

⁴ The collapse of the apprenticeship scheme aroused mixed feeling in the community. Disappointment and resentment were tempered by the political considerations of those opposed to any initiative in which they are not personally involved.

being ignorant of the potential of the young Aborigines. He believed such attitudes to be quite wrong and to be formed from a stereotyped perception of Aborigines in general:

That's the problem, you know. People think they're all like up at Wilcannia. Its hard to get across to them that they're not all the same. These lads here are doing a good job. So far, this is the only [Aboriginal apprenticeship scheme] in NSW that's working (Tape:86 M9).

It is an unfortunate reality that the failure of any such scheme, irrespective of the precipitants of failure, is taken to confirm such stereotypes. There is also a substantial cost to Aborigines themselves in the loss of self-esteem and the reinforcement of a conditioned expectation of failure.

Despite such apparent failures, the work ethic, seen by some people as not being part of the Aboriginal social and cultural consciousness, is certainly present in Menindee, even if not universally acknowledged. An Aboriginal woman, a member of a family in which the mother and several daughters are involved in Aboriginal social and political structures and who have experienced life in an Aboriginal community apart from Menindee, is typical of those who take pride in the sense of achievement gained from employment:

I've always been a worker myself. What I've got I've worked for. Both my husband and myself. We own our home and got two cars. You got to work for what you want (Tape:86 M7).

There is a lack of sympathy for those who are considered to lack the self-motivation to get a job, and a belief that work is available if one sincerely wants it. Here again, the comparison with Wilcannia is stressed by Aborigines themselves:

Most Aborigines are working, no real trouble. In Wilcannia they can get work but a lot don't want to work. Lot of Blacks used to getting things, not interested in work (Tape:86 M10).

Both the attitude and the comparison are supported by a young Aboriginal who contrasts the indolent Aboriginal with the willing-to-work non-Aboriginal who may not have the same opportunities:

Half of them, majority of the Aboriginal people is working because of Nyampa Housing Company and Bootingee...you can get a job in Wilcannia if you want to. Lot of them get jobs and stay a couple of months and pull out. Half them don't like work. But the white people will work around here if they can get it. But the Blackfellers got everything going for them, and they get a job and they go for a while and they lose it. They just used to lying around on the social, on the dole (Tape:86 M11).

Like many such comparisons, these statements are made on the basis of the individual's own interpretation of the employment situation. Such interpretations, in presenting a favourable comparison, often ignore the deficiencies of the local environment. To its people, Menindee is what they believe it to be.

8.4 Aboriginal - Non-Aboriginal Relationships

There is an overwhelming recognition among Menindee residents that the town is a 'good place' to live, that there is no conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attitudes and that the community as a whole shares a mutual interest in an alleviation of the problems posed by its isolation. The existence of an Aboriginal 'problem' is not denied, but it is stressed that this is not the situation in Menindee. It is elsewhere, such as Wilcannia, or it relates to the Aboriginal people in a national perspective, which is thought to be somehow different from the local and immediate situation.

Aborigines and non-Aborigines attribute the favourable local environment generally to the values, attitudes and behaviour of the Aborigines themselves. Rarely are non-Aboriginal influences advanced as determining factors. Questioning of local Aborigines reveals a pattern of closer association with the non-Aboriginal community leading to

improved living conditions which in turn results in greater acceptability. Because there is no residual Aboriginal group outside the town's population, the acceptability is general, rather than the conditional prescription applied in the case of Wilcannia. Whatever divisions existed in the past are forgotten or ignored by an analysis that stresses the contemporary situation. An older woman who has lived most of her life in the river town is unequivocal in her attitude to the community's relations and the cause of them:

My argument, most here at Menindee have lived with white people all their lives. Gone to school with them. As far back as I can remember its been the same. Old [a non-Aboriginal man], he used to say he could remember the kids coming in from the mission to school. They used to walk out the gate, arm in arm, Black and White. And old [a non-Aboriginal woman], lived here all her life, she went to school with Aborigines. She said there was never Black and White. Only that you get a few Blacks, try to stir up trouble. They couldn't get over that. They said you never got that in Menindee. You don't get it now (Tape:86 M15).

Equally positive in his response is a young Aboriginal who, despite his youth, is considered a potential community leader:

We went to school with one another and we're all still here. And it was probably a good school life at school. Most of them still here and we still get on alright (Tape:86 M11).

A more precise interpretation focuses on the individual experience: 'It's the way they brought up'. Other Aboriginal responses are invariably framed in the context of the homogeneity of the community; rarely is the need for a separate Aboriginal sense of purpose considered:

- Yes, Aboriginal and White. We support each other. We get together and talk things over.
- We don't have any discrimination.
- We all in together; we work together.
- Everyone's happy here, even the kids at school. They know they got to go to school to get jobs (Tapes:86 M5,M6,M7,M16).

Also considered in explanation of the favourable social environment of the Aborigines is the extent to which intermarriage has influenced the perceptions of non-Aborigines. One Aboriginal included most, if not all, Menindee residents in her analysis:

They're all got Aboriginal blood in them. Every family probably. Some of them, lot of them, won't admit it, but they don't push about the Aborigines because it might backfire on them (Tape:87 M15).

Another informant saw both positive and negative factors involved. Recognition of the fact of Aboriginal descent, she believed, assisted in the integration process, whereas denial created division between Aboriginal and Whites:

Well, intermarriage around, more so in Menindee. The first big [socially prominent] family in Menindee, their ancestors were Aboriginal. All related I guess. Yes, there's that integration, but also acknowledge that they did have Aboriginal ancestors. Where that is more acceptable you will see a better community. We get more racist attitudes where we know the community people are related to Aboriginal people and won't admit it. This is where we get the racist, from these people. They put up the barriers. They come around in a sneaky way afterwards and say 'My grandmother was an Aboriginal, but I can't tell my kids'. They putting up the barriers for us (Tape:85 B13).

It is obvious that the problem of identification is no less relevant in Menindee than it is in other, less favourable, social environments. Even here, where being Aboriginal is not an obvious handicap, the question of identity is as dependent on subjective perceptions as in other mixed communities. Julie Murkins, a non-Aboriginal resident of Menindee who has researched the community in writing its social history, has observed the extent of 'passing' in Menindee and the effect this has on the individual's self perception and social functioning, particularly in the area of education. But, she points out, the criteria for identification are complex:

It's very difficult in a community like this to define what or who an Aboriginal is. It depends on how they're brought up. Some are brought up to say they're not Aborigines, especially where they are fair...Then you get the very opposite end where you get

someone with as much Aboriginal blood...saying 'I'm very politically active. I'm standing up for what you've done to our culture'. But if you asked her [what being an Aboriginal was] it would be based on skin colour (Tape:87 M3).

8.5 Religious Influence

Personal observation and the evidence of others, including Aborigines themselves, suggest a religious element as providing another possible determining factor in the Menindee population's perception of its environment and consequent behavioural patterns. The Aboriginal Inland Mission (AIM), a fundamentalist group which influenced most western NSW communities during the 1920s and 1930s, had maintained missionaries at Carowra Tank until that station was abandoned, and continued their work at the new site at Menindee until its closure. The group's objectives, as outlined in its magazine, *Our Aim*, was 'the evangelisation of the Aboriginal and half-caste people of Australia...with the establishment of an indigenous Church and Native Ministry ever in view'. After the closure of the Menindee Mission a Methodist (later Uniting Church) presence was continued through the agency of the Bush Nursing Service, which, in the absence of a hospital, was, and still is, the community's sole local health care facility.⁵ A Roman Catholic Church presence was also established during the period of the mission station, but appears to have had less influence here than it did in Wilcannia, to where its Sacred Heart Mission was subsequently transferred. The possible explanation for the relative lack of influence of the Catholic Church is that it existed outside the Station,⁶ in which case it would not be

⁵ The association of religion with health care continues into the present day. However, the recruitment of professional staff to replace church members has created a sense of loss among older Aborigines. 'The old Sister would have prayed with me' complained an Aboriginal woman after receiving treatment, voicing a not-unusual regret or even resentment at the dispensing of health care without the expected religious accompaniment.

⁶ According to Hardy (1976:207) the Catholic presence was established *on* the Station but Aboriginal informants who lived there claim otherwise.

expected to have the same influence as the resident Church. The professed religious affiliation of Aborigines supports this.⁷

As a result of her personal experience and research, Murkins believes religion has had a significant influence in the social and political functioning of the community, albeit one that had more relevance in the past than it does now:

On the question of why we are like we are, I asked a few people in my interviews what they thought. One lady...claimed it was partly due to the fact that there was a very strong Methodist Church in this town in the formative years, compared to Wilcannia, where these sorts of things didn't take off too well. Her argument was that the Aborigines tended to bend under the sway of the Christian Nursing Service, and she quoted it as one of the reasons it tended to weld the society together; they were all Christians (Personal communication).

An Aboriginal woman, who had experienced the mission station life, had a similar interpretation of religious influence as a factor in contemporary relations, and on the comparison with Wilcannia:

Yes, they was all Christians, just about, on the old mission there...I think up there at Wilcannia, when they moved the people from the mission, the ones that went from Menindee, they didn't have that follow up with the missionaries or whatever, like our people did when they went to Murrin Bridge (Tape:86 B13).

It is, perhaps, relevant to an understanding of this belief in the importance of religion, at least among some of the community, that this person, describing how she had first become involved in Aboriginal politics, declared, 'They knew I was outspoken, and coming from a Christian family too, they knew they could trust me'. A younger, politically active woman, on being asked where she believed Aborigines were heading, replied seriously, 'All the way to heaven'. A Christian belief is affirmed also by a number of Wilcannia Aborigines, particularly females and those who live in a more settled lifestyle

⁷ Ninety per cent of Menindee Aborigines claim to be Christian, and of these only 33 per cent give their religion as Catholic. Of the 80 per cent of Wilcannia Aborigines who consider themselves Christian, 80 per cent are Catholic (1981 census).

similar to that which obtains in Menindee. Indications are that a religious background does facilitate the adaptation required of Aborigines to gain acceptance into the general society. It is not, of course, sufficient of itself to ensure this.

8.6 Incorporation Or Alienation

The Menindee experience is consonant with the proposition that where a favourable environment is in place or thought to be in place, and where an Aboriginal social identity reflects a capacity for adaptation, successful integration is possible. It needs to be stressed that, in this context, 'successful' implies not only amicable relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal but also that there should not be an expectation that Aborigines would necessarily forego a distinct identity. It is a form of identity that need not be supported by a sense of alienation to distinguish it from the host society, at least at local community level. Moreover, the social equilibrium within the integrated community fosters the recognition of a form of social control which indirectly assists the functioning of Aboriginal politics at the local level.

In a community such as Wilcannia, where the environment of interaction is interpreted quite differently, the level of alienation ensures that social control is an enforced, non-Aboriginal authority which is resented by most Aboriginal people, vigorously contested by some. Much of the anti-social behaviour that characterises the community can be attributed directly or indirectly to this opposition. However, there is no alternate structure of social control which might inculcate a respect for authority within the Aboriginal community, other than that within the immediate family. This significantly influences the shape of local politics. Without the legitimation of authority, it is extremely

difficult to obtain a broadly representative political structure and, notwithstanding the stimulus of alienation, local politics lacks leadership and direction. Its manifestation is, therefore, sporadic, invariably antagonistic or apathetic.

In contrast, where Aborigines are incorporated into a general community the likelihood is for a more ready acceptance of social control within the community itself. The acknowledgement of the legitimacy of authority not only reduces conflict but also facilitates the emergence of an intra-communal Aboriginal political structure. Although the incorporation of Aborigines is considered to occur at the individual level, the process includes the individual in a general community. It is possible within this community to reform an Aboriginal identity without compromising the integrity of the community. Nor does this restrict the individual to that level of Aboriginal identification. He or she can be an Aboriginal member of a general local community and also a member of an Aboriginal national or ethnic community. Integration is not simply a denial of an earlier sense of belonging; it can serve, paradoxically, as a dynamic in the strengthening of a collective, distinctive but non-confrontationist identity.

This form of integration would be an ideal type and is not necessarily replicated in the reality of Aboriginal social life in much of Australia. Yet the patterns of social interaction are such as to indicate a definite possibility for integration should Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal behaviour reflect the ideal. A comparison of Aboriginal communities argues a strong tendency for many Aboriginal people who have adapted to favourable environments, or whose demonstrated willingness to adapt has helped to generate such an environment, to consider themselves

as unalienated members of a general community while remaining distinctly Aboriginal.

8.7 Aboriginal Adaptation And Non-Aboriginal Acceptance

The suggestion that the Menindee Aborigines have integrated to survive in their particular environment is supportive of the hypothesis of adaptation proposed by Eckermann (1977). Having studied a rural community in South Western Queensland, Eckermann questions the utility of the assimilation/culture-contact/culture-conflict framework which has been the basis of much research into Aboriginal groups. Instead, she proposes an alternative which stresses the processes of adaptation. According to Eckermann it is the individual who must come to terms with the experienced environment and 'establish his own adaptive strategies and his own personal perceptions'. The 'adaptive hypothesis' she proposes as the basis of her model is that:

An individual's perception of himself determines to a large extent his ability to cope with the social and physical environments and his perceptions are largely determined by socialization, past and present experience with the majority and his ability to compete according to his own estimation in the economic environment (1977:32).

Such an approach appears more relevant to an understanding of the Menindee situation, and to the difference between it and that of other Aboriginal communities, than one stressing the historical factors of culture-contact/culture-conflict. The Menindee experience of the loss of the psychological shelter provided by the sense of collective identity and the subsequent movement of Aborigines, first to the camp site and later into the town, would be the individualising experience adumbrated by Eckermann's hypothesis. Menindee Aborigines *have* adapted to their environment as individuals. And, despite the political identity provided by their inclusion in structures designed specifically

for Aboriginal political and social participation, they live very much as individuals in the town.

But the environment to which Aborigines must adapt is not one fashioned by themselves. The opportunity for them to be absorbed into the general community is dependent very much on their acceptability to those comprising the majority of that community. Acceptance is conditional and 'must always be achieved' (Lippmann 1972:245). As Eckermann comments, 'socially, culturally and economically the majority dictates the terms under which the minority may participate in the environment' (1977:33). Earlier, this assessment had been placed in a broader perspective by C.H. Berndt who saw obligations on the part of both Aborigines and non Aborigines:

"Acceptance" is the key word to-day, with the implication that the onus is on the dominant population to ensure that Aborigines are received into social and political equality; it is framed as an obligation, or duty, to which dissenters should and must be constrained to obey. But the constraint extends, also, to those who are to be accepted...Tolerance of physical differences, acceptance of physical diversity where Aborigines are concerned... goes hand in hand with rejection of cultural diversity, and disapproval of any demands for social distinctiveness - especially on an "ethnic" basis (1961:32).

A minority group cannot so readily deny its cultural experience, and the diversity of this within a national population presents difficulties to nation-wide integration. But it is possible for differences to be minimised through the process of adaptation and acceptance, particularly at the local level where the actual experienced differences may not be so great. In any case, even where there is no significant cultural diversity or social distinctiveness, this should not prevent the minority group maintaining a valid identity, whether it is seen as 'ethnic' or otherwise. Nor should this in itself determine the extent of adaptation or acceptability.

Murkins sees the local situation very much in terms of 'acceptance':

My own experience as a Menindian; having spoken to a number of Aborigines on this topic; and as a teacher of young aboriginal children, has led me to believe that 'acceptance' is the key word in Menindee...there is this sense of 'We live here - we've got to get on' (Murkins, personal communication, 1987).

Murkins's 'acceptance', then, is one of the features which, with such others as employment, economic patterns, socialization, education and housing, form the proximal environment included in Eckermann's theoretical framework. According to Eckermann's thesis, this proximal environment 'has a direct effect on people's personal attributes and indirectly influences their behavioural attitudes' (1977:379). In the context of this analysis the behavioural and attitudinal characteristics are a function of Aborigines' adaptation to acceptance into a generally favourable environment, or one they interpret as being favourable. In turn, the way they adapt influences the relationship between them and the non-Aboriginal population whose reception of them may have originally been, in Murkins' terms, a 'grudging' acceptance. Because the proximal variables are not, in the first instance at least, determined by Aborigines themselves, the attitudes of non-Aborigines influence, and in turn are influenced by, Aboriginal self-perception and behaviour.

Whatever the initiating factor, the process follows that of Myrdal's 'cumulative causation' which, in this instance, sees non-Aboriginal prejudice or acceptance, and Aboriginal adaptation of behavioural patterns, mutually affecting each other. Because in this instance both have a positive progression, the result is an upward spiral in the self-perpetuating 'determining and limiting vicious cycle' (Myrdal, 1962:75). The assumption here is that Aborigines, because of the generally inferior social position they occupy, react to the variables which influence their environment; they do not initiate an upward progression.

If this theoretical prescription is extrapolated to the Wilcannia situation it becomes clear that the adaptation of those Aborigines who have been 'grudgingly accepted' as part of the town population is limited by the lack of an environment shaped by those other positive proximal variables available to the Menindee people. The limits of their adaptation in turn limit their acceptability. The 'vicious cycle' continues at best on a horizontal plane, or at worst spirals downward.

8.8 The Contrast Of Communities

Whatever the changing perceptions of Aborigines in the general Australian society, local attitudes formed over time, particularly antipathetic ones, have in large part been maintained in respect of the perception of an Aboriginal community. To be acceptable, Aborigines are required to function as individuals. The Aboriginal group presence has been, and to many non-Aborigines still is, resented. Aboriginal people are aware of this and, in turn, are resentful of their ascribed inferior status.

Much of the Wilcannia Aboriginal community is little changed from the fringe-dwelling groups that clustered along the river banks in the second half of the nineteenth century following their removal from traditional areas. Some families have continuity of existence for several generations in such conditions. They were left with a minimum of supervision - or assistance - to survive as best they could. Because the town has had a continuing Aboriginal presence in the form of an identifiable, and largely unwelcomed, community, the divisions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal have been sharply delineated.

Menindee's contemporary Aboriginal community has developed from a significantly different base. The initial post-settlement presence of a

significant population of Aborigines was not that of a camp on the outskirts of the town itself but of a supervised mission station some miles distant. Subsequently, the community has developed from the decisions of individuals and families to establish themselves in the town, rather than to an Aboriginal population. Many had a prior association with the area, but almost all have made a conscious decision to return in the period since most of the mission station population was moved to Murrin Bridge in 1949. The positive dimensions of the decision to return to Menindee contrasts with the apathetic acceptance of direction that has been the experience of many Aboriginal people. Whatever the reasons for their successful absorption into the town, their life style is a graphic reminder of the differences that distinguish Aboriginal communities and make difficult both the application of general policies and the realisation of national political goals.

Success or failure of any policy or process affecting Aborigines can be assessed only in the context of specific evaluative criteria. The Menindee experience provides at least two perspectives from which such criteria can be determined. Aborigines and non-Aborigines have become part of a homogeneous community which functions without apparent conflict attributable to racial differences. This is the view influenced by social criteria, one that is shared by most Menindee residents, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and supported by others who have some involvement with the community.

An alternate interpretation of the Menindee situation, one based on more politically inspired criteria, sees the Aborigines in the community as having a false consciousness of their identity because of their lack of interest in, and commitment to, Aboriginal political goals. In this

context they are considered to be politically apathetic, unconcerned with the real Aboriginal situation and unaware of what is happening to them. One former local Aboriginal, whose political involvement has distanced her physically and ideologically from the local community sees the problem in terms of a lack of an effective leadership which would maintain an awareness of the need to continue a political stance:

Lot to be done out there. Since I left, the Aboriginal community gone to pieces. The Aboriginal community won't work together the way it should. Don't give a damn, think it just like the Mother's Club (Tape:86 B13).

A lack of interest in specifically Aboriginal political goals is considered to reflect an apathetic population. But the absence of a sense of locally oriented alienation largely subdues the motivation needed for political involvement on specifically Aboriginal terms. There are Aborigines in the town who speak of Aboriginal objectives and of a denial of freedom that somehow restricts their progress, but these, invariably, have had exposure to Aboriginal politics outside their local community. The overwhelming majority of Menindee Aborigines live in the town, are part of that town's community and accept and are involved in the structures that determine their way of life there. Their apathy, to the extent it exists, is not that of the alienated, but rather what has been described by one resident as 'rural complacency'. This perspective, however, is relevant only to the localised political field. It is possible for Aborigines to display no sense of alienation at the local level, yet to express an historically inspired sense of alienation in a broader perspective of Australian social and political society. It is not uncommon to hear Aborigines affirm their satisfaction with the local situation while, at the same time, supporting the 'cause' of redress for 'what **they** did to **my** people'.

Many Wilcannia Aborigines, and others from outside the local community, whose political orientation is wider than the local level, are outspoken on the alleged lack of political awareness among the Menindee people. Attempts are made to denigrate Aborigines who have faced and overcome many of the problems that still exist in Wilcannia and other towns. They are dismissed as not being real Aborigines, or referred to as 'Gubbalovers', 'Gubbarigines' or 'Coconuts'⁸ because of their lack of a supposed *real* Aboriginal identity. In response, Menindee Aborigines are generally contemptuous of the 'lazy bastards in Wilcannia' who, they claim, 'won't get off their arse to help themselves', who 'won't do anything for themselves and want someone else to do everything for them'.

Whatever the basis for the assessment, it is universally agreed that conditions in Menindee are vastly different from those that exist in Wilcannia. Yet the Menindee community has experienced the same or similar influences as other communities in the state, particularly those in the Far West. There are kin-relationships linking the towns, and Aborigines in both Menindee and Wilcannia who have links with the old mission station community at Menindee, some of whom also shared the move from the river. A number of younger Aborigines in both communities were born on the Murrin Bridge Station. But a significant number in both towns are descended from those Aborigines who, for generations, moved along the Darling River, usually between Wilcannia and Pooncarie although sometimes further afield. Typical responses to questions of family background are provided by examples from each town. An elderly Wilcannia woman recalls her childhood as a time of constant movement.

⁸ Each of the terms appears to have been introduced from a more radical expression of Aboriginal politics. 'Gubba' is a term for non-Aborigines that was not commonly heard in the region until comparatively recent times. 'Coconut' is a derisive term suggesting 'black outside white inside'. It is used to describe a person who it is alleged looks 'black' and thinks 'white'.

Although born near Menindee she identifies with Wilcannia, to which town she first came in 1925. For many years her home was the temporary site where work was available:

Up and down the river, where there was work and that. My father - my mother used to work on the stations for the boss's wife and that. Well then, we lived around. My father, being a white man, wherever there was work, we stayed a month or a few weeks. He would arrange for us to have a bit of school, Louth or Tilpa and that. It wasn't much good for us. We couldn't stay for long. Had to move around. We didn't have a home, we had to make our own homes along the river wherever we stayed (Tape:86 W5).

Similarly, a Menindee woman identifies herself and the Menindee Aborigines generally with the 'River people' and their territorial domain:

Most of them came from along the river. People from here just travelled the river. My grandmother, she walked from Wilcannia to Pooncarie. Never moved off the river (Tape:86 M4).

The most common observation expressed by Aborigines and non-Aborigines is that the people in Menindee are in some basic way different from those in Wilcannia. 'They are a different type of Black', 'They're different altogether' and 'The Aborigines here are not the same as those in Wilcannia' are recorded examples of this explanation of the phenomenon. Differences, if they cannot be explained by inherent traits, and if the earlier historical influences were shared, must be influenced by more recent experiences and resulting variations in behaviour. A perspective provided by the Aboriginal officer of DAA who has worked in the region is worth repeating at length:

I could give you a short resume on why I believe that it's possibly different. At Menindee you only have rather a small population, total population, and half of that are Aborigines. And they've just integrated totally into that town situation. They've integrated to survive in that climate. So you have the whole lot: intermarriages, acceptance of Blacks and the Whites, and Whites and the Blacks, as living together, and that's why they may be stronger than others. If you go to Wilcannia where the population is double, so you have close to 1000 people in Wilcannia and 600 of those people are Aboriginal. No employment opportunities; there's more employment at Menindee because it's a smaller community. And it becomes a threat to the non-Aboriginal

population of towns like [Wilcannia] because so many Aboriginal people around doing 'nothing'...there's no local people employed in the shops. The Shire and the DMR [Department of Main Roads] employs a couple...and its non-Aboriginal people getting all the preferences. That's the sort of difference: the non-acceptance of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and the acceptance of the Aboriginal people in Menindee (Tape:87 B19).

Attitudes and behavioural patterns of Menindee Aborigines as a *community* contrasts with those of Wilcannia Aborigines as a *community*. Prominent Menindee Aborigines are vocal in their criticism of others who take refuge in apathetic indifference and alcohol abuse, and they refuse to accept the rationalising of aberrant behaviour as being an inevitable result of deleterious living conditions. One points to the local experience to illustrate the ability of individuals to rise above the conditions they encounter:

Blackfellers in Menindee lived in just as bad conditions as anyone, in fact worse, and you never found them drunkards and that, and they were clean and that, and why doesn't everyone. Old [a well respected Aboriginal woman] used to live on the mission, and her place - she had 14 kids - and you could eat your meal off the floor. She had a dirt floor but they used to sweep for miles around it. Now she lives in a house and its good. And it's not because she had it good all her life (Tape:86 M7).

A need for self-motivation, and contempt for those who lack it, are the underlying principles of such views of Aboriginal behaviour. It is a view shared by those, both young and otherwise, who obviously feel they have favourably influenced their own environment. Representative of these is the 21-year-old man whose indentured apprenticeship and general attitude had promised a favourable future:⁹

It's only what they make it themselves. No one pushed them and says because you're black and on the 'Social' you gotta get drunk every day. If you want to get yourself out of it you've got to *get* yourself out of it (Tape:86 M11).

⁹

The subsequent injury of this young Aboriginal and, later, the termination of the training scheme, deprived him of his employment. This again raises the spectre of the consequences of the frustration engendered by the denial of raised expectations which, as discussed above, is considered to be a significant factor in the generation of the attitudes of disaffection and alienation that is so evident among the youth of Wilcannia.

Similarly, a much older woman, whose involvement in Aboriginal and general community affairs - between which she sees no particular difference - earns her the respect of both Aborigines and non-Aborigines, invokes the principle of self-help:

Everyone wants to get to the top. But they should learn they got to work to get to the top. I had ten kids and all my kids found themselves jobs. You got to help yourself (Tape:86 M15).

In each case the denial of a welfare mentality is also an indirect affirmation of the despair - alienation nexus. The stress on individual effort highlights the importance attached to adaptation in the seeking of social acceptance. It illustrates also the importance of a consideration of the extent to which the processes of history and the exposure to the specific contemporary environments make possible such adaptation.

8.9 Limits Of Incorporation

An assessment of the relative social conditions of the Menindee and Wilcannia Aboriginal communities reveals a diversity of values, or a diversity in attitudes to many of the values held by other Australians. There is an assumption by sections of the Australian population that, because of their cultural experience, many Aborigines find these values alien. This may be a valid assessment of particular Aborigines or particular groups of Aboriginal people, but it cannot be ascribed to a population, or to all situations. Many Aborigines in rural and urban Australia have had the same, or a similar cultural experience as their non-Aboriginal peers, face the same pressures, and react similarly.

Menindee Aborigines are integrated into the general community because their cultural experience has prepared them for the necessary degree of adaptation and because non-Aboriginal people have accepted them. Their

acceptance ensures that they are neither denied equality nor afforded special treatment by the rest of the local community by dint of their past exclusion. This is not to suggest that the relationship, once established, is fixed; political change in particular can lead to a reinterpretation of the social environment and a reordering of relationships.

There are two principal problem areas facing Aborigines in a merged community such as Menindee. Firstly, their absorption into the larger society is generally seen as situationally specific; it is not necessarily readily transferred to another social environment. They are part of the Menindee community, accepted as equals there, but need to demonstrate their adaptability and acceptability to gain the same status elsewhere. The further the individual Aboriginal travels from his or her recognised community the more he or she is exposed to the generality of the Aboriginal 'problem' and, possibly, to the broader focus of Aboriginal politics. Secondly, the acquisition of political resources confronts the local community with a conscious or unconscious choice between the continuation and possible improvement of existing relationships, or the strengthening of an independent, ethnic identity. The options are not, necessarily, exclusive, but their alignment is difficult to achieve. In the period of a little more than a decade that the Menindee Aborigines have had access to political resources, they have utilised these to improve their social and economic life. If the objectives change and resources are used to develop an ideological base, a politically divided community appears inescapable.

What is possibly the greatest threat posed by a developing Aboriginal political consciousness, even at the local level, is the fear in the non-Aboriginal community of the independence of Aborigines. In a

community such as Menindee, Aborigines have been accepted as members of the community because their objectives are considered to reflect the same wants and needs as other, non-Aboriginal, residents. The use of resources to develop and strengthen an Aboriginal rather than a local identity could promote a needed sense of unity and purpose in Wilcannia; it has the potential to create tension and division in Menindee.

CHAPTER 9

ABORIGINAL POLITICS IN AN URBAN SETTING: BROKEN HILL

9.1 The Implications Of Social Mobility

In regard to its Aboriginal people Broken Hill presents a more complex phenomenon than either of its neighbouring communities. It is a much more diverse population and its people have been driven by quite different motivational forces to establish themselves as a spatially dispersed component of the population of the city. (see Figure 9.1) They have mostly migrated voluntarily to an area with which they had little or no previous association and where, at least in the initial influx, it represented a move into an area where there had been only a negligible Aboriginal presence. Of comparatively recent origin, the Aboriginal migration represents a conscious desire on behalf of those who have made the move to change the negative dimensions of their life. The result is a distinct form of social structure shaped by the exigencies of urbanisation and by the abandonment of an earlier protective influence of community living.

Aboriginal politics here, as in the other Aboriginal communities, is influenced largely by the nature of the social structures. Earlier affiliations and values have been undermined by the loss of the more communal style of living previously experienced by most members of the community. Urbanisation, despite the material advantages it offers, scatters the Aboriginal people throughout the city and deprives them of much of the psychological shelter of close ethnic contact. An increased interaction with non-Aboriginal society and greater exposure to non-

Figure 9.1: Map of Aboriginal dwellings, Broken Hill, 1988



Aboriginal values appear to affect the previous patterns of social interaction. New sets of relationships are formed, affecting and being affected by the political structures and alignments that evolve.

Wilcannia became the major Aboriginal population centre between Bourke and Wentworth and, consequently, a self-perpetuating entity as regional Aboriginal people sought a geographical, social and psychological shelter. The migration of the contemporary Aboriginal population to Menindee was based on a prior association. If few Aborigines were in the town when the drift back began it was, nevertheless, a place where Aborigines had lived; it had an Aboriginal association; as many of the returnees claim, it was their 'home'. In contrast, the Aboriginal migration to Broken Hill is basically influenced by an expressed desire to improve the individual standard of living; to gain greater access to material resources. Aborigines moved to, and remained in, Broken Hill because it was seen to promise better housing, health and education facilities and, possibly, employment. And it offered an escape for those who found their lives to have little or no meaning or promise in their existing environment. To some extent it could be seen as a physical move which represents also an attempted psychological escape from a past association of what has been variously described as 'feudalism' (Howard:1982b), 'internal colonialism' (Beckett:1982) or, in another context, 'welfare colonialism' (Paine:1977). It is a manifestation of independence, but one where the implied self-determination is limited by social, cultural and economic constraints.

Because it represents an Aboriginal community in a process of social change, Broken Hill offers an additional perspective within which to study the relationship between social identity and political functioning. Assuming an understanding of Aboriginal political

acculturation in which the political sphere is functionally related to the spheres of social and personal relations, it could be expected that this Aboriginal community would be fragmented and politically inept unless and until it became an incorporated part of the general community or could develop a collective identity. There is little within the community from which to assume identity apart from whatever common links its members might share from their past association, or from a common experience of exclusion or sense of alienation. Without a valid sense of place, at least in the short term, Aborigines seeking political significance outside the dominant society would be expected to look towards a wider, externally-based identification rather than towards the limiting dimensions of a tenuous local association.

