

Commissioner for Native Affairs (WA)

1936 – 1954

Details

The Commissioner for Native Affairs was an official role created by the *Native Administration Act 1936* (WA), replacing the Chief Protector of Aborigines. The 1936 Act also created the Department of the Native Affairs, of which the Commissioner was head, and extended the powers of that role. The Commissioner was the legal guardian of every Aboriginal child in Western Australia to the age of 21 years. He had the power to remove all Aboriginal children, even if they had a 'legitimate' parent or relative, and place them in Homes as part of assimilation policies. The Commissioner for Native Affairs was replaced by the Commissioner of Native Welfare in 1954.

The *Native Administration Act 1936* effectively made all Aboriginal children in Western Australia 'orphans', or 'wards' of the state: even if they were resident with their married parents, other 'legitimate' relatives, or in a private, church-run Home, the Commissioner was their legal guardian, and could charge local officials with the power to remove them to place in Homes or 'service' (work).

Auber Octavius Neville, former Chief Protector of Aborigines from 1915-1936, was the first Commissioner for Native Affairs and a fierce proponent of assimilation policies. In 1937, Neville presented at the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, outlining what he believed should be the goal of all State governments in Australia: to eliminate the Aboriginal 'race' by the removal of Aboriginal children, and placing them in suitable training institutions so that they might become suitable future partners for white Australians.

Neville retired in 1940, and by 1947 had published his book, *Australia's coloured minority: its place in the community*, outlining his belief that Australian governments should 'breed out' the Aboriginal 'race'.

Dorgelo (2007) writes that Neville has been 'simultaneously represented as cruel and benevolent, paternalistic and distantly bureaucratic' and that recollections of his character and activities serve as vehicles 'for constructions of (and anxieties about) postcolonial Australia'.

In her review of Pat Jacob's *Mister Neville: a biography*, Isobel White (1992) wrote that a picture emerged of Neville as:

a model family man and as a dedicated and efficient public servant, whose acute sense of duty caused him to serve the state and the Aborigines to the best of his ability and according to his strong sense of what was right and proper. In his favour he attempted to learn all he could about the Aborigines, by travelling all over the state, even exploring areas in the north that were still almost unknown. Thus he became known throughout the whole of Australia as an authority on the administration of Aboriginal minorities. When he retired at the age of sixty-five both Aborigines and non-Aborigines paid tribute to his achievements.

White also commented on the 'removal' of Aboriginal children that happened under Neville, who:

regarded the Aborigines as fully human. And was aware that their pitiful conditions were due to the attitudes and actions of their conquerors. He fought throughout his working life to change these attitudes, thus bringing upon himself many attacks in the state parliament and the newspapers. Many of his attempts to help the Aborigines were thwarted by a series of penny-pinching governments. Neville was particularly worried by the plight of the increasing numbers throughout the state of the part-Aborigines, and was an advocate of taking them away from their families in order that they should have the benefit of a western-type education. He genuinely believed that this would be 'for their own good', unable to realise that this was as cruel to the children and their families as it would be to take his own beloved children from their parents!

Haebich's entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* takes up this point:

While some Aborigines appreciated his concern, others referred to 'Mister Neville' in tones suggesting awe and even fear. His unwilling but unavoidable reliance on police as local 'protectors' contributed to a tradition of Aboriginal hostility towards police and 'the welfare'. Educated Aborigines from the south-west, whose legal and social status plummeted as a result of his measures, saw Neville as their main adversary. William Harris described the protector as one of the Aborigines' 'worst enemies'. The irony of Neville's administration was that in aggregating the power to assimilate Aborigines of part descent through economic and social (genetic) absorption, he accelerated the pauperization and segregation evident since the 1900s. Closer settlement in the south-west, competition from white workers, and the racial prejudice of rural communities worried by increase in the Aboriginal population, all helped to produce the 'Aboriginal problem' that Neville wished to solve.

Throughout his tenure, Neville travelled widely throughout the State to see Aboriginal people and the conditions in which they lived. His many photographs are held in the Battye Library.

Neville has been portrayed in the 1985 Jack Davis play *No Sugar*, and in 2002 film *Rabbit Proof Fence*, played by Kenneth Branagh.

