

Stanley Middleton's response to assimilation policy in his fight for Aboriginal people's equality, 1948–62

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From earliest childhood until I left home at the age of seventeen I heard so frequently the story of my birth and the role played by the kindly aborigines that it requires no effort even now to recount word for word as told to me by my mother. It never failed to stir me emotionally and the telling does to this day. I often considered in those early days, if ever and how I might be able to repay in some measure the kindness of these gentle people. Eventually that opportunity did come to me, not in my home state but on the opposite side of the continent. When I was placed in charge of the Native Affairs department in Western Australia I perceived the opportunity to contribute something towards their welfare and took as much advantage of it as the limits of Government policy, politics, money and public attitudes would permit. I know I succeeded up to a point but wish I could have done more. I – we – owe it to them.

Stanley Guise Middleton reflects on being the most senior public servant responsible for the administration of Western Australia's 22,763 Aboriginal people between 1948 and 1962, as well as the motivation provided by his early life on the Queensland–New South Wales border amongst the Kamilaroi people.¹ Middleton's appointment rested on his 22 years as a patrol officer in the Australian protectorate of Papua and the recommendation of Australia's most respected anthropologist, A.P. Elkin. Influenced by Elkin, the newly elected government had come to the conclusion that the poor socioeconomic position of Western Australia's Aboriginal population was due to ignorance of

¹ Middleton, S.G. n.d., 'The life and times of S.G. Middleton', typescript held by the Middleton family; WA Department of Native Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs* (hereafter *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*), 1949.

international Indigenous administrative practice.² Indeed, Middleton's training under Papua's Governor, Sir Hubert Murray, had prioritised studying the conditions of Indigenous people in Africa to help solve problems encountered in Papua, leading him to view all Indigenous peoples as the same.³ Australia-wide, governments and Indigenous rights organisations had from the late 1930s been lobbying for a similar policy to that in Papua.⁴ Following World War Two, anthropology had been included in the training of officers in the Northern Territory and New South Wales, and these two administrations together with Victoria also employed officers from Papua, as did Middleton when he became Commissioner.⁵

The Australian Government's administration of Papua, which it took over from Britain in 1906, had been its opportunity to show the international community it could govern Indigenous people humanely.⁶ The better position of Papuans struck Middleton when he returned to Australia two decades later. He was dismayed to find only a handful of the Kamilaroi people in Queensland he grew up seeing camped along the river, hunting, fishing, selling homewares and doing odd jobs left and 'an obvious increase in the number of so-called half-castes'. Middleton also attributed the Kamilaroi's demise to discriminatory treatment. When two shepherds were killed by Kamilaroi, a number of non-Aboriginal men in the district killed many Kamilaroi. Middleton said his father felt the Kamilaroi community never recovered from the tragedy and 'appeared to go down and down to what you can see of them today'.⁷

Middleton's work in Papua had been hands-on. To fund the administration and protect Papuans' kin networks and customary land tenure against European incursion, the administration turned Papuans' tradition of growing coconuts into the profitable venture of copra production.⁸ The job of a patrol officer,

2 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1953.

3 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1949.

4 In 1921 the League of Nations granted Australia a mandate to run the neighbouring territory of German New Guinea, governed separately from the Territory of Papua. In 1942 both territories were invaded by the Japanese and were put under military administration. Following World War Two the two areas were combined to form the Territory of Papua-New Guinea; Thompson 1990: 68; Lattas 1996: 142; Long 1992, 10.

5 Wise 1985: 319–20; Conference on Welfare Policies for Australian Aborigines. Armidale, 1960, 9, B C748.20/W1, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.

6 Haebich 2005: 203–4.

7 Middleton, Stanley Guise n.d., 'The life and times of S.G. Middleton', typescript held by the Middleton family.

8 Haebich 2005: 203–4; Lett 1942: 125; Murray 1923: 15, 1926: 19; *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 15 March 1940, National Archives of Australia, Canberra (NAA hereafter) A452/1, 1959/5966; Lattas 1996: 151; Smith 1987: 55, 56, 74; Legge 1956: 177; *Papuan Villager* 2(6) and 13(3).

therefore, was to visit villages to enforce planting of these cash crops, as well as to enforce schooling in English and the construction/maintenance of municipal structures and homes with proper sanitation.⁹

Middleton adopted this system of surveillance in Western Australia, along with other strategies operating in Papua such as the subsidisation of missions that taught to Australian standards.¹⁰ However, unlike Papua, Australia was a settler society built on migrant settlement and ongoing dispossession and removal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands. This positioned Aboriginal people as minorities to be assimilated into the nation via conformity to mainstream Australian values and cultural practices, thereby ignoring issues of sovereignty and colonialism.¹¹

The Western Australian Government sought to achieve the above by committing, alongside other Australian states, to a policy of social assimilation, which strove to make 'all Aborigines and part Aborigines ... eventually attain the same manner of living as other Australians ... enjoying the same responsibility, deserving the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties'.¹² Assimilation, as an ideology of incorporation, reflected a major change in state policy which legitimated the growth of pedagogical intervention as a means of resolving the Aboriginal problem.¹³

Nevertheless, in spite of this commitment, Middleton's recommendations of unconditional citizenship rights, access to social security benefits, housing and education to tertiary level were frequently opposed by politicians on both sides, many local authorities and much of the public. This article explores how a civil servant moved well beyond his role to publicly advocate for Aboriginal people.

Disagreements between Middleton and government over Aboriginal people's right to freedom and to access services is also the theme of research by Anna Haebich (2000, 2005, 2008) who analyses his administration in terms of its impact on child removal, Peter Biskup (1973) who emphasises his citizenship rights campaign to 1954, and Geoffrey Bolton (1981) who briefly considers his influence within a broader history of Western Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations. Middleton's treatment of rural Aboriginal people – not the focus of my study but necessary to understand the assimilation of urban populations – features in research by Jebb; Rowley; and Davenport, Johnson

9 *Papuan Villager* 6(11); S.G. Middleton, Territory of Papua patrol report, 27 September 1930; S.G. Middleton, Territory of Papua patrol report, 28 September 1929; S.G. Middleton, Territory of Papua patrol report, 15 November 1929.

10 Territory of Papua, *Government Gazette* XIV(12), (4 June 1919).

11 Haebich 2005: 45; *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 15 March 1940, NAA A452/1, 1959/5966.

12 Conference of Commonwealth and State Native Welfare authorities 1951, Hasluck box 33, 11, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA); Haebich 2000: 498–534.

13 Morris 1989: 139.

and Yuwali. What all these studies do not do is ask how their findings complicate our understanding of the term 'assimilation'. On this point, Haebich stressed the need to analyse the multiple meanings, discourse, logic, and implementation of assimilation.¹⁴ My research attempts to do this.

It supports previous research that Middleton's progressiveness was accompanied by paternalism, a persistent characteristic of humanitarian policies in Western societies since the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁵ Quoting Papua's governor that Europeans were morally obliged to assist Indigenous peoples to 'advance', by 1953, Middleton boasted 90 per cent of Western Australia's Indigenous population was 'under the surveillance and general supervision of field welfare staff – evidence', he said, 'that the government was fulfilling its obligation to monitor the welfare of Aboriginal people'.¹⁶

Patrol officers recorded their interactions and submitted them in reports to Middleton.¹⁷ These reports form the basis of my research, providing insight into an often neglected aspect of historical research: the everyday effect of policy on individuals. The assimilation expected of Aboriginal people in the south made officers' reports far more detailed there than those for the north, describing individuals' relationships, accommodation and employment status, and the attitudes of local authorities and townspeople.¹⁸

Theories of assimilation

Social assimilation emerged out of the scientific consensus that all humans belonged to one species and that differences between 'races' were not biologically determined but merely due to evolution. Thus all people could be 'advanced' towards the pinnacle of 'civilisation' set by Europeans without having their physical characteristics 'bred out' as had been the case prior.¹⁹ This influenced Australia's approach to Aboriginal welfare as did international developments such as the newly formed United Nations enshrining equality for all human beings into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (of which Australia was a signatory), and Native and African Americans' fight for equality in the United States.²⁰ Suddenly, the Australian Government had reason to fear condemnation

14 Haebich 2002: 70.

15 Biskup 1973; Bolton 1981; Jebb 2002.

16 Haebich 2000: 279.

17 *The Herald*, 28 February 1940.