It should be possible to assess whether social isolation will cause ethnic identity to contract as the former sense of community is weakened, or to expand to form the minimum size which Uchendu claims ethnic groups need to function (1975:271). On the other hand, Uchendu's thesis might be seen to reflect a process wherein contraction occurs initially, but is replaced by the expansion of identity as expectations remain unfulfilled or frustration inspires a need for political relevance.

A study of this community in such a context is of potential benefit in any consideration of the most appropriate directions for future policies affecting Aborigines. This would be so whether such policies were posited on a recognition of Aboriginal rights to some form of independent action, such as self-determination or self-management, or on a believed need to facilitate their absorption into the general society. It provides an opportunity to study the effects on attitudes of a change in social and geographical environments, and of the political

implications of these. There are few, if any, optimistic analyses from Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal sources of the possible future of the Wilcannia Aboriginal community and many Aborigines see the move away from there as the only alternative to a continuing bleak existence. But whether the urban move is successful or otherwise will depend on much more than a desire to escape. If the Aboriginal presence is an unwelcome one and no attempt is made to facilitate the transfer, Broken Hill could well become as alienating an environment as that which had earlier been forsaken.

The community study could also provide information of assistance in charting and predicting the probable directions of Aboriginal politics in an urban setting. If self-determination is to have any meaning at all, Aborigines must be able to organise into decision-making bodies the community within which they live and with which they identify. To attempt this at the national level and impose it from without would not be acceptable to locally oriented Aborigines; It must be created at the local level and extended from this. Yet to this point the evidence here is of political apathy in general, and an externally commissioned and directed political expression in the few instances where some action has been taken.

9.2 Community Origins

A majority of the Broken Hill Aboriginal community are former residents of Wilcannia, with the remainder coming from other areas in NSW and from South Australia. A number have drifted into the city from Tibooburra either after a period in Wilcannia or in the small town of Silverton, about 25 kilometres from Broken Hill. At a time when Aborigines were discouraged from remaining in the city, Silverton was a more or less permanent home for several families, most of which have subsequently

moved into Broken Hill as the hostile social environment underwent some change in the 1960s and beyond.¹ Of the South Australian migrants, there are few who do not have ties with one or more of the local families. In most instances marriage between a person from one of the far-western NSW communities and one from South Australia has established the link, and it is these people or members of their families who return. There are exceptions, as in the case of the pastor of an Aboriginal religious group who brought his family with him when he established his ministry in the town. He has been followed by a steady drift of relatives who have now established a sizeable and growing family group in Broken Hill.

Reasons advanced for the move to Broken Hill vary, but generally focus on the expectation of better material conditions. Closer questioning, particularly of those who have moved from Wilcannia, often reveals other underlying motives which appear to have had a significant influence on individual decisions. Prominent among these is a desire to escape the physically and psychologically destructive environment of alcohol and violence, often referred to euphemistically as the 'pretty rough life'. Another reason is related to the extensive, interconnected kin relationships that exist in a relatively small and static population. The fear of 'wrong' marriages is very real in these communities where youth become sexually active at an early age and the paternity of many children born of these liaisons is, according to Aboriginal informants, often not disclosed or not really known:

That's what's happening here now. Lot of relations [marrying] because lot of them don't go away anywhere. Lot of them don't know who their real father is (Tape:86 W15).

¹ It is significant that the Aborigines who were former residents of Tibooburra moved into Broken Hill as individuals and had no established Aboriginal community within which they could seek shelter. In most cases they have integrated well into the general community and many have no contact with the former Wilcannia people.

One example where the possibility of marriage problems has been a consideration is the woman who made the move with her nine children, citing better educational opportunities as the principal reason. Her daughter and other members of the community say the fear of unacceptable relationships to be a more urgent concern; 'Her kids are related to all the other kids, and if they stayed in Wilcannia there was only relatives and that' (Tape:86 W23). It is, perhaps, relevant that of the nine children eight subsequently married or formed *de facto* relationships with non-Aborigines. The mother appears to have welcomed these relationships despite an outspoken pride in her Aboriginal identity and her active and effective - albeit irregular - involvement in political activity.

For some Aborigines, residence in Broken Hill, whether short-term or on an intended more or less permanent basis can also be attributed indirectly to the serious alcohol problem that characterises the Wilcannia population. A number of Aborigines have sought to remain in Broken Hill following periods of detention, frequently for alcohol-related offences. Some have been attracted by the prospect of life in the larger city and have settled into their new environment without major problems. The less successful have been unable to make the expected social and attitudinal changes and have drifted into their former social patterns. Employment opportunities are lost, as is housing when overcrowding leads to a rapid deterioration of property and rents remain unpaid. Their regression is described by one Aboriginal who has been more successful in her adaptation:

There's still a few from Wilcannia still think they're living in Wilcannia and go the same way. Drink, got good homes, couldn't pay the rent, so got kicked out of houses and went back to Wilcannia. Lot harder to live like that here; you have to look after your house. Lot got drinking, smashed up their houses, got kicked out (Tape:86 B17).

Others have been disinclined to return to a life style they feel could only lead to further conflict. Their attempts to rehabilitate themselves are frequently threatened by an influx of relatives or former close associates who expect, and often receive, hospitality:

They might make a go here, it's easier to get off the grog here, it's not around you so much here. But they've always got visitors in their houses, start hitting the grog again. They give up - go back to Wilcannia (Tape:86 B17).

Despite the failures and those who return to their former hometown because of personal ties or for other reasons, the Broken Hill Aboriginal population shows a rapid rate of increase. It has become a permanent, if largely unwelcomed, feature of the city. Suggestions are made by some observers that a considerable part of the movement is the result of unacknowledged policy decisions. Neglecting to build houses in Wilcannia while offering to build more in Broken Hill is said to be part of a deliberate strategy of covert coercion. This belief has, at various times, been reinforced by widespread rumours of plans to close the Wilcannia Mallee settlement entirely and transfer its inhabitants to the city. At the same time a proposal that a large number of houses were to be built in one area of Broken Hill was widely believed to be the long term plan to house Aborigines.² This was strongly opposed by most Aborigines questioned who expressed their fear both of an influx of 'strangers' and of the concentration of Aborigines in one area.³ There appears to be a fear in many individuals that their own form of adaptation will in some way be compromised. Broken Hill's non-Aboriginal population has generally not welcomed its Aboriginal

² Housing authority officials denied knowledge of any such plan.

³ It is not unusual for urban Aborigines to resist 'ghettoisation'. In evidence to a NSW Legislative Assembly Select Committee an officer of the Housing Commission stated that 'I have had more Aborigines asking not to be housed alongside Aborigines than have asked to be put alongside Aborigines' (*NSW PP* Vol.IV, 1980-81:622).

migrants, and the possibility of spatial concentrations are regarded with concern.

9.3 Non-Aboriginal Perceptions Of The Aboriginal Presence

Until comparatively recent times, the attitude of most Broken Hill residents towards Aborigines probably reflected that held by most non-Aborigines and could most accurately be described as one of indifference:

The Aborigine was no economic threat, it would be hard to conceive of one's daughter as likely to marry him, and one would be unlikely to find him taking up residence next door. Indeed, for the majority of Australians, the Aborigine was probably not as visible as his counterpart, the American Indian, and his fate was of no greater concern (Western 1973:244).

For the greater part of its history there had been only an insignificant number of Aborigines in the city and residents were able to ignore the conditions that existed in the surrounding rural areas. Aborigines were expected to live in Menindee, Wilcannia, Ivanhoe or Tibooburra, not in Broken Hill. The few families which had permanent residence were grudgingly accepted because they conformed to expected standards of behaviour; they were successfully 'assimilated' or 'white blackfellers'. Short-term residents, mostly associated with the pastoral industry, were tolerated, as were the 'shoppers' from Menindee and Silverton. Less welcome were the drifters who occasionally camped on the city's outskirts until moved on by police.⁴

⁴ This situation is still a feature of the city's reception of Aborigines who cannot conform to accepted standards. Although less regular, an Aboriginal presence can often be found on the city's outskirts when they have been unable to secure shelter or have been evicted from one of the local parks. In mid 1988, a group who attempted to set up residence in the abandoned buildings of a disused railway station were moved out by police at the insistence of railway authorities. They camped on the outskirts of town with no shelter other than a clump of trees. These people had no kin among the town's community, being from places as diverse as Alice Springs, Cherbourg, Dubbo and Tibooburra.

The comparatively recent buildup of the Aboriginal population is resented by many non-Aborigines, in many cases an openly expressed resentment that is tempered by the social and physical distance maintained between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. As in other towns and cities, there are Aborigines who have merged with the general community, work with non-Aborigines and in a few instances have some form of social interaction. This, however, is not the general experience. According to one woman who is part of the Aboriginal social structure:

There is really bad racism in Broken Hill. [Aborigines] live in their own little group. They ignore the rest of the town. It's a form of protection (Tape:88 B5).

A high level of unemployment, which ensures a visible and generally unwelcomed presence in the city's main streets, and the associated drinking patterns reinforce the stereotypes that categorise Aborigines as alcoholics who won't work. Concern at the increase in Aboriginal numbers has been overshadowed by community concern for the economic future of the city. This leads to a belief that Aborigines are receiving special treatment or are manipulating 'the system':

You have a lot of white people against the Aboriginal people. They're supposed to get so much...people involved with certain organisations might be driving around in a new car, and even with the local football club, 'Ah! they're ripping off the local football club', because they've got a new car (Tape:87 B9).

A negative or hostile attitude towards Aborigines is often justified by reference to some real or imagined support that has been extended in the past but which is no longer warranted. Evidence of tangible support is difficult to find and it appears to have been little more than an acknowledgement that Aborigines were in need of some form of help. The first stirrings of political action or evidence of material gain is sufficient to change this, something that does not go unnoticed by Aborigines:

Each year less and less white people support [aid to] Aborigines. Whites say they can't go to Mootwingee now because the Aborigines have got it, all of Broken Hill know that. And they say 'Black bastards, we supported them a couple of years ago, but definitely not now'. And you get a person coming up saying, 'Listen, is it true [that] if you Aboriginal people want cars you make the first couple of installments on them and you don't make any more payments on them, the government pays for them for you?' That's the type of thing you get here (Tape:87 B9).

Another stereotype of Aborigines, common in Broken Hill, is that they are violent people. Many non-Aborigines allege experience or at least knowledge of violence, particularly against young males. Objective data are difficult to obtain as NSW crime statistics do not classify offenders according to race or ethnic origin. Overall figures, however, indicate that Broken Hill has a very much lower rate of crimes with violence than either Wilcannia or Menindee. (see Figure 7.2).

Claims of widespread violent behaviour, levelled against Aborigines, are refuted by police who report relatively minor problems with the Aboriginal population. Violence is said to be minimal and invariably related to domestic incidents. Aborigines themselves tell of 'bashings' by groups of non-Aborigines who ambush solitary Aborigines leaving hotels: 'Their favourite sport is wading into a lone Aboriginal person. Twenty to one and they get away with it most of the time' (Tape:88 B15). Police admit that the practice exists but deny that it is as prevalent as Aborigines claim. It is, nevertheless, widely believed by Aboriginal people and is a further disincentive to their efforts to make a successful life for themselves in this predominantly non-Aboriginal society.

9.4 Aboriginal People In The Process Of Adaptation

9.4.1 Underlying Problems

In attempting to establish themselves in Broken Hill, Aboriginal people face similar pressures and form similar social patterns to those of

other urban areas which have been studied. (Barwick 1964; Beasley 1970; Eckermann 1977; Gale 1964, 1972; Gale and Wundersitz 1982; Lippmann 1972; Pierson 1977; Smith and Biddle 1975). Gale and Wundersitz (1982), in their study of the Aboriginal population in Adelaide, identify a community that functions in a number of different and changing ways. While not directly comparable, the correspondences between the two communities are such as to indicate that Broken Hill Aborigines are undergoing a similar, if less advanced, process of incorporation:

On the one hand, it operates as a series of separate families and individuals well integrated into the urban environment and using the same facilities as those available to the population as a whole. At another level, it functions as a separate, self-defining Aboriginal community, developing and using facilities which are for Aborigines only. In yet a third way, it operates as a series of sub-groups, primarily kin-defined, whose members interact with each other but have limited contact with other Aborigines in the city (1982:1).

There is an attitude of awareness of contemporary realities implicit in the move of Aborigines into the urban area of Broken Hill and explicit in the statements of a number of these people:

What people got to realise...We in the modern age today, the old way of life is gone forever (Tape:86 B15).

I suppose I shouldn't say this, but [the traditional life] is all gone now. We can't live in the past, we got to look ahead (Tape:87 B20).

This implied willingness to adapt to the changed situation confronting them is undercut to a large extent by the reluctance of a significant percentage of the non-Aboriginal community readily to accept its migrant population. As one Aboriginal complains, 'We want to mix but we can't; they won't let us'. A lack of support services which could facilitate adaptation is an additional inhibiting factor for people attempting to adjust to a significantly different social environment. The search for a better life is one which these Aborigines undertake often without significant moral or material help. Housing, education and employment

present difficulties which may be as traumatic as those they have sought to escape.

9.4.2 Housing

A survey of the Aboriginal population of Broken Hill undertaken in 1986 identified housing and employment as its principal needs. In a subsequent survey in June 1988 these priorities had not changed (see Appendix A). This can be expected with an increasing population when the stated policy for housing construction is to follow, rather than to anticipate, demand. In spite of the inevitable lag in construction, housing authority officers claim that no significant waiting list exists. In 1986 the situation was considered to be satisfactory and in June 1988 only three or four families were said to be awaiting authority housing. This does not contradict the evidence of need, but rather reflects the lack of awareness of the availability of, or of the procedures necessary in applying for, housing. Moreover, it is another example of the reluctance of Aborigines to approach such authorities. Although many Aborigines are apprehensive of bureaucratic structures, both ignorance and reluctance can, in large part, be ascribed to the deficiencies in the operation of welfare and support policies. These deficiencies are present in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal controlled organisations.

Where housing authorities have provided accommodation for Broken Hill Aborigines⁵ the general standard is superior to most of that available in Wilcannia. Against this, a steady flow of visitors causes a good deal of overcrowding and lack of care resulting at times in a rapid deterioration of properties, a problem that is not evident in the more

⁵ Although spatially dispersed throughout the city, There is some clustering of Aboriginal people due to the provision of housing authority accommodation in specific areas. These areas, however, contain both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents.

stable community of Menindee. It is believed that this problem will be overcome when Aborigines are more accustomed to living in an urban environment and additional housing eliminates much of the overcrowding. This, however, will depend on the extent to which relatives will continue to follow the migrants.

The visible evidence of neglect reinforces stereotypes of Aborigines as being unfit for urban socialisation and contributes to the scarcity of rental accommodation. Aborigines report the virtual impossibility of obtaining rental accommodation other than low standard, expensive properties which vendors would have difficulty renting to non-Aborigines. Even with Aborigines who claim they suffer no prejudice or discrimination, the problems associated with trying to obtain rental accommodation is attributed to racism. An Aboriginal woman with a non-Aboriginal spouse was philosophical about the inevitable racial prejudice:

I don't get much agro from Whites. But you can't get flats, not if you're black. You ring up and it's all right, but when you turn up and they see you the flat's gone. As soon as they see you're black they won't take you (Tape:86 B17).

A non-Aboriginal woman with an Aboriginal husband was less understanding:

Until we got this [housing commission home] he couldn't get anything at all. They're real bastards. They won't rent to an Aboriginal no matter who he is. Everyone knows [husband], and he would be the neatest, cleanest person you could find (Tape:88 B15).

Aborigines are frequently accorded a cool, if not openly hostile, reception when they move into housing in what has previously been an all-non-Aboriginal area. In some cases this hostility is overcome and the Aboriginal family becomes an accepted part of the neighbourhood. This is much more likely when the non-Aboriginal neighbours are in the lower socio-economic strata and are themselves occupants of housing

authority homes. With others, the initial hostility dissipates but no contact occurs between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal:

When we first went to look at the house, people on the opposite corner said, 'Ah, no! Don't tell me the boongs are moving in'. Now we don't have any trouble. Can't tell you the names of the neighbours, but we don't have any trouble. Nobody complains about us. We mind our own business (Tape:86 B11).

Not all non-Aborigines are so ready to come to terms with their Aboriginal neighbours. Several instances have been reported, and confirmed, of non-Aborigines complaining of having to sell their houses and move to another part of the city because there were 'too many Blacks in the neighbourhood'.

A majority of Broken Hill Aborigines when first questioned claim little or no experience of discrimination or resentment from non-Aborigines. (see Appendix A) Yet there is ample evidence that this is not the reality most confront. Further questioning invariably results in an admission of the awareness of prejudice which is either ignored or largely overcome by minimising contact with non-Aborigines. Racist-inspired prejudice inhibits the adaptation of Aborigines to the demands of urban living, and isolates them, initially, in small groups. Its persistence denies them a collective identification with their geographical place and is likely, in time, to increase a consciousness of alienation. A political expression generated within this consciousness would be expected to reflect their perceived exclusion.

9.4.3 Education

If housing, health and employment are the material components of acceptable contemporary urban living standards, education is the acknowledged prerequisite for future individual and collective economic advancement. In each of the far western communities, education and training are generally claimed to be the principal needs of young

people. Even where discrimination in employment is alleged it is still acknowledged that without the necessary educational background Aborigines have little chance to gain economic security. Most Aboriginal students drop out of school before gaining meaningful qualifications (Australian Government 1985; Department of Employment, Education and Training 1988; Turney, Sinclair and Cairns 1980; Young and Fisk 1982), and many schemes to supplement Aboriginal education and vocational training have failed. Yet there is general awareness of a lack of needed skills and continuing demands that these be provided. To some extent, this apparent contradiction can be understood in the context of the ambivalence displayed by Aborigines in so many of their interactions with the non-Aboriginal world. This, however, is not strictly an Aboriginal response. Similar attitudes are apparent with non-Aborigines in comparable socio-economic situations who reflect a sense of alienation from the society at large.

Few, if any, rural or urban Aborigines renounce the material benefits of the non-Aboriginal world; they resent what they see as their deprivation and the discrimination that is the cause of this. However, they are often defeated by their social environment, by their own inculcated attitudes and expectations and by the perceived racism that denies them inclusion on terms of equality (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen 1979). Referring to this, in regard to education, a non-Aboriginal teacher said:

You know, this thing, the minute they can't do something, they run, they escape. And you spend all your time bringing the kids back because we were told that's what we had to do...They're so insecure (Tape:87 B8).

An Aboriginal educational officer, who has herself been through the process of Aboriginal education and who now sees it from the outside, can understand the philosophy of failure:

I think, 'what do I have to grow up as?' I know I'm Aboriginal but I go to this white school and learn the white man's ways, and the history right up to now was taught from a white person's point of view and they gave the child no history about themselves to identify with in that white system. And everyday of their life they've got to go to school, in Broken Hill especially, and be called 'boong' and whatever, and the kids end up fighting and rebelling against the system and it's always the Aboriginal child gets expelled (Tape:86 B7).

And at the local level the experience of a young Aboriginal woman is distressingly similar, the school environment reinforcing the expectation and acceptance of failure:

When we first came here from Wilcannia the kids were pretty prejudiced. I had a few fights, nearly got expelled. There were too many hassles so I left school, tried some tech courses, but no good. Then they started courses for Aboriginal people so I started an accountant's course but then I had a baby. I want to go back later (Tape:86 B17).

School principals report apathy and absenteeism but are generally aware of the social patterns which are relevant to these problems. The high rate of absenteeism - as distinct from truancy - is considered to be due to a lack of interest in the school by children and their parents or guardians, the mobility of families and, frequently, the incidence of violence within families.

There is a degree of racist conflict in the schools, but this is said to be minor compared to the considerable hostility, and at times violence, between Aborigines themselves. This, it is believed, reflects the social order of the community. Aboriginal students are socially stratified, with those who are most reluctant to identify as Aborigines but need to do so to receive education grants, the most successful performers. At the other end of the spectrum, the poor performers are those who are most Aboriginal-oriented.

These and other dimensions of the difficulties Aborigines face in their interaction with educational structures are replicated in many other Aboriginal communities. When added to the resentment of real or

imagined prejudice and discrimination many Aborigines feel, they create a climate wherein education as it is structured is a particularly unattractive experience.

Education becomes another area where past patterns of socialisation and contemporary pressures inhibit Aboriginal adaptation. If it fails to equip them for participation in the general society their alienation can only increase. As with the other factors working against Aborigines and their attempts to adapt, it has the potential to influence eventually the shape and directions of political expression. The importance of the educational experience in creating a favourable social, political and economic environment is implicit in the assessment of a senior officer of the Department of Education:

By and large, despite the best policies and will in the world, whatever will ultimately happen to the benefit or otherwise of the Aborigines will begin in the classroom (*NSW PP* 1980-81 Vol IV:689).

If employment be the objective sought by Aboriginal people, it is in the classroom that the possibilities for this are established or denied.

9.4.4 Employment

Opportunities for Aboriginal employment in Broken Hill are limited by the structural conditions of the city's economy and by the negative influences of Aboriginal social and educational backgrounds. Most Aborigines lack the training for other than unskilled or semi-skilled work and opportunities within these categories are severely restricted in this city. The mining industry, which is the major employer of labour, faces diminishing ore reserves which become increasingly expensive to mine. Increased mechanisation has improved cost efficiency and reduced the labour force. A serious downturn in commodity prices in 1986-1987 led to a reorganisation of operations and a dramatic decline in employment. The optimism that had long sustained the Broken Hill

community was replaced by a reluctant acceptance of the finite life of the mining field. In such an environment the needs of Aborigines are not accorded a high priority.

In times when employment was available the mining companies had no policies specifically applying to Aborigines. They were neither denied opportunities nor afforded any incentives to apply for jobs. A small number have applied for and secured employment, but few have remained in such positions for long periods. Where there has been a reasonable continuity of employment the Aboriginal worker appears to have been readily accepted by his non-Aboriginal work mates, and supervisors have regarded them as competent workers. As has been reported in other areas, Aborigines who have successfully adapted to regular employment and live among and in a similar style to their non-Aboriginal associates, may identify more with the non-Aboriginal values than with those of Aborigines (see e.g Eckermann 1977; Gale 1972). Nonetheless, there are a number of factors which inhibit Aborigines in the process of reaching this stage of accommodation and affect their attitudes in seeking and continuing in employment. Moreover, the alignment with non-Aboriginal values is not necessarily a permanent position. The reinterpretation of identity according to perceived Aboriginality has become a feature of many urban Aboriginal people.

A conditioned - and understandable - lack of self-esteem and a reluctance to confront authority structures prevents many Aborigines from applying for employment in an open labour market. The mental set associated with an inculcated state of dependency inhibits the self-confidence needed actively to seek employment, and, where work is obtained, discourages participation in the long term. In each community there are Aborigines who have obtained employment but have lacked the

motivation to continue for more than a few months or, in some cases, even weeks. Young people in particular, uncertain, conditioned to failure, and lacking even the experience of sporadic employment their fathers or grandfathers might have had, are often disinclined to consider the possibility of employment. Others, with an employment history that includes several positions, cite boredom, 'not liking the job', of 'something else coming up' or 'just looking around for something better' as reasons for leaving their jobs. Paradoxically, most of these people, together with most other Aborigines questioned, cite lack of employment as one of the major problems facing their communities. Apathy, however generated, becomes the reality behind a facade of self-determination or 'independence'.

9.4.5 Unemployment Or Independence

Many calls for independence or self-determination for Aborigines are made without differentiation between life styles and expectations. For the rural or urban Aborigines, their independence would have to be within the cultural, social and economic structures that form the framework of their existence. It is not, nor could it be expected to be, the form of independence that might be envisaged, and to some degree attainable, by more remote Aborigines. This does not deny the subjective reality of identity; rural and urban Aborigines mostly *believe* they belong to a national collective and to this extent they can be seen in the perspective provided by Sutton (1981:61), who states that 'Aborigines are still Aborigines without what is popularly called "traditional culture"', or Coombs (1983:3) who claims, '...wherever people live who identify as Aborigines, they share certain characteristics that distinguishes them quite clearly from non-Aborigines'. However, the expectations of these rural and urban Aborigines are generated from within their particular socialising

process. They are expectations cast within a range of options peculiar to their particular social structures.

In discussing independence, Coombs (1985), although focussing on central Australia, implies a generalised Aboriginal population in his prescription. He sees independence as involving Aborigines having access to choice about their life styles, and considers that employment for a wage or salary as one of the 'landless proletariat' should be one option open to them:

But if it is the only option, then Aborigines would not have a genuine sense of being 'independent'. Equally 'independence' does not require that they refuse to accept the services and other rights available to other members of the community generally. Thus they can expect to have access to education for their children, to health services, to Social Security, to Unemployment Benefits if they are eligible, and so on (1985:3).

Whatever the moral or philosophical justification for this prescription, its destructive effects on communities where there is no spatial isolation from the general society is evident. Where dependency is perpetuated the very idea of independence is devalued, a point made obliquely by one Aboriginal in response to a question on the meaning of self-determination put to him by a member of a Parliamentary Select Committee:

It means that you stand on your own two feet. It means that you do things for yourself and do not depend on other people to give you what you want...They must be taught not to depend on others all the time (*NSW PP* vol IV, 1980-81:835).

Another area of Aboriginal urban socialisation that may contribute to unemployment - and has done so in Broken Hill - is the expectations of close family and friends. As with the expected provision of space in the house, the sharing of economic resources is considered by some people to be an unquestioned responsibility. As Coombs (1983:53) sees it:

...an Aboriginal feels free to call upon the hospitality of quite distant kin or 'country people', and the expectation of hospitality at least for a 'reasonable time' - is quite strong.

But Gale (1977:331) suggests that there may be sound economic reasons why so many Aborigines maintain their kinship ties in an urban location and questions the widespread interpretation of obligation:

The extended family is an economic necessity for many. So long as this condition remains, is it really legitimate to discuss such kinship ties solely in terms of tradition or social obligation?

Eckermann (1988) also casts doubts on the typicality of the extended family in Aboriginal social organisation in urban and rural areas. She questions the stereotype which alleges that Aboriginal people are 'communally oriented, always share, make decisions by consensus, and are dependent on group orientations' (1988:34). Her research suggests the situation can be quite different, at least within the Aboriginal groups she has studied.

In the context of survival in a situation of general unemployment, Rowley (1982:11) refers to 'a precarious sharing economy' based on the sharing of pensions. Where incomes are limited but basically equal this form of economic necessity significantly influences social relationships. In Wilcannia and to some extent in Broken Hill the continuity of alcohol supply is maintained by the acceptance of this form of obligation and the spread of welfare payments:

We get the 'social' [social security benefits] one week and the pensioners and that get their's the next week. There's usually someone got money and we know where to go for a drink (Tape:87 W16).

Broken Hill Aborigines generally see their obligations to have a more limited application. There is sharing, as with the woman who declares:

That's why we're pretty poor these days. Share out what you got, or what someone else needs. Aboriginal people not money grabbers. Some are, but most not (Tape:87.B17).

These comments refer to a close family relationship; they do not have the general application implied in Coombs' statement. In this urban community sharing is often resented and generates hostility between those who see themselves as having made a better life for themselves and others whom they believe want to share what they are not prepared to strive for:

A lot [of Aborigines] are bludging on other Aborigines. They're selfish, won't try to help themselves, won't get involved with the community (Tape:86 B7).

Much of the problem in Broken Hill is attributed to envy of those who have made the break from Wilcannia and appear to have gained some advantage, by those who are reluctant to follow:

They look at you and say you're getting this and that. Because people from there look here and say you're getting everything. You get a lot of this, people just sitting back and doing nothing and looking at other people and saying 'How come I haven't got what you've got?'...some of the people got good jobs here and people in Wilcannia look at that and say 'Why haven't I got it?' They're not doing anything about it. They just sit there in gutters and say 'Why haven't I got that?' (Tape:88 B5).

When an Aboriginal is employed and is responsive to the obligations - or demands - of numerous kin, he or she is faced with several choices: accept the inevitable decline in available income and the consequent decrease in living standards; deny the obligation and withdraw into the nuclear family structure; or relinquish the employment and so eliminate the need to share in such an unequal relationship. At least in the urban environment of Broken Hill, an initial selection of the first option appears inevitably to lead to either of the others. But the choice is dependent on the way the individual interprets his or her environment and the way in which he or she identifies within it.

9.5 Aboriginal Identity In An Urban Setting

A meaningful Aboriginal social identity needs to be sought firstly within the local community sphere, but a degree of self-interest and of political apathy is indicated in the individual motivation to seek a foothold in the wider society. In turn, this is itself inhibited by the continuing ties of past relationships and associations, what Langton (1981:53) refers to as 'kinship and regional affiliation for community security'. Aborigines in an urban environment are subject to opposing pressures which, unless resolved, can lead to, or reinforce, a state of disjunctive marginality. The tension between the push for a better future and the contrary pull of the past are revealed in the discourse of one perceptive woman:

You come here for all sorts of reasons: for education purposes, for medical purposes, you come here to get away from domestic situations elsewhere. You come here for all these reasons and you stay here. Then you go back again and then come again and go back again...The people who live here now, who have lived here for ten or fifteen years, don't really see this as home at all. And their children don't either...I think it's to do with the family, with the belief in the family and the community that they all have. They don't separate themselves from their relatives, they couldn't do that. They've got strong family ties (Tape:86 B21).

Apart from the importance of family ties, the lack of a sense of community and of social organisation in a new environment would incline migrants to consider their move to be temporary. The greater sense of security and acceptability represented by past ties would preserve them, at least until new relationships could replace what had been foregone. This is the attitude alluded to by Coombs (1978:116-117) when he describes the movement of Bourke Aborigines from the reserve site into the town:

The reserve alone - despite its unprepossessing character - serves as a unifying influence. Even those who have left it to live in newly built houses in the town return to it, often daily...It is in a way a symbol of security and of the unquestioning acceptance which this Aboriginal culture of poverty holds out to all the 'dark people', whatever their failures or inadequacies.

With Broken Hill Aborigines, however, the past association has a diminishing importance in light of the considerable majority who indicate their intention to remain in their present locality.⁶ Whether they stay as individuals or as part of a collective depends on the extent to which they identify with a community.

Without a sense of community local Aborigines are unlikely to be politically active, and this, on the surface, might well be applied to Broken Hill. As seen by one Aboriginal woman, 'They work together more if they can identify their community, but here in Broken Hill they don't identify with their community' (Tape:86 B13). Seen at a more practical level, the lack of community consciousness is evident in the social dispersal of the people:

...when you go to other places the first thing you say is 'Where's the pub that the blackfellers hang out at?' There's always a pub where all the Aborigines go to drink - they all together. But here at Broken Hill they don't drink together. Everybody is interested in a lot of things and they mix with other people (Tape:86 B18).⁷

In contrast to Wilcannia where, at least within their respective residential areas, Aborigines are well acquainted with the movements of other Aborigines and visiting patterns are extensive, the Broken Hill people tend to keep within the narrow confines of immediate family. The exception is the group which, lacking suitable accommodation or relationships, congregate in some part of the city for communal drinking sessions. Aborigines quite often know little about other Aboriginal near neighbours unless these are close relatives. 'We don't live in one another's house', 'We don't have much to do with them', 'She only visits

⁶ In a random sample of Broken Hill Aborigines in June 1988 more than 80 per cent of those questioned expressed their intention to remain in the city.

⁷ This Aboriginal view of the community contrasts with that held by many non-Aborigines. It requires only a small number of Aborigines to be seen drinking in a hotel for it to be seen as an 'Abo's pub'.

her brother over in the next street', 'I don't know much about the people [in another part of the city]' are typical responses to questioning about social interaction. They indicate a much greater adaptation to the social patterns of the general population than is often believed to be the case.