Neville was succeeded in the post by Francis Illingworth Bray in 1940. Bray, who had been working in Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia since 1932, was Commissioner until 1948.

Stanley Middleton held the role of Commissioner from 1948, following the Survey of Native Affairs 1947 (also known as the Bateman Survey) into the 'native problem'. Middleton continued in the role of Commissioner of Native Welfare from 1954.

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More info

Chronology

- Chief Protector of Aborigines (1898 - 1936)
- **Commissioner for Native Affairs (WA) (1936 – 1954)**
 - Commissioner of Native Welfare (WA) (1954 - 1972)
 - Department for Community Welfare, State of Western Australia (1972 - 1985)
 - Department for Community Services, State of Western Australia (1 January 1985 - 1 October 1992)
 - Department for Community Development, State of Western Australia (1 October 1992 - 1 July 1995)
 - Department for Family and Children's Services, State of Western Australia (1 July 1995 - 1 July 2001)

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Survey of Native Affairs, State of Western Australia \(1947 - June 1948\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Beagle Bay Mission \(1895 - 1976\)](#)
Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Beagle Bay Mission.
- [Carnarvon Mission \(1945 - 1975?\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Carnarvon Mission.
Date: 1945 - 1954
- [Wandering Mission \(1944 - 1979\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the guardian of all 'native' children at Wandering Mission.
Date: 1944 - 1954
- [Warburton Mission \(1933 - 1977\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Warburton Mission.
- [Child Welfare Department, State of Western Australia \(22 December 1927 - 15 June 1972\)](#)
The Child Welfare Department shared responsibility for the 'care and control' of Aboriginal children who were Wards with the Commissioner of Native Affairs.
- [Department of Native Affairs, State of Western Australia \(1936 - 1954\)](#)
The Commissioner was the head of the Department of Native Affairs.
- [Cosmo Newbery Mission \(1953 - 1973?\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the guardian of Aboriginal children placed at Cosmo Newbery Mission.
Date: 1953 - 1954
- [Sister Kate's Children's Cottage Home \(1934 - 1980\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of Aboriginal children at Sister Kate's Children's Cottage Home.
- [Sunday Island Mission \(1937 - 1964\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Sunday Island Mission.
- [Wotjulum \(1951 - 1956\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Wotjulum.
Date: 1951 - 1954
- [Port George IV Mission \(1912 - 1951\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Port George IV Mission.
- [Halls Creek Mission \(1943? - 1960\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Halls Creek Mission.
- [Cosmo Newbery Native Settlement \(1951 - 1953\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the guardian of children placed at Cosmo Newbery Native Settlement.
- [Forrest River Mission \(1913 - 1968\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Forrest River Mission.
- [Kurrawang Mission \(1952 - 1984\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the guardian of all 'native' children at Kurrawang Mission.
- [Lombadina \(1909 - 1975\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Lombadina.
- [Mount Margaret Mission \(1921 - 1975\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Mount Margaret Mission.
- [Norseman Mission \(1935 - 1985\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Norseman Mission.
- [Pallottine Mission, Tardun \(1948 - 2004\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at Pallottine Mission, Tardun.
- [St Mary's Mission, New Norcia \(1848 - 1974\)](#)
The Commissioner of Native Affairs was the legal guardian of children at St Mary's Mission, New Norcia.

Related Legislation

- [Aborigines Act 1905, Western Australia \(1906 - 1964\)](#)
The Commissioner continued the legal authority granted by the *Aborigines Act 1905*.

- [Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936, Western Australia \(1936 - 1964\)](#)

The *Aborigines Act Amendment Act 1936* changed the title of the Chief Protector to the Commissioner of Native Affairs.

Related Concepts

- [Aboriginal Protection in Western Australia \(c. 1832 - c. 1972\)](#)

Resources

- [Long Service Ending](#), The West Australian, 6 February 1940
- van den Berg, Rosemary, *Aboriginal protectors*, Historical Encyclopedia of Western Australia, 2009
- [Neville, A. O. \(Auber Octavius\) \(1875-1954\)](#), Trove, 2012
- [W.A. Harvest Prospects Not Bright](#), The West Australian, 28 July 1948

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