cutting pine planting in line with the decline in the birth rate.

But the foresters seem to argue for provision for higher per-capita consumption on grounds that packaging demands for timber will soar. The Treasury is likely to argue that if the packaging industry is to be the main cost-giver for the vast increase in timber production, then let it risk its money planting the trees. The Federal Primary Industry Minister, Ian Sinclair, has already suggested that exports may be more inclined to leave forestry to private enterprise in the future. There are already very generous tax concessions to private forestry, which have indeed been criticised as unjustified by the Asprey committee of inquiry.

Conservationist arguments could carry some weight, too. Although they have not been notably successful so far in limiting the new clearingfelling forestry techniques, they have succeeded in having freeway plans in most big cities and have put the fear of a new god into every industrialist who might otherwise be inclined to propose a new oil refinery, chemical complex or steel plant. But the massive destruction of State forests continues as relentlessly as ever, and several new massive woodchip projects are afoot. Every one of these projects depends on massive public subsidisation of transport and other infrastructure, on minimal royalties, and unknown regeneration costs to the State forest services. Where the bush is wrecked by chipping, the land may only be suitable for pine.

Even with heavy subsidisation of infrastructure costs, none of the woodchipping ventures have been a notable financial success, and at least two would not have started without the support of another government agency, the Australian Industry Development Corporation. State governments have recently shown signs of dwindling enthusiasm for grandiose forestry. The long-established and supposedly well-based scheme on the NSW south coast was recently said by the State Lands and Forests Minister, John Mason, to have cost his forestry commission nearly $6 million. Earnings from royalties had been inadequate to meet this and left an accumulated deficit of $1 million.

By contrast, old-fashioned selective forestry continues to be quietly profitable, can afford to pay considerably higher royalties to governments, needs no taxpayer subsidisation and is far less damaging to the bush and its animal inhabitants.

For once the Federal Government’s various objectives of saving the taxpayer money, reducing the power of bureaucrats and improving the quality of life seem to nicely coincide.

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RACE PROBLEM

Seeing Aborigines as people

By JACQUELINE REES

“IT IS essential the Australian public at large recognises its obligation to Aboriginal Australia and accepts that Aborigines and Aboriginal traditions are worthy of government action.”

Aboriginal Affairs Minister Ian Viner, in his first interview since taking office, put this matter of public opinion forward in Canberra last week as one of the major problems of his portfolio.

Commenting on a people who are endangered through the curable eye disease trachoma, suffering the highest rate of blindness of any race in the world and whose infant mortality rate – 170 deaths for every 1000 births in some areas – is among the highest, he said: “It doesn’t take us anywhere to say we have a long-term job ahead. That’s what people have been saying for hundreds of years. But without positive public opinion, governments aren’t going to get anywhere.

“People dwell on alcohol problems among Aborigines, they single out those who appear not to work and allege discrimination because grants given to Aboriginal children are not given to other Australians. They don’t look at what Aborigines are doing themselves to counter alcoholism or the benefits of vocational training programs. And they don’t really understand the Aboriginal heritage.”

Viner, a 43-year-old West Australian lawyer, took the former Labor seat of Stirling for the Liberals and entered Federal politics in 1972. In 1974, after a marathon recount, he held the seat by 12 votes. A strong supporter of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, he was one of the numbers men who worked to oust former Liberal leader Bill Snedden.

Aboriginal Affairs is his first ministerial的责任. Since getting it, he has travelled more than 38,000 miles endeavoring to understand it. He has also appointed 39-year-old fellow West Australian Ken Winder as private secretary. Winder, a highly respected Perth community leader, is the first Aborigine to be appointed to a Federal ministerial staff.

Viner borrows from his predecessors the view that it is not feasible to change the lot of Aborigines dramatically in the lifetime of one government. But he has begun already to put his own print on the process.

He appointed David Hay, one-time administrator of Papua New Guinea, and first appointee to Labor’s ill-fated position of defence embassador, to inquire into the effectiveness of Aboriginal Affairs Departmental spending.

He met the cynicism of some of the Aboriginal community by saying: “The Hay inquiry is not a witch hunt. It is to examine the efficiency of service delivery by the department, to see if the way services are provided is effective and if the value of money spent is actually getting to Aboriginal people.

“The department had the Herculean task of digesting a massive injection of money in a very short time recently, and there has been a lot of criticism, with reports of waste, inefficiency and disillusion. The inquiry is to study how to eliminate these.”

He has already had a run-in with the National Aboriginal Consultative Council. After his first address to it a fortnight ago, several members walked out.

“I have no fear of losing rapport with the Aboriginal people over that incident,” he said. “The important thing to remember is that the big majority of members did not walk out and all of those who did came from New South Wales and Victoria.”