18 East Kimberley District patrol reports, State Records Office of Western Australia (hereafter SROWA) AN 1/7, Acc 993, 485/49; Middleton to Superintendent Cosmo Newbery, 25 October 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 234/49.

19 Garn 1968: 250–54.

20 Haebich 2008: 189.

of its discriminatory policies.²¹ Equally, wartime suffering had made people desperate for 'normalcy', expressed in conservatism and circumscribed gender roles.²²

The new social assimilation policy was advocated primarily by Elkin and the Federal Minister for Native Affairs (responsible for overseeing the administrations of Papua New Guinea and the Northern Territory), Paul Hasluck.²³ Attributing the more southern population's 'cultural demise' and loss of economic independence to rapid, intensive European settlement, Elkin observed full-descent employees on pastoral stations had adapted their culture to colonisation.²⁴ Hasluck endorsed the anthropological position that Aboriginal culture was rapidly disintegrating, after his 1935 history thesis identified no homogenous cultural traits among the southern Western Australian mixed-descent population. He predicted that given opportunities and assistance, individuals would willingly conform to mainstream societal norms.²⁵ In contrast, Elkin believed Aboriginal people would always retain an element of difference from mainstream society, blending their culture with it, and that this presented no problem unless it overrode loyalty to Australia.²⁶ This was how he reconciled his belief in the universal human right to 'progress in civilisation' according to Enlightenment theory and the right of each human group to maintain its cultural particularity.²⁷

In his 1944 *Citizenship for the Aborigines*, Elkin assessed readiness for assimilation according to whether people lived in 'thickly settled', 'frontier' or 'isolated' regions, with the occasional individual falling outside these categories. Mixed-descent people were considered ready for assimilation, their 'whiteness' enabling them to take advantage of cultural and social influences.²⁸

Middleton's belief in this continuum of human development may have come from training under Murray, another disciple of anthropology.²⁹ Elkin regularly advised Middleton on policy, and Middleton often quoted Elkin's theories when justifying his policy decisions.³⁰ In 1960, Middleton referred to Elkin

21 Haebich 2008: 23–24, 44.

22 Haebich 2008: 23–24.

23 Indigenous administration was a state responsibility with the Commonwealth Government administering only the Northern Territory.

24 Haebich 2008: 115; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1950; Holland 2005: 89.

25 Hasluck 1953: 51.

26 McGregor 2005a: 172.

27 McGregor 2005a: 173.

28 Elkin 1944: 11.

29 *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 15 March 1940.

30 Elkin to Middleton, 29 March 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 196/49; Elkin to Middleton, 9 April 1953, P130, Series 41, item 454, Elkin Papers, Fisher Library.

as the 'greatest living authority on Aboriginal people' when he agreed with his observation that Southern mixed-descent people had adopted a welfare mentality that would have to be resolved for assimilation to take place.³¹

Middleton praised the way Papua dealt with its mixed-descent population. He said they were 'assimilated as a matter of course' by their 'white' fathers who sent them to missions.³² And then by working and living alongside the European community, they automatically accessed the same rights by declaring their separateness from full-descent Papuans.³³ Although assimilation was not Murray's objective, as The Australian National University PhD scholar, Allan Healy, commented, in his 1962 thesis, Murray without realising it 'placed Papuan administration in a strait-jacket, because he was totally dedicated to European attitudes and values and was determined that Papuans would exercise no authority until they "advanced" according to European notions'.³⁴ This was one of the paradoxes of policies towards Indigenous people. As I show, it was only when mixed-descent individuals were succeeding in employment or education that Middleton encouraged them to have cultural pride and adopt leadership positions representing the interests of Aboriginal people.³⁵

Nevertheless, in 1958, Middleton questioned assimilation policy's dedication to European values: 'Social gradations, colour, caste, ways of living – these do not necessarily make natives a people apart from ourselves, a people who need to be "assimilated" and so become as we are.'³⁶ That year also marked the first time assimilation was publicly questioned, as opposed to promoted, by an anthropologist. The anthropologist, W.E. Stanner, was a student of Elkin and while agreeing with him that Aboriginal people would blend their cultures with the dominant culture and that they had to be the ones to decide how to adjust to colonisation, declared it a fallacy to think of Aboriginal people as 'primitives' requiring instruction in the virtues of a European life to advance along a continuum of human development.³⁷ Likewise, although he was comfortable with Aboriginal people choosing a similar socioeconomic lifestyle to Europeans, he was – in contrast to Elkin and Middleton – equally comfortable with them resisting this transformation. Where Stanner advised that the best the

31 Western Australia, Department of Native Welfare, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1960; Haebich 2008: 79.

32 Western Australian Native Welfare Council first state conference, 1 February 1958, MN 1176, Acc 3491A/51, State Library of Western Australia (hereafter SLWA); Chesterman and Galligan 1997: 3, 10; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1953; Nelson 1982: 169–70.

33 Nelson 1982: 169–70.

34 Healy quoted in Thompson 1986: 81.

35 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1953, 1954.

36 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1958.

37 McGregor 2005a: 174; Stanner 2009: 14, 164.

state could do was to provide Aboriginal people with opportunities, Middleton paternalistically concluded: 'The native must inevitably adjust himself to our way of life and we must help him adjust.'³⁸

Even so, it is noteworthy that Middleton felt the need to soften what he meant by 'assimilation'. His negative contrast of it with the word 'adjust' suggests he saw 'assimilation' as implying cultural destruction – an end he wanted to disassociate himself with. 'Adjust' enabled him to reconcile his desire to see people fully participate in mainstream society with his desire to preserve their way of life beyond this.

From this it is reasonable to assume Middleton was not demanding all Australians adopt the same lifestyle when he questioned assimilation policy at a 1960 Conference of State Aboriginal administrations: 'Can't we say that naturalized New Australians who have their own clubs and ceremonies and live according to the way they formerly lived in their own countries still need to be assimilated?' Admitting only a 'layman's knowledge of assimilation' and that he was unclear about the intentions behind it, he asked Elkin for a definition. The question was extraordinary given he had spent the previous 12 years advocating and implementing 'assimilation'.

To Middleton, Elkin replied: 'We are only learning what assimilation is as we go along. We don't particularly know which way it is going'; definite only that it meant 'giving Aboriginal people the opportunity to share in the life of the community without any hindrances or prejudice'.³⁹ There could be no greater validation of Stanner's critique of assimilation: while conceding that those involved in Aboriginal administration were sincere, had high aspirations, and were extremely busy performing an ever-growing number of tasks, he posed the question 'do they really know what they are doing?'⁴⁰

Stanner's point is a good one, though it might also cause us to ask – did differing perspectives on the extent to which Aboriginal people should be able to determine their futures merely represent the lower level of responsibility an anthropologist had as compared with an administrator? An anthropologist did not have to create the circumstances for Aboriginal people to be able to make that choice. For instance, to give people the choice to either adopt or resist a similar socioeconomic lifestyle to Europeans, an administrator would need to impose mainstream schooling on them as children. But in doing so, they take children away from Aboriginal learning, denying them the opportunity to make a proper choice about this. In addition, an administrator has to contend

38 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1958; Conference on Welfare Policies for Australian Aborigines. Armidale 1960: 23; Stanner 2009: 164, 280.

39 Conference on Welfare Policies for Australian Aborigines. Armidale, 1960: 23.

40 Stanner 2009: 43.

with extra complications such as limited employment opportunities in locations where people live, prejudiced employers, and home conditions that may not be conducive to learning. Administrators are judged by the outcomes of their policies, and these policies have to be concrete, not abstract.

So, whether it was a decade of resistance by Aboriginal people and migrants, society's acceptance of migrants keeping their traditions, or a concern merely to overcome Aboriginal people's relegation to society's fringe, Middleton was now prepared to approach assimilation more open-endedly. Notwithstanding, while Aboriginal people may have held more power over their destiny than would be expected, to access assimilation's promise of freedom, individuals still had to be succeeding in education or employment – and, as we shall see later, to be living in a home that matched their level of success.