The isolation of people into close family groups contradicts, at least in the short term, the expectation that the apprehension of a largely alien environment will stimulate the expansion of identity. Aboriginal people are often as reluctant to become involved in Aboriginal community facilities as they are to confront non-Aboriginal organisations or bureaucratic structures. In 1986, relatively few Aborigines used the facilities available at or through the local Aboriginal cooperative organisation, a situation attributed to indifference or to a lack of awareness of their existence:

People don't get together, don't drink together. Lot of people didn't know this place was out here...Lot of people still don't know this is out here. Look at [an Aboriginal Teachers' Aide], she was working at the school for twelve months and didn't know the parents of the children (Tape:86 B18).

An explanation of a lack of awareness of, or a reluctance to become involved with, community facilities and organisations is important to an understanding of the social and political processes in the community. One reason for the lack of interest in community organisations lies in their being dominated by particular individuals or groups who are considered to be interested only in the needs of their own 'mob'. Conflict between organisations is a feature of each of the studied communities and to a large extent the dominant organisation and its principals determine the shape of political expression at any one time. For most of the period covered by this study, Aborigines tended to identify the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Regional Land Council as

the bodies to which they could turn for help. By 1988 this had changed,⁸ due in part to a greater awareness of the alternative community organisation and its personnel but, more importantly, to the eclipse of the previously dominant political figure who had been associated with the other structures.

9.6 'Outsiders'

Social and political realities, however, are more complex than affiliation with a perceived power structure. Although the primary identification is very often with another town, or with the *people* of another town, there is an obvious, fairly widespread form of social cohesion that tends to exclude 'outsiders', that is, Aborigines from other areas. Although the majority of Broken Hill's Aborigines are comparatively recent migrants to the city, they differentiate between themselves collectively and others from outside a circumscribed region unless these can claim close kinship ties with locals.

The reception of Aborigines from outside the community or its regional affiliates is at best a qualified acceptance, at worst rejection, and invariably ambivalent. If the Aboriginal concerned replaces a non-Aboriginal in a position of some influence there may be some expressed satisfaction at this evidence of the extension of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs. This is qualified by the awareness of the person's origin from outside the community and, consequently, his or her inability to express the real attitudes, objectives and expectations of local Aborigines. Alternately the appointment of an Aboriginal is

⁸ When asked, in 1986, where Aborigines would seek assistance if this was needed, almost 80 per cent nominated the individual who held the positions of Regional Land Council Secretary and Legal Service field officer. In 1988, a similar percentage nominated one or other of the two principal figures identified with the Aboriginal cooperative organisation.

frequently seen as tokenism and the person is considered to lack the skills necessary to function competently in the position.

Examples of this 'outsider' phenomenon illustrates the difficulties faced by Aborigines in their efforts to perform their expected functions. One woman, generally acknowledged as an efficient and dedicated worker in the educational field, was aware of her lack of acceptance and became increasingly dissatisfied with her role:

...when I came to town here there were a lot of people didn't like the idea of me getting the job. I still face that when I talk to people. I'm considered an outsider...People say I'm not from the tribal area...A lot of people will be glad to see me go (Tape:86 B15).

Another Aboriginal person, who had replaced a succession of non-Aborigines in a high profile position, was equally forthright in identifying his own lack of acceptability:

They don't see what my role is really and that's like a lot of people working in government. The community people fail to see what they're actually doing, infiltrating government to try to sway a department just a little bit...They think you've sold out because you're working within that structure (Tape:87 B5).

In still another case an Aboriginal, also in a position formerly filled by a non-Aboriginal, had to contend not only with the rejection of outsiders but also with the hostility of students who had previously objected strongly to the proposition that they should have an Aboriginal teacher. 'We want a proper teacher' they demanded. Their reluctance to cooperate has led to a rapid decline in their progress, and another Aboriginal training scheme appears destined to failure:

They discriminate against me *because I'm Aboriginal and because I'm not a local*...They haven't come to grips with having an Aboriginal teacher, they won't cooperate with another Aboriginal. I think its part of that welfare mentality; they're used to white people providing everything for them (Tape:88 B11 emphasis in original statement).

There is some irony in the dilemma faced by this individual. His mother, also employed in the educational field, has a self-ascribed

leadership role in the community and is involved in efforts to regenerate traditional Aboriginal culture in the region.

Despite the ambivalent reception of outsiders, it is not unusual for them to be solicited by groups or factions engaged in local political conflict, particularly when this conflict involves people seeking support for their opposition to a local political elite. The assumption here is that influence might be exerted at the higher levels of the political or bureaucratic hierarchy. Factional conflict, particularly where it reflects the localised political perspective, illustrates the fragility of the notion of the ethno-political collective. Moreover, the rejection of outsiders shows the limited apprehension of identity, the very basis of the supposed Aboriginal national, or ethnic, identity. Political cohesion is difficult in the face of such social disunity.

9.7 Social Structures And Political Expression

At this stage of its development, the Broken Hill Aboriginal community lacks a collective social identity, and this is reflected in the fragmentation of its political structures. This is reflected in a political expression that can be both sophisticated and inchoate. The establishment of regional structures and agencies in the city has raised the potential for political socialisation. At the same time, the lack of a sense of community inhibits the formation of a localised political expression representative of the community itself. But the political process is a continuing one. The patterns of social and political alignments are continually redrawn in response to changing patterns of personal and group relationships, and both internal and external forces continue to influence the shape and focus of political expression.

Considered over time the community has relevance particularly in regard to the question of whether increased urbanisation leads to greater

incorporation of the Aboriginal population into the general society, or whether it will provide the environment for the generation of political consciousness, an increased sense of alienation and a greater alignment with an abstract ethnic identity. As the Wilcannia and Menindee experiences indicate, a major factor in influencing the future shape and alignment of the Aboriginal community will be the extent to which its members are accepted in, or remain an isolated group outside, a total community. The Broken Hill experience reflects Aborigines in a process, the directions of which cannot be predicted without reference to the variables which might influence its outcome.

If Aborigines remain socially isolated, if their attempts to adapt to the urban environment fail to secure their acceptance, they may be inclined to return to their former geographic area. For the majority the indications are otherwise; the impression is that they will stay, their awareness of the conditions that precipitated their migration outweighing the deficits of their present environment. But the community has not been in place long enough for a generation to be raised in these conditions. It is this generation which will largely determine the future directions of Aboriginal politics, and their conditioning will be a principal determinant of their political orientation. Exposed to the generally higher economic standards enjoyed by non-Aborigines in the urban society, while lacking the experience of rural conditions and even greater deprivation suffered by their parents, their expectations are likely to be correspondingly raised. The frustration of unfulfilled expectations might impel their politics into more militant, even confrontationist, dimensions. They may be less inclined to accept passively their relative poverty. As Campbell, Sahid and Stang (1970:106) point out, 'The lesson of history is not that poverty as such causes violence, but rather that frustrations arising

out of poverty can cause violence'. Impressions of the Broken Hill Aboriginal people are of both internal and external factors presenting difficulties to their adaptation to urban living and, consequently, influencing their political activity.

PART III

CHAPTER 10

POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

10.1 The Nature Of Community Groupings

It cannot be said that a political 'system' functions in an Aboriginal community, although there are in each instance the fundamentals of political activity located within particular community organisations. These structures, however, have a limited role in that they represent specific aspects of community activity and, invariably, a particular group within the community. They are often considered in terms of being the organisation of local resources through ostensibly non-political groupings, although to a large extent they represent the actual extent of political activity within the community and reflect its opposition to the intrusion of external forces which may appear to be more obviously political. The capacity of the community organisation to exercise political influence is a function of the resources available to the individuals involved in it. These resources include access to decision-making processes and to the political skills to utilise them. They also include the extent to which the authority of the group involved is acknowledged by the Aboriginal community or by some section within it.

There are serious limitations to the functioning of community politics in the absence of a single organisation which could command general community support as the legitimate representative of collective opinion and decision-making. The limited scope of the particular organisation limits also the acceptability of its leadership and, as a consequence, of its authority. In turn, this creates problems when government

policies allocate resources to the community. There is difficulty in maximising benefits when there is conflict between organisations for control of resources. As a result, the community suffers because it has no overall leadership and authority structure to oversee its necessary administrative functions. Policy creation is itself made more difficult when community conflict distorts attempts to assess community needs. It is difficult to heed the often repeated call to 'listen to Aborigines' when the Aboriginal voice is a discordant one within which its diverse components express conflicting demands and have varying levels of acceptability amongst the Aboriginal people.

Community politics, then, is invariably fragmented. Because of the nature of relationships, certain individuals or a particular group might exercise a dominant role within a community, but their authority is usually challenged by other individuals or other groups who seek to replace them or simply to deny them a legitimate leadership role. Aboriginal politics becomes very much a manifestation of the relationships and conflicts between various local individuals and groups, and between these and other levels of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisation. It exists in a state of what Eckermann (1988:35) aptly describes as 'balanced anarchy'. Political behaviour is shaped largely by the same factors that characterise the community's social patterns and is subject to the same divisions and conflicts. In discussing the patterns of political behaviour that can be related to the particular locale, this chapter reveals how these divisions and the conflicts they engender, limit the scale and scope of Aboriginal politics. But it reveals also the factors that are common and which might be extrapolated over a much wider domain of Aboriginal Australia.

10.2 Community Leadership And Organisation

Organisation and administration within the studied Aboriginal communities vary in the strength and acceptability of their respective leaderships and in the extent of community involvement. These are influenced considerably by the social and cultural environments of the populations or, more precisely, by the specific interpretations of these environments; not all individuals see their environments similarly. Organisations are often seen as separate from the community itself, partly because of the individuals involved and partly because those outside the organisation feel alienated from it. The problem this creates, according to one observer living in an Aboriginal community, is how to get people to think as a community, to stop saying 'they' and to say 'we':

...how do you structure the organisation so that people feel they've got a say, that traditional authority and kin groups are being fairly represented and not in conflict with that (Tape:85 W5).

Not all people consider they are being fairly represented and believe those who are in positions of power represent only their own immediate supporters. Analyses of power in Aboriginal communities in NSW are frequently supportive of an elitist model wherein a small group, often one family, has a political role which is consistently larger than that of the rest of the community. Aborigines themselves frequently refer to 'family control', to groups 'looking after themselves and their family members' and of 'related groups' who 'put themselves in and can't be got out'.

Within the local community an elite group or single family usually is the dominant political force and might remain so over a considerable period. However, as with the wider levels of political activity, it

cannot command unconditional respect for its authority. In addition, at all levels of political activity the elitist model is undermined by the continually changing patterns of relationships within the community which alter perceptions of legitimacy and representation. Even in the single family or kin group the patterns are seldom stable and unchanging.

Leadership and political authority require, in the first instance, some power base from which a political position can be expressed. Lacking the ideological base of the political party, which is the principal avenue available in non-Aboriginal society, the aspiring Aboriginal political figure usually finds his or her base in one of the service or welfare organisations. The strength and acceptability of the particular organisation in the local community is usually related not only to the political efficacy of its principals but also to the extent their ties with the community can ensure a support base. Opportunities for such involvement have been, and remain, limited, and incumbents difficult to dislodge.

Within the organisations, individuals tend to consolidate their position both from the status accorded by the position itself and from the recognition this affords in other fields. Representatives of bureaucracies and agencies outside the local community acknowledge the positions and tend to deal with the individuals involved. Attitudes and aspirations expressed in these relationships are therefore often taken as reflections of community opinion. As one group saw the process:

People come here, they talk to [prominent male], they talk to [prominent female]. That's it. And they think they're talking to the community, and they're not (Tape:85 B12).

This selective representation creates a source of continuing hostility between those who believe they speak for the community, and others who

feel they, and the majority of the people, are being ignored. Many believe they are being denied direct involvement in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. Their representation is by individuals whose endorsement, or acknowledgement, has been by external agencies, not through community participation in the selection process. Hostility is often intensified when the resources being discussed or allocated are already enjoyed by those involved in the decision-making:

When outside agencies come to deal with the community they tend to deal with the people who are better off; they're more articulate and they generally might be people who have jobs and houses already. If you have a housing association, the people who have houses making the decisions on behalf of those who haven't, you've got a poor relationship building up between one group who are increasingly involved in government decision-making [and the group] that's actually in need (Tape:85 W5).

It can be expected, then, that both the standard and acceptability of leadership will be influenced significantly by the extent of community cohesion or fragmentation. In the relatively stable Menindee community, where there has been a general consensus on basic objectives, one could expect good leadership. There is, in fact, an acknowledged and effective leadership, although it is not without opposition and the community has not escaped a political polarisation that has developed along the lines of traditional tribal identification.¹ In Wilcannia leadership is fragmented, variable and often lacking in direction. Broken Hill, because of the nature of the Aboriginal community and because of the city's regional importance, presents an even more complex situation in regard to leadership. On the one hand the social fragmentation seriously inhibits the leadership at the local level. On the other hand, leadership representing the regional level is well defined in relation to its interaction with the upper level of the

¹ It is arguable that the political division is less a result of earlier tribal associations than the use of these as justification for opposition to a dominant faction.

political hierarchy, but lacks legitimacy and authority with much of the Aboriginal population.

Regional leadership assumes the representation of the Far West communities as a collective Aboriginal entity. It is seen by many, not only in Broken Hill but also within the other local communities, as an imposed authority which represents an unendorsed political expression. Opposition, however, does not always indicate available alternatives. Assumed leadership is challenged often from a position of denying authority, not of replacing it. In the words of one Aboriginal:

...there's just no one around to grab the reins and say we going to do it this way. No one's prepared to do it; they haven't got any directives. There are too many other people backstabbing, complaining, saying 'Who are you, doing that?' But that person theirsself [sic] is not prepared to do anything (Tape:87 B5).

Assessments of political behaviour by individual Aborigines usually reflect their own position relative to a particular community or to the region as a whole, but they provide an insight into Aboriginal politics which may not be accessible to the non-Aboriginal who is outside the particular environment. An overview of political organisation in the Far West of NSW is provided by one Aboriginal who is involved in Aboriginal administration but, being from outside the region, is less likely to be aligned with a particular community:

In the western region it's strong in some parts and in other parts its very weak. If we look at Menindee...the Nyampa Housing Company...they know what they want. But if we look at other places, like Wilcannia...Broken Hill...the strength of the organisations vary...It gets down to what human resources are available to the local community (Tape:87 B19).

Because it has been confident, determined and reasonably successful in satisfying the immediate aspirations of the community, the Aboriginal leadership in Menindee has remained relatively stable for more than a decade. Unencumbered by the ideology of regional or national politics,

it has fitted well with a community where the majority concern has been with material objectives rather than with protest of the Aboriginal condition. Although opposition to it and its policies has been limited, a significant change in the distribution of resources could well alter the political behaviour of the community.

Effective leadership has been possible in the Menindee community not only because of the capabilities of the personalities involved, but also because the community itself has had a reasonably clear idea of what it wanted. The relative social stability of the community facilitates the task of leadership where this is responsive and mostly uncontroversial. In another, less amenable, social environment the same human resources would face greater difficulty in having their leadership accepted. This has been the Wilcannia experience.

From within the Wilcannia community the response to the question of leadership is quite negative and reflects the long-term generation of dependency:

There's a lack of self-confidence that it can be done...Everything comes from outside and people have learnt to expect solutions to problems to come from outside too, outside the town and outside the Aboriginal people. There's an attitude of 'they should do something about it; what are they going to do?'. They look for someone else to solve it (Tape:85 W5).

This community typifies the situation where long-term economic dependence encourages political dependence and makes difficult the emergence of effective leadership from within the community. This is not confined to Australia but is a feature of displaced Aboriginal people that has been identified in many other societies (see e.g. Allen 1977:130).

Divisiveness and disquiet within the Wilcannia Aboriginal community also severely limits the extent and efficacy of political mobilisation.

There is tension, and often conflict, between older and younger groups in relation to leadership, between social classes and between what has been described as the 'divisiveness [which] stems from tribal, family and district feuds which have in large measure spilled over from long gone days' (Tape:88 B16). Differences that divide the community can only be overcome when the issue is such as to involve all its factions in common cause. In the words of one prominent figure, 'It takes a big thing, you know, something really important to make them forget and join together' (Tape:86 W15). Where this mobilisation is effected to some degree it is usually issue-related and short-term and involves the sense of alienation characteristic of the Wilcannia Aborigines:

The situation in Wilcannia is pretty close to hopeless. Political action is generally negligible, but it can still drag itself around. People can drag themselves out of that state and organise now and again if there is something - a response to some outrage...(Tape:85 W4).

A number of Broken Hill Aborigines suggest apathy as the limiting factor in political involvement in that town. This is placed in the context of resignation to the inability to command authority or even to gain access to the avenues of authority. Comments range from the observation that people become 'sick and tired of going to meetings' where all they do is 'sit and talk and nothing really happens', to the acceptance that it is pointless going to meetings where actual involvement is meaningless: 'They won't listen...they all talk at once' or 'They just shout you down; they just see who can shout the loudest'. Without the recognition of authority there is little chance of effective leadership:

There's no leadership. What I mean by leadership, there's no one out there could, would want to lead the people anyway...No one's game to stick his head up out there. Anyway, they wouldn't listen to him; It's gone. See, the likes of the white people, he could **enforce** something like that. Suppose when you look at it one way, they don't give a stuff, much, and when you look at it another way, I suppose, it's no good caring a stuff. Because they can't get in, you know (Tape:86 B8).

Other Aboriginal analyses stress the divisions within the community and the struggle for power between organisations with conflicting priorities:

If there's going to be money given out it should be given to one organisation. We shouldn't have two organisations in the town fighting and tearing the town apart. And that's what's happening. That is the problem (Tape:87 B9).

This is supported by another Aboriginal, himself a vocal opponent of the dominant faction in local and regional politics: 'There's a lot of viciousness within our own community. There's a power struggle to control it. It's worse than anything in the white community' (Tape:85 B8). Another agrees that it is the power struggle among Aborigines themselves rather than their alienation from non-Aboriginal society that is the major cause of tension within the communities: 'I think they see their own people as the enemy. They don't seem too worried about white people; It's their own people' (Tape:85 B17).

But the nature of the Broken Hill Aboriginal community is such as to inhibit leadership and the organisation of its people as a collective. It is fragmented largely because it represents the individual decisions of people to migrate to the city because they sought to change some dimension of their lives. The fragmentation is maintained because they have not achieved the acceptance by the non-Aboriginal population that would enable them to become part of a socially homogeneous community, nor has their mobilisation as a socially or politically defined Aboriginal population been possible. They exist as individuals or small groups relatively isolated in a generally alien environment. The diversity of attitudes within the community presents considerable difficulties to political mobilisation, but so too does their physical dispersal:

In Wilcannia they can talk with one another, everyone knows about something in a day. Whereas here it might take three or four

weeks. There you're all together as a group; here you're all scattered. It's not easy to get everyone together (Tape:86 B17).

Apathy, in varying degrees, is apparent in each community, but equally there is resentment of any form of leadership not acceptable to the particular group or individual interest. There is a seeming inevitability of such conflicts where diversity largely inhibits social or political cohesion, and where the state is perceived as an alien entity. Any dominant group is usually seen as elitist and not representative of the general community, notwithstanding the improbability of an acceptable form of representation in such a fragmented population. The problem is compounded when the dominant group's position is acknowledged at a higher level of the Aboriginal and/or the non-Aboriginal political hierarchy. This tends to reinforce the disinterest of many who feel they are powerless and, consequently, denied a fair share of available resources because they are excluded from the elite group and its control of such resources. In this regard, Pollard comments on

a bias in the allocation of very limited resources towards those Aboriginal groups already in positions of power and leadership and through them, to their clients (1988:71).

10.3 Who Participates In Community Politics?

Although there does appear to be some support for the proposition that elitist groups are able to function because of a high level of apathy, involvement in community affairs is not the preserve of any one section within an Aboriginal population. Age, background, motivation and aspirations are variables which provide only a composite profile of the political actor. Nor can assumptions be made about the extent of participation, comments on apathy and exclusion notwithstanding. In each community most Aborigines are aware of the significant issues, but

the extent of active involvement varies with the specific issue and with the length of time that interest can be maintained. Yet the membership numbers of particular organisations - as distinct from actual participation rates - are at times such as would be envied by any non-Aboriginal political or social body.² It is here that the issue of apathy becomes somewhat clouded. When compared with levels of involvement within the non-Aboriginal community, it would appear that Aboriginal apathy is often measured not from actual but from expected participation rates. Nonetheless, scheduled meetings are frequently poorly attended or abandoned because of lack of interest: 'They sign up but after that they don't get involved. They're not available, probably find meetings boring' (Tape:88 B10), or, 'They go to a protest, but when it comes to meetings and that they won't come' (Tape:86 W8).

In the local communities the active participant is more likely to be female,³ a tendency which reduces with the extension of the analysis into wider levels of political activity.⁴ In some instances the reality of female involvement, and prominence, in an organisation may not be reflected in the formal structures that result from elections; an individual elected to a particular position may be no more than a nominal title holder while the actual function associated with the office is carried on by a non-elected woman.⁵ Women, in fact, dominate

² Between 1985-86 and 1986-87 the membership of the Weimijar Aboriginal Corporation in Broken Hill rose from around 35 to 60, a figure that represented 18 per cent of the total Aboriginal population.

³ This is most pronounced in Menindee where women occupy almost all the positions of influence.

⁴ In the local land councils women comprise a majority of active participants. In contrast, the 13 regional land council secretaries, who represent their organisations at state land council level, include only one female. A similar imbalance was a feature of the NACC and NAC.

⁵ An example of this, not unusual, situation is the election in Wilcannia in which several prominent women were replaced by men. The women, who had been absent from the town during the elections, continued to perform their previous functions within the reconstructed organisation despite their

the decision-making in most local organisations in the Far West local communities.

There are numerous avenues through which the individual becomes involved in community affairs. Some older Aborigines have a long history of concern for their community and participation in attempts to effect improvement in general conditions. Their basic identification tends to be with the local community and their objectives centred on their perception of its needs. At times they resent the intrusion of younger people who do not acknowledge an age-related authority and who are often more militant, more demanding of change and, in some instances, because better educated, better equipped to exert political pressure.

Youth, however, does not of itself ensure political success. Older people may retain their authority in the face of challenge, or they may regain it when younger participants lose interest or standing, or move on to more personally advantageous or politically prestigious positions. It is common - if not usual - for the younger and ambitious individual to become alienated from the local community and to move on to a higher level of involvement. This is particularly so with males, the females mostly remaining within the local community which is their primary area of concern. This no doubt influences the gender bias in the statement of the Aboriginal who claims that, 'Anyone that does come any good doesn't hang around in his community, he's going to go somewhere, down in an office job somewhere' (Tape:86 B17).

Some individuals drift into an organisation or are drafted onto a committee. Others gain a position in education, health or similar authorities and from there attempt to expand their influence and broaden

lack of official title. Their action appears to have been what was expected of them by the organisation.

their support base. Still others establish links with the wider dimensions of Aboriginal society and advocate a more militant expression of Aboriginal politics than that commonly associated with the local community. The consequence can be a lasting tension, and possibly conflict, between those whose political orientation is fixed firmly within the local community, and others who seek to inculcate an awareness of a more broadly based political awareness and Aboriginal political identity. Mostly the orientation of the individual is influenced through the actual opportunities presented and exploited. Until comparatively recent times these opportunities were limited for the Aborigines of rural NSW.

10.4 Vehicles For Political Participation

10.4.1 Background To Involvement

Aborigines in western NSW were largely insulated from the early manifestations of Aboriginal politics in the state. Their relative isolation from the major centres of population, the limited boundaries of their perception of Aboriginal identity and the patterns of mobility which restricted their movements and consequently their social interaction generally to a fixed locality, or beat, were effective barriers to the penetration of external political ideas and pressures. Early movements such as the Aborigines Progressive Association had not interested them,⁶ nor had they been involved in political agitation (Beckett 1958a:114).

⁶ There is evidence indicating individual political activity but this appears not to have spread to include community organisation or involvement. Duncan Ferguson, a brother of William Ferguson, who founded the Aborigines' Protection Association in 1937, was a resident of the Menindee Mission Station and kept his brother in touch with conditions there. William Ferguson used his brother's information in evidence before the Select Committee on Administration of the Aborigines Protection Board in 1937.

Notwithstanding the respect accorded the older members of the community, their authority appears to have been limited in the fringe camps to a concern primarily with social obligations; it was not a force for political mobilisation. In the period from the mid-1940s until the late 1950s the most respected members of the Aboriginal community were those whose style and standard of living most closely resembled that of their non-Aboriginal neighbours. These were the Aborigines who had jobs, reasonable housing and a well-cared-for family. It is an era to which many Aborigines look back with nostalgia:

Everyone was good then. There was some decent black people...[the old people] held a lot of influence over the people themselves, you know. But now they've lost all leadership among the people...(Tape:85 B8).

You talk to a lot of the older people, they say the men had jobs in those days, they had self-esteem, Aboriginal people had respect (Tape:87 B5).

My old man always worked and he always drove it into us kids that we had to get out and work and not bludge around the town or sit on the river bank getting boozed (Tape:88 W16).

The advantages, if not the ideals, of assimilation were acknowledged and the idea of Aboriginal leadership did not fall within the pattern of this objective. In addition, the tribal or area of origin associations, however diluted, would maintain fairly rigid divisions within a community of mixed-origin Aborigines, as they do today, albeit with reduced significance. These divisions and the distrust they generated limited the extent to which leadership, able to include all sections of the community, could come from within the community. In such circumstances the possibility of leadership from outside would be enhanced, even though it might well be leadership by default. Beckett, writing in 1958, suggested that 'Aborigines were prepared to accept leadership and domination from whites which they were not prepared to accept from Aborigines' (1958a:121).

It was the loss of employment opportunities, due mostly to the economic depression and the major restructuring of the pastoral industry, which largely curtailed, and often reversed, the social mobility of many previously employed Aborigines. Many were forced back to the camp environment and to a much reduced standard of living, conditions which had serious consequences for their self-esteem. Initial attempts to mobilise local Aborigines grew out of these conditions, but lacked defined strategies and structures and the effective leadership to set these in place.

In one of the first organised attempts to involve local communities in the political process, no recognised local Aboriginal was able to command the wide community and inter-community support necessary for representative endorsement. Despite the political ambitions of a number of community figures, none was able to succeed in elections for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee elections in 1973. Although somewhat handicapped by an intolerance of 'outsiders', the short-term Broken Hill resident who became representative of the region was an Aboriginal from Darwin who, while in that city, had married a Broken Hill non-Aboriginal woman. Prior to his election he was working for a Broken Hill mining company, and his associations were predominantly non-Aboriginal.⁷

Initial exposure of many Aborigines to the political process came from their involvement in some form of association of local people whose object was the improvement of community living conditions, such as in

⁷ There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence to suggest his success was due more to factional opposition to other candidates than to his own popularity. Reports indicate that other aspirants were supported only by their particular 'mob', and that the successful individual, unencumbered by local association, was the only one able to move around the communities and talk with people. Other fairly common but unsubstantiated reports allege vote buying with alcohol, and tampering with ballot boxes.

the areas of health, housing and education. Often ad hoc groupings rather than formal organisations, they mostly lacked the means to pursue Aboriginal objectives beyond the point of rhetoric but provided, for many individual Aborigines, an awareness of the need for a solid organisational base. It seems inevitable that these people would be drawn towards participation in other bodies with greater political potential that were to become established in the communities. Whether these were considered as avenues for personal ambition or, in Langton's terms, for the expression of cultural aspirations, they offered involvement in structured organisations:

When paternalistic restraints and the stigma of Aboriginality began to lift in the mid 1960s, many Aboriginal groups, both in and out of the cities gained the freedom to express their cultural aspirations in their own terms and idioms. Aboriginal medical, legal and housing organisations are manifestations of this (1981:19).

It was the housing companies that were established in Wilcannia and in Menindee that were the first vehicles providing a significant role for Aborigines in organisation, planning and, to some extent, management. In each case the focus was primarily, if not totally, on the local community. Aborigines became involved but their aspirations were limited, as indeed were their opportunities.

Although some Aborigines have moved from one organisation to another, or been active in more than one, there has been a tendency for the individual to consolidate his or her position within one area and to resist encroachment on this political domain while he or she remained in the community. The political divisions within the contemporary communities usually reflect such polarisations, in some cases reinforced by family involvement and, in one case, by the particular traditional association of the respective principals of conflicting organisations. To many Aborigines, the housing companies were, and remain, Aboriginal

organisations, whereas other bodies are seen as part of the 'government' because of the hierarchical links with bureaucratic structures, and are therefore suspect. This may be due partly to the long term suspicion of government and its agents, but the rivalry between different power bases almost certainly plays a part, particularly where this can be seen to reflect the conflict between local politics and that considered as being intruded from outside the community.

Housing companies and their equivalent organisations are the types of vehicles through which Aboriginal people gain access to decision-making structures. They also illustrate the extent to which success or failure is influenced by the level of authority that can be established, or, on the other hand, the extent to which internal conflict prevents this. Menindee and Wilcannia provide examples of these respective situations.

10.4.2 Bakandji Limited

Bakandji Limited, which was established in Wilcannia in 1974, was the first Aboriginal housing company in the region. It had its origins in the Aboriginal Advancement Society which had been set up in the town a few years earlier. Stimulus was provided by the evidence of the deplorable conditions being experienced by Aborigines living in tents in the Mallee area following their removal from the flooded residential area opposite the town. Housing was an urgent priority, and the publicity given to the conditions being experienced by the Mallee Aborigines created a favourable political climate for a major initiative.

From its inception the Bakandji housing company has been embroiled in controversy, its chequered career reflecting the social conditions that influence the community. Like many other organisations in Wilcannia,

the housing company suffered from the same problems individuals in the community suffer from, including a lack of confidence, determination and direction. Its operation was affected even more by conflict within the Aboriginal community. An initial ambitious programme to build 65 houses foundered amid a barrage of accusations, claims and counter-claims that involved the various sections of the Aboriginal community, the Shire Council and DAA. A DAA evaluation of the project identified a number of reasons for poor performance which included:

the isolation of Wilcannia, too much money spent on labour cost, the utilisation of funds in unplanned areas of expenditure and in responding to various needs as they arose and the growing alienation of the company from the community (*Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly upon Aborigines*, second report, 1981:83-84).

Other witnesses to a Legislative Assembly Select Committee alleged inadequate training of Aborigines and opposition to the housing of Aborigines so close to the town. A submission from two academics who had examined the situation in detail concluded that:

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs by acting contrary to the wishes of the black community, by reneging on promises and commitments made and by demanding constant reviews and changes of the project - and quite possibly because of internal lack of concern, understanding and/or efficiency the D.A.A. effectively undermined Bakandji, destroyed the housing project and brought about a result contrary to their stated and official policy of encouraging and assisting Aboriginal self-management (1981:85).

Bakandji was to struggle on, plagued by financial problems, internal conflict and a period of closure.⁸ Its directors have tended to be associated also with other organisations and have often been unsure of their priorities. This problem was exacerbated by the formation of the

⁸ Because of the indebtedness of the company, funds that would have been used as operating costs were withheld and issued to a trustee for payment to creditors. For a period of more than six months the company ceased to function, depriving the community of its political focal point and generating a great deal of resentment.

Wilcannia Land Council with a similar executive and with involvement also in the housing area:

There's a tremendous amount of confusion because quite often the land council and Bakandji have common executives and they don't know which hat they're wearing (Tape:86 W9).

A dearth of talent with over-involvement or involvement in conflicting strategies, constant failures through opposition, lack of support or lack of resolve and the factionalism that makes difficult a consistent approach, are the major features of the Wilcannia political environment. Without strong and effective leadership it was inevitable that the housing company would suffer the same problems as have most other initiatives undertaken in the town. A non-Aboriginal, who had for a number of years worked with and for the Far West Aboriginal communities, suggests the leadership issue as a principal area of concern:

The leaders themselves are in some disarray and have a tendency to sway to the whim of the day or a given state of any particular situation. Such inconsistency amongst their own ranks adds to an already existing bad state of affairs (Tape:88 B18).

