**The Aptly Named W.C. Wentworth - First Minister for Aboriginal Affairs**

Over the past 45 years I have had the misfortune of dealing with almost every federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. Mercifully, I did not have an opportunity to meet with either Mal Brough or Amanda Vanstone during the Howard era, but I have met and dealt with all the others. This gives me a unique perspective on the general attributes of each one and a reasonable knowledge of each of their strengths and shortcomings. And the first thing to be said is that over the years Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs have proven to be a very miserable and inept collection lacklustre politicians whose primary qualities seem to have been mediocrity and mental instability.

In my observation every single Minister also went through a magical metamorphosis the instant that they became Minister. They all were people who had previously had minimal or non-existent knowledge of Aboriginal affairs, and mostly they had never met an Aboriginal person. But all were able to become in their own minds the world’s foremost expert on all things Aboriginal the instant they were sworn in. This unique and remarkable phenomenon has always intrigued me, especially when you consider that each initially declared themselves to be the one who would solve all the problems of Aboriginal people. And yet despite us having had the benefit of their self-proclaimed wisdom and knowledge, not only has our situation not substantially changed, but it seems in many ways that things have actually gotten worse. All we have been left with is a long trail of empty and broken promises.

But rather than dwell on the failings of the whole miserable mob of former Ministers, I have decided in this article to only reflect on the life and times of just one, who happened to be our very first Minister, the aptly named W.C. Wentworth.

The position of Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs was first created by Prime Minister Harold Holt in the aftermath of the 1967 Referendum. Holt was caught by surprise by the referendum result, when 90% of the Australian people expressed support for Aboriginal aspirations for justice and freedom. The Prime Minister’s knee-jerk response was to create a federal advisory body called the Council of Aboriginal Affairs. This was an Aboriginal advisory committee that consisted of three white men; Governor of the Reserve Bank and amateur anthropologist Dr. H.C. “Nugget” Coombs, former ambassador to Laos Mr. Barrie Dexter, and the doyen of Australian anthropology Professor Bill Stanner. To service this new committee from within the federal public service, Prime Minister Holt created a secretariat called the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and appointed Barrie Dexter as its administrative head.

Thus Holt was able to create the appearance of politically responding to the 1967 referendum. But Holt unfortunately went AWOL whilst swimming in December 1967. Two months later the new Prime Minister John Gorton added to the illusion that something was being done for Aboriginal people when he appointed the first ever Minister Responsible for Aboriginal Affairs to preside over the operations of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs.

The man appointed as first Minister was political maverick and rabid anti-Communist Mr. W.C. “Billy” Wentworth. Billy was a direct descendant of the W.C. Wentworth who, along with Blaxland and Lawson, found an Aboriginal track across the Blue Mountains in colonial days. But Billy’s primary obsession in life was his McCarthyist-style determination to root out Communism in all aspects of daily life. Wentworth was described by Alan Martin, the biographer of Sir Robert Menzies, as "the notorious Liberal Party backbench red-baiter". To say that Billy Wentworth was eccentric would be putting it mildly, and Gorton must have thought it was very clever of himself to send Wentworth off to a remote and obscure part of the Australian political system where he could do little harm to himself or the Liberal Party.

Unfortunately Wentworth did end up doing a great deal of harm to Aboriginal interests. He became a cannon-ball loose on the deck, not only for the white advisory committee the Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA), but also for the long suffering Aboriginal peoples as well. To the CAA Wentworth’s inattention to detail and own self-proclaimed personal expertise in all things Aboriginal were sources of dissatisfaction and discontent. To the Aboriginal community Wentworth’s eccentric manner and obsession with Communist infiltration of Aboriginal organisations were sometimes amusing and sometimes aggravating. Recently released ASIO documents reveal that Wentworth was responsible for numerous requests for ASIO and Commonwealth Police investigations into relations between the Communist Party and Aboriginal community organisations. Consequently, whilst many in the Aboriginal community saw Billy Wentworth as the clown and buffoon that he was, nevertheless his actions as a delusional Minister would have harmful effects on those he deemed fellow-travellers of the Communists.

One aspect about Wentworth that probably contributed to his being perceived as irrelevant and eccentric was his age. He was in his 60s when he became Minister and his white hair and sometimes weird demeanour accentuated the impression of him as a clown. Even members of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs found him to be a complete fool and that he was utterly disinterested in their views. On the rare occasions he would meet with them, he would spend most of those meetings expounding his own views on Aboriginal affairs, as well as his concerns that Aboriginal people might be manipulated by Communists into thinking they were oppressed.

Such was the farce of the relationship between the CAA and its Minister, that Council members were reduced to sitting around bewildered and cracking jokes after tumultuous meetings with him. On one occasion, Professor Stanner, not a man famous for his wit, was heard to declare of Wentworth, “he would mount his charger and ride off in all directions at once”.

Despite Wentworth’s age and eccentricity, he managed to grimly hang onto the Minister’s position for another four years. This was in part because no young, ambitious and bright politicians were really all that interested in a Ministry associated with Aboriginal matters. Even in those days the position of Minister was seen as poison for politicians, and no one in parliament was really interested in Aborigines anyway. Except maybe for an aging eccentric who was mildly demented and possibly senile.

And thus Folks, that is how we came to have “Silly Billy” Wentworth as our first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

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