The same logic convinced Middleton that people meeting their needs through hunting and gathering should be left to do so. He criticised missionaries for enticing people with rations and refused to collude with the South Australian and Northern Territory governments' strategy of bringing hunter-gatherers in from the desert to assimilate them through station employment.⁴¹ Middleton followed Elkin in that Aboriginal people's adaptation to European life had to be at their own pace and by their own decision, the aim being to prevent social and cultural breakdown.⁴² In Papua too, villages that had no contact with Europeans were protected by a 'restricted areas' policy, which prohibited the administration from 'civilising' them.⁴³

While government and society prevented Middleton implementing many of his envisaged assimilation strategies, by the end of his career, in 1961, he was able to enthuse that Aboriginal people were:

metamorphosing at a speed which at first seemed impossible into a people with hope instead of despair, education in place of illiteracy, enlightenment where formerly there was ignorance; in short, a people whose feet are now so firmly placed on the ladder to complete equality with other members of our community that the attainment of that goal is now well in sight.⁴⁴

Even as attitudes were changing, Middleton continued to subscribe to the continuum of human development.

41 Middleton to Hon. Minister for Native welfare, 2 November 1956, Re: Adult subsidization in missions, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 483/51; Conference of Commonwealth and State Native Welfare authorities, 26–27 January 1961, Hasluck box 32, NLA.

42 Haebich 2008: 115.

43 Rowley 1971: 305.

44 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1961.

Legal equality

Middleton opposed the *Native Administration Act 1936* (WA), which forced Aboriginal people onto settlements, prohibited them from interacting with the non-Aboriginal community, denied them civil rights, and entrenched their socioeconomic disadvantage through excluding them from Commonwealth social security benefits and housing assistance.

The Act's policing of personal interactions aimed to prevent further growth of the mixed-descent population while it 'bred out' the Aboriginal physical characteristics of the existing mixed-descent population. A legacy of Auber Octavius Neville's long dominance of Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia, biological assimilation was based on the same theory as social assimilation: that humans belonged to one species. Its point of difference was that it relied upon erasing Aboriginal people's 'Caucasian ancestry' via 'white' genes predominating over 'black'.⁴⁵ Developing out of a context of non-Aboriginal men dissociating from their children, the assimilation of mixed-descent children required the government to gain control over them, which it achieved by defining them as different.

The only way an Aboriginal Australian could escape legislative control and access mainstream services and rights was by applying for exemption and arguing in court that for two years prior he/she had lived as a member of the non-Aboriginal community.⁴⁶ Middleton believed this achieved the opposite of assimilation: for as long as legislation defined mixed-descent people as 'natives' and restricted their lives it would 'create a class of people white or almost white in colour but still living after the manner of natives', a 'demoralized poverty-stricken people despised by the white community'.⁴⁷ Thus Middleton, too, associated biological assimilation with social assimilation, horrified at the prospect of biological assimilation occurring in the absence of social assimilation.

Equally distressing for Middleton was learning that Aboriginal people were frequently informing department officers they came under the 'White Act' or were applying for 'white rights'.⁴⁸ He commented, 'The vehemence manifested does not carry the pride of achievement but a pathetic aggressiveness bordering

45 Haebich 2000: 272, 1992: 317, 334; Jacobs 1990: 188–90; McGregor 2005a: 159–61; Biskup 1973: 193.

46 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1950, 1952; Minister for Native Welfare to all local authorities, 22 July 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 419/52; Conference of Commonwealth and State Native Welfare Authorities 1951, Hasluck box 33, 11, NLA; Wright Webster to Constable DC Ayling, Protector of natives Boddington, 8 October 1953, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 74/49; Great Southern patrol reports, Wright Webster, 18 July 1949–26 August 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 614/51; *Greenough Sun*, 12 January 1956.

47 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1949; Middleton to Under Secretary Premier's Department, 11 November 1950, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 262/50.

48 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1952; Applicant for citizenship rights to Wright Webster, 28 November 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 74/49.

on defiance'.⁴⁹ Middleton argued that a citizenship 'dependent upon individuals subjecting themselves to a humiliating investigation and turning their back on their identity, family, and culture' was 'incompatible with assimilation's aim of equality'.⁵⁰ The first commissioner to consider the psychological effect of such policies on individuals, he was also disgusted at the class distinctions arising out of citizenship being an earned status, with citizenship holders forming themselves into 'exclusive cliques' ashamed of the 'lower group persons' when they 'need[ed] to be united and loyal to their splendid Aboriginal heritage'.⁵¹

In 1949 Elkin wrote to Middleton:

Aborigines are British subjects and Australian born, and I think as soon as possible restrictions should be removed from them. We must not keep the Aborigines under wardship too long. They have been in contact with our culture for about two generations and, of course, there is a good deal of mixed blood in the situation also.⁵²

And in his Annual Report of 1952, Middleton says he discussed his concerns about citizenship with Hasluck, before arguing at the 1951 Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers of Aboriginal Affairs organised by Hasluck:

This conference should press for the removal of all discriminatory legislation, and insist on the recognition of all Aboriginal natives as native citizens of Australia having full citizenship rights. If this is approved, then the way would be open for the introduction of special native welfare legislation which may apply at the discretion of the State Native Affairs authorities only to natives who, through possessing full citizenship rights in respect to other legislation, may still stand in need of its benefits.⁵³

Middleton's proposed legislation was not passed by the Western Australian Parliament.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Hasluck convinced the Commonwealth Government to pass legislation in the Northern Territory that reflected this same principle of providing paternalistic assistance on the basis of need and not race. Unfortunately, however, it resulted in the very situation it was attempting to combat: the denial of citizenship to most Aboriginal people. By 1960, only 1,300 out of 15,000 Aboriginal people had citizenship while the rest had been

49 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1952.

50 Biskup 1973: 252; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1952; Applicant for citizenship rights to Wright Webster, 28 November 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 74/49.

51 *The Helping Hand*, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 215/51.

52 Elkin to Middleton, 29 March 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 196/49.

53 Milnes 1985: 307; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1952.

54 Middleton to the Minister for Native Welfare, 3 October 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1069/48.

declared 'wards' on account of lifestyle, personal associates, or inability to manage their own affairs. By contrast, only one non-Aboriginal adult had been declared a ward.⁵⁵

Elkin opposed the term 'ward', an administrator possessing the authority to declare individuals 'wards', and the promotion of a conception of assimilation that erased culture instead of blending it with the dominant culture.⁵⁶ He advised Middleton:

I suggest that you be very careful about details in any citizenship plan. Of course the aim of citizenship is to be realized by all Aborigines, full blood and otherwise, as soon as possible, but ... Mr Hasluck in his attempt to hasten matters has allowed certain features to appear in the Ordinance presented to the Northern Territory Council which are very undesirable.⁵⁷

Initially supporting Hasluck's legislation, Middleton now labelled it 'a tragedy – for the natives' and claimed 'Australia isn't yet prepared to render more than lip service to Aborigines and the adoption of the assimilation policy is merely a conscience palliative and window-dressing for the outside world'.⁵⁸ Although Middleton advocated legislation similar to Hasluck's, his did not use the term 'ward' or treat Aboriginal people as if they were indistinguishable from non-Aboriginal people.⁵⁹ Overtly excluding from citizenship those living outside mainstream society – hunter-gatherers and pastoral employees – Middleton insisted full-descent people needed to be 'legally, socially and in most cases economically, treated as being racially apart from the white' because they were 'not sufficiently assimilated to understand mainstream systems of education, politics and finances'.⁶⁰ While Middleton did not see biology as an impediment to 'advancement', the biological model still dominated how he and most people thought about Aboriginal people – in terms of a progression through 'octoroons' to 'half-castes' to 'full-bloods'. Furthermore, as observed by Jebb, Middleton's

55 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1952; Middleton to the Minister for Native Welfare, 3 October 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1069/48; Partington 1996: 42–46.

56 McGregor 2005b: 522.

57 Elkin to Middleton, 9 April 1953, P130, Series 41, item 454, Elkin Papers, Fisher Library.

58 Middleton to Stilling, 14 September 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 204/54.

59 Introduced, through the Minister for Native Welfare. WA Native Welfare Council first state conference 1 February 1958, MN 1176, Acc 3491A/51, SLWA; Western Australia, Parliamentary Debates (hereafter WAPD), Legislative Assembly, 29 November 1957, 3975; Middleton to the Minister for Native Welfare, 3 October 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1069/48.