At the beginning of 1989 the lack of leadership and of community interest and involvement was such that no annual general meeting of the housing company had been held for more than three years.

10.4.3 Nyampa Housing Company

An early attempt by the Wilcannia housing company to extend its influence to Menindee was rejected by the latter community which, in 1975, proceeded to establish what was to become arguably the most successful Aboriginal body in the region. With considerable support from a generally cohesive community, a resourceful and effective leadership has planned and executed a successful and relatively trouble-free strategy to provide, firstly housing and, later, general facilities designed to improve the social and material life of the community. The individuality which distinguishes the Menindee Aborigines from their

neighbours was, from the beginning, a motivating force in opposing the concept of Aboriginal regional cooperation:

We heard there was money available for homes. Bakandji had just started up in Wilcannia and they wanted us to go along with them. But [local Aborigines] wanted to go alone, get their own funds for housing (Tape:86 M15).

Nyampa Housing Company's success can be measured in material, social and psychological terms. Menindee Aborigines are well-housed and their housing company is a source of considerable pride for its continuing role in the social and economic life of the community.⁹ Its premises were constructed by Aboriginal apprentices and are an attractive and well maintained addition to this small town.

As with most Aboriginal organisations, Nyampa became the power base of a small group of people and, while its achievements are lauded, its alleged political role is resented by others seeking to establish their own political ascendancy. Although generally subdued, this political tension has led to a degree of polarisation of the Aboriginal community around its two basic tribal affiliations. The argument advanced by representatives or supporters of the political 'out group' focuses on the name of the housing company and the supposed origins of its principals. These, it is argued, represent a group whose members were initially forced, and later voluntary, migrants to the Darling River country. In contrast, the opposition group considers itself to be descendant from the traditional Bakandji people, to have had a

⁹ In addition to its providing the venue and often the organisation for social events, the Aboriginal housing company's premises became, in 1988, the centre from which a 'Meals on Wheels' scheme provided daily meals to Menindee's aged citizens, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Additionally, following a police suggestion, amusement and soft-drink dispensing machines were installed so that children would have a venue for night-time activities. This was instigated by a desire to end the practice of children congregating outside a hotel so they could persuade one of its patrons to purchase drinks for them in the only establishment open at night.

continuous association with the area and, consequently, to be the rightful decision-makers.¹⁰

Whatever the relative strength of Nyampa or the deficiencies of Bakandji, what the housing companies illustrate is the fact that Aboriginal people do have the abilities to manage their own affairs. Given the opportunities and favourable social and political environments they can be successful. Self-determination can work at this level if factionalism can be contained and if non-Aboriginal intrusion is not such as to exacerbate existing tensions.

10.4.4 Weimijar Aboriginal Cooperative

Lacking a housing company within which to establish a base, politically minded and locally oriented Aborigines in Broken Hill have attached themselves to various service organisations, most of which have had limited political relevance. The one organisation to which all could, theoretically, be involved has been the Weimijar Aboriginal Corporation, which was formed in 1983 with a charter for the general advancement of Aborigines in the area.

Initiated by a group of women, Weimijar replaced the short-lived and generally unproductive West Darling Advancement Association. The organisation gained political importance with its domination by the members of one kin or 'family' group who maintained effective control through most of the period prior to 1988. This domination was, however, mostly involved with decision-making in regard to policy matters or to the allocation of resources. The actual day to day work of the centre,

¹⁰ The argument is undercut to some extent by the housing company's having on its executive people from both Nyampa and Bakandji backgrounds.

which involved programmes designed to assist Aboriginal people, was carried out by a small group of dedicated individuals.

The ascendancy of the family group was the reason given for non-participation by a number of Aborigines who expressed their own political objectives in terms of 'breaking down family ties'.¹¹ According to their analysis, Weimijar should provide help to the general Aboriginal community and not be subject to manipulation by one group within it. Their task was complicated by the involvement of members of the dominant family group in Aboriginal organisations at the regional and wider levels. During this period Broken Hill reflected in microcosm the conflict in national Aboriginal politics between attempts to mobilise political expression on a broad scale and the limited, locally-oriented objectives of the individual community or group. It was the dominance of regional and national politics, and the ascendancy of their supporters, that inhibited the influence of local groupings in this town until 1988. Prior to the establishment of the Regional Land Council, the principal vehicle for the expression of the broad level of politics was the Aboriginal Legal Service.

10.5 The Aboriginal Legal Service

Apart from the housing companies, the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS) has probably been the most important avenue for individual entry into politics. Unlike the former, the structure of the legal service inevitably involves the individual in the broader fields of political functioning. It has to service a wider area than the local community

¹¹ Claims were made that 'family' control became so complete that meetings had been called and conducted wholly within the related group. On occasions, other members of Weimijar were not notified of meetings, which would be held in the residence of one of the group.

and to maintain links with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal bureaucratic structures.

The Western Aboriginal Legal Service (WALS), which services the Far West region, began, in 1977, as a breakaway from the established ALS based in Sydney. It was led by Aboriginal staff and directors of the ALS from the western area and broke from the parent body 'in an effort to create a legal service which would give a better service to the West of N.S.W.' (*WALS Policy Statement*, n.d.). Its office in Broken Hill, which was later to house also the Western Regional Land Council, became the locus for political activity in the Far West, and its field officer the dominant political personality in the area. In addition to his position with the legal service he also held the positions of secretary of local and regional land councils and, for a time, president of Weimijar Corporation.

In 1970 the ALS had been established in Redfern, the inner Sydney suburb which had become the principal area of Aboriginal population and political activity in that city. The service was designed to attempt to change attitudes towards Aborigines, to educate people about the special problems faced by Aborigines involved with the law and to educate Aborigines themselves about their rights under the law (Wootten 1971:4). It presented also an opportunity for Aborigines to become involved in the provision of services and in the political structures involved in this field. Although it may not have been the intention of its founders, the legal service became part of the cooptation process, involving Aborigines in the very processes that were considered to be contributing to their oppression (see e.g. Parker 1987; Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982; Collman 1981). Collman (1981:49) sees the Aboriginal legal service as an example of cooptation as part of the government's

attempts to institutionalise conflict over Aboriginal affairs under its own control, while Parker (1987:141), noting the dependence on DAA approval and Commonwealth funds, considers the legal service structures and *modus operandi* 'ensures that they are creatures of the Establishment'.

Although considered to be a showpiece of the government's self-determination policy the ALS remained under bureaucratic control as it recruited many of the most able and politically active Aborigines. In spite of this constraint, it was a political training ground, and many prominent NSW Aboriginal figures began their political careers here, establishing links with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal political structures. The nature of their political socialisation was such as to give them a perspective that was wider than that of the local community, one that was usually in conflict with the expectations associated with kin and local obligations.

When, after 1972, the service expanded into regional areas of NSW, Aboriginal field officers gained the mobility that previously had not been available to them. They were able to move through their region developing a necessary political profile and generating a degree of political awareness among Aboriginal people. Eggleston (1977:353) suggests that:

It may be in the long run, the setting up of Aboriginal legal services will...turn out to have been one of the most significant developments in Aboriginal affairs.

She believed that Aboriginal control of the services was a key concept of their functioning: 'Aboriginal legal services can promote Aboriginal self-determination and enhance Aboriginal identity and dignity in a number of ways' (1977:262).

Not all Aborigines agree with such assessments of the legal service. Some argue that it has had a negative effect on the sense of accountability they believe to be indispensable if self-determination is seriously to be considered. This alternative analysis highlights the social cost of political success. It sees the provision of legal services in terms of the destructive dependency non-Aboriginal Australia has inflicted on Aborigines and which continues to bedevil many families and communities. Typical of this viewpoint is the statement of one Aboriginal who decries the loss of personal responsibility:

I think what's destroyed us more than anything is the advent of this legal aid system. You take it before, you was responsible for your case; you **was** responsible. Today the legal aid solicitor is responsible, to keep you out of trouble or anything. You're not the one to go down and front up if your kid's in court, 'That solicitor there, he can take you down to court.' I think that has wrecked our families (Tape:86 B15).

Established initially in Wilcannia, the legal service office in the far-western region was transferred to Broken Hill in 1976. This contributed greatly to the political dominance of the regional structures, centred in Broken Hill, over the local communities, and to the antagonism that followed. The establishment of an agency in a local community is seen by Aborigines as indicating a primary responsibility to that host community; administrative efficiency is not its concern. The agency's removal to another centre is resented and its officers considered as being no longer concerned with their local community. Authority may be challenged within the local community, but it is even less acceptable when there is an attempt to impose it from outside that community. Evaluation of the particular organisation and its relevance to the community is the principal determinant of the legitimacy of authority.

10.6 A Question Of Authority

Irrespective of its assumed success or otherwise, each Aboriginal organisation has its critics and, often, its active opposition. Opponents of the existing structures stress the unrepresentativeness of the particular controlling group, the lack of accountability and the widespread nepotism that characterises most of its decisions:

You get family control...certain groups get into the organisation and they end up only looking after themselves, or family members (Tape:85 B9)

You get a family group up there want self-determination for themselves, don't give a damn for the community (Tape:85 M7).

A lot of these organisations split the community...everyone likes to look after themselves and their links...Once they get in they're hard to get out. They can just keep putting themselves back in. They've got that related group behind them (Tape:86 B8).

To counter this, many Aborigines expressed the need for the involvement of older and more respected members of the community. An attempt was made to have an 'Elders Council' set up in each town and also at the regional level to reflect a more traditional form of authority and leadership:

The problem of the organisation, especially on the local level as it is today, the elderly people, people who have actually known the law and the culture and the land better than we do, are the ones that the younger people are not allowing these people to have a say (Tape:86 B15).

We tried to unite. Now the older people are coming out saying 'We want to form this elders committee, or council - make the young ones accountable for what they're doing. Make sure the benefits do get to the Aboriginal people in the community. And we put that proposal up to the state government (Tape:86 B13).

In a letter written by an Aboriginal woman and sent to State and Federal authorities concerned with Aboriginal affairs, disillusion was expressed at the exclusion of older Aborigines from the decision-making structures:

I have become very disillusioned about our future. From what I can see our Affairs now [are] being mismanaged not only by white people but by self elected community "Aboriginal leaders"...I feel that [an Elders Council] is a must in NSW Aboriginal Affairs at this point of time. We must look at our Elders for guidance for the future...NSW people have done a great injustice to our Elders by denying them their just position in our community (personal copy 1986).

The position of the so-called elders varies within the communities. They are overwhelmingly female and generally highly respected locally, and in one instance, throughout the area. But several of those mentioned have only a tenuous association with the area and their high profile results from their position within the welfare or service bureaucracy. Some are involved in social and political affairs and play significant roles in the community. Others decline participation or are denied access to the organisations. Contrasting perspectives on the participation of older persons are provided in the case of one celebrated clash which is reported firstly by a neutral observer:

Like [two of the politically active, older women], they were causing some sort of disturbance amongst the land council...They was speaking out for their rights. One day at a Regional Land Council meeting they said, 'Those two old women are making too much trouble, and they disputing people, we'll vote them off the board. Every hand went up, so they voted them off the board (Tape:86 B18).

An alternate explanation is provided by the instigator of this action, although in this instance he considers the overall political environment rather than the particular incident:

We appointed [them] to represent the land council on the plan of management of the Mungo, Willandra Lakes area, and she'd go down there and rubbish us, more worried about sitting fees and that young people getting on, where older people should be doing it. But we do give the older people a say, if they're talking sense. There's nothing to say the older ones are the ones that should be elected to [the organisation] (Tape:86 B10).

There is, however, an apparent conflict between local expectations and the demands on individuals whose political perspective and responsibility is much wider than the community level. Outside the

introspective environment of the local community, where older Aborigines might be accorded some respect for their authority, the Aboriginal person considered by most to represent the regional perspective is acknowledged as an experienced and skilled negotiator whose local problems are due to his wider vision of politics:

The people like [him] didn't just see the problems for [the local community], he saw the problems for the region, the whole western area. And that's what he fights for. And there's no one following him through. He was involved in the early 70s with that militant group...whereas no one else around here was involved (Tape:87 B5).

It is through such individuals and their links that the local community is included in the wider Aboriginal collective. From another perspective, it is from the same source that national, state and regional politics intrude into the local community, creating tension as they attempt to broaden the political awareness of the local people.

10.7 Regional Mobilisation And The First Land Council

Attempts were made in 1981 and 1982 to organise the far-western Aborigines politically on a regional basis and to dispel the parochial attitudes that characterise the communities. The impetus and most of the organisational personnel came from outside the area, but local people also attended meetings held on the site of the old Menindee Mission Station. A notice of the meeting in 1981 advised that land rights, land claims, compensation and protection of sacred sites would be on the agenda. It also noted that no alcohol would be allowed on the old mission site during the two days of the meeting (*Paddlewheel*, Nov.27, 1981). During the meeting two representatives from each town were elected to a body to be known as the Western New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council (WALC). A subsequent meeting held in April 1982 decided to affiliate with the National Federation of Aboriginal Land

Councils and to send delegates to the national meeting in the Kimberley in May.

The embryonic land council was eventually overtaken by political events played out on a much larger stage, that of the state government. Prior to this, it had a short-lived role as a militant political voice for the Far-West Aborigines even if its level of active support within the communities was limited. Although influenced by Aborigines from outside the area and by non-Aboriginal advisers within, it became the local manifestation for the changed focus of Aboriginal politics. Long term social and economic issues were not ignored, but a more distinctly Aboriginal agenda, such as that being expressed at higher levels of the political hierarchy, became apparent. The Land Council became the focus of Aboriginal protest in the region. It was also at this time that the question of land rights was placed in the context of specific political demand.

During one organised rally of Aboriginal people at the old Mission Station site, it was decided to petition the Government to grant the land to the local Aborigines. The proposal was successful and the meeting's conveners were told that the land was available to any Aborigines who wanted to settle there, for whatever purpose and for as long as they wished. A Menindee resident describes the Aboriginal response:

The visitors left, victorious; the locals left for their homes back within the town boundaries. A recognised leader of the Aboriginal community here said, 'Why do we want to go up there and live? We've got all we need right here - a school, houses, pubs, shops, friends. Why go up there to nothing? (personal communication).

Five years later the site, now owned by the Aboriginal community, was still deserted, the only observable change being two concrete picnic

tables, evidence of an aborted plan to create a camping area. Nonetheless, the ownership of the land has both symbolic and political significance for local Aborigines. Although relatively unused it is a source of some pride among a section of the community who see it as a reference point for their Aboriginal identity. It provides also a focus for the local political conflict. Aborigines who oppose the dominance of the group involved with the housing company and disagree with its strategy, have attempted to see the development of the old mission site as a priority in the disbursement of available funds.

To some extent the old mission site represents the gaining of land rights and, as such, an important political resource. The housing company is seen already to control a mixed farming property purchased for the local Aboriginal community through the Aboriginal Development Commission. Run as an economic enterprise and as a training establishment for Aboriginal youth, the farm has created a degree of ambivalence in those Aborigines who consider themselves to be denied participation in decision-making. Pride of community ownership conflicts with the farm's symbolic representation of their perceived exclusion. In contrast, the old mission is a piece of land with which they can identify even if its political potential has not generated the support necessary for the group's political ascendancy.

Demands for Aboriginal ownership of the old mission site did not arouse concern or create conflict with the general society or even the non-Aboriginal community in the region. Little or no objection was raised, and most of those who voiced an opinion were supportive of the Aborigines' demands. Other political activity by the WALC, however, had a much more widespread impact and generated considerable opposition.

This involved the adoption by the WALC of the strategy of active protest.

Organised protest is a form of political activity in which local Aborigines can be included in fields where national politics are being shaped. It can be seen as an attempt to widen local political horizons and, through this, to lessen the conflict between local and national objectives. But here again it can be, and often is, interpreted as another unwelcome intrusion of outsiders into the local domain.

10.8 The Politics Of Protest In The Far-West

10.8.1 Koonenberry

Aboriginal protest action in the Far-West prior to the early 1980s was almost exclusively confined to the local community and took the form of localised outbursts against police, education authorities or other political or bureaucratic agents. When it became a feature of regional political organisation it created a conflict within the communities between the general support for broad Aboriginal objectives and opposition to the intrusion of external political influences into the local arena. In 1982, protest was given a regional dimension when the WALC actively opposed a plan by Telecom Australia to erect a facility in the area. The proposed site for a radio-telecommunication tower was on the highest point in the north-western area of NSW, Koonenberry Mountain, 100 kilometres north-west of the township of White Cliffs. Protesting that Koonenberry was an authenticated sacred site, the land council demanded the plan be abandoned and that Telecom supply plans for any future tower erection.

Senior Telecom officials who visited the area were reluctant to negotiate directly with the Land Council Aborigines and nominated the

Regional Director of the National Parks and Wild Life Service to act as mediator. A preference was indicated for the commissioning of an Environmental Impact Statement rather than direct contact with the Land Council. This attitude may have been influenced by reports from Telecom technicians of aggressive Aboriginal objections to their movements in isolated parts of the Far West.¹² Eventually, it was decided to proceed with an alternative 'to avoid delays resulting from inaccessibility and objections from the Aboriginal lands Council' (Telecom, personal communication 1988). The additional cost of the alternative installations on Wonnaminta Hill and Mount Shannon was assessed at \$133,000.

Few local Aborigines were actively involved in the Koonenberry protest nor did they appear concerned at its outcome. The site is generally considered to be outside their area of interest, and the protest to have been the work of a small group directed by a non-Aboriginal 'adviser'. One well-informed Aboriginal offered a somewhat cynical comment on the event:

[The adviser] really put one over Telecom about that Koonenberry. Aborigines around here knew nothing about it. I worked all around there and it doesn't mean anything to [Aborigines]. He just stirred them up, a couple of them (Tape:85 B8).

Whatever the reality of Aboriginal association with the site or of the protest organisation, the exercise could be considered a political success and a stimulus to further action. On the other hand it could not be considered an example of locally initiated political action. Nevertheless, it was to be followed soon after by protest action that centred on the nearby Mootwingee national park.

¹² During interviews, technicians gave details of such clashes.

10.8.2 Mootwingee

In 1983, the mining city of Broken Hill celebrated the centenary of its existence with a year-long program of activities. On the weekend of September 4-5 when the festivities were to reach their climax, and several thousand visitors were in the city, Aborigines painted protest slogans and pasted posters carrying the Aboriginal national flag on various buildings. They also blockaded the road to Mootwingee National Park, one of the most popular tourist sites in the district.

Mootwingee (called Mutawintji by many Aborigines) is a scenic area of waterholes and rugged gorges within which are a number of Aboriginal art sites. It has significant archaeological importance although it had suffered from vandalism over a considerable period prior to its incorporation into a National Park. In a report of the incident, the local newspaper implied the blockade to be a combined protest about alleged slowness in granting land rights to Aboriginal people, and against 'white man's desecration and exploitation of sacred sites' (*BDT* September 6, 1983).

An Aboriginal viewpoint on the protest action is given by one who was actively involved:

We was moaning to the Government about taking part in Mutawintji, having some say in the management of the place. When we decided to blockade...the Broken Hill Centenary was on...as good a time as any to show that we were interested...If Broken Hill could celebrate 100 years of occupation why couldn't we have something to do with Mutawintji? (Tape:85 B4).

Of those taking part, the informant claimed that '90 per cent had a close association with the place', a statement hotly denied by an overwhelming majority of other interviewees. One suggested: 'Those people that blockaded Mootwingee, go and ask them what it means; they wouldn't have a clue. And ask them where they come from' (Tape 86 B15).

On being asked if local Aborigines had been involved, members of two related families were named. Other participants were said to have been 'people from away' and 'people not from here':

...mostly legal service people from Dubbo and Sydney, all from the Legal Service and Land Council. We weren't even consulted. Now we got old people up in arms about it, from here and from Wilcannia too (tape:85 B7).

A Menindee Aboriginal was similarly dismissive of the suggestion of local involvement:

No one from here was in it and I don't think anyone from Broken Hill. Few said to me it'd make you shake. Like [a prominent conservative Aboriginal], he said its alright for them, writing on walls and that, but we got to live here. But the locals got blamed for it (Tape:86 M10).

The significance of these statements is obvious when it is considered that the leaders of the protest flew to Broken Hill by charter aircraft. Outside influence is resented when it involves local people in political expressions in which they have no input and over which they have no control. And because the regional structures and the people involved with them are usually associated with this outside influence, they also are considered by many within the local community to be part of an alien authority. It is, however, an influence and authority they have been unable to escape and which threatens the significance of the local groupings. Any intrusion into the local sphere further limits local autonomy and weakens the power bases of the locally-oriented political figures.

10.9 The Limitations Of Local Politics

Because of the nature of regional politics Broken Hill became, in the late 1970s, the focus of Aboriginal politics in the Far West. Apart from its functioning as the regional administrative centre, the political figures based there have displayed a greater awareness of the

realities of political functioning in the general political arena. They were comfortable in their urbanisation, had links with the white bureaucracy and possessed the negotiating skills to exploit these links. If these attributes are the determinants of political efficacy, they are also the factors which tend to isolate the individual from the community, particularly when representative or administrative functions are influenced by, or merged with, political roles. The closer the individual comes in relation to non-Aboriginal politics, the greater the chance for effective political advocacy, but at the cost of increased distance from the local community.

Yes, even likes of our people in prominent positions in DAA officer and whatever. They sort of set aside from our people, you know, once they've gone through and learnt all these other skills. They think they coming back to help their people but there's a gap there now. They're highly educated and he [sic] can't sit with his people at their level and talk because he's part of the bureaucracy (Tape:86 B23).

Individuals do not see themselves in this light. They do not consider their involvement in terms of cooptation, of being, in Howard's (1975,1982) terms 'brokers', but of being part of the Aboriginal political dynamic. They believe they are providing much needed leadership.

Domination of political decision-making by an alleged elite, which in the study region has tended to be a dominant individual with non-Aboriginal advisers and, initially, support of a kin network, is circumscribed by the lack of an enforceable authority. Without this, decisions cannot be made which would be binding on the communities. No real locus of power can be considered to exist within such an association other than that obtaining through its links with the non-Aboriginal bureaucratic structures. Additionally, any supposed authority having been challenged and, in particular instances, denied, the future potential for the exercise of influence is inhibited unless

leadership can be reestablished. If this is achieved only through manipulation of external political processes the division between local and wider levels of community is likely to be reinforced.

In the past, leadership, or at least political dominance, has been exercised and acknowledged, albeit often reluctantly, not because of demonstrated community support of the particular person, but in many instances because of his or her position at the head of a regional organisation. It is a feature of contemporary Aboriginal politics that leadership and decision-making are not necessarily functions of the numbers supporting a particular person or a particular option. Rather, the forum and the way individuals act within it are major determinants of outcomes. An ability to use the forum and to shape its processes are characteristic of the experienced political actor. The region's dominant political figure saw the consensus approach as being slow, cumbersome and indecisive, and considered it necessary to use direction and persuasion. He has been accused of 'bulldozing' decisions through meetings and of a failure to consult with the community:

There used to be a lot more meetings and more used to go to the meetings and talk at them. But not many go now because he does all the talking now (Tape:86 B15).

This form of political domination largely undercuts the rhetoric about the Aboriginal consultative process which is given much prominence in Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal political interaction. Nevertheless, domination can be a feature of Aboriginal politics where an active and determined individual is, or believes he or she is, confronted by unnecessary obstruction or by an inert or apathetic community.

An alternate view of this aspect of Aboriginal politics, one that is supported by observation, is of a competent and forceful leadership made necessary by a population lacking political stamina and clearly-defined

objectives. One critic of the so-called elite who 'run the show' nevertheless agreed that 'If he didn't make the decisions there wouldn't be any made' (Tape:86 B21), and suggested apathy, rather than dissatisfaction, as the reason for lack of interest in meetings. For his part, the person concerned expressed disappointment at the lack of participation:

You get them to come to meetings from time to time, but they won't stick there...We've tried to get people involved, taken people away on trips for experience. It's very disheartening, there's times when I feel like dropping out myself (Tape:87 B7).

Apathy and a limited perception of political objectives, of political identity, might well be the major inhibitors of political collectivisation. Another explanation acknowledges that Aboriginal identity is localised in space and time, and that it is this rather than apathy that limits the scale of political involvement. The regional level influence can at times override this localism, but it has a temporary primacy. In the words of an Aboriginal bureaucrat:

It all comes back to the Aboriginal politics, the expectation of what people see as being the best thing for their people. And their people are usually their own family or their own little community. They can't see that they have to work together (Tape:87 B6).

Given the nature and diversity of Aboriginal group and community structures it is unlikely that Aboriginal people will work together without significant change in attitudes and objectives. Aborigines want to run their own affairs, but these are invariably personal, family or group affairs.

CHAPTER 11

REGIONAL POLITICS, LAND RIGHTS AND AUTHORITY CONFLICT

11.1 The Expansion Of Political Identity

Local-regional interaction is the first stage of any national or pan-Aboriginal political collectivisation; it is also the first stage of inter-level conflict. It is the regional level of political expression that incorporates a number of communities and establishes the connection between these and the State itself. Described by the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs:

Regional councils provide the means by which people at the grass roots are able to have their views and decisions flow through to the centre of Government in a way that has never been available to them before (Hand, *A PD.* vol.162,1988:254).

In seeking to represent the Aboriginal population in its area, the regional structure has to seek a consensus among the often diverse interests of several or many separate and distinct groups and communities. It then has to fit this into a framework structured by the interaction of the State with the macro dimensions of Aboriginal politics. It has to confront and to reconcile two manifest and often conflicting dimensions of identity: that defining the fundamental unit of Aboriginal social and political functioning and that representing the broad field of the national, ethnic collective. Within this complex field the regional structure is inevitably an intrusive, and generally unwelcome, influence.

Political activity in the communities has mostly been carried on through the interaction of a local organisation and a government department or

agency. Alternatively, some individual Aborigines have preferred direct contact with their local member of Parliament, a strategy that helped them to develop both self-confidence and the skills needed to operate effectively in the political arena. It also made them particularly unresponsive to the imposed intermediary function of the regional structures.

Regional politics in the Far West has been influenced considerably by the establishment in Broken Hill of the regional offices of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the Aboriginal Legal Service, educational and other service and welfare organisations and, after 1983, the Regional Land Council. While the centralising of these may be bureaucratically and administratively sound, it is not readily endorsed by the other Aboriginal communities who see themselves as communal entities and not as satellite groups.

Although they have tended to dominate Aboriginal politics in Broken Hill, the regional structures were less tolerable elsewhere. Each community demands its own health, education and other welfare services and, if they fail to gain these, are inclined to ignore regional intrusion as much as possible. If the service is not located and controlled locally it is considered to be largely an alien intrusion. Against such a background the advent of land councils introduced a significant new dimension into local politics.

Established as a result of the NSW Land Rights Act of 1983, the land councils could be considered as an attempt to empower Aboriginal people. On the other hand they are potentially powerful political tools, particularly those with regional authority. As such they inevitably become centres of conflict as attempts to centralise resources and power threatened to destabilise local authority, motivation and

leadership. Higher levels of political activity have a constant need for leaders and taking them from the local community depletes scarce human resources and is a challenge to local power. Aborigines tend to resent the individual they believe has deserted them. They have experienced in the past the whimsicality of directives from power structures that are remote from the community and are suspicious of those people who are connected with these structures.

The politics of the land councils was particularly intrusive during the period covered by this fieldwork, revealing a valuable perspective on the conflict between levels of political activity. In this, the councils are important in at least two areas of study of Aboriginal response to political initiatives. It was through the councils that an avenue was provided for change and collective involvement; for Aboriginal people to overcome the political impotence of fragmentation. They represent also a link between the national level of Aboriginal politics and the local communities in respect of the campaign for Aboriginal land rights.

11.2 The Philosophy And Ideology Of Land Rights

Because land rights is a highly emotional term with no simple meaning (Peterson, 1981:1), the NSW legislation had the potential to raise expectations which were unlikely to be fulfilled, leading possibly to increased frustration and alienation. But an even more important aspect of the functioning of the legislation was its exposure of the volatility of Aboriginal politics, particularly the patterns of authority and leadership through which any possible transfer of power would be carried. And in whatever context it is justified, land rights involves some aspect of the transfer of power. Because of the central, even pre-eminent, position land rights has assumed in the Aboriginal political

agenda, its background and philosophy in NSW, and its influence on the Aborigines of the Far West, warrants exploration in some detail.

Subsuming a range of material and psychological imperatives, land rights has become the dominant focus of the Aboriginal political agenda. Whether conceived of in terms of cultural regeneration, compensation for dispossession, or the ascension to political relevance, the term represents the apotheosis of the Aboriginal search for power. As such, it is considered to be self-defining, needing no explanation or elaboration:

It all boils down to one thing, and that's land rights;

We've got to get land rights or we got nothing;

Land rights has got to come first; we got to have our land;

are examples of local, apparently spontaneous, expressions of an attitude common among Aborigines interviewed in the Far West of NSW. It is an attitude reflected also in the rhetoric of other prominent political spokesmen and women in the state. Wilkie (1985:17) relates one community submission to the NSW Legislative Assembly Select Committee upon Aborigines which epitomises this concept of land rights as the *sine qua non* of Aboriginal politics:

The fact is, there is only one real problem facing NSW Aborigines - and that is Land Rights. All these other things can be sorted out in time once we have our land.

An individual Aboriginal, described as a tribal elder, told the Committee of his perception of land rights in terms of personal freedom:

We want the right to go over the whole of this country and do what we like. We want to go where we like and live where we like. We want the opportunity to live in a three bed-room house for a while and then move on if we feel like it (**First Report from the Select Committee upon Aborigines**, Part II, 1981:20).

In the same forum Barbara Flick linked land rights, through decision-making, to education:

Although I believe in the work that TAFE [Technical And Further Education] is doing, a lot more could be done, given that we ensure that the people have a responsibility of making their own decisions about their future. The only way that can be done is if people are granted land rights (1981:702).

Gary Foley's linkage was through economic independence to alcoholism and health:

I believe that the problem of Aboriginal alcoholism will not improve until such time as the Aboriginal communities are in full control of their affairs through the establishment of Aboriginal land rights...the opportunity to develop economic enterprises designed to create a state of self-sufficiency and economic independence can only be good for Aboriginal health in general (1981:728)

In addition to the acknowledged traditional and continuing significance of land to the Aboriginal people, the question of the allocation of particular areas has long influenced suggested policies designed to address the Aboriginal issue. Whatever Aborigines may have thought on the matter, and however their contemporary attitudes might be considered to have been formed, non-Aboriginal advocacy has had an undeniable influence. On many occasions this advocacy had less to do with any idea of justice than it did with a recognition of a problem that might be resolved by segregation. In his report of December 1882, the Protector of Aborigines in NSW offered the opinion that:

...reserves of land should be made in such parts of the Colony, where it can be conveniently and usefully done, for the purpose of the Aborigines to enable them to form homesteads, to cultivate grain, vegetables, fruit etc. etc., for their support and comfort (*NSW LC Journal*, vol.34,Part 2,1883:2).

Sixty years later the problem remained and segregation or isolation was still the suggested policy in some quarters. A NSW politician, whose electorate in the west of the state included a number of impoverished Aboriginal communities, approved the strategy but doubted the possibility of its succeeding:

Except in rare instances, the Aboriginal is of no use in a civilised community...I have said that 100,000 acres of good country...with abundant watercourses and game should be available to the aborigines and they should be permitted to live there in their natural state...But how long would the aborigines stay there? (Horsington *NSW PD*. vol.170,1943:2854-2855).

