**Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs and Other Horror Stories**

**By Gary Foley**

19 April 2011

In recent times I have found myself saying in speeches at rallies and meetings that ‘Jenny Macklin is the worst Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in history.’ (the word ‘indigenous’ is meaningless to me)

Then I thought to myself, ‘That is a pretty big call, after all, there have been some pretty awful Minister’s over time’. That then prompted me to recall all the Minister’s for Aboriginal Affairs that there have ever been. I had known them and had dealings with all of them since the position was first created in 1968 by Prime Minister Gorton.

It is a very enlightening exercise to look back over the rougues gallery of dunces, duds and dopes who have occupied the position of Minister for Aboriginal/indigenous Affairs in governments of every political persuasion over the decades. It makes one more aware than ever that Aboriginal Australia has indeed been very poorly served by the motley collection of half-wit, has been politicians who have been ‘our’ Minister.

The first ever Minister for Aboriginal Affairs was the loopy anti-Communist fanatic W.C. (Billy) Wentworth, appointed by Prime Minister John Gorton when he created the portfolio in 1968 in the aftermath of the famous 1967 Referendum. Wentworth was a direct descendant and namesake of the Wentworth that accompanied Blaxland and Lawson when they were shown the way across the Blue Mountains by a few friendly passing Aboriginal people.

As a Minister Billy Wentworth was completely useless because of his primary obsession which was a fervent and rabid fear that Aboriginal people were extremely susceptible to manipulation by the feared ‘Reds’, which Wentworth was notorious for finding everywhere.

One of Wentworth’s first actions upon being made Minister was to seek a meeting with the Deputy Director-General of ASIO, Peter Barbour, to be briefed on Communists within the Aboriginal movement. As historian Lachlan Clohesy observed, ‘Wentworth asked for information on specific identities including, among others, Professor Rose, Aboriginal union organiser Dexter Daniels, Wave Hill Welfare Officer Bill Jeffrey, Frank Hardy, Ray Peckham and Faith Bandler. He also received a paper on CPA interest in Aboriginal Affairs.’

A bizarre sidelight to all of this was that Wentworth enjoyed a ‘very close’ relationship with Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, who apparently shared Wentworths extreme anti-Communist beliefs and consequently their friendship meant that they were frequently visitors to each others homes in Canberra in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Furthermore, Wentworth fancied himself as an amateur anthropologist to an extent that the then Secretary of the Committee for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA), Mr Barrie Dexter believed that Wentworth was only interested in simply recording ‘everything known about the Aborigines before they or their culture disappeared, rather than fostering a continuation of their culture and survival as a race’.

By the time he had become Minister in 1968 Wentworth had already established a long habit of getting his high level friends in ASIO to spy on Aboriginal organisations and individuals he believed were being infiltrated and manipulated by Communists, including the conservative Federal Council For Aborigines & Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and identities such as Faith Bandler and Kath Walker (Oojeroo Noonuckle).

Billy Wentworth blundered his way through the portfolio of Aboriginal Affairs until March 1971 when John Gorton was overthrown as Prime Minister by Billy McMahon. The new PM appointed one of his political supporters, Peter Howson as new Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts. Howson, who was a plum-in-the mouth Pomee and former WWII spitfire pilot was duly unimpressed with his new position and was reported to have responded, “The little bastard (McMahon) gave me trees, boongs and pooftas”.

Howson need not have worried. His time in the Ministerial seat was to be brief but turbulent as he ineptly tried to manage the Government crisis of the Aboriginal Embassy, and before he knew it he was out on his arse as the triumphant Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister in the December 1972 election.

Aboriginal people (and most Australians) had high hopes of the new Whitlam Government. It was the first Labor administration in Canberra since the 1949 and Whitlam had in early 1972 at the Aboriginal Embassy promised Land Rights for Aboriginal peoples. Therefore we greatly anticipated that we would get a dynamic, young energetic Minister in the mould of Whitlam himself. Alas, it was not to be.

Whitlam delivered to us the tired, old discredited Gordon Bryant as our new Minister. Gordon Bryant who liked to regard himself as the ‘best friend’ of the Aborigines, but who had led the concerted opposition to Aboriginal control of their own national organisation FCAATSI during the big split of 1969-70. Gordon Bryant was seen as most Aboriginal people as a very poor choice of Minister and was known by many to be weak and susceptible to influence by his conservative faction in the Aboriginal movement. For someone who regarded himself as something of an ‘expert’ in Aboriginal politics, Bryant proved spectacularly inept and managed to hold onto the job for less than ten months before Whitlam mercifully dispatched him back to political oblivion where he belonged.

Bryant’s failure to manage the minefield of Aboriginal affairs resulted in a rapid deterioration in relations between the Whitlam Government and Aboriginal activists.