60 WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 29 November 1957, 3975. Middleton recommended amendment of the *Electoral Act* to give them the right to optional instead of compulsory enrolment and voting. Introduced, through the Minister for Native Welfare. WA Native Welfare Council first state conference 1 February 1958, MN 1176, Acc 3491A/51, SLWA; ABC Listening groups 'In Focus' No 1 'In the privileges of citizenship?' 21 May 1951; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1955.

motivation also lay in keeping Aboriginal people employed, which was assumed to rest on pastoralists not having to pay them award wages or compete with social security benefits.⁶¹

Indeed, it was not until 1958 that Middleton advocated citizenship for full-descent people. Attempting to quell international condemnation, which in the late 1950s included charges of racial discrimination and genocide, he explained that as 'the educated and sophisticated mixed blood' could not be pushed 'back to the status of the desert nomad, so the only alternative is to make the status of the desert nomad identical to that of his more advanced brethren'. Echoing Elkin, Middleton advised, 'he probably will not know anything about it, nor is it necessary for anybody to go out of their way to inflict anything on him as a result of such a decision'.⁶² Formal recognition of people's universal human rights while ignoring these in practice allowed Middleton to reconcile his desire for equality with his desire to preserve Aboriginal people in their traditional state. Assimilation would not be inflicted on those outside mainstream society, and the pastoral industry would continue to gradually 'advance' people without causing them harm.

Parliament rejected every one of Middleton's proposed laws, alleging his promotion of 'citizenship as a birthright ... worked against assimilation' by provoking resistance towards applying for exemption and removing the incentive value of citizenship. Furthermore, the majority perceived citizenship to be harmful to the 'unassimilated', exposing them to alcohol, non-Aboriginal sexual predators, change they were ill-equipped for, and the frustration of having legal equality when society continued to discriminate against them.⁶³

Alcohol, Middleton publicised, was the main factor deciding any application for citizenship in Western Australia. What is more, he considered access to alcohol a civil right and that its effect was not determined by race, attributing much of the drunkenness among Aboriginal people to the type of alcohol available to them (wine, methylated spirits) and its consumption outside unlicensed premises. Middleton drew on experience: 'although it was an offence to supply a Papuan native with liquor, few people ... including the former Lieutenant Governor Murray ever denied trusted employees liquor in reasonable quantities

61 Jebb 2002: 228–29.

62 Haebich 2005: 35; Middleton's response to the Special Committee on Native matters, 12 March 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1069/48.

63 WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 11 November 1952, 1958; 29 November 1957, 3975; 22 October 1958, 1663.

... and the effect on them was seldom noticeable'.⁶⁴ Middleton saw the solution as subjecting Aboriginal people to the same controls over alcohol that existed for non-Aboriginal people.

Government inaction on citizenship led Middleton to appeal to the public. In 1952 he anonymously published two articles in the state's newspaper, the *West Australian*. Entitled 'Not Slaves – Not Citizens', the articles paraphrased the central character in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, a Jewish man outcast because of race and religion:

Not Pagans, not Christians; not white, not black; not half-castes but outcasts. Such are we, who are the descendants of the original half-castes, the progeny of white men – and not always the 'degenerate' types, my masters – mating with Aboriginal women ... We are natives whether we like it or not. Well then – Hath not [a native] eyes? Hath not [a native] hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt by the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means? If you prick us, do we not bleed, if you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? Have we not been turned away from your places of worship, and other public places?⁶⁵

The centrality of pedagogic intervention to Middleton's strategy shows in his criticism of government refusal to pass his proposed 1951 legislation to provide housing and welfare assistance to all Aboriginal people on the basis of need while still giving them citizenship rights:

If assimilation means removing all measures which assist and protect us while maintaining a solid front against giving us citizenship rights, then away with assimilation we say ... We do want to be treated like other human beings, to be given the opportunity to rear and educate our children in proper homes and good schools. At present we are being given a good education, but that is beginning in the middle.⁶⁶

Additionally, he wanted to be able to give department assistance to individuals who did not come under the Act as he recognised they still experienced difficulties obtaining apprenticeships or housing.⁶⁷

64 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1953; *State News*, 3 March 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 184/53; Middleton's response to the Special Committee on Native Matters, 12 March 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1069/48.

65 *West Australian*, 10 October 1952.

66 *West Australian*, 11 October 1952.

67 Beharrel to Middleton, 12 December 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 654/51; Middleton to Secretary Lotteries Commission, 5 March 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 88/50; Middleton to Clerk of Courts Carnarvon, 13 April 1960, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 8/52.

Letters flooded in, with the editor rating it among the most thought-provoking articles the paper had published. New voluntary organisations formed to promote Aboriginal welfare.⁶⁸ The Labor Party, who was in opposition, also committed itself, and one member introduced a bill to extend citizenship rights to all mixed-descent people, supporting this with excerpts from Middleton's 1952 Annual Report.⁶⁹

To maximise the influence of voluntary organisations and enable them to raise politically sensitive issues, Middleton united them under an independent representative body, the Western Australian Native Welfare Council.⁷⁰ Instrumental in getting bills to Parliament, the council supported Middleton's citizenship campaign with petitions and public meetings discussing proposed legislative changes.⁷¹

Middleton's need for an outlet to express his views became clear when he was accused of writing 'Not Slaves Not Citizens' and subject to an enquiry (fortunately the Public Service Commissioner, a friend of Middleton's, accepted on his word that he was innocent. Middleton later admitted to writing the articles, in his autobiography).⁷² History repeated the following year when Parliament berated Middleton for consenting to a four-page article in *People* magazine praising his goal of citizenship against opposition from politicians and pastoralists, and for a speech he gave to a service club reported on by a local newspaper:

They must be given a point of commencement and that point is the immediate removal of this worthless legislation that bars their pathway to opportunity and eventual assimilation ... The remedy and the means of effecting it lie in the hands of the electors of the State.⁷³

Two months later, the newly elected Western Australian Labor government signed into law the *Native Welfare Act 1954*, repealing 28 of the 35 restrictions over Aboriginal people's lives in the *Native Administration Act 1936*, as well as allocating the Minister for Native Welfare land and machinery to be made available

68 *West Australian*, 10 October 1952; WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 30 October 1952, 1725; 26 November 1952, 2359; Middleton.

69 WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 30 October 1952, 1725.

70 R. Houghton, Town Clerk, Municipality of Bunbury and Bunbury Water Board to Middleton, 17 July 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 305/58; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1962.

71 Resolutions from inaugural meeting of proposed Western Australian Native Welfare Council, 30 January 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 565/44; Special Annual State Conference, 31 January 1959, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 43/59; Western Australian Native Welfare Council public meeting to consider the removal of all legal restrictions against Aboriginal natives of Australia notice, 4 November 1958, MN 1176, Acc 3491A/41, SLWA; Annual Report of the Western Australian Native Welfare Council, 18 March 1959, SLWA; *State News*, 5 November 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 184/53; Middleton's response to the Special Committee on Native Matters, 12 March 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1069/48.

72 Middleton, S.G. n.d., 'The life and times of S.G. Middleton', typescript held by the Middleton family.

73 *People*, 7 October 1953; WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 26 November 1953, 2106; Middleton developed an understanding of journalism in his first occupation with a newspaper.

to Aboriginal people for farming (economically empowering – provided people had the requisite skills and contacts for selling produce).⁷⁴ Middleton applauded the bill, especially its changed reference to 'welfare',⁷⁵ which encapsulated the role played by pedagogic intervention in his assimilation strategy. But he was disappointed Parliament stopped at granting citizenship, commenting this failed to 'give legal recognition to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Human Rights'.⁷⁶ Middleton's awareness of international developments and his desire to base assimilation policy on the notion that all men were equal unfortunately conflicted with local anxieties about Aboriginal people's ability to accept the associated responsibilities. Middleton would have to wait until 1963, a year after his retirement, for the Native Welfare Act to be abolished.⁷⁷

Fortunately, access to the welfare state came sooner. Middleton applauded the Commonwealth Government amending the *Social Services Act 1947* in 1959 to extend social security benefits to all Aboriginal people except those deemed 'to follow a mode of life that was nomadic or primitive'.⁷⁸ Social security imposed assimilation through providing 'cash inducements to the Aborigine who was forced to orient himself or herself in the "white" direction'.⁷⁹

Also, at the level of implementation, Middleton was able to discourage department officers from cancelling or objecting to applications for citizenship rights, reasoning the department's task was to assist Aboriginal people to improve their status in the community and advising against any action likely to 'retard their assimilation'.⁸⁰ By 1957 he had convinced the Minister of Native Welfare to prohibit officers below senior level revoking 'citizenship rights' and then 'only in the most pressing circumstances'.⁸¹ There remained an element of taking advantage of the incentive of an exemption certificate, but this was to be avoided. Under Middleton's instruction, department officers encouraged individuals fulfilling the criteria for citizenship to apply for it:

Proceeded to house of [potential applicant], a native who works as a shunter in railway yard ... Married to a white woman. Their house and grounds would be a credit to any white man. The lawn was neatly mowed and the flower beds were full of flowers. They live in a Commonwealth-State rental home allotted for railways personnel, I think. While talking to [wife] – a plump, clear-eyed woman in her thirties I could see a good dining room suite and a very highly

74 *State News*, 15 April 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 184/53.