By the 1960s the focus of the debate had changed to the extent that it included notions of justice, entitlement and restitution. These, however, were considered by some to have been introduced not by Aborigines themselves, but through the efforts of sympathetic non-Aborigines. Before a Joint Committee of the NSW parliament, the Under Secretary of the Chief Secretary's Department and Chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board alluded to this form of consciousness raising when he stated that:

[Aborigines] are being told 'You resent having lost your land, don't you forget it'. Twenty years ago most aborigines could not have cared less (Kingsmill *NSW PP*. vol.5,1967-68 :143).

Without doubt, land rights became in NSW as elsewhere in Australia the symbol of the Aboriginal pursuit of political, social and economic objectives. But symbolic approaches to practical problems raise the possibility of increased alienation and hostility when expectations remain unfulfilled. A former Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, in speaking on the use of symbols, warned of the dangers in any approach 'which suggests to Aboriginal people that their problems can be externalised'. He related his personal experience of what he obviously considered to be the generation of unrealistic expectations through the use of symbols:

...when I was dealing with the Aboriginal people in the late 1970s and early 1980s and we talked about their problems of alcoholic abuse, of unemployment and of illness, they said to me, 'The Labor Party has told us that we can solve these problems. They are going to give us our land' (Chaney, *A PD(S)*. vol.128,1988:60).

The need for a more realistic assessment of the issue of land rights, inherent in Chaney's argument, is supportive of the approach suggested by others who see the danger in loosely defined concepts. Howard (1982b:82) refers to 'some narrowly perceived panacea such as land rights' and while acknowledging the importance of the issue, suggests that, '...land rights by themselves without other fundamental changes in the mode of production mean little and may even spell disaster'.

It is not possible to determine accurately the extent local expressions are influenced by statements made by national figures. However, the significance of simple, even simplistic, assessments of the basic problems facing Aborigines and of the strategies necessary to alleviate these, cannot be ignored. Charles Perkins typifies the person who considers he or she speaks for *all* Aborigines, identifying their common condition and imposing a common resolution:

We demand our rightful place in Australian society and central to all this is Land Rights.
Land Rights is really the key...
[Land] provides the base for the restoration of Aboriginal society (1985:10).

Notwithstanding the apparent contradiction between a demand for a place in *Australian society* and the *restoration of Aboriginal society*, the underlying philosophy of this expression of land rights suggests a national or pan-Aboriginal stance, couched in the rhetoric of retreatism. It encompasses several of the modern myths of Aboriginal social existence. Aborigines, it implies, form an Australian-wide society with the same or similar interests and with common goals based on a desire to return to some form of Aboriginal way of life. While this is doubtful for Aborigines still living in a semblance of a traditional mode, it is certainly largely irrelevant to the increasing population of urban and near urban communities in southern Australia.

11.3 Contrasting Attitudes

Opposition to land rights, or at least to some of the expressed attitudes, has often originated in, or been articulated through, the anti-land rights campaigns of political and commercial interests who consider any land rights proposal inimical to their objectives (see e.g. Morgan 1984, 1988; Australian Free Enterprise Foundation, 1988; Institute of Public Affairs, 1985; Australian Mining Industry Council, various publications n.d.). But more moderate Aboriginal voices have also warned of the unrealistic expectation inherent in some of the demands. Northern Territory Aboriginal businessman Robert Liddle, writing in the prestigious *Wall Street Journal*, questions 'the dubious assumption that Aborigines can be addressed en masse'. Emphasising the social and geographical diversity of the Aboriginal population, he states:

...some Aborigines have used Land Rights as a lever in their effort to carve out an Aboriginal nation - something that has never existed. Land Rights and a treaty simply cannot create a nation out of a people who constitute but 1% of Australia's population and are scattered about its vast continent (1988:23).

On the question of land rights, one Aboriginal in the study area responded with an appreciation of more immediate basic needs rather than of long-term, vaguely-defined goals, a not uncommon reaction in the communities:

I think - it's a good thing...but it's not top priority. There's other things got to be looked at...In a way it's good, in another way it's not good. You got to look at top priorities, health, education, housing (Tape:86 B8).

A more emphatic attitude was expressed by an older woman, considered by many Aborigines to be one of the *de facto* elders of the communities of both Wilcannia and Broken Hill:

This land rights too...I can't see why they want the land...We was all born out in the bush, and none of us, come from out there, don't mention anything about it. All we want, we only want a

house to live in - don't want no land out in the bush...This is a good life this mixing in with the white people (Tape:85 B9).

Contrasting priorities and the conflict these generate present only one facet of the whole complex question of land rights. The extent to which any Aboriginal community could function as a valid political collective depends as much on the political structures in place as on the territorial base it might be afforded. Political structures imply power relations, and the idea that these could in some way be created from a traditional mode poses immense problems for many associations of Aborigines. For these people, the tradition has been lost and once lost cannot be recaptured (see e.g. Friedrich 1972:114). Moreover, the ideology of ethnic identity, or pan-national Aboriginality, which underlies much of the land rights rhetoric, departs from the apparently limited apprehension of identity and authority in traditional society. Still, a return to a recreated past is considered by some to be the objective of land rights, an observation made by Campbell who claims that:

Some advocates of Aboriginal land rights seem to entertain the romantic notion that this policy will restore the situation of Aborigines prior to European settlement (1985:17).

The NSW legislation appears, in part, to be informed by this attitude. In the foreward to the Green Paper on the legislation, the Government's viewpoint is stated in terms of the regeneration of a lost past:

The Government believes Land Rights will provide a major foundation for Aborigines to *rebuild* their shattered culture and to *recover their dignity and pride* (1982 emphasis added).

Aborigines would need to be a collective entity for such to have other than a general reference. As no land rights legislation in Australia has been formulated on the basis of granting land to be held and utilised in common by the Aboriginal population, specific groups and

areas must be identified, a process which is likely to reinforce the divisions already existing. As Campbell observes:

It is one thing to claim, in a general way, that Aborigines are entitled to enjoy the possession of land in Australia, but this does not help to establish just which Aborigines have title to just what areas (1985:16).

In its attempt to resolve these problems the NSW legislation left it to the Aborigines themselves to determine their claims within the established criteria. Herein lies a stimulus to conflict between the various levels of identification; between social and political positions. Political mobilisation of Aborigines at a broader level than the local community is inhibited by a concept of land rights based on supposed cultural regeneration, because this would tend to reinforce local identity.

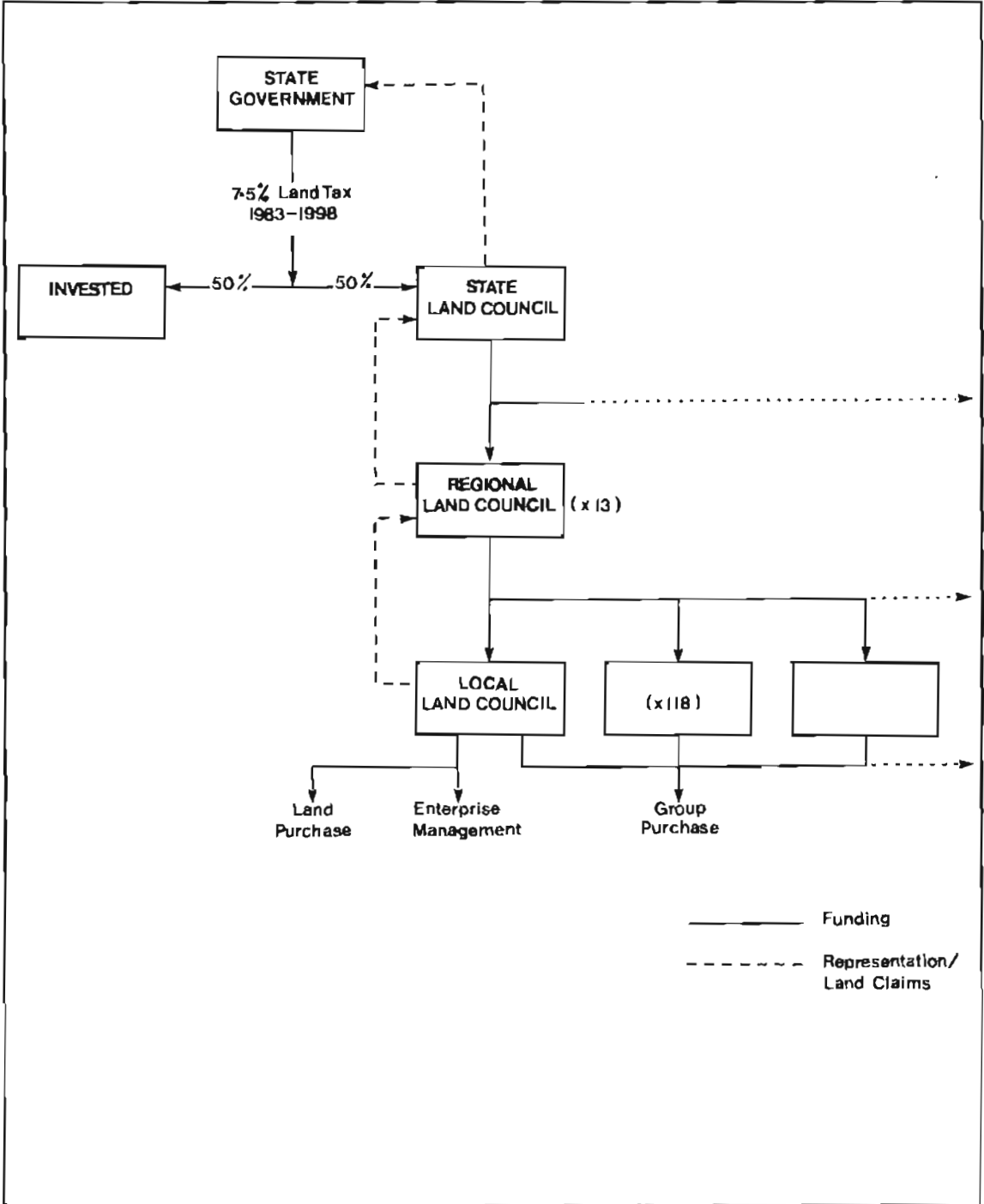
11.4 Political Participation And The NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act, 1983

11.4.1 Regional Land Councils

Under the terms of the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act a three-level representative structure of local, regional and state land councils was set up to allow participation of all Aborigines in NSW. The state was divided into thirteen regions each with a Regional Land Council (RLC) and with each Aboriginal community within a region forming a Local Land Council (LLC) on the basis of geographical separation.

Within the theoretical framework of the Act, structures were provided through which control could be exercised from the local, through regional to the state level. Local representatives would determine the collective will of the community and pass this to the region which in turn would act as the agent for its transmission to the state level (see Figure 11.1). With funding for locally determined initiatives following

Figure 11.1: Theoretical framework of the NSW Land Rights Act, 1983



the reverse path through the hierarchy, the mechanisms were in place for an effective Aboriginal political operation. In actuality, the RLCs were ideally placed to become the principal tools for political power. The dominant figures in these structures would not only be in a position to influence the communities through the LLCs, their membership of the State Land Council would also ensure their involvement at the highest level of the political hierarchy.

The significance of the legal service as an agency for recruitment and a training ground for Aboriginal political actors became even more pronounced with the introduction of the Act. Initial appointments to the RLCs were of Aborigines involved with the legal service, an understandable strategy when one considers the paucity of Aborigines with organisational and administrative experience. It was one, however, that was resented by many other Aborigines, some no doubt aware of that feature of Aboriginal politics in which initial appointments tend to become long term - and strongly defended - positions. As one Aboriginal informant described the selection process:

A phone call went from [the Minister's] office to Tranby College to Kevin Cook and he had to have twelve names for regional directors of Aboriginal land councils that same afternoon to present to parliament. And the irony of it was that was the first breaking of the rights of the Green Paper because we were supposed to have elected our local land council, and two representatives from the land council to join with two reps from the other communities to form our regional land council which then would elect [officers] from within their own ranks. That did not happen... He just referred to the legal service...The legal service is the Aboriginal Land Councils (Tape:85 B8).

Another Aboriginal, herself an active participant in community affairs, similarly opposed the lack of community involvement, a supposed fundamental aspect of the Act:

...it was set up wrong. They're all hand picked...[the Minister] should have said, 'Send it out to the communities and let them nominate'...But they all from the Aboriginal Legal Service, and because they supported - when there was any land rights marches,

demonstrations or what - they're the mob that went. So that's why he picked them (Tape:85 B7).

It is significant to an understanding of Aboriginal political behaviour to consider that the initial appointee to the Western Region Land Council managed to retain his position despite the extent of his unpopularity and the frequently expressed determination to vote him out of office. His experience¹ illustrates well the difficulties confronted by the Aboriginal political actor who seeks to broaden his or her power base. Inevitably he or she becomes a victim of the Aboriginal conflicts of identity and perceptions of loyalty.

11.4.2 Individual Involvement And Community Benefit

Although it was the legal service that initially inducted many individuals into the political process, it was the passage of the Land Rights Act that put political participation - in theory at least - in the reach of all adult Aborigines. Seen as a landmark in Aboriginal policy initiatives, the legislation was considered to offer both material and psychological benefits. It recognised the need for Aboriginal self-determination and set in place the structures for democratically controlled organisations in each community. It promised a guaranteed source of funds and provided for community controlled land holdings and enterprise developments which would create employment opportunities. In addition to these obvious advantages the Act was seen by its framers in a much broader perspective. The Green Paper on the proposed Act, issued in December 1982, referred to recent studies which, it said,

have demonstrated the close link between land rights and significant improvements in welfare, health and housing, and a downturn in alcoholism.

¹ Discussed below.

[studies] have been released pointing to the often remarkable improvements in lifestyle brought about by changed attitudes stimulated by the granting of land rights (1982:6).

In introducing the bill, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Labor Government described it as the first dealing with land rights in NSW, one which on many counts went far beyond land rights legislation existing in other states. Of its importance he stated:

This proposed legislation takes the first step in this State towards redressing the injustice and neglect of real Aboriginal needs since Captain Phillip stepped upon the shores of Port Jackson in 1788 (*NSW PD*. vol.174,1983:5088).

Similarly acknowledging its significance, an opposition member said of the bill:

...in many ways it is the most significant social legislation that has been brought before the Parliament in living memory...this bill, underlying the social philosophy rather than the mechanisms contained in it, is of paramount importance to both the black and white citizens of New South Wales (*NSW PP*. vol.174, 1983:5280).

Conceived in the acceptance of moral obligation, framed in compromise and executed with an awareness of political realities, the land rights legislation provided potential political, economic and psychological benefits for Aborigines: it set in place structures through which collective political resources might be mobilised and maintained; it promoted collective decision-making and goal-setting; and it held the promise of some marginal improvement in the material conditions of Aboriginal communities. But possibly the most significant, if not the most stressed, aspect of the legislation was the possibility it afforded for a dispossessed people to regain a sense of ownership; of the pride in having property from which they could not be denied access. In the words of one Aboriginal: 'Everyone's got to have land; without that he's nothing...just adrift' (Tape:86 B8). Even more important is the importance of belonging somewhere, of having the sense of place that is lacking in the consciousness of so many Aboriginal people.

11.4.3 Democratic Participation Or Nepotism

The NSW land rights legislation fell between two philosophical stools. It imposed, or at least set in place, structures designed on the basis of democratic participation in processes that included the local - or 'grassroots' - regional and state level organisations. The implied intention certainly was of a form of collective decision-making. At the same time the individuality of the local unit was reinforced by the nature of proposed resource ownership and control. Again, the tension was between levels of identification; between individual and collective aspirations. Moreover, the processes themselves were supportive of the notion of a state-wide collective comprised of sub units down to the community level, each of which would have both an independent and a collective identity. The reality was quite different.

Grass roots political resources are not spontaneously generated, nor are the political priorities readily determined, particularly where apathy is widespread and community decision-making, if undirected, slow and uncertain. Political actors, whether acting as agents, or through some ideologically-inspired motive, may exercise considerable political authority if able to influence community decisions.

As with many other strategies posited on a subjective perception of Aboriginal needs, intention and effect did not necessarily coincide. Designed on the basis of representation from each local community, the regional land council in effect removed, or at least made remote, from local Aborigines the processes of decision-making. Many Aborigines have problems associating representative structures with local authority even where the latter is little more than symbolic. Delegated authority is considered to be abrogated authority. At most, the local representative is considered to act for those who support him or her, invariably the

kin or family group (see e.g. Eckermann 1988:35). Others feel they have been excluded entirely from the process.

Much Aboriginal political behaviour suggests that democracy, as it figures in the Aboriginal consciousness, is conceived of in very small units. Some Aboriginal people would deny this notion, arguing that participation is fundamental to the Aboriginal decision-making process. Lois O'Donoghue is one who has spoken of 'the fact that the majority of Aboriginal people cherish a democratically elected organisation' (*Age*, July 1, 1985). What needs to be considered here is the actual scale of the participation and the scope of the resulting organisation. As is seen in the communities, the local organisation is not considered to be representative of all groups in the community. An organisation that is structured on a broader scale of representation is likely to attract even greater opposition from those who are not actually engaged in its operation. O'Donoghue herself opposed the concept of a nationally elected advisory body, arguing that it would be '*more likely to produce politicians than advisers*' (cited in Hiatt, 1976:117).

Democratic participation implies unity in place of competition and conflict, and it is this that appears to influence Sutton's prescription for Aboriginal land rights. Sutton believes that land rights needs to be welded 'into an instrument of public, political and economic influence...' (1981:9). His arguments are antithetical to the underlying philosophy of the NSW legislation in its original format and, indeed, to the perception of the benefits of land rights by many Aborigines. According to Sutton:

If you have decentralisation of everything and dozens of largely autonomous local land trusts or boards, with a weakly representative central office, land rights will merely be some sort of local compensation settlement and will not have reverberations in the wider community, especially in the settled regions where most people live (1981:9).

One cannot argue with the value of Sutton's thesis but its practicality is open to question. Aborigines, no less than other people, invariably consider the local community ahead of the larger collective, and consider kin ties ahead of the local community. Aborigines themselves, and others working closely with them, acknowledge this:

If they come along to a meeting and there's something to be done, their family's got to be the first (Tape:86 M10).

Everyone likes to look after themselves and their links...I'm the manager here, right, well I'd like my son to have a job in the garden, my daughter to do the cleaning. Stuff like that. That's the sort of thing that happens. I don't think it will ever change (Tape:86 B8).

Broken Hill got Mutawintji, Menindee got their place, we got Weinteriga. It belongs to Wilcannia and we don't want [others] telling us what to do with it because it's nothing to do with anyone else (Tape:86 W16).

Aboriginal involvement and interest [in training programs] ceases once a member of the family gets the job. The job is important because it brings money into the family. There is no interest in actually being trained, no sense of responsibility to learn so that they can help the community. It's the family that matters, not the community. They think of their family and not of the future benefits that could come to the community (Tape:88 B18).

Attitudes represented by these examples contrast with Sutton's ideal but do not negate it. Conflict between attitude and ideal does, however, point up the differences between culturally influenced dimensions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal politics that need to be reconciled within the politics of transcultural adaptation. Nepotism is a feature of Aboriginal social life and shorn of its pejorative connotations, has a positive function in family cohesion. The often cited - and at times exaggerated - Aboriginal sense of obligation is, with urban and rural Aborigines, mostly family centred and is a significant influence in social and political relations. Helping 'your own family' does not appear to Aborigines to be anything other than a natural response to opportunities provided. Nor would it be judged otherwise in the general Australian community if considered within the moral criteria of that

society. Making just such a point, Woodward (1975:72), considering the question of obligations and the dangers of nepotism, comments on 'what could be seen by some as corruption, when similar obligations are recognized in a society which has personal property'.

11.5 The Question Of Elite Dominance

To function successfully, the land rights legislation in NSW would have had to satisfy an Aboriginal population comprising people who have a cultural heritage influenced by social disintegration and enforced group association. They are many generations removed from contact with traditional life and culture. Whatever its stated intention, the legislation functioned not so much to restore or to regenerate what has been lost, but to give Aborigines an opportunity to achieve an economic foothold in the mainstream of Australian life. The politics of land rights, at least as it is expressed at the Aboriginal organisational level, has, however, institutionalised a demand for power, even though few, if any, strategies have been designed by Aborigines for the exercise of this power on a collective basis. Given the nature of Aboriginal social and political life it seemed inevitable that the organisations set in place by the land rights legislation would be monopolised by elite or kin groups.

The implications of this suggested minority control of political power attracted comment from within the political structures opposed to the land rights Act and its anticipated effects in NSW. Speaking in the state parliament, a member referred to the situation where, he alleged:

...Aboriginal land councils in this state are dominated by a few families...A few privileged Aboriginal families have been gaining all the benefits from the funds. They hand out largesse to their friends for sitting fees, cars, parties, booze and trips to Sydney (NSW PD. vol.190,1986:2593).

In recommending the adoption of a policy to repeal the Land Rights Act and rescind all claims granted under it, the Opposition spokesman on Aboriginal Affairs also stressed the supposed elitist nature of the Aboriginal political structures:

Many councils are run on an undemocratic and unrepresentative basis and are often dominated by a particular family or political interest (confidential memo September 4, 1986).

Such criticism of Aboriginal political behaviour is consistent with the opposition expressed at the time the legislation was debated in parliament. One member claimed the bill would 'superficially give almost absolute powers of controlling Aboriginal [affairs] to Aborigines'. Later, the same speaker declared of the bill:

[It] creates in New South Wales one huge tribe of Aborigines which will be dominated by twelve Aborigines, in the first instance appointed by the Minister, and probably, in the last instance retained there once they have entrenched themselves in power (*NSW PD*, vol.174,1983:5306).

Notwithstanding the somewhat simplistic analysis of the scale of Aboriginal political collectivisation, this statement and those preceding it are reasonably accurate descriptions of the way the councils have functioned. The Western Regional Land Council became the locus of power throughout the Far West, its principal figure extending his influence to the composition of almost all the local land councils in the region. Commenting on this one family dominance, one Aboriginal expressed the feeling of many who felt they were excluded from participation:

You get that chap up top, and the representatives, more or less, are his people, cousins and that, reps of local groups. Same people running everything, same people on Weinteriga, Mootwingee, Dareton, Ivanhoe, Menindee, Wilcannia, Broken Hill, all relations (Tape:86 B12).

This monopolisation of whatever political power resided in the structures set in place by the Land Rights Act isolated the councils from significant sections of the local communities.

11.6 The Conflict Between Regional And Local Authority

To those Aborigines who consider the community to be the centre of their social and political identification, regional authority is an alien concept related more to the former authoritarian control of the non-Aboriginal bureaucracy than to any Aboriginal form of self-determination. Referring to the attitude within her particular community, one outspoken Aboriginal woman was unequivocal in her analysis of the unacceptability of regional influence:

Well, because the Regional Land Council is government, [the community] don't want to have any part of it. There's that dictatorship again (Tape:86 B13).

Other Aborigines in all three communities respond with similarly negative viewpoints, although not always for the same reasons. The most outspoken opponents of regional involvement have been those who were themselves in positions of political significance within the communities and were, no doubt, keen to protect their positions. Comments ranged from the dismissive 'We do things our way; we don't want them to interfere with the way we do things', to the suspicion inherent in perceptions of personal opportunism, 'They're only interested in their own mob', or 'They're looking out for themselves'. Those most supportive of regional authority were either non-local Aborigines, those ambitious for personal advancement or those who had close ties or connections with individuals or the 'mob' identified with the regional structures.

Because the regional structure is so often seen to be remote from the local community, those individuals who are associated with it are similarly regarded with suspicion. The transfer of the legal service from Wilcannia, the largest Aboriginal population centre, had been resented. Even more resented was the alleged reluctance of its field officer to visit the town on request, particularly after he had gained increased political status through his appointment to the RLC. Whatever the reasons for the denial of service, it was seen by the community as a betrayal by one of their own. Indications are that the more politically powerful posts of RLC secretary and representative to the State Land Council took precedence, certainly of time, and most probably of interest.

A very high level of arrest for both minor and major offences in Wilcannia indicates a need for full-time legal services, if not locally based at least promising ready access. But the duties associated with executive involvement in the land councils were quite demanding of time and it was often difficult for offenders to gain the support services they needed and believed they were entitled to. The unavailability of a legal service in Wilcannia meant that offenders had to travel to Broken Hill to consult their solicitor or their field officer if he were available. This resulted not only in a decline in the service to the community most in need of it, but also a decline in the acceptability of the individual concerned:

He comes from here but he's not very popular with Wilcannia people because since the land council came here he got appointed state rep and he neglected his job with the legal service and people didn't see him for the past three years. Like, before the land council came in he would be up here for the full week talking to people who had to go to court and all that (Tape:86 W15).

In addition to frequent visits to Dubbo and Sydney, and in one case to an overseas conference, the demands of political involvement made

considerable inroads into the time available for legal service commitments. This last area of concern is referred to in a letter to the NSW Premier, in which a Wilcannia resident described the now-deposed legal service field officer and his non-Aboriginal adviser as being the most apathetic, disliked, mistrusted group in Wilcannia:

They both drive \$30,000 Toyotas supplied and funded by government departments. I am given to understand that these vehicles have attended rallies in Alice Springs, Brisbane and Sydney (personal copy).

There is, however, an apparent conflict between local expectations and the demands on individuals whose political perspective is much broader than the local level. Outside the introspective environment of the local community the Aboriginal person involved is acknowledged as an experienced and skilled negotiator whose problems are due to his wider vision of politics:

The people like [him] didn't just see the problems for [the local community], he saw the problems for the region, the whole western area. And that's what he fights for. And there's no one following him through. He was involved in the early 70s with that militant group...whereas no one else around here was involved (Tape:87 B5).

Unable to dislodge him from his position of political importance, his long-time opponents gained some satisfaction when an alternative strategy removed him from the source of his paid employment, the legal service.² (see Figures 11.2, 11.3)

²

Deprived of a source of income by a strategy mounted from within his own kin-based support group, and under economic and personal pressure to leave Broken Hill, he returned to the site of his original power base in Wilcannia. He was, however, no longer able to command respect or authority in that town as he was considered to have 'turned dog' on the community. Although lacking credibility and with no political or economic base, political manoeuvring resulted in his accession to a specially-created political position. A meeting of the land council, involving only selected individuals and to which local members were not admitted, created and installed him in a salaried position of Regional Land Council Coordinator.

Figure 11.2: Patterns of political influence in the study region, 1984-1988

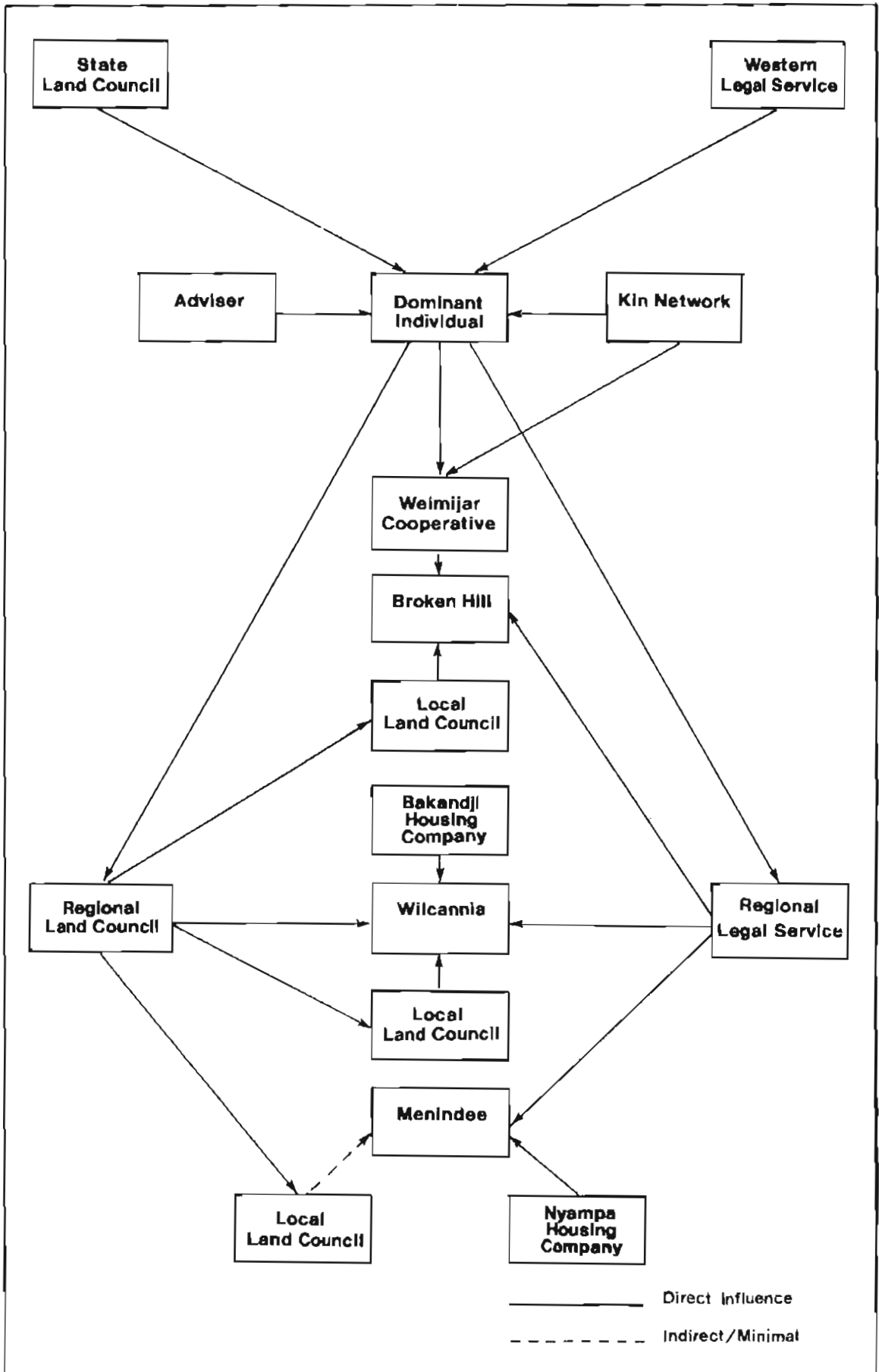
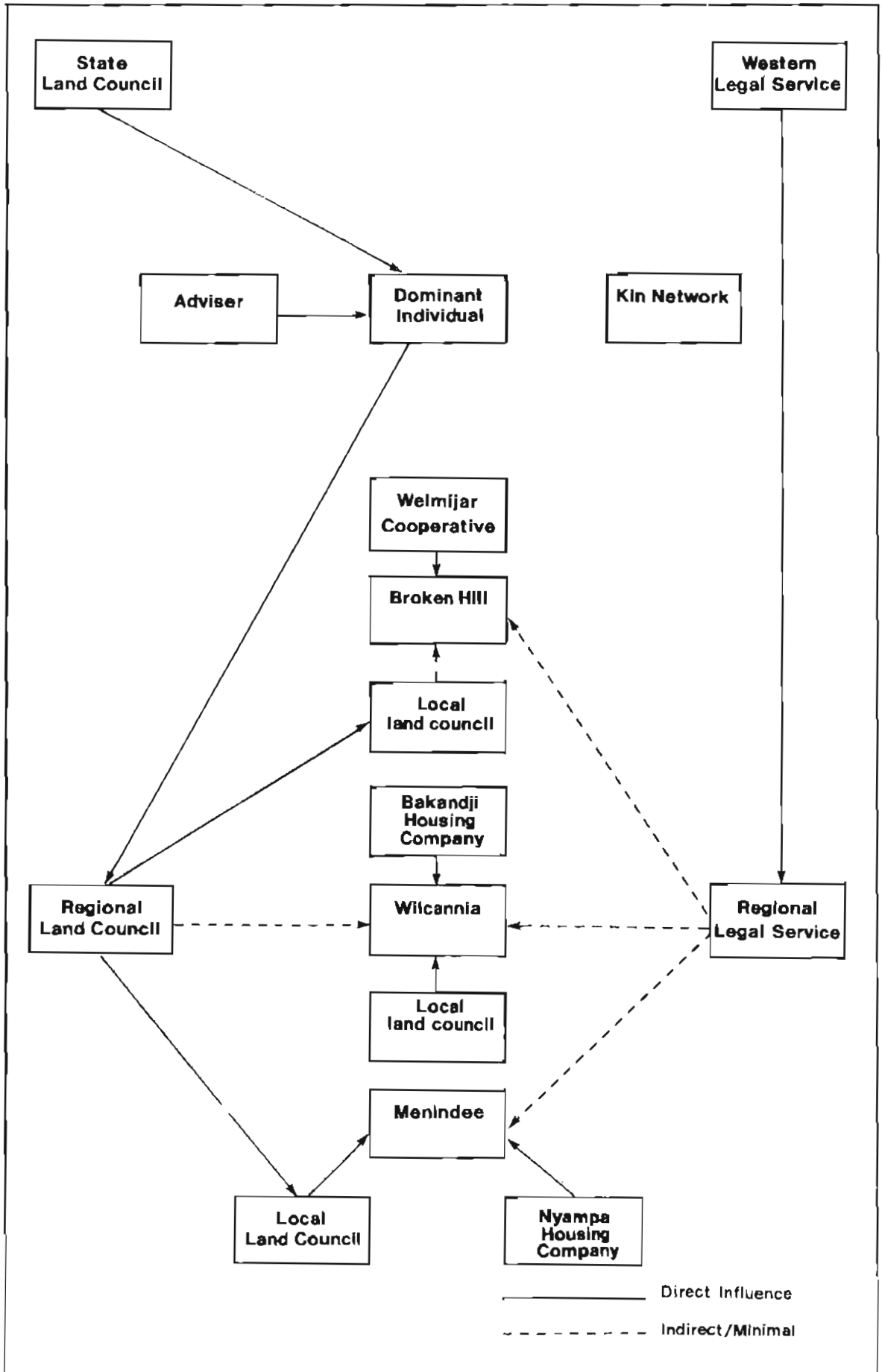


Figure 11.3: Changes in patterns of political influence in the study region, 1988



11.7 Western Regional Land Council In Operation

11.7.1 The First Land Purchase

The Western Regional Land Council provides an example of an Aboriginal organisation that is successful on a broad level but a failure locally. As with others throughout the state, the council was criticised as being dominated by a kin-related group which exercised control of the political agenda throughout the area. Yet, in a political climate where accusations of corruption, misuse and misappropriation of funds and lack of accountability to the communities were widespread, this council was cited as an example of the success of the Act (*vide. NSW PD. vol.190,1986:2587-2588*). Funding for disbursement to its eight LLCs totalled \$218,740 in 1983-84 and \$702,078 in 1984-85 (Auditor-General's Reports).³ Rather than having these amounts distributed, the LLCs were persuaded to maintain a common account which was invested in short-term securities until such time as a worthwhile land purchase could be made. Agreement was forthcoming, although the way this was secured has been criticised by many Aborigines who claim their representatives had been unable, or unwilling, to act in the best interests of their respective communities. Leadership at the regional level, they maintained, was an imposed authority structure, unrepresentative of the Aboriginal people.