Viner is to appoint a committee – predominantly Aboriginal – to review the role of the council on advising governments.

He said: “The question is not
whether there will be an NACC. The NACC will remain (but) the constitution which has been developed by the existing NACC is not acceptable to the government in the context of an advisory organisation.

"Further, the idea of a national body placed between the government and the Aboriginal people with an open-ended arrangement to control and use public funds is unacceptable to our parliamentary system and to the principles established in our policy on Aboriginal Affairs...."

"The inquiry must be seen as part of our aim to establish the best consultation machinery for Aboriginal people at local, regional and national levels so that Aboriginals are as free as other Australians to determine their own future.

"The department is in fact highly decentralised. That has strength in involving Aboriginals directly but weakness in that the lines of communication are long.

"We have to develop an effective national framework for consultation that provides for the lifestyles of both city and tribal Aboriginals.

"It has to lean as much toward local community involvement and decision-making as it does to providing an opportunity for national issues to be pursued with the national government.

Viner talks a lot of self-management: "It is not just getting money and letting people do anything they want to with it. We have to build into programs a sense of co-operation with government. This is where the abstract things come in. People are more responsible when they have an identity, a sense of social cohesion.

"At Oombulgurri, formerly the Forrest River mission in the north-west, the Aboriginal elders have decided on programs to preserve their own language and culture. They have also decided to ban liquor.

"Then there is the out-station movement in central Queensland and northern Australia. People who have felt inhibited in main settlements have taken their families and moved away to organise their own communities.

"This is spontaneous self-management among people who have their dignity. It is where the abstract comes in. Where Aboriginal pride in traditions and culture have not been destroyed, the people have social discipline. This is what we have to restore.

Viner saw the same pride countering the tragic problem of Aboriginal children who live now in the mutually exclusive worlds of the home and the school: "The conflict of moving between Aboriginal and other Australian environments would be less if Aboriginal art and culture provided other Australian communities as a living thing.

"I am anxious to encourage teaching Aboriginal culture in schools as well as combining former government programs in bilingual education for Aboriginals.

Viner defended the current $7.5 million cut in the $142 million Aboriginal Affairs budget. No commitments would be broken, he said. The cut would in the main operate by deferral. It was a good "muscle hardening" exercise. On land rights, he said they were fundamental to the Liberal Party policy on Aboriginal Affairs: the policy clearly enunciated a commitment to land rights.

And on the particular question in which he has already been involved, the Queensland Government granting bauxite mining rights to the mining consortium, Aurukun Associates, over the heads of the Aurukun Aboriginals, he said:

"The Prime Minister has written to the Queensland Premier on this subject. There are two questions involved, the rights of the Aurukun people and the foreign investment policy of the government. We will be looking very closely at both."

Viner numbers among other problems facing the inland Aboriginals, a growth in population.

"Some say the Aboriginals are a dying race. This is not so and it highlights what is going to be a major social problem in remote Australia where the nature of the place means little work is available and where it is highly expensive to bring in basic community facilities.

"Some of the facilities are sometimes a problem, too. At Papunya, a hospital was damaged. The people didn’t feel any close identification with it. One of our aims should be to encourage a sense of responsibility for facilities like this.

"One thing I would like to say, I will be supporting the further purchases of cattle stations in areas that Aboriginals are familiar with. It is another means of giving them an identity through their own community activity as well as being an economic prospect, and it is another important aspect of their affinity with the land.

"The Wattie Creek cattle station will always be seen as a high point in Aboriginal progress on land rights."

He felt the increasing involvement of Aboriginals in hygiene measures was essential to combat chronic health problems: "I quickly became aware of the value of Aboriginal medical services in this process."

On legal aid, introduced to alleviate situations like that in one WA town where 42.6 percent of Aboriginals convicted were jailed compared to 19.2 percent of other Australians, and which, like the medical services, faces financial problems, Viner said:

"We support the policy of Aboriginal legal aid. In future we could see its activities more closely related to other legal aid services, without the loss of Aboriginal identity, so that there are a network of services available to Aboriginals.

"I think there has been a significant change since the introduction of legal aid, a decrease in prison sentences as the public awareness of the disproportionate Aboriginal prison population has travelled through to magistrates and justices.

"But it is complex. An Aboriginal in the outback might be tried in a European court and then by tribal law. The situation is different for an urban Aboriginal. Again it comes back to strengthening Aboriginal traditions. If the people were secure in their own traditions and we achieved a real lift in living standards for them many of the minor disciplinary problems would not occur."

According to Ian Viner, the direction of government policy was neither integration nor assimilation. He summed it up: "It is a respect for human dignity and equality, a recognition that Aboriginals have their own racial identity and that given the supportive measures of government and the public, they will find their own place in society."

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