75 *State News*, 8 December 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 184/53; WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 11 November 1952; 3 December 1953, 2640; Biskup 1973: 253.

76 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1955.

77 Hunter 2001: 82.

78 Chesterman and Galligan 1997: 164.

79 DeMaria 1986: 37–38.

80 Middleton to Clerk of Courts Mt Magnet, 13 March 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 78/52.

81 Middleton to District Officer North Central, 14 February 1957, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 78/52; Middleton to Minister for Native Welfare, 31 January 1957, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 78/52.

polished dining room floor. [The potential applicant] was not at home, his wife told me he had the forms but he was too proud to apply for citizenship (his father had applied and had been granted earlier this year). Went to the railway yard where [the potential applicant] was at work and spoke to [the potential applicant] pointing out the benefits of citizenship to him, to his family – he has five daughters. He promised when I left him, that he would put his application in soon. This man is well spoken of by the police. His wife told me that he would not even drink beer when his father brought it to the house. He appears to be accepted in the white society in which he mixes. [The potential applicant] is probably the most deserving case for citizenship rights I have met.⁸²

Another officer, inspecting a couple living in a State Housing Commission house, reported:

I found the house in a very clean condition. His wife was in the act of scrubbing the floor. The house was sparsely furnished but all essentials were present. The kitchen furniture included a kerosene refrigerator on which ten pounds remained to be paid off. The bedroom was furnished but the living room was bare.⁸³

These officers' reports are typical of the many I viewed, with assessments of assimilation reflecting a highly conformist 1950s society. Within this society, conformity was achieved via informal codes of behaviour, dress and presentation of the home; shared daily routines; the pursuit of consumerism and adherence to a rigid morality.⁸⁴ Securing Aboriginal people's conformity required regular monitoring, which would break down existing patterns of behaviour so that new ones could be constructed; that is, as above, women had to attend to their housework as a daily routine.⁸⁵ As Barry Morris, drawing on Foucault (1977), observed in his analysis of assimilation policies towards the Dhan-Gadi people of New South Wales, each individual was subject to a 'normalising judgement' and his or her 'performance' ranked according to his or her ability to conform to the set normative standards. The ultimate aim was to internalise self-regulation within each individual and thereby remove the need for surveillance.⁸⁶ Inspection of a rental property need only concern itself with cleanliness and maintenance, yet because this couple were subjects for assimilation, the officer saw fit to report on their lack of material comforts – the couple had not yet conformed to the expected standard.

82 Great Southern patrol reports, Wright Webster and Asphar, 26 September 1949–5 October 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49.

83 Central District – patrol reports, Tilbrook, 26 June 1956–29 June 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 106/56.

84 Haebich 2008: 100.

85 Morris 1989: 132.

86 Morris 1989: 129–30.

Assessed to have internalised the behaviours expected of members of Australian society, 'citizenship holders' still faced inspections of their own homes if their family contained 'natives'.⁸⁷ Knowing that citizenship holders tended to resent department interference in their family's affairs, Middleton cautioned department officers to approach them 'with delicacy'.⁸⁸ Another way Aboriginal individuals employed resistance toward citizenship that was not automatically theirs but had to be applied for was by navigating the legislation to their best advantage. An Aboriginal man with a block of land approached the department for assistance to build a cottage. When the officer pointed out that the man had completed forms for citizenship rights and that the department could not assist citizenship holders to obtain housing, the man decided not to proceed with citizenship rights until it was first decided whether he was in the running for a house.⁸⁹

Along with assisting Aboriginal people to secure citizenship rights, department officers also sought legal equality for Aboriginal people by challenging instances of discrimination within their districts. This included investigating employers not paying Aboriginal employees award wages and even overruling police officers.⁹⁰ When police ordered a cinema to refuse entry to Aboriginal patrons (after *two* Aboriginal individuals ran inside the cinema to escape police and could not be found in the darkness), the department officer informed the cinema the police were not authorised to do so. The cinema resumed admitting Aboriginal people.⁹¹ Officers educated (typically racist) local council authorities about the department's aim of complete equality for Aboriginal people; and monitored teachers' attitudes towards Aboriginal students, encouraging them to promote tolerance in the classroom.⁹²

Middleton's endeavours to reform legislation helped define an interpretation of assimilation that regarded civil rights, as opposed to privileges, and a racially tolerant society just as essential to assimilation's success as Aboriginal people

87 Great Southern District patrol reports – Narrogin sub-district, KI Morgan, 19 May 1958–29 May 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 605/57.

88 Employment for native youth, Patrol officer, Adams, 18 December 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 654/51.

89 Great Southern District patrol reports, Wright Webster, 26 May 1952–1 June 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 614/51.

90 Middleton to David Secker, 12 January 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55; AO Day to F Gare, 22 March 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 76/54; Great Southern District – patrol reports, Hawke, acting inspector, 2 March 1949–11 March 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49; Great Southern District – patrol reports, Wright Webster and Asphar, 26 September 1949–5 October 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49; Southern District – Narrogin patrol reports, Wright Webster, 11 August 1954–20 August 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 94/54; Jacobs to Wright Webster, n.d., MN 1252/95, Acc 3797A, SLWA.

91 Jacobs to Wright Webster, n.d., MN 1252/95, Acc 3797A, SLWA.

92 Middleton to Robertson, 17 July 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 921/49.

practising a Western lifestyle. The second part of the article builds on this, showing how Middleton's campaign for equality and its assumptions of Western superiority influenced his approach to educating and housing Aboriginal people.

Housing

Arriving in Western Australia, Middleton was confronted by the incarceration of Aboriginal people on badly run government settlements. One of his first steps as Commissioner was to close these down or, following the practice in Papua, to transfer control to missionaries.⁹³ Housing Aboriginal people in the mainstream community became a priority, with Middleton fearing continued segregation would lead Western Australia to experience the difficulties the United States had integrating its African American population.⁹⁴ Complementing this, he announced a policy of decreased supervision in adults' affairs, ordering department officers to contact all adult 'natives' and give them the opportunity to manage their own money.⁹⁵

In his 1952 Annual Report, Middleton promoted the idea that Aboriginal people shared this dream, publishing a patrol officer's finding that '[i]t is the opinion of many natives though not all that integration of white and non-white people in private housing will largely solve the problem of racial tensions and discrimination in Western Australia. "We have got to know each other better" is what in effect they say'.⁹⁶ No mention was made of the sample size or of any opposition to the proposition.

The civilised status attached to housing is clear in the following officer's comments:

It [housing] will be a great step towards educating employers that natives are human beings with the same basic emotions, who enjoy the same nature and share in the same hope that we ourselves do, when we are able to assist them to purchase houses of their own as is now done unhesitatingly for non-English speaking background New Australians.⁹⁷

On this last point, the success of federal government policies towards immigrants was providing those in Aboriginal welfare with evidence-based solutions for assimilating minority groups.

93 Middleton interviewed by Bunbury, 1986.

94 Middleton to Minister for Native Welfare, 19 September 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 498/52.

95 Circular memorandum 289, 12 October 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1026/48.

96 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1952.

97 Central patrol reports, A/patrol officer McCrae, 17 September 1951–7 May 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 498/52.

Unfortunately, however, deinstitutionalisation of Aboriginal adults did not end their segregation from society: low incomes and local government reluctance to grant building permits saw these adults join already large populations on reserves designated for Aboriginal people. In 1957, 85 per cent of families lived on reserves.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, between 1947 and 1961, federal and state assistance increased home ownership amongst the mainstream population from 50 to 70 per cent and offered a limited number of low-cost rentals to the socioeconomically disadvantaged.⁹⁹ As non-citizens, Aboriginal people were ineligible for the former and only eligible for the latter if approved by their local government.¹⁰⁰ Thus people relied on the department whose funding was so inadequate that its 1958 plan to build 60 houses annually had to be reduced to six.¹⁰¹

Repeatedly, Middleton petitioned the federal government to amend the Constitution to give the department access to federal funds.¹⁰² Refusal led him to equip reserves with basic amenities, and to exploit the assistance of Western Australian Native Welfare Council-affiliated organisations which, by 1961, had built 17 houses on reserves, along with shelter sheds, sanitation facilities, community halls and kindergartens.¹⁰³ Against this, he cautioned, a 'fine balance had to be struck between improving conditions to enhance people's hygiene, self-respect and acceptance by the community without improving them so much that people would want to live on reserves permanently'.¹⁰⁴ Elderly residents were the exception: Middleton argued they should be permitted to live on reserves since 'communal living' was 'all they had ever known'.¹⁰⁵

To overcome the communal lifestyle on reserves and encourage adoption of a Western nuclear family pattern, houses were built onsite, forming the first stage of a 'transitional housing' scheme. Residents' successful maintenance of these houses saw them graduate to a basic house on department-owned land at minimal rent. Then, provided they kept up with rental payments and successfully maintained the house, they could apply for a State Housing Commission home.