In 1985, when a grazing property on the Darling River close to Wilcannia was offered for sale, the LLCs were persuaded to use the pooled funds to purchase the property. Again, 'persuaded' is denied by many Aborigines who use alternate terms such as 'directed', 'told', 'manipulated' or 'forced'. Nevertheless, whatever the manner of securing agreement - and

³ The total funding to the Western Regional Land Council had totalled \$1,710,500 by the year 1986-87.

the form and procedures of meetings of Aboriginal organisations are frequently such that it is difficult to determine accurately the processes of decision-making - the decision was taken as recommended by the politically dominant RLC secretary. Within the communities - if not within the meetings - many Aborigines expressed a preference for funds to be used to help alleviate the deleterious housing conditions present in most of the communities. Despite opposition, and despite the proposed purchase being common knowledge and widely discussed within the Aboriginal communities, it is noteworthy that no leakage occurred. The eventual bid by the RLC was an unwelcome surprise to many non-Aborigines, including the vendors.⁴

As the purchased property lies within the area of the Wilcannia land council it was decided that title to the property would be held by that community. With the realisation that they were now *owners* of land, a number who had opposed the purchase, or at least had held reservations about it, now became ardent supporters and sought active participation in the determination of its use. Others, both within and outside the Wilcannia community, were vocal and active in their opposition. One Aboriginal woman's outspoken comment reflected an attitude common throughout the region. She considered the whole process as unauthorised and divisive, and angrily denounced the use of common funds to benefit one community:

The local people in Wilcannia, they were told [the property] belong to the Region. Now we told Wilcannia owns it. Its causing a lot of friction; its a station no one's got access to. Now the people realises what's happened, see what fools they taken for; they taken for a ride. They were talked into it. Now, instead of the Regional reps saying 'We can't make that decision unless we go back and consult with our local people, Local Land Council, and then we'll come back with an answer from them'. But because

⁴ In reporting the transaction the *Weekend Australian* (March 30-31, 1985) headlined its story **A Day That Shocked The Outback**.

there's a dominant person up there, they just said, 'Yes we agree with it' (Tape:86 M13).

11.7.2 Aboriginal Reaction

The conflict of priorities reached the national political level when a number of Wilcannia Aborigines approached the local Federal Member of Parliament. After inspecting living conditions in the township the Member issued a press statement in which he referred to the appalling conditions many Aborigines were living in 'despite the expenditure of countless hundreds of thousands of dollars by government authorities'. In a later communication he declared that:

The Aboriginal representatives that spoke to me were an elderly group of men and women who said they were very concerned that a few local white men seemed to be strongly influencing a number of aborigines who are on the Land Council. They also expressed concern that most of the aboriginal people were unaware of the workings of the local and regional Land Councils and felt they had no say in their operation (personal communication).

He stated that the people were particularly upset that over \$800,000 had been spent on the purchase of the sheep station 'when most Aborigines have very dilapidated housing and generally poor living standards'.

An elderly woman, considered by many to be the most respected authority figure in the community, was reported as saying the Wilcannia Land Council would have preferred to use its share of the regional money, about \$30,000 a year, to improve housing (*Age*, February 27, 1986). Her preference did not prevent her from becoming involved in the committee initially set up to oversee the management of the station.

In response to criticism, the RLC secretary dismissed the suggestion that funds should have been applied to housing. It was, he claimed, the responsibility of DAA or the ADC to provide housing. If land councils' funds were used for this purpose it would relieve these bodies of their responsibility, and he pointed to a successful application for 17 houses

to be built in the near future for the Dareton community. Instead of opposing the purchase of land the Aboriginal communities should be following Dareton's lead and applying pressure for more housing and for the relief of many problems facing Aborigines. Most importantly, Aborigines must be free to determine their own priorities:

Creative thinking and Aboriginal control are needed. We must be free to meet our needs on our terms. Aboriginal people need houses, jobs, education and a fair go. But our greatest need is for chances to feel good about ourselves as individuals and as a group. Weinteriga is a step towards Aboriginal independence (Telex to Member for Riverina-Darling, January 29, 1986).

The long-term objective that inspired the purchase of Weinteriga was the ultimate ownership of a property of its own by each community in the region. But the experience of Wilcannia exposes the areas of conflict in Aboriginal perceptions of ownership and utilisation. It reveals also the constraints that are imposed upon Aborigines even as they gain a supposed degree of self-determination

Aboriginal reaction to the land purchase was coloured by individual perceptions of Aboriginal needs. For those who opposed it, the result was a waste of urgently needed funds. But supporters, at least in the initial, euphoric reaction to ownership, offered various interpretations of its significance and of the use to which it should be put. Some saw the land as providing a base for cultural regeneration, the recreation of a meaningful life style, or simply a place where they could be free from non-Aboriginal interference: 'People will be able to come out and camp along the river bank and fish and hunt without having any problems with anyone' (Tape:85 W11).

To others it promised a temporary retreat for Aborigines who needed to escape the pressures of town life after serving gaol terms, or for those who wanted relief from the effects of alcohol abuse. Another view was of a bush centre for the rehabilitation and education of youthful

offenders. But the regional land council, or at least its prominent secretary and his advisers, sought to maintain the station as a viable economic unit as well as a training establishment for Aboriginal apprentices. To these ends, assistance was obtained from the Commonwealth Employment Service to search for a manager with the necessary experience and expertise, and to select suitable young Aborigines from throughout the region for training. These plans were aborted when power to enact them was withdrawn from the RLC by the property's Wilcannia owners. Handing over of the property to local ownership was accompanied by the loss of the region's authority to influence its future, at least in the short term.

WLC members, acting more as individuals than as members of a political body and reinforced by the support of many Aborigines who previously had shown no interest in community affairs, refused to accept intrusion into what they now considered to be their own affairs. Because the station was their property they would make all decisions connected with it. Bluntly telling the RLC secretary to keep out of their affairs, they demanded the withdrawal of advertising for a manager and the cessation of interviewing of prospective apprentices. They selected apprentices from within the local community and appointed as manager one of their own land council members whose experience did not appear to have included property management or apprentice training. The local land council became the owner and controller of a valuable resource, although there was little evidence of any clear idea of how it would be utilised.

Whatever unrealistic expectations were generated by the promise of land rights, Aborigines experienced the continuation of their often deplorable living conditions, and interest in the property rapidly declined. While they still retained control it became little more than

a symbol of the politics of alienation which remains the principal - if sporadic - uniting force in the community. It raised the consciousness of Aborigines mostly because it could be seen as a place where non-Aborigines could no longer say 'You're on my land' and this had a significant psychological effect on the Aboriginal people. A large sign erected at the entrance to the property advised that it was Aboriginal land and warned 'Whites keep out'. Beyond this psychological benefit, or the prospect of some individual material advantage such as an expected right to obtain free meat, there appeared to be little practical concern with the property's economic potential.

11.7.3 Aboriginal Expectations And Political Realities

There are a number of practical and theoretical consequences of this manifestation of Aboriginal politics: It makes difficult the effective political and economic utilisation of an acquired resource because decision-making is carried out on an *ad hoc* basis without the structures being in place for continuous collective involvement and meaningful planning. Secondly, the failure to fulfill expectations leads not only to disillusion and apathy but also to individual consideration of the right to share in whatever can be gained from the resource. With only a vague idea of what the land could mean to them, the property's livestock became the focus of a community seeking some measurable benefit. As one informant described it:

All they got with Weinteriga is somewhere they can go out and pinch a sheep. Five thousand sheep less one a week for every family, what's that give you? (Tape:86 M15).

Thirdly, the experience demonstrates the obstacles faced in trying to generate and to maintain a collective approach to Aboriginal politics when the primary concern is with local interests and individual advantage. Fourthly, the tentative and incomplete nature of any

supposed transfer of power or authority is revealed. When questioned on the possible decline of the property and loss of the region's collective equity, the secretary acknowledged the Aboriginal Affairs Minister's power to prevent the situation reaching that stage. Autonomy granted to Aboriginal communities by the Land Rights Act was limited and could be exercised only as long as it conformed to non-Aboriginal defined criteria. If Aborigines could not manage their resources to the satisfaction of these criteria, their right of control would be withdrawn.

Finally, Aboriginal politics functions as a fragmentary process, lacking a recognised and legitimated authority structure which could promote cohesion, stability and consistent direction in decision-making. The Wilcannia community was unable to maintain an acceptable, effective and responsible authority structure in relation to the functioning of its land council in general or to the station property in particular. Given the provisions of the Land Rights Act it was inevitable that the state would intervene. With the rapid decline of a valuable economic resource and the unacceptable performance of the land council, that body was dismissed and an administrator appointed. Weinteriga became the responsibility of a professional rural management company.

Wilcannia Aborigines were divided on the fate of their property. Loss of Aboriginal control was resented by those who saw intervention as another denial of the Aboriginal rights of self-determination. Others welcomed the demotion of individuals whose authority they refused to recognise. A few applauded the likelihood of greatly increased economic benefits flowing to the community from a 'properly run' station. An overall perspective is provided by the Aboriginal woman who was saddened by the loss of Aboriginal involvement but resigned to the seemingly

inevitable consequence of Aboriginal factionalism: 'That's a real shame, but there was too much interference and they lost interest. No one seems to care much anyway' (Tape:88 B6).

The RLC's initial exercise in collective political functioning was later repeated in respect of other properties in other parts of the region.³⁴⁵ In each case, however, the benefits were considered to have local application only. Nor did they reduce in many Aborigines the suspicion, even contempt, of the 'bigger land councils' (see e.g. *Weekend Australian* February 20-21, 1988). But conflict within the Aboriginal community has seldom if ever been left to be resolved by Aborigines themselves. The intervention of external political influences has invariably further confused Aboriginal attempts to come to terms with the demands of political association.

11.8 The Change In Government Perceptions

Following the defeat of the NSW Labor government in March 1988, the Greiner administration announced its intention to repeal the Aboriginal Land Rights Legislation. It considered the Act had provided for 'a cumbersome, unwieldy and unworkable system of Land Councils, which had been an administrative nightmare since 1983' (*NSW Government Discussion Paper*, 1988:34). Although earlier accusations of corruption, misuse and misappropriation of funds and the lack of accountability to the communities were not repeated in official documents, the Act was considered to have failed to improve the continuing poor living conditions of many Aboriginal people:

The coalition Government is concerned that little or no attention has been given to addressing the dire socio-economic problems of

⁵ Pooled funds were again utilised to acquire a property for the Balranald community in 1988. This was followed by the purchase of another in the Wilcannia area and, in 1989, of a sheep station near Menindee for around \$1,200,000.

many Aboriginal people across the State...most attention since 1982 has been directed towards the present Aboriginal Land Rights Legislation with limited results (1988:10).

In a subsequent Green Paper allegations of 'wasteful and unproductive' expenditure of public money were repeated, the Government's own assessment of Aboriginal needs being listed as 'better housing and clean water supplies...education, training, employment and enterprise development...' (1989:8). At the time of the change of government none of the LLCs in the research area was active, one was under the control of an administrator and the RLC was becoming increasingly isolated from the communities.

An outburst of protest and a flurry of activity that followed the release of the Government's proposals was largely uncoordinated in the region and did not lead to effective political action. A meeting called to discuss the situation at regional level was variously interpreted as being intended to deal with particular local problems. Aborigines in one community believed it would discuss the local authority conflict; in another it was thought to be a forum wherein the actions of certain individuals could be challenged. Individual opinion in regard to the specific Government proposals was divided. There was spontaneous opposition to the idea of losing any possible benefit, but at the same time there was widespread dissatisfaction with land councils, particularly the RLC. Most vocal opposition to change came from those involved with the land council structures. Overall, community response was confused by a general lack of understanding and many individual Aborigines adopted a 'wait and see' attitude.

The Land Rights Act provided for a limited form of autonomy in the local communities through their land councils, but the dominance of the regional structure reduced this to a largely symbolic expression.

Because the RLC controlled the allocation of funds and was able to enforce its own strategies, the LLCs never gained significant support. Attempts to establish power bases within the LLCs were unsuccessful both because they were overshadowed by the regional structure and because other local organisations continued to control resources available outside the influence of the Land Rights Act. Most Aborigines concerned with the LLCs either lost interest or sought their objectives in other directions.

In amendments to the Act in 1986 the RLCs had been specifically prevented from providing funds directly to the LLCs because it was considered this would have the effect of

concentrating the decision making in respect of land purchases at the regional level and preventing the inappropriate use of Land Council funds at the local level where the teething problems of the Act have so far been apparent (*NSW PD*, vol.190,1986:2597).

Yet, as an Opposition speaker pointed out, some of the worst corruption and misappropriation of funds had occurred in the RLCs (*NSW PD*, vol.190,1986:2597).

Regional association is an essential part of the political process if Aborigines are to function as a national collective. But the specificity of local identity inhibits this wider association when it goes beyond the abstract or symbolic representation of Aborigines as an ethnic group. In terms of local autonomy and of the political mobilisation of Aboriginal people, the NSW experiment was not a success. Its lack of success can be attributed to a number of factors, not all of which were controllable by the Aboriginal people. Despite the obvious sincerity of those whose efforts shaped the Act, it was based on a number of assumptions which did not accurately reflect the reality of Aboriginal social and political structures or of the specificity of community behaviour. Not only is the notion of regionalism at odds with

the essential localism of the Aboriginal sense of community, the local community is seldom if ever the corporate entity it is assumed to be.

Funds allocated through the Act did not necessarily go to a community but to a group within the community. This accentuated the factionalism and nepotism that marks the competition for resources and promotes much of the community disunity. In his analysis of the Act, Pollard (1988) indicates a belief that the implicit notion of community is one of its inherent weaknesses. It is, he suggests, 'too simplistic to function successfully' (59). Many of the presuppositions influencing the drafting of the Act are, according to Pollard, now seen to be defective,

undermined by the difficulties involved in consulting Aboriginal communities, the difficulty of Aboriginal community-based groups to perform in minimally accountable ways, and the gradual perception that perhaps Aborigines do not want to be so different from the white community after all (1988:94).

It is, however, the nature of the local community that is the dominant factor influencing the success or otherwise of social and political adaptation. To understand Aboriginal politics it is necessary to understand the Aboriginal community.

CHAPTER 12

1988: A YEAR FOR ACHIEVEMENT OR A LOST OPPORTUNITY

12.1 The Need For Involvement

Aborigines' involvement in decision-making affecting their future has become an article of faith in most prescriptions of policies to address their poverty and general disadvantage. Rarely detailed are the scale and scope of this involvement. Similarly ignored is the passivity of many Aborigines and their reluctance often to get involved even in basic community activities, while, at the same time, not readily accepting the concept of representation on their behalf. Involvement, then, is not simply a question of afforded opportunity. It demands also a willingness to participate or to delegate authority, and an unambiguous set of guidelines which would legitimise decision-making for whatever level of Aboriginal community is being represented. These criteria are not always a feature of Aboriginal social and political consciousness.

Calls for Aboriginal involvement in determining goals have come from many quarters over a long period, in most instances propounding ideals rather than specific policies. An Aboriginal woman's declaration that 'Instead of other people deciding what is good for us, let us decide what we want' (*Commission of Inquiry Into Poverty. First Main Report*, 1975:252) is similar to Lippmann's 'the only way forward is to listen to what Aborigines want' (1972:236) and Rowley's 'their welfare depends on decisions which only they can make' (1986:28). This theme is taken up also by Tatz in his criticism of 'the psychological inability

of whites to stop talking *about* blacks rather than *with* them...to allow them to act on their own behalf' (1979:1).

Much later, obviously believing that this had not occurred, Tatz expressed astonishment that there had been so little 'political, grievance of episodic violence' on the part of Aborigines who, he claimed, were in 'a state of crisis'. He predicted that if something were not done to help the Aborigines, the community could expect their frustration and anger to boil over into violence. To emphasise his point, Tatz declared that were he a 'black' in Australia he would be an urban terrorist because of the 'crisis' facing Aborigines (*Age*, June 3, 1989:5).

What Tatz does not suggest is what it is specifically that should be done, nor does he indicate any incumbency of Aborigines to help themselves other than in the earlier, somewhat vague sense of 'acting on their own behalf'. The impression is that Tatz, like many others, considers Aboriginal decision-making largely to involve decisions about what should be done for them, rather than what they might be able to do for themselves; non-Aboriginal society, it would appear, is not doing enough. The questions must be asked of Aborigines what is it they want, and precisely for whom; this is not always clear and unambiguous. In Rowley's words:

They all express a determination to obtain whatever is politically possible. But like the rest of us, Aborigines have no knowledge of what this might be (1986:152).

Clearly, no single policy or simple programme could satisfy the multiple and often conflicting demands of this diverse population.

It is obvious that Aborigines must be involved in the decision-making that will influence the course of their future. Equally obvious is the limitation imposed by any society - in this context, either the general

Australian society or some form of separate Aboriginal collective - on the freedom allowed any individuals or groups within it. How Aborigines eventually resolve their situation while remaining within the general Australian society is not possible accurately to predict. Any ongoing phenomenon presents problems to definitive interpretation and projection, particularly so with political behaviour where any change in a range of variables can disturb existing and projected patterns, and challenge unqualified assumptions.¹ Nevertheless, it is possible to see 1988 as being especially relevant to an attempted analysis of Aboriginal aspirations and political possibilities.

The exceptional environment created by Australia's Bicentenary, and the activities it inspired, provide a perspective that is made more meaningful by the coincidence of social and political factors of unusual significance. If the question is raised as to whether there has ever been a time favourable for Aborigines to define their individual and collective wants and needs, 1988 provides an affirmative answer. Aborigines were afforded an opportunity to speak and to be heard that was without parallel in the history of Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal interaction. Equally, it provides, in retrospect, grounds for an assessment of Aboriginal politics from which to make projections which would otherwise be much more questionable.

12.2 Creating A Receptive Environment

Australia's bicentennial year commemorated the establishment of a society and, indirectly, the disestablishment of another. In this celebratory context, neither could be recalled without reference to the other, with the result that the two became inexorably linked, their

¹ The extent to which one of the research communities has undergone rapid social and political change is discussed later in this chapter.

respective histories creating a discordant, historical coalescence. It was difficult in this environment to avoid the juxtaposition of possession and dispossession, progress and regression, generation and degeneration. For Aborigines, there had not been a more propitious time for political activity in pursuit of individual and collective goals. Nor had there been a time when non-Aborigines could be made more aware of the cost of their national prosperity.

Encouraged by a mood of introspective analysis in Australian society, Aborigines and others who supported them had made good use of a receptive media in the lead-up to the 1988 celebrations, helping to create a climate in which non-Aboriginal guilt became a hotly debated issue. As early as 1984, the Chief Executive of the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) was cited as having expressed concern that Aborigines would be ignored in the celebrations:

I for one would not want to be involved in a Bicentenary that does not address the running sore of black/white relations in this country. If it is to be a white wank I want nothing to do with it (*Quadrant*, 28(10): 6).

Another commentator suggested the Prime Minister had 'inherited what might be termed a festival for positive discrimination' (Duncan, *Bulletin*, June 18, 1985:48). Reflecting the other side of the debate, an article titled *The Bicentenary: Celebration or Apology*, criticised this stance and the general philosophy underlying the ABA's plans:

The issue here is not whether the Bicentenary should show respect to Aborigines and their traditional culture. It should. Rather it is whether guilt about settlement of Australia by Britain is to be the guiding sentiment of the celebrations (Baker, *IPA Review*, Summer 1985:181).

Aborigines were well placed to exploit the unprecedented opportunity. One media report spoke of a 'vocal vanguard of blacks' who, it predicted:

ppwill shout, agitate, disrupt and speak out to the world until December 31 in the knowledge that Australia has an image-conscious Prime Minister they believe is vulnerable to pressure (*SMH* January 9, 1988:37).

Later, an editorial in the same source identified the year as being one which should be a painful experience for white Australians and a crucial time for Australia's Aborigines:

They will have the attention of the outside world and of an embarrassed nation. Nineteen eighty-eight will be a year in which they build a new confidence or a new despair (*SMH* January 26, 1988:12),

while another saw the year as providing 'a springboard to launch [Aborigines] into the 1990s and beyond with a sense of purpose and achievement' (*Canberra Times* January 26, 1988:10).

Aboriginal expectations were no doubt raised by the favourable social and political climates, although there is a suggestion of sober reflection, even a note of desperation, in some comments. For Gary Foley it was Aborigines' 'last chance to make substantial gains' (*SMH* January 9, 1988:37); Galarrwuy Yunupingu, chairman of the Northern Land Council saw 1988 as 'a last breath, a last word...The timing is perfect, but if we're not careful it will slip away' (*Advertiser* January 30, 1988:30). Away from the exposure of national politics a similar cautious optimism was expressed, at least by those who sought to take advantage of the favourable situation:

This is the best chance we've ever had. I don't believe in this bullshit about boycotting the bicentenary. If we don't make the most of [1988] we're stuffed; we'll never get anywhere (Tape:87 B12).

12.3 The Question Of Collective Guilt

Supported by a number of non-Aborigines, including politicians, academics, journalists and prominent churchmen² (for comment see e.g. Baker, 1988; Hirst, 1988; Morgan, 1988), Aborigines were able to generate or stimulate a sense of inherited responsibility in respect of dispossession of, and violence against, Aboriginal people from the beginning of European settlement. The Prime Minister himself was outspoken on the issue, although appearing to face a conflict of disposition in varying statements made in relation to this notion of collective guilt. In the parliament he sought to include all political parties in a common *mea culpa*:

...all of us have a guilt and responsibility for many of the impulses that occurred in those 200 years...we all, collectively and across party lines, if we look back over our period of governance of this country, share a sense of guilt and responsibility in respect of the Aboriginal people (*A PD*, vol.158,1987:3197).

Shortly after this appeal for a bipartisan acknowledgement of guilt, Hawke appeared to equivocate on - or at least to qualify - the actual extent of this inheritance. In a statement made outside the parliament he asserted:

The Australian people should never be asked to accept that their entire history as a modern nation must be predicated on the notion of a collective and irredeemable guilt (National Press Club, December 22, 1988).

Hawke's apparent equivocation suggests less a clear change of attitude than a reflection of the confused perception of the Aboriginal debate shared by many non-Aborigines. Concerned about the plight of Aborigines and willing to listen to their demands, they were on the other hand often unsure of, or unconvinced by, suggested solutions.

² An example of this is the programme developed by Archbishop Penman, the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, which included a service of penitence wherein one or several Aboriginal persons would be present to hear a confession of guilt recited by a member of the congregation.

Apparently less contrite than the Prime Minister in his parliamentary statement, but no less hopeful of the creation of an environment in which 'justice and security for all' could be pursued, the Liberal/National Party coalition saw 1988 as 'a year for reflection, reconciliation and vision'. It reaffirmed its commitment to a brighter future 'for the Aboriginal community of Australia and for all Australians' (*Liberal/National Party Coalition*. January 24, 1988).

Any evaluation of the climate created by the Bicentenary needs to be considered in relation to the source of the particular comment. Demands made at the national level by a number of Aboriginal spokespersons in most instances prominent urban, political figures invariably associated with the national political expression - indicate a conviction that the climate was indeed favourable for change. Supporting this was the media attention to the Aborigines' plight, historically and contemporaneously, and the constantly expressed belief in many areas of non-Aboriginal society that it was an appropriate time to make amends for the delinquency of the past 200 years.

The extent of Aboriginal reproach and its effect on the general community was not allowed to pass unchallenged. In one noteworthy article titled *The Black Story They're Scared To Tell*, a former Hawke Government Minister attacked what he termed the exaggeration emanating from some Aboriginal spokespersons. This, he claimed, was accepted by the rest of the community simply because the speaker was black:

Leading Aboriginal activists, the Michael Mansells, Paul Coes and Gary Foleys, have the white community bluffed. No one, unless you count the lunatic fringe on the right, is game to take them on in public debate for fear of being labelled racist, paternalistic or worse. The most outrageous statement goes unchallenged for fear

of being³ pilloried as unsympathetic to the plight of the Aborigines (Cohen, *Bulletin*, March 15, 1988:28).

12.4 Aboriginal Bicentenary Objectives

Taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the Bicentenary, Aborigines made demands or expressed hopes that ranged from the extremes of a separate Aboriginal sovereign state or nation to basic improvements in living conditions and greater opportunities for economic advancement. Well before 1988, the Aboriginal Development Commission had produced a discussion paper on national Aboriginal bicentennial objectives which listed twenty items. Amongst others, these included the enactment of land rights legislation, initiatives in housing, education, employment, health, the administration of law and justice, the promotion of Aboriginal culture and a programme of public awareness to 'educate and inform all Australians about the culture of Aborigines, their problems and their needs, and vice versa' (ADC 1983).

A newspaper sample of a group of 15 NSW Aborigines, asked what they hoped for in 1988, named similar objectives of equal rights, jobs, better health and education facilities and housing. The fact that 10 of the respondents also included land rights suggests either dissatisfaction with the existing NSW land rights legislation, ignorance of its provisions or, as seems likely with many urban Aborigines, confusion as to what land rights really signifies⁴ (*Sunday Herald*, January 24, 1988:9). Aborigines questioned in the Far West in June 1988 listed almost exclusively housing, employment and training as their

³ The challenge was, in fact, taken up in various media and by many outspoken critics, notably Professor Geoffrey Blainey, Hugh Morgan, the Institute of Public Affairs and the Australian Free Enterprise Foundation.

⁴ Pollard (1988:107) claims there is considerable evidence that Aboriginal communities regard land rights activities as those which are carried on with land rights money.

basic needs.⁵ The bicentennial environment had not effected noticeable change in their priorities.

Radical demands made by particular Aborigines suggest more the politics of Aboriginal leadership aspirations than an understanding of social, economic and political possibilities, or, indeed, of actual individual and community aspirations. It might be argued, however, that some Aboriginal rhetoric represented ambit claims rather than a conviction, propounded with a fervour that would inevitably be weakened by the unrealistic nature of the demands. Kevin Gilbert was reported as claiming initial compensation of one billion dollars and an annual payment to Aboriginal people of seven per cent of gross national product for ten years (*Canberra Times* January 26, 1988). Paul Coe's demands included 'the right to self determination to the nation of Aboriginal people' (cited in *A PD (S)*. vol.128,1988:62), and Michael Mansell spoke of Aborigines wanting to share Australia's goods and resources, 'but as a separate Aboriginal nation' (*Advertiser* Jan 30, 1988:30).

Proposals that Aborigines should share a separate geographical area had been advanced at least as early as 1927 when a petition calling for 'A Model Aboriginal State' was presented to the federal parliament (*A PP*. vol.1,1926-27-28:691-694). They reappeared on a number of occasions, most notably in the list of demands made by Aborigines at the time the Aboriginal 'tent embassy' was set up in Canberra in 1972 (Newfong, 1972:4). Reporting an Aboriginal conference held in Sydney in September 1987 one newspaper suggested that the conference

⁵ One enterprising Aboriginal sought a cash grant from the Bicentenary authority to establish an Aboriginal complex which would include a hospital, kindergarten and other facilities. A committee was formed but enthusiasm rapidly waned when the initiator of the scheme became involved in an administration training course and his personal future became of more immediate importance than that of the community.

was expected to make a historic decision on whether to sever all ties with "white man's Australia" and establish an Aboriginal sovereign State on January 26, 1988 - Australia Day (*Advertiser*, September 19, 1987).

A similar ambitious - if unrealistic - course was included in the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations' draft treaty which included a request for

a land base of not less than 40 per cent of Australia providing for an Aboriginal state that is autonomous in government, development, culture and law (*A PD.(S)*. vol.128,1988:62).

To a considerable extent, radical positions adopted by some outspoken Aborigines through the period of the Bicentenary were condemned by other Aborigines and created division within the Aboriginal population. In mid-year Mansell was acknowledging the 'argument and serious differences of opinion' among the Aboriginal leadership and suggesting that 'one people' could have different views on how best to achieve what he described now as 'justice'. There was, he suggested, still time to take advantage of the opportunities available to Aborigines: 'The next months can be the most exciting and productive time ever in our struggle, if only we don't let it slip by' (*Land Right News*, July 1988:34).

There was also a threat that an unrelieved verbal assault on the non-Aboriginal social conscience had the potential to change the mood of much of the society. Extremist rhetoric imputing culpability was not likely to remain a sound base from which Aborigines could make demands on this society, a point not missed by some astute Aboriginal political figures. Acknowledging the limits of non-Aboriginal contrition, Paul Coe discounted the possibility of the Bicentenary's beginning a 'whole new chapter of power' for Aboriginal people: 'We've played the guilty trip for what it's worth. We've touched consciences. But you can't build a community with that' (*SMH* January 9, 1988:37). The building of such a community, or at least the consciousness of community, inspired

the organisation of what was to be the most significant Aboriginal activity of the bicentennial year.