98 Jacobs to Wright Webster, n.d., MN 1252/95, Acc 3797A, SLWA; Haebich 2008: 98–99; Middleton to Minister for Native Welfare re Lower Great Southern Regional Council Conference 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 222/50; Notes of deputation from the Lower Great Southern Regional Council which waited on the Minister for Native Affairs, 27 June 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 222/50.

99 Haebich, 2008: 243; Eslake, 2013: 2.

100 Welfare inspector Moora to the Secretary Returned Services League Sub-Branch Carnamah, 12 December 1961, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 462/61.

101 Haebich 1992: 89; Middleton to Under Treasurer, 13 August 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 476/52.

102 Middleton to Innes, 20 March 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 1044/47; Middleton to Under Treasurer, 13 August 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 3797A, 476/52.

103 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1961; Department of Indigenous Affairs 2004: 46; Notes for inclusion in report of Native Welfare Conference 1961, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 384/59.

104 Rowley 1972: 104.

105 Middleton informed by McLarty, 5 July 1957, Lower eastern wheat belt and survey of housing and employment, 30 May 1956–9 June 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 106/56; Elkin 1951: 15.

Alternatively, they could keep the house by having the title of the property transferred to them when the total cost of the building had been reimbursed to the department.¹⁰⁶

Believing it would be 'psychologically beneficial' for tenants if 'Department control was not apparent', Middleton gave voluntary organisations, who were already assisting reserve dwellers, the authority to supervise, evict and collect rent from tenants. He also supplied these organisations with names of individuals financially able and willing to purchase land for them to supervise.¹⁰⁷ Intolerant of Aboriginal resistance to efforts to house them, Middleton enhanced the success of his policies by governing 'at a distance'. Authoritarian objectives were concealed within a context of volunteers teaching tenants cooking and other skills in their homes and gaining their trust in order to convince them of the value of moral and domestic improvements.¹⁰⁸

The schemes were judged outstanding successes, with tenants installing furniture, curtains and gardens, and some families saving to move into State Housing Commission homes.¹⁰⁹ In 1948, only two Aboriginal people in Western Australia occupied State Housing Commission homes. By 1961, voluntary organisations had assisted the Commission to build 97 houses and the department to build 130.¹¹⁰ As a point of comparison, in New South Wales only 39 houses were built in towns between 1946 and 1960.¹¹¹ Touring Australia in 1961 convinced Middleton that Western Australia's closure of 'large stations and settlements' placed it in an 'advantageous position' over other states 'for assimilating Aboriginal people' because it reduced communities to family-sized groups on reserves, missions and stations.¹¹² At the 1960 conference of state

106 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1959; Conference on Welfare Policies for Australian Aborigines. Armidale, 1960; Frank Gare interviewed by Bannister.

107 Middleton to Under Treasurer, 13 August 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 101/59; Manning to Graham, 16 May 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 101/59; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1959; *West Australian*, 9 September 1959; Conference notes Narrogin council chambers, 16 July 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 101/59.

108 Wright Webster to Middleton, 22 July 1957, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 464/52; Employment for native youth, Patrol officer, Adams, 18 December 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 654/51; Robinson 2000: 84.

109 Great Southern District patrol reports, Wright Webster, 8 May 1958–23 May 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 605/57; Acting Commissioner of Native Welfare to Wright Webster, 3 September 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 305/58; Southern District patrol reports – Narrogin sub-district, Wright Webster, 11 August 1954–20 August 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 94/54; Wright Webster to Middleton, 2 February 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 57/49; Deputy Commissioner of Native Welfare, Anderson, to Minister for Native Welfare, 13 January 1961, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 101/59; Frank Gare interviewed by Bannister; First Western Australian Native Welfare Conference, 1 February 1958, MN 1252/51, Acc 3797A, SLWA.

110 Wright-Webster to Middleton, welfare projects Narrogin, 6 September 1961, SROWA AN 1/7, ACC 993, 835/60; Department of Indigenous Affairs 2004: 46, 74–75.

111 Goodall 1996: 328; Broome 2005: 313–27.

112 Jebb 2002: 252–53.

Aboriginal administrations the previous year, Middleton informed delegates that better accommodation was having the 'automatic effect of assimilating' people.¹¹³

Department officers encouraged people in employment to build or rent and inspected people's homes. Abolition of private space was essential to the task of totally controlling people in order to change their behaviours.¹¹⁴ The following judgements were made by one officer over numerous patrols:

Inside the house with the garden was a refrigerator, sewing machine, wireless, lounge suite, new stove etc ... The family is a fine example of what coloured people can do to rise above their environment without assistance from anyone if the desire to do so is real.¹¹⁵

Indicators of assimilation varied depending on the subjective judgment of the officer, and could be quite laughable: 'A chicken run and fowl-house, soundly constructed would suggest that the people who live here have reached a standard of living higher than many other native families.'¹¹⁶ The certainty of the declared goal of assimilation contrasted with the arbitrary, vague reflections of its achievement and the uncertainty expressed by Middleton and Elkin in the late 1950s over how assimilation might be measured.

Financial independence did not exempt people from department interference; on the contrary, it subjected them to even greater scrutiny: a man with a 'well-paying job' but living in a 'small, dirty corrugated iron house' assured the same officer he would buy materials to improve it.¹¹⁷ Likewise, the officer reported on another man:

Here is an example of one, who by his own actions, is retarding severely the chances of his family's social acceptance. One would wonder if he, or his people, want to be accepted in the community at large ... and then having wondered, put the answer in the negative. He earns about thirty pounds a week, his two boys earn approximately the basic wage each. There is probably about fifty pounds a week going into this household. The Austin 40 [car] is deteriorating rapidly, there is no garden at all ... dust blowing everywhere, the house while being large by native standards is not well kept exteriorly and inside there are few indications of homeliness. This family needs very tactful guidance and a lot of

¹¹³ Conference on Welfare Policies for Australian Aborigines. Armidale, 1960: 23.

¹¹⁴ Morris 1989: 131.

¹¹⁵ Central and Eastern Goldfields District – Kalgoorlie sub-district patrol reports, A.O. Day, 28 November 1955–1 December 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 298/52.

¹¹⁶ Central and Eastern Goldfields District – Murchison sub-district patrol reports, A.O. Day, 14 January 1953–21 January 1953, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 9/53.

¹¹⁷ Central and Eastern Goldfields District – Kalgoorlie sub-district patrol reports, A.O. Day, 18 November 1954–27 November 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 298/52.

it. If this man has the real desire within him he could be living in luxury in one of the best houses in Coolgardie and he and his family largely accepted socially in the community.¹¹⁸

The desirability of a house in the suburbs with modern furniture and appliances led to moral condemnation of those who could afford the lifestyle but chose not to. Conforming not only signified assimilation but, together with improved hygiene, facilitated it through increasing the likelihood of non-Aboriginal people accepting Aboriginal people into their neighbourhoods.¹¹⁹ Such conforming showed its tenants were engaged in mainstream Australian employment and had become slaves to Western consumerism; the family had been redefined as the nuclear family, separated from customary Aboriginal kinships obligations. The house is more than a house; it is a space for atomising and disciplining consumption.

What officers' reports indicate is that many were satisfied with modest homes, or, conversely, that those desiring better homes were, sensibly, reluctant to commit to rent or the purchase of furniture because they lacked regular employment. People's eagerness to obtain employment was emphasised by officers, who wished they could do more to assist.¹²⁰ The requirement to work and support one's immediate kin (the nuclear family as the unit of consumption) reshaped kinship networks and destroyed relations of exchange and obligation with more distant kin.

Education

Middleton attempted to increase employability by educating Aboriginal children to the same standard as non-Aboriginal children and providing additional support to young adults transitioning to professional employment – the first Australian Commissioner to do so.¹²¹ Haebich acknowledges his efforts when she attributes Middleton's inaction on unemployment to his concentrating on the next generation of workers.¹²² Where in 1948, 1,592 Western Australian

118 Central and Eastern Goldfields District – Kalgoorlie sub-district patrol reports, A.O. Day, 28 November 1955–1 December 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 298/52.

119 Middleton to Minister for Native Welfare, 19 September 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 498/52.

120 Patrol officer, Long, to Wright Webster, 8 July 1959, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 101/59; Central District patrol reports, 1 July 1951–30 June 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 695/51; Great Southern District patrol reports, Wright Webster, 22 May 1950–27 May 1950 and 31 May 1950–1 June 1950, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49; Biskup 1965: 410; Native welfare projects, reports etc, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 90/57; Patrol officer, Long, to Wright Webster, 8 July 1959, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 101/59; Great Southern patrol reports, patrol officer Asphar, 12 June 1950–16 June 1950, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1955; Haebich 2008: 264–72.

121 Conference on Welfare Policies for Australian Aborigines. Armidale, 1960: 23; Holland 2005: 96–97.

122 Haebich 2008: 264–272.

Aboriginal children attended schools, by 1961, 3,526 attended – 384 of these at secondary schools.¹²³ Between 1950 and 1960, 22 children passed the Junior Certificate examination and five the Leaving Certificate examination. Four of the latter graduated from Teachers Training College, and one became the first Aboriginal person to study at university and the first Aboriginal department officer.¹²⁴ In addition, a number took up nursing, trades, and office employment. To put this into perspective, government secondary schools were only established in Western Australia in 1946 (between 1950 and 1958 for rural areas), with a mere 1,742 non-Aboriginal children having completed year 10 by 1952 and 5,147 by 1960.¹²⁵

Middleton's success 'assimilating' individuals into the middle-class defied government and previous commissioners who condemned Aboriginal people to basic schooling and low-skilled employment.¹²⁶ Indeed, it was working alongside highly capable Papuans that led Middleton to conclude intellectual ability was universal, confirmed in Australia upon witnessing the rapid academic progress of adolescents with a 'hunter-gatherer' background.¹²⁷ However, his belief in sociocultural assimilation did not mean he would force this on people still living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

Just as Middleton had argued Australia's commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights obligated it to recognise Aboriginal people's citizenship rights, he argued it also conferred a responsibility to provide both full and mixed descent children with the opportunity to attend primary, secondary and tertiary education.¹²⁸ Furthermore, by 1962, Middleton had, like Murray, appointed Aboriginal people to roughly half of all department positions, pursuing a future where Aboriginal people 'administered their own welfare'.¹²⁹ To this day, employment within the welfare sector gives many an environment supportive of culture and the autonomy to make decisions affecting their lives.

123 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1949; Conference of Commonwealth and State Native Welfare authorities 26–27 January 1961, Hasluck box 32, NLA, 147–48; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1961; Bray to Thomas, 3 October 1945, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 921/49.

124 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1960.

125 Tully 1999; Helm 1979: 224.

126 Biskup 1973: 231–32; Department of Indigenous Affairs 2004; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1949; Southern District patrol reports, Wright Webster, 10 March 1952–19 March 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 614/51.

127 Middleton; Middleton to Minister for Native Affairs, 24 November 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 921/49; *The West Australian*, 6 January 1951; Murray 1923: 8–9.

128 Conference of Commonwealth and State Native Welfare authorities 26–27 January 1961, Hasluck box 32, NLA, 147–48.

129 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1954; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1960, 1961, 1962; Middleton to District Welfare Officer Carnarvon, 19 July 1961, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 656/61.

The centrality of education to Middleton's assimilation strategy showed in his 1953 Annual Report:

Education is perhaps the most significant index of overall native progress. As long as he is ignorant and illiterate the aborigine – including the 'half-caste' – is unqualified for the better jobs; without the improved income which comes from better jobs he is handicapped in finding better housing; poor housing breeds disease, crime and discouragement. Given education he is enabled to speak up for his rights; he increases the prestige of his community and his own self-respect and is able to thereby develop friendly face-to-face relations with the white population. Most of all he achieves real cultural status and the sense of social responsibility which exerts continual and inexorable pressure against the web of discrimination which confines him.¹³⁰

Middleton viewed education as more than just facilitating the economic goals of assimilation: by achieving mainstream measures of success, Aboriginal individuals earned the respect of non-Aboriginal society and, ironically, the privilege of enjoying pride in their Aboriginality – albeit framed in terms of their universal human rights rather than as Indigenous people. Again, this shows Middleton understood the impact societal judgement had on assimilation, and the complex psychological factors involved in empowering individuals.

To give children an equitable education, raise expectations of their abilities, and (as emphasised by Elkin) foster interaction between them and non-Aboriginal children, Middleton ended segregated department-provided schooling in favour of mainstream government schooling.¹³¹ Children in remote areas continued to be educated on missions, although they too learned the state curriculum; Middleton secured missions' compliance via subsidies, a strategy used in Papua and most British colonies.¹³² He said parents should 'treat missions as free boarding schools', reflecting how acceptable this institution had become in the education and disciplining of non-Aboriginal children.¹³³ Middleton guaranteed that 'the Education Department would bring outstanding scholars up to the standard where they would be 'economically and socially equal with any white

130 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1953.

131 Central and Eastern Goldfields District – Kalgoorlie sub-district, A.O. Day, 30 September 1953–15 October 1953, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 298/52; Middleton to Mrs K. McNeil, 18 August 1950, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1949; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1960.

132 Biskup 1973: 252; Smith 1987: 56; Middleton to Mr A.R. Astle, 20 July 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55.

133 Legge 1956: 177; Austin 1978: 33; Beresford and Omaji 1998: 47; Biskup 1973: 242; Haebich 2005: 211; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1953; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1957; Notes of meeting held at the Office of the Commissioner, 1 September 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 490/49. Prior to this, unqualified teachers had taught children to be domestics and station hands; Milnes 1985: 134; Morris 1989: 170.

child'.¹³⁴ Dominance of the Western economy made schooling necessary to secure socioeconomic equality, and schooling was such a commonly accepted institution within mainstream society that the political and cultural control it had over each new generation went unnoticed.¹³⁵

Viewing education as an 'effective means of overcoming nomadic habits and weaning children away from tribal life, particularly in matters that conflicted with mainstream society's laws', Middleton encouraged mission schoolteachers to only perpetuate 'worthwhile aspects of Aboriginal culture' and to insist on communication in English.¹³⁶ On Elkin's advice, Aboriginal people relying on a hunter-gatherer economy were left to do so.¹³⁷ Children living as hunter-gatherers were not schooled but kept under surveillance in case their circumstances changed.¹³⁸

In 1955 the Superintendent of Native Education advised Middleton that educating children in remote areas did them a disservice because of the lack of employment opportunities.¹³⁹ Accordingly, Middleton desired to move children to town centres. Furthermore, he directed missionaries to 'do everything in their power to discourage parents from following their children'.¹⁴⁰ The seamless continuum of evolution outlined by assimilationists was, in implementation, cruel and complicated. Middleton's support for the removal of children for education ran counter to his general commitment to keeping families together, as we shall see below.

Department officers tracked students' progress and singled out the academically gifted for higher education, promising assistance with training following graduation.¹⁴¹ Middleton considered one of his greatest achievements to be the

134 Minutes of a deputation to the Minister for Native Affairs from representatives of the Methodist Mission in regard to a proposal to take over the Moore River Native settlement, 10 May 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 34/51.

135 Morris 1989: 133.

136 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1949; Middleton to Mr A.R. Astle, 20 June 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55.

137 Holland, in Rowse 2005: 87.

138 Central and Eastern Goldfields District – Kalgoorlie sub-district, A.O. Day, 30 September 1953–15 October 1953, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 298/52.

139 Superintendent of Education's Report on Native Education 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55.

140 Superintendent of Education's Report on Native Education 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55; Middleton to Secretary Mrs Telfer, 19 December 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 794/51; WAPD, Legislative Assembly, 17 October 1956, 1414; 26 November 1956: 1108–09; 26 September 1956: 1108–09; 9 September 1958: 668.