12.5 The 'Long March'

Apart from the extensive media coverage of the Aboriginal issue, and the continuing censure of non-Aboriginal society for its inherited responsibility, the major Aboriginal activity of 1988 was the so-called 'Long March for Justice, Freedom and Hope'. Aborigines from many parts of Australia converged on Sydney for a protest march coinciding with the celebration of Australia Day.⁶ The protest was an effectively coordinated exercise in macro politics, involving what was probably the largest number of Aborigines ever to assemble in Australia.

It can be argued that Aborigines participating or represented in the march were taking political action as a national population against the Bicentenary and what it represented. One participant described the event in terms of 'people...coming together as the Aboriginal nation' (Harris, *Advertiser*, January 27, 1988:2). In planning, execution and in symbolic terms it was certainly successful. Less certain is what it was thought to have achieved, or how it was perceived by the majority of Aborigines themselves. There was widespread, perhaps universal, pride in the event. Self-esteem obviously was raised as was the political consciousness of Aborigines and their supporters. In view of the conditions experienced by much of the Aboriginal population it is reasonable to ascribe common cause to the participants, but there are indications - suggested by Aborigines themselves - of a carnival, rather than a protest, environment. If this is a valid point, at least in

⁶ In the event, after dispute between Redfern Aborigines and the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisations, two marches were held, the major one in the afternoon attracting the participation of what was variously estimated at 13000 to 25000 Aborigines and their supporters.

regard to some Aborigines, it suggests participation in, rather than protest against, the bicentennial celebrations. This was certainly the reality in one of the research communities.

Another appraisal of the significance of the march interprets it as a successful merging of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in common cause. Gary Foley, usually considered as part of the radical element of national Aboriginal politics, was one who spoke out favourably on his reaction to the non-Aboriginal participation in the march and at the subsequent rally:

It's so magnificent to see black and white Australians together in harmony...It's what we always said could happen. This is what Australia could and should be like (*Advertiser*, January 27, 1988:2).

The absence of conflict and the fact that Aborigines did not seriously disrupt the Bicentenary suggests that extremist Aboriginal politics has limited support. Differences, it would appear, are not irreconcilable.

12.6 The Lessons Of 1988

An increased consciousness and consolidation of identity that marked the early part of 1988 did not create an effective political organisation that could replace the fragmented and divisive structure that has long characterised the Aboriginal population. Nor did it lead to a united voice expressing specific and attainable goals which could be embraced by all Aborigines. For Aborigines, the year ended without the spectacular change to their overall situation promised in the political rhetoric. No major initiatives had been set in place and the primary focus of Aboriginal politics had changed from the Bicentenary and the expectations it had prompted, to the ongoing Royal Commission into

Aboriginal deaths in custody which had - perhaps symbolically⁷ - begun hearings in January 1988. With this change of focus came a return to the politics of anger and confrontation which had for more than two decades characterised much of the national Aboriginal expression and limited its efficacy.

The opportunity presented by the events of 1988 had not been entirely wasted, however, and prominent Aborigines had made good use of the media and of their opportunities to lobby sympathetic governments. But demands for self-determination and for Aboriginal involvement in decision-making were impaired by a tendency to generalise the Aboriginal condition and to mythologise and idealise an Aboriginal past as the basis for an Aboriginal future. In the general Australian society there was a greater awareness of the Aboriginal condition and of the history that underlay their plight - even if the enthusiasm for change had to some extent abated. There had also been some positive signs in the government's proposed treaty with the Aboriginal people and its plans for ATSIC, the new Aboriginal representative structure. These proposals received a mixed reception from Aboriginal political actors, Charles Perkins on the one hand claiming a treaty was 'a method of achieving reconciliation between blacks and whites' (*SMH*, June 14, 1988:1), and on the other hand, Michael Mansell objecting that the Federal Government gave only 'rhetorical commitment to distributing power to the Aboriginal nation' (*SMH*, June 14, 1988:1).

Improvements that had occurred indicate an increasing Aboriginal inclusion in the general political structures and processes rather than the strengthening of autonomy featured in some Aboriginal political

⁷ The first hearing began January 27, the day after Australia Day and the day after the Aboriginal 'Long March'.

expression. But the divisions remained between the national Aboriginal political agenda and the reality of local community expectations. The dilemma of Aboriginal identity had not been resolved. It still remains for Aborigines to determine, at the appropriate level, who they are, where they are going and what they see as their place in Australian society. If 1988 offered the chance for Aborigines to be heard, there was no effective and widely supported, collective, Aboriginal voice to express their aspirations. The Aboriginal message, though at times strident, was more often confused.

Aborigines need to be involved in the determinations that direct the course of their lives. This implies more than the right to participate in the decision-making directed solely or primarily at increasing the dependency on the transfer of resources; it involves also their assuming responsibility. The bicentennial year provided an opportunity for a new set of policies premised on the suggested fundamental 'that Aborigines, like the rest of us, must resolve their own problems (Pollard, 1988:10).' They are unlikely to do this as a national, ethnic-inspired collectivity without significant changes in their attitudes and objectives.

12.7 Local Community Reaction

All Aborigines in the study communities appeared to be aware of the major protest activities and to share to some extent the pride engendered by the display of Aboriginal collective endeavour. Those who expressed cynicism invariably projected this on to elements of the Aboriginal leadership and their motives. Actual participation in the activities in Sydney was limited to a small number of individuals, most of whom are involved in local and regional politics. They cannot be

seen as representing the communities other than as self-appointed or organisation-endorsed delegates.

Apart from the few who had been involved, most Aborigines questioned in these communities had little or no continuing interest in national activities. Many expressed opinions indicating a belief that those who had joined the march had done so for purely personal motives, 'to see what was going on' or 'to have a good time, a big drinkup'. Several of the older Aborigines voiced their concern at the reported inflammatory statements attributed to prominent Aborigines, and disclaimed any association or sentiment with these extremist views. A prominent matriarchal Aboriginal's comments typify this distancing of local attitudes from national dispositions:

We worried about what people saying, like that Mansell fella and them. They don't come here or ask us what we want. They not talking for us. Old people frightened [of non-Aboriginal reaction to extremist statements] We don't want to live with all Aboriginal people like they say, we better [living in the town] like this (Tape:88 B6).

Invariably, discussions with Aborigines in the Far West communities returned to the basic, and frequently repeated, Aboriginal objectives of better housing, employment and education. Land rights is still an issue which has support, although it is seldom raised as an objective of immediate concern.⁸ Questions of Aboriginal sovereignty or nationhood are rarely understood or are dismissed without serious consideration.

In Wilcannia and Broken Hill there was little indication of Aboriginal involvement in locally-organised bicentennial events. This is not indicative of a boycott, but of a continuing social pattern in which Aborigines do not participate, or are not included, in many activities

⁸ This concentration on the basic material needs supports the analysis of Hall and Jonas (1984). In their survey of NSW Aboriginal communities they found none where land rights was ranked as first priority.

organised by non-Aborigines. Those areas wherein Aborigines and non-Aborigines usually do have some interaction continued in 1988 much as before. The Bicentenary was not an important factor.

Menindee was the exception. In this community, where Aborigines and non-Aborigines have for some time shared in most, if not all, social activities, the Bicentenary was actively celebrated. The principal locally organised function, a Bicentennial Costume Ball, attracted an attendance of almost 300 Menindee people, more than one quarter of whom were Aborigines, an attendance figure that represents more than 60 per cent of the total Aboriginal community. In the words of one of the Ball's organisers, 'all...demonstrated the wonderful ACCEPTANCE of each other that exists here...Who says there has to be strife' (personal communication; emphasis in original). The extent of Aboriginal participation in activities that at the national level were considered to be antithetical to Aboriginal interests suggests a low level of identity ambivalence, at least in this local environment, and in a specific time frame. When there is no substantial conflict perceived between identification as a member of the Aboriginal community and as an Aboriginal member of the total community (in this case the total town community), Aborigines are in a good social and psychological position to take advantage of opportunities offered. Active Aboriginal involvement similar to that which occurred in Menindee would, for many Aborigines in Wilcannia or Broken Hill, be an exceptional and unexpected form of interaction. It would be a divergence from the norm that generally maintains a social distance between Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

The forms of national Aboriginal politics engendered by Australia's Bicentenary had little direct impact on the Far West communities.

However, there has been noticeable change in regional politics, in the locus of power in Broken Hill and, most significantly, within the Menindee community, the one which, paradoxically, had previously been the most political stable and the one where Aborigines most actively participated in the bicentennial celebrations. The Bicentenary itself may not be a direct cause of community change, but the environment it created and the politics it generated must be considered as contributing or indirect influences. Again, the communities can be useful case studies of the local effects of national politics.

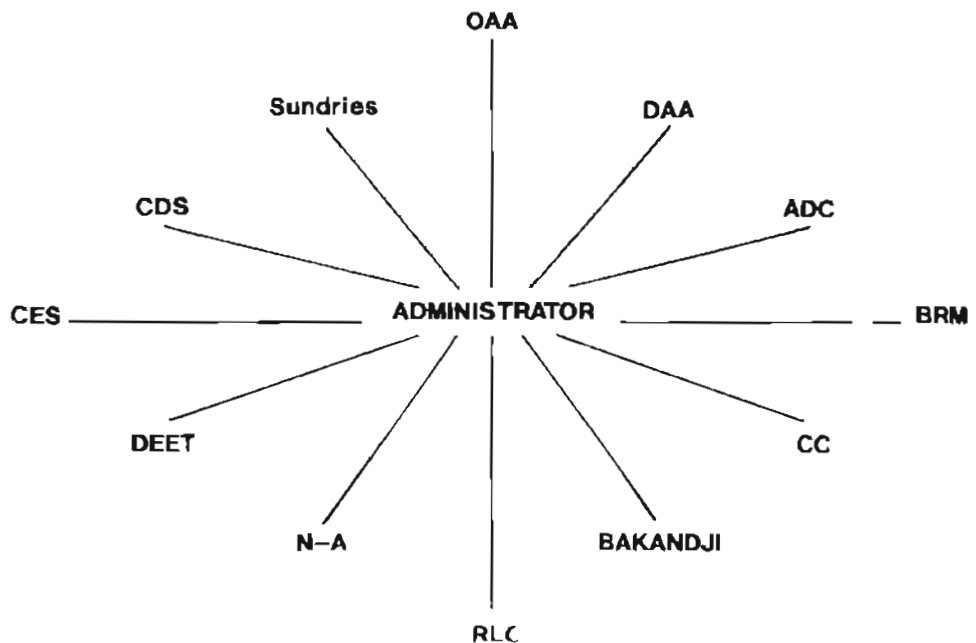
12.8 Continuity Or Change In Local Communities

12.8.1 Wilcannia

As the promise of 1988 faded, the overall situations confronting the Aboriginal community of Wilcannia remained as unpromising as ever. The climate of optimism that inspired many Aborigines, at least in the early months of 1988, appears not to have extended to this community. Here, the town was still plagued by problems of social disruption, and political activity was mostly confined to internal conflict.⁹ The LLC and its property remained under the control of an administrator, and the housing company had not had an annual general meeting within the previous three years. A general lack of cohesion and the complex patterns of conflict involving Aboriginal groups and the numerous public service and other bodies is graphically illustrated by a sympathetic but frustrated administrator who saw himself as being in the middle of this destabilising confusion (see Figure 12.1). His inauspicious impression is supported in a report from another local source to the NSW Premier's

⁹ The RLC secretary, having been forced to return to Wilcannia, and seeking to rehabilitate himself within the community, had become more militant in his political expression. The LLC was not functioning but the RLC was still regarded with suspicion in the community and not generally considered to represent the wishes of the local people.

Figure 12.1: Community conflict in Wilcannia, 1988



Major conflicts are:

OAA is in opposition to DAA
 DAA " " " " CDS
 ADC " " " " BRM
 CC " " " " RLC
 CDS " " " " CC
 CC " " " " BAKANDJI
 ADC " " " " CC
 C & B " " " " N A RLC
 There are split ranks (opinions) in ADC
 OAA does not give direct or supportive answers
 BRM usurps and manipulates
 Divisiveness is rife

Abbreviations:

ADC: Aboriginal Development Commission
 BAKANDJI: Bakandji Housing Company
 BRM: Rural Management Company
 CDS: Central Darling Shire
 CC: Consultative Committee
 CES: Commonwealth Employment Service
 DAA: Department of Aboriginal Affairs
 DEET: Department of Education, Employment & Training
 N-A: Non Aboriginal Adviser
 OAA: Office of Aboriginal Affairs
 RLC: Regional Land Council

office. In this^a bleak view is presented of a divided and directionless community:

...Wilcannia's aboriginal [sic] population can be described by a few words: apathy, inertia, desperation and fear, and what may well be found on investigation, corruption...There is a total lack of unity among the community...The "Local Land Council" is the most apathetic, disliked, mistrusted group in town...While the members of the land council are condemned and shunned by the vast majority, particularly the elders, there is an administrator who leans over backwards to assist and advise on a wide range of subjects. He is abused, treated as a novelty, and expected to jump whenever told to by the land council. He is shunned because of his association with the land council (confidential report, 1988).

Shortly after this, a depressed and disillusioned administrator resigned his position¹⁰. The lack of progress and the absence of any evidence that this condition would be reversed other than over a very long period undermined a long-term commitment to the Aboriginal people of the Far West. Commenting on the situation in Wilcannia, which he believed had not changed in the six years of his association with the community, he stated his conviction that change was a long way off, '...it will take two or three generations of sustained, applied change of attitude and social acceptance for the changes we would like to see really take place' (Tape:88 B18).

12.8.2 Broken Hill

In turn, Broken Hill Aborigines similarly remain socially dispersed and politically unorganised, but the internal conflict that characterises Wilcannia is not a major factor. The earlier dominance of a kin-based, political elite has been nullified by a combination of internal

¹⁰ Prior to his resignation in 1988 the administrator wrote: '...I am frustrated out of my mind in my illustriously given title as the administrator of the Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council in that I am merely a caretaker of crises until such times as the people themselves decide to shake off dull sloth and become involved...I am in the process of resignation from both the position and the Aboriginal community. Whilst not having lost respect for the Aborigines, I do find that I have lost both patience and stamina for results that are not forthcoming.'

disruption and a loss of enthusiasm for political activity by most of its members. As a consequence the loose coalition of interests, which had seen itself as an alternative political network more truly representative of the community and had opposed the dominant group, has lost much of its motivation. Individuals and small groups of Aborigines have tended to concentrate on their own particular spheres of involvement and influence, or have become increasingly apathetic. The Broken Hill LLC, previously overshadowed by the locally-based RJC and its prominent secretary, remains virtually inactive, its executive membership still comprised mainly of members of the previously dominant political kin group. Asked about the land council's activities in 1988, the secretary replied that 'a couple of meetings' had been called but that 'no one turned up' (Tape:88 B10).

Locally influenced political change in Broken Hill left the Aboriginal Cooperative the principal Aboriginal organisation in the city. Its executive was, in 1988, free from the direct influence of the politically ascendent, regional 'family', which had previously maintained majority control. Sectional conflict no longer characterises its operation, and attention has been concentrated on its many service functions and social amenities. These consist mainly of schemes to assist Aborigines in basic social areas, to provide children with educational assistance and generally to facilitate Aboriginal adaptation to urban life.

The concerns of all Aborigines surveyed in Broken Hill in 1988 were concentrated on individual and immediate family needs. National politics appeared to be of passing interest to few. It is reasonable to assume that the lack of a community-based identity seriously inhibits local political activity; a common Aboriginality does not ensure a

cohesive collectivity, nor does alienation support even the limited and short-term mobilisation that is a feature of the Wilcannia Aboriginal population. Social identity - in these instances, segmentary and amorphous - appears certainly to have been a major factor in the inability of these communities to take advantage of any opportunities offered in 1988.

12.8.3 Menindee: A Changing Community

Unlike its neighbouring communities, Menindee has undergone marked social and political change over a period coinciding with the celebration of the Bicentenary. Previously a community which displayed what could be considered as a successful blending of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, there is now, in the words of one of its residents, 'a cold wind blowing on both sides of [its social] face' (Personal communication).

Change that has occurred within this small community is not unexpected, and reflects the intervention of external political influences into the local area. This does not imply some form of Aboriginal political organisation infiltrating the community, but rather the political consequences of policies and attitudes that intrude into the local consciousness. These have an effect on the perceptions of people and on the patterns of relationships that have been structured within an earlier set of interactions.

Both the social and economic 'balance' that were a feature of Menindee have been disrupted by Aboriginal acquisition of significant economic resources and by the positive discrimination that has favoured them. In the first instance the Aboriginal people have, through their LLC, gained title to a valuable grazing property. 'Appin' station was purchased by

the RLC with pooled funds of around 1.2 million dollars made available through the NSW Land Rights Legislation. It became the second enterprise owned by the community.

The Menindee Aboriginal people have demonstrated with their small market-garden and mixed-farming property, East Bootingee, that an Aboriginal enterprise could be successful. There are, however, several caveats entered by Aborigines themselves in respect of the enterprise management. East Bootingee has been successful because it has been well managed and not subject to community interference. From the time it was acquired there was an acknowledgement - no doubt reinforced by ADC insistence - that it should be professionally managed. Managers have been non-Aboriginal because of the recognised lack of expertise within the Aboriginal community and, from the same consideration of efficiency, seasonal workers have been recruited according to ability, not race.¹¹

Management of the grazing property, however, may not follow the same pattern as that which has proved successful with East Bootingee. Whereas the latter property has been under the firm control of Nyampa Aboriginal Housing Company, Appin will be the responsibility the Menindee Local Land Council. The political polarisation represented by the expressed, and often opposed, ideals and ideas of supporters of the respective organisations has the potential to create considerable conflict within the community. Until Appin station became a factor to be considered, the LLC lacked the resource-based political power that had ensured the dominance of the individuals controlling the housing company. Refused funds for some form of development of the old Menindee mission station property, which would have given their

¹¹ Aborigines in Menindee agree that non-Aborigines have been recruited for seasonal work because of the unwillingness of Aborigines to respond to calls for farm labour, or because of poor performance when engaged.

political ambitions a focal point, Aborigines associated with the land council could only act as a form of local, political opposition, inspiring the political polarisation that took shape along the lines of former tribal association.

Several members of the land council executive, perhaps reacting to their exclusion from power, have adopted a more militant political stance than that which characterises the housing company's leaders. In the relatively benign social environment of Menindee, this political division has not created major problems, being centred mainly on the personalities behind the policies rather than the policies themselves. Allegations of nepotism have been made, supported in part by the evidence of support for family members and their success in obtaining employment, opposition has been expressed to various housing company initiatives and demands made for Aboriginal management of East Bootingee.¹² But unable to undermine the influence of the housing company's long-term secretary, the opposition remained relatively powerless. The grazing property, if it does not unite the Aboriginal population, has the potential to alter the power relationships within that population. It appears certain to threaten the stability of Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal relationships.

It is doubtful that the Menindee land council would be allowed to follow the course taken by its Wilcannia counterpart that led to its loss of control of the community's Weinteriga property. Pride of ownership is moderated by an awareness of the inevitable bureaucratic intrusion

¹² This demand appears to have little support and, in fact, can be considered as one calculated to present an image of militant political activity rather than a serious proposal. A similar situation occurred in Wilcannia where the out-of-favour R/C secretary demanded the return of Weinteriga to Aboriginal control, despite his history of opposition to local - and presumed inefficient - management.

should the property management be deemed unacceptable.¹³ On acquiring Appin station, the Menindee LLC advertised for a manager and, in the words of its secretary, planned to maintain an all-Aboriginal staff and to continue operations as a sheep grazing property.

In another environment the property could possibly become the base for the establishment of a separate, Aboriginal, social entity. With the Menindee community it would require more than a common Aboriginal identity to promote the social and political homogeneity necessary for the success of such a venture. As the experience of the old Menindee mission station reveals, these Aborigines would be reluctant to move away from the amenities of the town which have become part of their lives.

Aboriginal response to the acquisition was possibly influenced by the experience of East Bootingee, where the exigencies of resource management overshadowed any psychological benefit of land ownership. Initial comments tended to reflect a perception of an exploitable resource rather than one of cultural, spiritual or traditional significance. A number of Aborigines expressed doubts about the prospect of Aboriginal control at such a level of economic activity:¹⁴

It takes a lot to run a place like that.

Where are we going to find people to work it?

Too big - not like Bootingee (personal communications).

But the overwhelming source of negative comment was the local non-Aboriginal community:

More bloody coon land!

¹³ Since the introduction of the NSW Land Rights Act a number of land councils have been placed under the control of a government-appointed administrator. The administrator of the Wilcannia land council in 1989 had previously been appointed to administer five others in the state.

¹⁴ One Menindee resident interpreted the response as being generally apathetic, rather than negative.

Another Weinteriga - wait and see.

There goes a good station.

They get everything they want, these days (personal communications).

Commenting on the non-Aboriginal reaction, a resident - and astute observer of the Menindee social environment - identified much of the non-Aboriginal response in terms of the distinction made between Menindee's 'good' Aborigines and others, a categorisation that is by no means restricted to non-Aboriginal perceptions:

Some are concerned at Appin's proximity to Menindee, and fear that it will attract a host of "undesirable" aborigines [sic] from Deniliquin, Dareton etc.; and that they will use Menindee as a service centre. A bit too close for comfort, as it were (personal communication).

Aboriginal access to economic resources which are not shared by the non-Aboriginal community is resented in a town where previously there was seen to be equality of opportunity. It is not, however, the first instance of positive discrimination disrupting the existing pattern of social relationships in Menindee. Of more urgent local concern is what has been described as 'the current problems at School [which are] a reflection of a host of socio-economic problems in the wider community' (personal communication). The acquisition of the grazing property fuelled a situation that had been building for some time.

Aborigines have been seen to be enjoying treatment more favourable than that accorded the non-Aboriginal sector of the community. It is arguable whether this treatment has been influenced by the environment of the bicentennial celebrations, by attempts to redress the deficits of Aboriginal society through policies designed to have general application, by specifically local conditions or by a combination of these and other factors. But the result has been a growing resentment

at the 'pro-Aboriginal' bias that has been identified by the non-Aboriginal population.

In mid-1989 a group of non-Aboriginal parents petitioned the school principal on the subject of the school's alleged predilection for Aboriginal-based programmes and funding, and on the apparent inequality of treatment. They cited a number of causes for concern: a week of camps for school students at which a paid Aboriginal artist conducted workshops; the design of the backdrop for the new school hall, and its almost total Aboriginal content; the imbalance in funding for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, which puts the latter at a disadvantage¹⁵; the apparent differences in treatment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in terms of discipline; and the claim that teachers generally, and the Principal in particular, are powerless to stop Aboriginal students flouting school rules, whereas they are quick to punish non-Aboriginal students.

Seeking to explain the apparent discrepancies, a Menindee teacher suggested that, aside from the discipline aspect, the common denominator was money:

It is true that a submission to either of our two major funding bodies...will be approved with zest if it has an Aboriginal perspective. This may well be the result of Federal policy. [It is] Also expedient in areas like Menindee, with a predominantly Aboriginal school population. In some ways our hands are tied, 'extra' resources require money, and Schools don't often have that resource; so a submission that has the desired perspective will produce the funds (personal communication).

Unanswered are questions of whether discriminatory policies are making a long-term contribution to some overall strategy of community improvement, or whether they merely assuage non-Aboriginal guilt.

¹⁵ An example of this is the \$160.00 per year received by the school on behalf of each Aboriginal student for the purposes of subsidising excursions. There is no such subsidy for needy non-Aboriginal students, which means funds must be raised to enable all students to participate equally.

Policies founded on a principle of positive discrimination would have a predictable effect in a community where there have been no sharp social and economic divisions marking-off its Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sectors. Demographic change, however, does appear to contribute to the build-up of community tension. Again, it is a local resident whose analysis emphasises this dimension of social instability:

Until...perhaps ten years ago, the school population was tilted in favour of non-Aborigines. All's well when the system works for the majority - if you are part of that majority. But today, when Aborigines make up a vast majority of the pupil body, yesterday's "winners" see themselves as losing out in a big way (personal communication).

12.9 Decision-Making And The Influence Of Identity

The town of Menindee, when compared with other centres with significant Aboriginal populations, has in the past demonstrated what can be achieved when there is a balance between acceptance and adaptation. It is also a useful social laboratory wherein change can be observed as external political influences transform the status quo. It demonstrates the limitations of Aboriginal political structures and the fragility of forms of incorporation of Aborigines both as an Aboriginal community and as part of a general community. Above all, it confirms the individuality of the local Aboriginal group, but at the same time affirms the political - if not always the social - interrelationship of these individual groups with wider conceptions of Aboriginal identity.

Because the local group cannot be isolated totally from other levels of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society it is, when exposed to these, subject to what are often conflicting influences. Disruption of a particular local identity and social orientation confronts the people concerned with the necessity to make decisions about their future. They must decide, as individuals and as groups, what their preferred social

and political positions are and whether these are realistic, attainable goals. For any such choice to have validity the overall position of Aborigines in Australian society must be resolved if the basic elements of Aboriginal society are to be reconciled within the conflicting dimensions of their identity.

CHAPTER 13

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

13.1 Reexamining The Essentials

This thesis argues that a national identity, which can be understood in terms of an ethnic identity, serves a useful, perhaps essential, political purpose. The assumption of this identity by Aborigines, albeit selectively, is probably an inevitable response to the non-Aboriginal construction of an Aboriginal racial identity. Because this form of ethnicity endorses the assumed distinctiveness of an Aboriginal population, it constitutes the basis for the politics of separateness, or alienation, from the general society, that has characterised much of the Aboriginal political expression in the past two decades.

However, it is obvious that there are considerable difficulties when this expression is used to shape the political agenda. Ethno-politics defines a political agenda for an assumed collective that is not congruent with the essential localism of Aboriginal social identity. Despite its emphasis on the collective aspirations of the Aboriginal people, Aboriginal ethno-politics has had an overall effect of reinforcing localism and local factionalism because its goals have been endorsed to the extent that they can be used to individual and group advantage. Self-determination has been interpreted on the basis of local, rather than national, autonomy, and land rights and compensation for lost land reinforce the ideal of local ownership and control.

Attempts to broaden the political perspective through national representative structures have had limited success, not only because of the inherent weaknesses of the particular structures and the restrictions placed on their operations, but also because Aboriginal political socialisation is not such that this form of representation could be accepted as legitimate. It has produced Aboriginal politicians but not leaders. Yet it may well be that Aborigines will need to come to terms with some form of national representation - with a national, political leadership - if they are to function as a group with national significance in the overall Australian society. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of localism is an existing reality, and its importance cannot be ignored or underestimated in any research analysis.

By focusing on specific communities this study has been able to identify many of the factors which individualise communities and contribute to the perpetuation of the diversity that characterises the Aboriginal population. When set against the background of national politics, a standpoint is provided from which it is possible to suggest an assessment of the dynamics of the interaction of the macro and micro dimensions of Aboriginal political life. Before this, it is relevant, in light of the exploration of the three communities, to address again the basic factors involved in Aboriginal social and political life.

In regard to the factors contributing to the specificity of the communities and of the determinants of the consciousness of identity and community, an historical background and a contemporary description make it possible to identify both the individualising influences as well as those which have had a more general impact. Social and cultural dislocation was the common experience; responses to these, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, were, and continue to be, more locally-

influenced because of the distinctive characteristics of the particular environment, and the ways in which these have been interpreted.

The conditions affecting the Wilcannia community can be seen as being influenced by long-term resentment of, and opposition to, an Aboriginal presence in the vicinity of the town. Interpretation of the Aboriginal condition according to racist criteria has served to justify the neglect and unconcern that has been a predominant feature of the history of the non-Aboriginal response to this Aboriginal presence. In turn, this generates and perpetuates resentment, bitterness and, of more immediate concern, hostility. The alienation that informs the subsequent political expression, is, when it can be mobilised, a hostile rejection of a non-Aboriginal world long-denied the Aboriginal people and now frequently unattractive to them. It is difficult, in such an environment, for Aborigines to respond favourably to the belated - and conditional - non-Aboriginal acceptance. Little has changed to influence a more favourable reinterpretation of the overall conditions of existence. Equally difficult in the face of the apathy born of generations of denial and disruption is the development of leadership which could be the first stage of transformation.

A different set of variables has been identified and posited as the primary reason for the more favourable conditions of Aboriginal life in the town of Menindee. At least until recently, a relatively non-competitive frame of reference has minimised tension between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups. Although factionalism is still part of community relations, just as it is in any non-Aboriginal community, it has not prevented a generally acceptable and effective leadership from assuming a large degree of responsibility for community development. The absence of alienation from non-Aboriginal society as a factor in

this leadership facilitates the Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal social interaction at both community and individual level. Through this interaction Aborigines in the Menindee community have been able to achieve general social and economic equality with their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Further, their position in local society, assisted by policies of positive discrimination, has, in some respects, helped them to political ascendancy in the community. This situation, discussed above, may well have generated some inter-communal hostility and created a new set of relations. But it cannot be denied that Menindee Aborigines are in a particularly favourable position to take advantage of opportunities afforded them, provided they are able to resolve the inevitable political conflicts in the allocation of resources.

On the other hand, the process of urban migration that distinguishes the Broken Hill Aboriginal population has further fragmented the discrete components of the Far West communities in NSW. To this point, their political expression has been restrained by their lack of social collectivisation and by the local dominance of the regional structures. A lack of concern for the aspirations and expectations that motivated their migration, their lack of incorporation into the social life of the general community and a continuation of the non-Aboriginal resentment of their presence in the town could inspire the self-destructive, internalised anger, or the social alienation that characterises Wilcannia. Alternately, continuing exclusion could stimulate Aboriginal social and political mobilisation, but it would not of itself provide a positive basis for community functioning.

As the study of the communities shows, there are many factors influencing the dynamics of Aboriginal groups and their consciousness of identity and community. Of preponderant importance is the degree of

acceptance or rejection by non-Aboriginal society and the degree of alienation that is consequent. It is inevitable that these factors will create internal and external tensions. A political process that would be appropriate to all Aborigines would need to include the mechanism to resolve these tensions. Similarly, as has been pointed out in the thesis, any policies designed to address the Aboriginal condition in Australian society must have regard to the diversity of the population and the diversity of its needs. At the same time they need to address the possibilities of Aboriginal political mobilisation at a broad, possibly a national, level. Aborigines themselves cannot be passive in these processes. What then is the overall situation within which the conflicts of macro-micro interaction need to be resolved if an appropriate Aboriginal political process is to become a possibility?

13.2 Aborigines And Change

It is clear from this comparative study of Aboriginal communities and of the specificity of their interactions with other levels of social and political structures, that diversity engenders many conflicts. Most notably, Aborigines are involved in conflicts of identity which confuse or disrupt their sense of social place and their political affiliation and, consequently, condition their behaviour. Consonant with these conditions is the conflict and competition of community disunity which inhibits leadership and prevents the Aboriginal people negotiating as a united group. Moreover, identity conflict induces discord in the defining of goals, in the allocation of resources and in relationships with other elements of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society. Because the resolution of conflict - in the sense of the reconciliation of conflicting interests - is a basic function of political activity, the

Aboriginal task might be seen as purely a political one. It cannot, however, be isolated from its social, cultural and economic dimensions.

An analysis of the variability of Aboriginal existence, as it is made manifest by the study, demonstrates that there is no simple mechanism which might resolve the complex patterns of conflict that confront these people. Rather, if unqualified, it suggests a bleak and pessimistic prospect that will not be dispelled without significant changes to the predispositions and expectations of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. But no social or political condition is fixed; change is a feature of human existence. The Aboriginal future will depend on the extent to which change is influenced negatively by the past or positively by the setting and pursual of achievable goals. In order to determine such goals it is necessary for both Aborigines and non-Aborigines to comprehend the fundamentals of the contemporary Aboriginal population generally, and also those specific to the particular units of that diverse population.