141 Wright Webster to Miss Winsome Colbung, 17 February 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 669/49; Middleton to Mrs M.S. Niblock, State Secretary Country Women's Association, 6 April 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 669/49; Middleton to David Secker, 12 January 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 185/55; A.O. Day to F. Gare, 22 March 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 76/54; Great Southern District – patrol reports, Hawke, acting inspector, 2 March 1949–11 March 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49; Great Southern District – patrol reports, Wright Webster and Asphar, 26 September 1949–5 October 1949, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 190/49.

establishment of two city hostels providing accommodation for adolescents studying or undertaking skilled employment. Parental consent was required and those who could afford it paid their child's board.¹⁴²

Establishment of the first hostel, Alvan House, signified another instance where implementing assimilation required challenging prejudice. Located in the affluent suburb of Mount Lawley, it incited a public protest meeting at which Middleton successfully defended his plan. In turn, boarders' behaviour impressed neighbours so much that the second hostel, McDonald House, went unopposed in affluent West Perth.¹⁴³

Actually, boarders from both hostels quickly became the poster children for assimilation, featured in newspapers and invited to more functions than they had time to attend.¹⁴⁴ Under the heading 'Two worlds now live happily as one', *The Australian Women's Weekly* described the hostels as 'unique in Australia' and claimed the 'assimilation of these students challenged the critics and made Aboriginal parents keen for their children to be given similar opportunities'.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, department reports reveal several parents required years of convincing, and loneliness led some children to return home.¹⁴⁶

Aboriginal people's resistance to removal from community for education led Middleton to establish hostels closer to where Aboriginal children lived.¹⁴⁷ Assisted by missions, employers and prominent townspeople, he had built six remote hostels by 1961, accommodating 300 adolescents.¹⁴⁸ Middleton staffed hostels with Aboriginal guardians to make them more welcoming to boarders.¹⁴⁹ This challenges assumptions about assimilationists' desire to divorce children from their Aboriginality, although it should not be overstated since Middleton valued 'assimilated' Aboriginal people serving as role models for others to

142 Middleton to Under Secretary Premier's Department, 11 November 1950, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 262/1950; Middleton to Mrs M.S. Niblock, State Secretary Country Women's Association, 6 April 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 669/49; Report on Alvan House October 1951–31 May 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 375/51; Form 2 December 1954, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 47/53; Wright Webster to headmaster Jingalup State School, 28 August 1957, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 921/49; Middleton to Robertson, 16 July 1952, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 921/49; Middleton to Wright Webster, 26 May 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 47/53.

143 *State News*, 12 December 1950, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 758/1950; Biskup 1973: 243.

144 Report on Alvan House from October 1950 to 31 May 1951, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 375/51.

145 *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 July 1958.

146 Wright Webster to Mrs Pullen, 24 May 1955 and Constable at Boddington to Wright Webster, 11 February 1956 and Wright Webster to Middleton, 18 January 1956, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 47/53; Middleton to Wright Webster, 2 October 1958, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 47/53.

147 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1961.

148 Haebich 2000: 522.

149 Middleton to District Officer Carnarvon, 19 July 1961, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 656/61.

emulate.¹⁵⁰ Likewise, to facilitate assimilation, the Education Department accommodated Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students together in two northern-located hostels.¹⁵¹

Child removal

Acknowledging Middleton's determination to keep families together, Haebich attributes continued high removals to his imperative to educate children when schools did not exist in many areas where Aboriginal people lived, his surveillance of Aboriginal households, and the federal government's insufficient funding of welfare programs (as evidenced in the preceding sections of this article).¹⁵² To this I would add denial of citizenship, since ineligibility for Commonwealth social security benefits and housing made it near impossible for Aboriginal parents to provide the material conditions necessary for raising children.

Early in his administration, Middleton warned child health would be impeded until the government was able to launch an extensive housing scheme in Western Australia.¹⁵³ Then, in 1958, he publicised the case of a 16-year-old mother struggling to keep her baby because her Aboriginality disqualified her for a maternity allowance (for this Middleton was again attacked in Parliament).¹⁵⁴ Ineligibility for the maternity allowance – along with surveillance – played a huge role in the following intervention by a departmental officer who set out to reduce the number of women receiving department rations. Despite acknowledging that a widow with five children 'looked after them very well', he convinced her to send the three eldest children to a mission.¹⁵⁵ Tellingly, at the end of the patrol, he concluded: 'As soon as all the eligible children have been sent to missions and the mothers are working, this number will have decreased to nine.'¹⁵⁶ However, in an encounter with another widow who stood up to him, the officer allowed her large family to remain on the ration list. This suggests he knew his actions were unethical. Preference for removal was similarly indicated when rations were given to a family living in 'appalling conditions on no income'

150 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Affairs*, 1954; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1960, 1961, 1962.

151 Middleton to Minister for Native Welfare, 25 November 1957 and G.F. Thornbury to T.L. Robertson, 18 November 57, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 262/1950.

152 Haebich 2000: 524, 2005: 204–12, 217; Report of the Special Committee on native matters (with particular reference to adequate finance), NAA A452, 1958/3886.

153 Middleton to Miss A. Evans, Princess Margaret Hospital, 30 January 1953, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 32/53.

154 WAPD, Legislative Council, 22 October 1958: 1662–63.

155 Murchison sub-district patrol reports, J.C. Hendrikse, 7 February 1955–11 February 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 9/53; Frank Gare to Middleton, 18 February 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 9/53.

156 Murchison sub-district patrol reports, J.C. Hendrikse, 7 February 1955–11 February 1955, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 9/53.

only because there was insufficient space in the mission to accommodate the children. The department officer even assisted the husband (unsuccessfully) to find employment.¹⁵⁷

Middleton's frustration at his continued failure to reduce child removals, which more than doubled between 1957 and 1961, showed in his almost annual announcements that this would be the year the department moved away from institutionalisation towards keeping families together.¹⁵⁸ Extension of social security benefits to Aboriginal people and 'moderate progress in housing' saw him emphasise this in 1959. In his 1960 Annual Report he admitted that until the mid-1950s when the department's plan for better housing and living conditions was first implemented, missions were presented to parents as the solution to seeking better living and educational opportunities for children.¹⁵⁹ Certainly, Department Officer (and Middleton's successor) Frank Gare recalled a culture of avoiding child removal, with Middleton buying every department officer Dr John Bowlby's book *Child Care and the Growth of Love* that advised against separating children from their mothers. Gare said this led him to the regrettable decision of leaving a child with an alcoholic couple who subsequently rolled on to the baby, smothering it to death.¹⁶⁰ The psychological damage wreaked on a generation of parents removed as children and suffering the effects of welfare dependency and alienation from culture, kin and purpose presented yet another challenge to Middleton breaking with the past. So, too, the temptation to remove children might be found in the objective stated by Middleton in 1958: 'The social development of any race lies in its children and it is through them that the Department hopes chiefly to guide and direct the cultural change taking place among Aborigines.'¹⁶¹

Conclusion

An underappreciated figure in Aboriginal affairs, Middleton fought hard to secure Aboriginal people's civil and socioeconomic equality within mainstream Australian society. Believing Aboriginal people were of equal intelligence to Europeans and worthy of the same rights and responsibilities, a product of his international training in Indigenous administration and his early life, made him more progressive than most Western Australians. This prompted him to

157 Central District patrol reports, D.W. Hardwick, 23 June 1957–28 June 1957, SROWA AN 1/7, Acc 993, 106/56.

158 Haebich 2000: 524–25, 2005: 17; Marron 1994; *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1961; Notes for inclusion in report of Native Welfare Conference 1961, AN 1/7, Acc 993, 384/59, SROWA.

159 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1960.

160 Haebich and Mellor 2002: 147.

161 *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare*, 1958.

move well beyond his civil servant role to petition for Aboriginal people's inclusion within society. However, it was this same conviction that led him to assume Aboriginal people desired the European way of life and positioned them on a continuum of human development where environmental factors were responsible for the perceived differing levels of advancement by different 'races'. Consequently, Middleton's solution came to be to facilitate people's advancement through education and housing, the provision of unsolicited assistance, the discouragement of collective modes of living in favour of an individualist one, and continual assessment of people's progress via constant surveillance. In so doing, Middleton contradicted his progressive stance on civil rights and made families even more vulnerable to child removal. Understanding how such contradictions occur is important; for future motivations may, albeit unintentionally, replicate the assimilation era and governments may be tempted to renege on commitments to preserve Aboriginal culture, community and autonomy if these become costly, impractical, or incompatible with overcoming socioeconomic disadvantage.

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