Aboriginal people are in a continuing process of change even if the change, or at least the direction of change, is not endorsed by many who claim to speak for Aboriginal people. Attempts to redirect the process through some form of cultural regeneration or reinvention often ignore the actuality of cultural and social transformation. Cultural identity is not a constant unaffected by circumstance. It is a variable, subject to numerous temporal and structural pressures.

Aboriginal culture is not an ideal to be recreated, but, as the Far West communities reveal, an existing reality shaped by the individual and group experience and by the particular patterns of response to these. Political behaviour, however, can have some influence on the direction of change that will fashion their future, principally where this is

applied to a limited social and spatial field. Because of this, the extent of incorporation into, or alienation from, the general society, is also subject to change. In each dimension of these changes the central variable is identity, the Aborigines' perception of who they are and where they belong.

Because Aboriginal identity is incorporated in the notion of community, as the particular dimension of community changes so too does the individual's self-identification. Ethno-politics, which so far has sought to invest 'community' with a significance that has an orientation with a mythologised past and its supposed inheritance, conflicts with the social reality of contemporary Aboriginal existence in much of Australia. In local communities in NSW, groups of Aborigines define needs and goals that are more a manifestation of their level of interaction with elements of the larger society than of their identification with an ethnic community. This is a significant factor in the underlying tension that structures Aboriginal politics.

Politics and policies posited on interpretations of the past are unlikely to ensure worthwhile and lasting change. With Aborigines they promote anger and alienation; with non-Aborigines, guilt and a desire to redress injustice through compensation. Where concerns for compensation inspire the transfer of resources, moral criteria might be fulfilled, but at the risk of further entrenching Aboriginal dependence and antagonising non-Aborigines.

13.4 Aboriginal Dependence As A Political Liability

It is a real, if unreasonable, factor in many non-Aboriginal perceptions of the Aboriginal condition that these are dependent people unable or unwilling to help themselves. This, of course, ignores the facts and

consequences of the long history of non-Aboriginal control of Aboriginal people and the resulting denial of self-responsibility. Aborigines, having been forced into dependency, are blamed for their dependence and considered to have an obligation to help themselves out of this state. At the same time they are constantly referred to as being unprepared or unready for such a move; non-Aborigines have invariably been the arbiters of when Aborigines were ready for inclusion in the larger society. Nevertheless, it is apparent that there can be no significantly improved future for Aborigines unless and until prejudice is overcome and they have a greater degree of involvement in, and responsibility for, shaping the conditions of their existence. This does not imply a resort to 'blaming the victim', but neither does it consider attributing blame elsewhere will of itself alter an unsatisfactory situation and absolve the victims of the need for self-help.

There have been, and continue to be, many views of the Aboriginal population expressed in a general context of identifying a common condition within which Aborigines as victims are denied self-responsibility. The interim report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody - in its initial term, invariably referred to as the 'Muirhead enquiry' - includes, in its conclusions, one of the more recent examples of this form of assessment:

Aborigines, whilst far from homogeneous, share a common anxiety to play a role in their own future, to seek restoration of self esteem and fulfillment of their anxieties that their children should have equal safety, status and opportunity in this country. This will only be achieved when they are able to play an important part in the decisions which influence their daily lives, when they have opportunities to attain their own economic base and when they can play a real role in dealing with their immense social disadvantages (*Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Interim Report, 1988:65*).

Like many others before him, Muirhead identifies many of the issues that need to be addressed if Aboriginal prospects for a meaningful life are to be enhanced. Also like many others, he does not offer specific correctives to achieve the needed changes, nor could he be expected to do so within the limits of his brief. What his statement does is to illustrate again the distance between identification of an unsatisfactory situation and its resolution.

Many proposals fail to differentiate between the general and the particular in relation to Aboriginal interests and expectations. They tend to ignore the importance of localism, the social phenomenon which often operates against a background 'of internal factionalism and community disharmony' (Pollard, 1988:67). Suggested initiatives which propose simple, even simplistic, solutions also ignore the underlying factors influencing a particular situation. Whether these initiatives originate from Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal sources, they can have the effect of raising expectations of rapid and significant change through the intervention of an external agency, without effort by Aborigines themselves. This is the point taken by the leader of the Opposition in the Senate when he argues 'the dangers of any approach which suggests to Aboriginal people that their problems can be externalised'. He points out the difficulty in suggesting a 'golden key solution' such as land rights or a treaty when

the reality is that the solution to most of the problems which face Aborigines requires not only government assistance but also an enormous amount of effort from Aboriginal people themselves (Chaney, *A PD(S)*. vol.128,1988:59-60).

Significantly, after many years' involvement in Aboriginal politics and in bureaucratic structures, and after many calls for non-Aboriginal initiatives, for more to be done for Aborigines, Charles Perkins also denies the possibility of a simple resolution. There are, he affirms,

'no magic solutions to Aboriginal affairs' (*ABC PM*, August 15, 1989; *The Age*, August 18, 1989).

Muirhead's identification of the need for Aborigines to play a role in their own future, to regain their self esteem and to be involved in decision-making, highlights not only the shortcomings in social and political life, but also the reality of Aboriginal dependence. None of these factors will be overcome without considerable effort on the part of Aborigines themselves. Aborigines will not be removed from their dependent state simply by some government initiative, or through a change in general community attitudes. Dependency will be overcome only when Aborigines are able to, and are unimpeded in, assuming responsibility for their own lives. Political activity alone will not achieve these objectives.

13.4 Overcoming Dependence

13.4.1 Political Or Economic Processes

Whether from choice or from the limited options available to them, Aborigines have relied on the political process for community advancement. The early struggles for civil rights, equality and citizenship were necessary because discriminatory policies and practices had to be overcome before any real progress could be made. In a more enlightened era, and particularly since 1967, the reliance on political activity, it can be argued, has militated against the economic advancement sought and needed. Addressing this issue in the USA, black conservatives argue that political power follows economic power rather than the reverse. Robert Woodson, described as 'a rising star of the black right', provides an analysis of the American experiences that is pertinent to an understanding of Australian Aborigines' relative lack of economic progress:

Most groups in this society didn't start off trying to achieve political equity. They went into business. Blacks, unfortunately, have focused almost exclusively on civil rights for the past 20 years or so, as if applying civil rights would translate into economic equity. It didn't... (*Weekend Australian*, January 24-25, 1987:9).

Any suggestion that Aborigines' problems could be overcome by a mass move to entrepreneurship would ignore the historical and social content of the Aboriginal inheritance. The free enterprise society has not always provided equal opportunity. Yet the argument has been advanced for an economic foundation as an essential precondition for political autonomy. According to Vaszoli (1978:154), there can be no political independence based on economic dependence. Nonetheless, there is an assumption in much of the political rhetoric that some form of autonomy will in itself create the climate wherein can be resolved other problems confronting Aborigines.

13.4.2 Self-Determination

Self-determination, self-management and similar expressions have been at the forefront of political demands made by or on behalf of Aborigines since the 1970s. Social and economic benefits are invariably assumed, if not overtly defined, in many of these demands. Once again they represent general claims, often unrelated to the social, spatial and economic realities of the Aboriginal population. They are macro objectives invariably expressed by Aborigines at the national level of politics, or by supportive non-Aborigines. Theoretical concepts, however, need to be supported by practical considerations if they are to have other than symbolic value, a point well made by Young:

Theoretically, self-management of Aboriginal communities should provide a remedy, but unless it is associated with control over an economic resource...adequate to provide an income for the population, it will never succeed in practice (1981:11)

Additional to Young's qualification, there are questions relating to the fundamental social structures and human resources that would be necessary for a community to function as a self-managing unit. Essentially, these are questions of the degree of social and political incorporation and of management and leadership expertise. Unless there were considerable social and political changes, family networks, nepotism and factionalism would seriously inhibit the success of any resource management by Aborigines in many communities, and certainly those in the NSW Far West. The possible exception is Menindee, and even here the events of 1989, discussed above, illustrate how rapidly relationships can change and tensions be generated when there is a change in the status quo. The particular avenue through which resources are made available to the particular community can be seen as a major factor in determining who will exercise control, and to whom the benefits of such control will be directed.

To extend the notion of self-management wider, such as to the possibility of regional incorporation, would be to confront even greater difficulties. The conflicts of local - regional interaction provide clear evidence of this. It is apparent, then, that if responsibility, self-reliance and political relevance require an economic base, this must be on a scale that reflects the particular level of Aboriginal identity and community being considered. To some extent, the rationale of the claim for land rights satisfies this criterion.

13.4.3 Land As The Basis for Economic Self-Reliance

It cannot be denied that rights to land have significant material, social and psychological importance to Aboriginal people. However, a continuing emphasis on land rights as a prerequisite for economic self reliance presumes that ownership of land will somehow lead to the

elimination of dependency or the effects of dependency. This is seldom explained other than in the context of some form of social and cultural reorganisation that would create a self-reliant community, or of pastoral or agricultural properties which would be viable economic enterprises. Pastoral properties would benefit communities but would not provide an economic base for large numbers of Aborigines. At best they might provide an income supplement to augment welfare payments or contribute to general community facilities. Even here, as the NSW experience has shown, management expertise, so often lacking in the Aboriginal community,¹ is essential to economic success.

In the appropriate Aboriginal social and spatial environment the acquisition of land can lead to the establishment of small, socially independent communities, referred to variously as outstations, country camps or homeland centres. These have been described as:

small decentralised communities of close kin, established by the movement of Aboriginal people to land of social, cultural and economic significance to them (*Report of the H of R Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs*, March 1987:xiii).

Although such communities might represent some improvement in the social and psychological conditions of groups of people, they do not represent Aboriginal self-reliance. Instead, the probability is for an increased dependence when even the limited economic opportunities of towns and settlements are foregone and where basic community infrastructures and continuing support need to be provided. The outstation movement, argues Collman (1988:37), only makes sense in the context of Aboriginal dependence upon white resources.

¹ One rural management company has a continuing plan to train managers for the Aboriginal properties under its control in NSW and SA, including the Wilcannia Land Councils' Weinteriga. The plan has encountered numerous problems. The principal causes advanced for the lack of success to date are an unwillingness to persist with the training course and, what may well be a contributing factor in the apparent loss of interest, the reluctance of Aborigines to accept the authority and direction of another Aboriginal.

Collman also denies the relevance of these initiatives to any general Aboriginal social, cultural or political strategy. In contrast to the view that outstations are an Aboriginal initiative to try to halt the cultural fragmentation process and an attempt to revitalise traditional life, Collman (1988:36-37) sees Aborigines as identifying their local group and asserting

the uniqueness of their particular interests and thereby (legitimising) administrative support for their own needs independent of the competing demands of other Aboriginal groups.

Whether the emotion that inspires these communities will sustain them over the longer term is questionable. While they might represent an escape from the often enforced association of antagonistic groupings and the exposure to the debilitating consequences of social erosion, they have the potential to generate their own negative characteristics.² At best they represent a refuge wherein a group might be able to prepare itself for its future.

Younger Aborigines in particular, although at times more militant than their elders, are also more accustomed to the stimulants of non-Aboriginal society and may be reluctant to remain indefinitely in the isolation of the small community. In any case, to attempt to extrapolate the concept from the usually remote areas, where Aborigines may still live in some quasi-traditional mode, to eastern and south-eastern Australia is to ignore the structure of the Aboriginal populations in urban and rural communities. Limited employment prospect and the resulting inactivity is cited by Aborigines in these areas as a

² It is pertinent to consider the comments of Dr Christopher Anderson in relation to an isolated Aboriginal community. Anderson tells of '...family and clan group tension and conflict in the confined space of the community...' and notes: 'For urban dwelling Australians it is worth considering the reality of living within a small community containing all one's relatives...and all one's enemies - constant reminders of one's mistakes and failures' (*Advertiser*, August 3, 1989).

primary cause of social, particularly alcohol, problems. These people, generations removed from an active participation in a hunter-gatherer society, are unlikely to re-evaluate a sedentary existence merely by way of its spatial transformation. As Collman (1988) indicates, if there is a particular criterion relevant to this form of autonomous community it would involve not so much a general Aboriginal identity as the specific orientation of the incorporated group. An appropriate economic base would have to reflect this incorporation.

13.4.4 Aboriginal Enterprises

After land rights, Aboriginal enterprises are probably the most frequently proposed form of potential economic bases. Usually seen in the context of community ventures, they are subject to the same qualifications as community management of land resources. In most towns in western NSW the notion of community management would certainly have a connotation that was narrower than that of the total local Aboriginal population. Several attempts to set up small, Aboriginal run, craft industries have failed because of community indifference.³ Elsewhere, when the possibility was endorsed it was in the context of individual or family management of small business.⁴ Not unexpectedly, enterprise ventures appear to have a greater appeal where the community is characterised by a considerable degree of individuality and self-responsibility.

³ Attempts in Wilcannia and Broken Hill in recent years to establish community-run craft enterprises attracted limited support even though the initiatives came from resident Aborigines. In Broken Hill the initiative was taken by leaders of the Aboriginal Cooperative; in Wilcannia, by an Aboriginal, Uniting Church Minister. In the latter case, the motivation was to provide gainful employment for Aboriginal youth in an attempt to reduce the incidence of alcohol abuse attributed to young people 'having nothing else to do'. The plan was to have the young Aborigines involved in setting up and running the enterprise. Failing to gain the necessary support, an already over-committed Minister himself organised and attempted to conduct the enterprise.

⁴ A number of Menindee Aborigines spoke of the difficulty in getting finance 'for a business', 'to be independent' or 'to go on our own'.

Another factor undermining the possibility of Aboriginal enterprise management in particular communities is the dearth of individuals with the requisite basic skills. This deficit is often exacerbated by the devaluation by Aboriginal people of educational or training processes which might redress this problem. Unless enterprise activities are confined to subsistence agriculture or could be otherwise contained within some closed Aboriginal economy, they must function as part of the overall Australian social and economic structures. Yet some Aborigines and non-Aborigines profess that educational and training processes, as at present provided, are inappropriate to the Aboriginal way of life. Aboriginality becomes the rationalisation or excuse - for the inability or unwillingness to cope with the demands of a structured society.

13.4.5 Education: An Economic Or Cultural Imperative

One recent review of the debate on Aboriginal education suggests it as being structured around various interpretations of Aboriginal identity and the place of Aborigines in Australian society. Once again, the politics of identity consciousness influences, or attempts to influence, determinations in the social and economic domains. Where it seeks to present cultural unity, it succeeds only to highlight the confusion of diversity. Aboriginal education as a culturally relevant curriculum would need to be as diverse as the culture itself. As the authors of the review observe:

One form of curriculum is viewed as culturally supportive and a basic right of the individual in one area but in another the very idea of such a curriculum is considered to be discriminatory and depriving Aboriginal children of their rights as Australian citizens (Gale, Jordan, McGill, McNamara & Scott, 1987:269).

It is a common assertion that Aborigines' education problems arise from the failure of education authorities to provide curricula that would

serve Aborigines fundamental needs and be compatible with Aboriginal culture. In a report to the Schools Commission, the Aboriginal Consultative group sought to present a people threatened by the imposition of alien values:

It would be a tragedy to destroy one of the last remaining people who do not worship material values. Our vision of education is not compatible with the current education system with its emphasis on manpower oriented goals that most Australian people know (1975:62).

The 'people' referred to without regard to the particularity of individual experience or social condition are assumed to be the repository of a static Aboriginal culture.

A survey of isolated schools in NSW concludes that 'the education of Aboriginal children in the far western region of NSW has all but failed' (Turney, Sinclair & Cairns, 1980:228). It recommends that Aboriginal education should be reshaped to take account of the particular orientation of Aborigines in the region. From a similar perspective, the report of the NSW Parliament Joint Select Committee on the Western Division indicates that the majority of Aboriginal students find school 'neither relevant nor enjoyable'. On the other hand, the report provides also an overall view of the school population which implies a general, rather than an Aboriginal, problem in the isolated schools.

A considerable proportion of pupils, it claims, could appear to present as 'bored, listless, lacking motivation to learn and as "disciplinary" and "absentee" problems' (1983:229). Later, the report lists the general factors to which the situation is attributed, a list that reads very much like outlines that have sought to account for the specifically Aboriginal, student problem. Such factors as isolation, the domestic environment, unemployment, apparently irrelevant syllabi, inadequate resources and inadequate teacher training, have an impact on *all*

children exposed to them. To attempt to invoke some distinctly Aboriginal, cultural artifact as a principal cause is to invite initiatives which might further disadvantage these students. Turney *et. al.* cite the 1977 Report of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board's identification of the ingredients of a 'culture clash' affecting Aboriginal students, which might be summarised as self esteem, competitiveness and industry. The implication is that, because of cultural factors, many Aborigines find these values alien. This may be a valid assessment of particular Aborigines or particular groups of Aborigines, but it cannot be ascribed to a population or to all situations.

Many Aborigines in rural and urban Australia have had the same, or a similar, cultural experience as their non-Aboriginal peers, face the same pressures and react similarly. A teacher in a school in which the Secondary classes have an Aboriginal population of from 60-70 per cent, believes that these students 'do not recognise that they have a fundamentally different attitude to education than their non Aboriginal peers'. She accepts that there are differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in this school, but points to the same differences *within* each group. In regard to the lack of sensitivity in curriculum development which, it has been alleged, ignores the different nature and cultural background of many Aboriginal children, this appears to be largely irrelevant to the merged community of this particular isolated town:

If, as many reports say, aboriginal society holds dear tenets which oppose those upon which our education system is based, these tenets do not appear as important here among the aboriginal population, as elsewhere (personal communication).

Special curricula may be relevant in remote areas or where Aborigines, for whatever reason, do not aspire to the material and economic benefits

of contemporary Australian society. But most Aborigines live in close association with non-Aborigines and many have similar aspirations and expectations. They face a future in which they have to compete socially, economically and politically for available resources. These Aborigines need access to the learning which would offer the same expertise and skills available to non-Aborigines. Many of the more articulate and influential Aborigines who function at the macro-political level have achieved their position because education has prepared them for its demands. Earlier research by Watts (1976), which indicated that Aborigines found it harder to obtain employment than non-Aborigines even when they had equivalent qualifications, seems no longer to be a valid assessment of the situation in much of Australia. If there are areas where specific cultural aspects, or prejudice and discrimination still restrict Aboriginal opportunity, a recast curriculum would not make it easier for Aborigines facing these to obtain employment and might, in fact, have the opposite effect of perpetuating a perception of an inferior capacity.

Aborigines themselves have expressed strong opposition to the provision of special education services when they have considered these to be inferior to what is available to the general population.⁵ Watts (1982) stresses a need to understand the values and lifestyles of Aborigines 'in their diverse socio-cultural settings' before programmes are assessed. Their culture is not static but changes as they respond to their changing situations in the wider, Australian culture:

To understand the people one needs thus to comprehend their contemporary culture, the socialisation of their children within that culture and their aspirations, born of their values and their

5

A number of Aborigines interviewed in the Far West communities devalued or told of their refusal to participate in programmes they considered to be 'only for kids', to 'keep the Aborigines quiet' or to 'give some [Aboriginal] people a job teaching when they don't know much about it themselves'.

current situations, for their own and their children's future (1982:50).

Aboriginal aspirations and values are not always accurately expressed by non-Aborigines nor are they always clearly defined by Aborigines themselves. However, many Aborigines do relate education to employment opportunities and see these as twin goals. Hall and Jonas, in their survey of Aboriginal needs in NSW report:

The highest ranking response in all regions indicated a positive appreciation of the need for full high school education beyond the racially structured disadvantage of the past and related lack of effective access to society (1984:201).

Against this, Aboriginal students are often the unwilling occupiers of classrooms, their reluctance leading to hostility and rejection, their ambition limited by the hopelessness they see around them.

They don't seem to be too worried about education, but like it or not they're going to need it (Tape:86 M13).

They don't give a stuff. At the present moment I don't think they're going to come out any brainier than us (Tape: 86 W19)

There's very few want to take advantage of the educational opportunities about these days. Better jobs. You can't drink when you're young and go and do these college programmes. It's got to be one or the other. [Alcohol] is what most of them settle for (Tape:86 B17).

The question one might raise here is what are Aborigines going to do? If education and training programmes are designed specifically for a supposed community-based, non-competitive and non-exploitive, Aboriginal way of life, Aboriginal inequality in the Australian society will be perpetuated. Education and training needs to be relevant to Aboriginal aspirations and to the employment opportunities which are what so many Aborigines say they seek. It is a possibility that many Aborigines will have to construct their economic base at the individual level, the condition that obtains for much of the non-Aboriginal population. Participation in the paid work force is, in one analysis, 'the classic

way in which, in the long run, groups of people liberate themselves' (Pollard:10).

Aborigines look for change, and change without conflict is possible if it is in accord with the fundamental social and political aspirations of the dominant Australian society. This is not a satisfactory option for many Aborigines and is certainly outside the terms of the national, Aboriginal, political agenda. Nonetheless, it is acceptable to others, individuals and groups, who do not share the views of many of their self-appointed leaders. Goals have to be determined within the specific social environment of those who will be affected. This is not always acknowledged by policy-makers or by the Aborigines they listen to.

13.5 Defining Aboriginal Needs

If Aborigines are to be afforded the justice they, and many others, justifiably believe has been denied them, there must be no impediment to their participation in Australian society. Equally, Aborigines may need to acknowledge their role as part of the society if they are to use their identity as a useful political resource. Identity cannot be evaluated according to some absolute criteria and assume political relevance from this; it has political relevance only when it can be used within a power structure. Outside the general polity Aborigines have no power to direct that polity, other than the power to embarrass and to disrupt, and these are limited.

The macro issues of Aboriginal social and political directions, as they are articulated within a national agenda are questioned by Hasluck, who asks:

Will the separate development that is being pursued with a beneficent purpose today have the result after two or three generations that persons of aboriginal descent find that they are shut out from participation in most of what is happening in the

continent and are behind glass in a vast museum, or are in a sort of open-range zoo? Or is it intended that their separate development will be carried to a point where they become virtually a nation within a nation (1988:145).

The limitation of Aboriginal concepts of identity, the localism of their social and political orientation, suggests Hasluck's fears are unfounded. Too many Aborigines have become too distant from the possibility of a separate, national, social and cultural entity.

Because it is acknowledged that total separation is not politically or economically feasible without immense social and economic disruption, what must be established is the shape of Aboriginal involvement. The resulting political process would be one in which incorporation establishes the necessary preconditions for groups of Aborigines to achieve an economic base from which they might organise a meaningful political base. At present many are relying on history, guilt, anger and alienation. (see e.g. Cowlshaw, 1988 *passim*) These were, in themselves, insufficient to effect major change in 1988; they are unlikely to do so in the future. Confronting the political realities, Charles Perkins emphasises the need to grasp the future rather than to dwell in the past of self-pity when he asserts the need for change in the Aboriginal consciousness:

...we must stop carrying the cross of history into the future. White people must be released from this consciousness about the past by a new positive relationship between black and white...Injustice can be a continuing reality in the figment of our imagination. "The poor bugger me mentality" that has weighed many of us down for so long must be abandoned (*Age*, August 18, 1989).

If they want a share of power - economic and political - Aborigines must be part of the society within which the power resides, or else form their own. The latter is improbable.

13.6 A Political Future For Aborigines

What then are the possibilities for Aboriginal politics? The options that have usually been canvassed interpret an Aboriginal future that will be based on justice, independence and autonomy, or the denial of these and full incorporation of the population into the general Australian society with a resulting loss of identity and individuality. Aborigines will become a nation within a nation, or they will cease to exist as a distinct people. Each approach begs many questions and ignores alternatives.

In the long term it is highly improbable to expect Aborigines to remain as isolated groups, denying social and cultural change and squatting in some spatial and temporal atavism. Nor can it seriously be considered they could, or that a majority would want to, become part of an independent, autonomous nation within a nation, Hasluck's 'dangerous absurdity' (1988:145). A middle path has become the social actuality for many Aborigines and it can be expected that it will be for more with the passage of time. But reliance on this process of incorporation would not remove the lingering, historically-inspired, sense of injustice that would always offer, to some people, the motivation, if not always the means, to seek alternatives.

That Aborigines have been unjustly treated cannot be denied; the evidence of the social, cultural and physical destruction of too many people is stark testimony to this. Although they may be unable to reverse this history, it is understandable that they demand redress for its consequences and seek to form an identification with some form of reclamation of the past, even if this is in symbolic terms. However, Aboriginal identity is not fixed in the past and one may well agree with Pollard's contention that:

While continuing to identify as Aborigines, the content of the word 'Aborigine' may well be changing already under the influence of higher aspirations, the effects of positive discrimination and steadily increasing material benefits (1988:122-123).

This is not to imply that Aborigines do not or could not embrace a collective identity, contribute as Aborigines to decisions which affect them or take control of their lives. Nor does it preclude their assumption of a collective political voice. On the contrary, a greater degree of incorporation into the general Australian society could well create a situation favourable to the integration of the diverse Aboriginal population into a viable political unit.

13.7 Beyond Localism: A Hypothetical Political Unit

In the political field, Aboriginal structures have been almost entirely government sponsored or government supported. National Aboriginal politics has not accurately reflected the national Aboriginal community or the broad range of Aboriginal interests. Yet a form of national or ethnic political structure could be the means through which the fragmentation of the Aboriginal people could be arrested. Ethno politics is relevant to Aborigines irrespective of their particular identity consciousness.

What has in the past been presented as representative of an Aboriginal ethnic collective is a political hierarchy which has served as a voice governments needed to hear. It was a structure governments could tolerate and deal with despite the awareness that it lacked wide community support. In speaking for a virtually voiceless and unorganised people it created a need for itself without the active organisation of these people.

For a number of reasons, National Aboriginal organisations have not been particularly successful. In the first place they have not been able to gain the necessary level of Aboriginal support. They assumed a national voice would in some way unite the many elements of the Aboriginal population. This did not happen. They were unsuccessful because they were a tolerated minority outside the general political process; they could not control power because they were outside the spheres of power. And they disenchanted many Aboriginal people because the ideology that inspired this expression of Aboriginal politics was alienation-inspired and separatist, ignoring the many who, while maintaining their Aboriginal identity, were already in varying stages of interaction with, or even incorporation into, the general society.

To become a legitimate, national, Aboriginal voice a structure would need to reflect, in some way, the diverse social, cultural and economic interests of Aboriginal Australia. It is a difficult but not impossible concept. It could happen with a tremendous effort in organisation, in consultation and in a form of representation based on something other than a numerically determined process. Above all else, it would demand a very high level of political skill.

13.8 Some Fundamentals Of An Ethnic Collectivity

A valid national Aboriginal organisation or movement is possible if Aborigines are able to develop the organisational and political skills necessary for what, in Australia, would be a revolutionary concept. The foundations already exist; what is needed is for these to be organised into a total structure. It would need to have the capacity to reach into every area of Australia and to appeal to virtually all sections of the Aboriginal population, that is, to be a heterogeneous organisation of consensus, perhaps factionally divided but sensitive and responsive

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Part 3 NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

Adelaide News. November 19, 1981.

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Age, Melbourne. July 1, 1985; February 27, 1986; June 31, 1989; August 18, 1989.

Australian. January 4, 1965; January 11, 1965; March 30-31, 1985; January 24-25, 1987; February 20-21, 1988.

Barrier Daily Truth, Broken Hill. June 30, 1948; October 22, 1982; September 6, 1983 February 4, 1987; February 5, 1987.

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Paddlewheel, Wilcannia. March 18, 1976; April 4, 1976; October 27, 1978; December 13, 1978; February 9, 1979; July 27, 1979; November 6, 1981; November 27, 1981; December 4, 1981.

Sun News Pictorial, Melbourne. November 19, 1981.

Sunday Herald, Sydney. January 24, 1988.

Sydney Morning Herald. June 29, 1948; January 9, 1988; January 26, 1988; June 14, 1988.

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Western Grazier, Wilcannia and Broken Hill. August 19, 1928; April 17, 1942; July 2, 1948; January 1, 1949; March 24, 1950; August 10, 1950; (as a monthly) May 1967.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Community:

Sex: M F

Age:

Original community:

1. When did you come here?
2. Why did you come here?
3. Where were you immediately before coming here?
4. What organisations are here to help Aboriginal people?
5. What are the needs of the Aboriginal people?
6. Where would you go if you needed help?
7. Who do you see as the Aboriginal leaders here?
8. Is this a friendly town?
9. How do you get on with the non-Aboriginal people?
10. Do you experience any resentment from non-Aboriginal people? Any Discrimination?
11. Do you intend to stay in this town?
12. Do you have a job?
13. (If no job) Are you looking for a job?

Responses to survey of Aboriginal people, Broken Hill June 1988. (n=43. All figures are percentages)

Q.2. Why did you come here?

Work	46.5
Health	23.2
Education	11.7
Housing	9.3
Other	9.3

Q.4. What organisations are here to help Aboriginal people?

Land Council/Legal Service	13.9
Weimijar Aboriginal Cooperative	44.2
None	41.9

Q.5. What are the needs of the Aboriginal people?

Housing	41.9
Employment	48.8
Training	9.3

Q.6. Where would you go if you needed help?

Individuals associated with Weimijar	74.5
Land Council/Legal Service	13.9
Other/don't know	11.6

Q.7. Who do you see as the Aboriginal leaders here?

Individuals associated with Weimijar	58.1
Other	25.6
None	16.3

Q.8. Is this a friendly town?

Yes	53.5
No	14.0
Qualified (at times/some people)	11.6

Q.9. How do you get on with the non-Aboriginal people?

Good	79.1
Qualified (some are OK/depends)	9.3
Not much contact	11.6

Q.10. Do you experience any resentment from non-Aboriginal people? Any discrimination?

Yes	62.8
No	30.2
Qualified (little contact/new here)	7.0

Q.11. Do you intend to stay in this town?

Yes	79.1
No	20.9

APPENDIX B

GENERAL COMMUNITY SURVEY

Sex: M F

Age:

Residence period:

1. What is your opinion of the present economic climate in this town?
2. How do you see your future here?
3. Is it a good town to live in?
4. What do you like about it?
5. What don't you like about it?
6. Is it a friendly town?
7. What is the population here?
8. Do you know how many Aborigine live here?
9. Do you know any Aborigines or have any contact with them?
10. What is your general attitude toward Aboriginal people?
11. Do you believe they have special needs?
12. Do you believe they already receive special attention?
13. (If yes) Is this justified?
14. What should be done for the Aboriginal people?

Responses to survey of non-Aboriginal people, Broken Hill, June 1988.
(n=56. All figures are percentages)

Q.6. Is it a friendly town?

Yes	71.4
No	12.5
<u>Qualified (not to strangers/insular)</u>	<u>16.1</u>

Q.8. Do you know how many Aborigines live here?

No idea	10.7
<300	17.8
300-500	3.6
500-1000	14.3
1000-2000	16.1
>2000 (includes 1/4, 1/3 population)	21.4
<u>Too many/a lot</u>	<u>16.1</u>

Q.9. Do you know any Aborigines or have any contact with them?

Yes	33.9
No	42.9
Limited	16.1
<u>Emphatic no/definitely not</u>	<u>7.1</u>

Q.10. What is your general attitude towards Aboriginal people?

Positive	16.1
Negative	67.8
<u>Qualified (some are OK/ignore them)</u>	<u>16.1</u>

Q.11. Do you believe they have special needs?

Yes	32.1
No	51.8
<u>Qualified/unsure</u>	<u>16.1</u>

Q.12. Do you believe they already receive special attention?

Yes	96.4
No	3.6

Q.13. Is this justified?

Yes	13.0
No	57.4
Qualified (at times/only for some)	29.6

Q.14. What should be done for the Aboriginal people?

Treat them equally	42.9
Help them regain dignity/pride/culture	14.3
No more than being done now/they don't take advantage of what they already get	23.1
Nothing specific	8.9
Force them to assimilate	3.6
Quieten them down	1.8
Don't know	5.3