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Introduction

The idea of using Indigenous peoples as police was not new when South Australia was colonised. Throughout the British Empire, Indigenous people had been used by the British colonial authorities in both police and military roles. Sepoys were employed in India; there were African troopers in West Africa and Hottentots were used on the Cape Frontier. The first experiment in Australia in using Aborigines as an active Native Police Corps was attempted in New South Wales in 1837. Initially abandoned, it was attempted again in 1838 and again in 1839. However, a true Native Police Corps, as distinct from either mounted or border police, was not established until 1848. This later corps was found to be useful but never acted independently. In 1838, and in light of the attempted establishment of a New South Wales Native Police Force, there were calls for the formation of such a force for South Australia.

In 1850, the South Australian Lieutenant Governor, Young, proposed the establishment of a Native Police Corps organised as a separate unit. Although native Aboriginal constables already existed in South Australia, they were used as auxiliaries to the regular police force and were not part of a special unit. At Young's instigation three Native Police Corps were formed but there is little evidence to suggest these corps were active in the same sense as their counterparts in the eastern colonies. However, by 1860 the Native Police Corps, as a unique unit, existed in name only - essentially they were employed as trackers and remained as such.

As the Australian colonies grew, the frontier continually expanded and encroached on Aboriginal land. European settlement had a marked effect on the Aborigines. They were vulnerable to introduced disease, exploitation and Aboriginal cultural identity was under threat. In Britain, humanitarian groups such as the anti-slavery lobby raised concerns for the welfare of the British Empire’s Indigenous peoples, specifically those in Africa and Australia. It was believed that Indigenous people should be protected as British subjects, and exposed to the benefits of Christianity and Western civilization. It was hoped they would change their 'uncivilised' ways. In Australia, there were also humanitarian concerns about the plight of the Aboriginal people and solutions were sought to remedy the situation. This coincided with thoughts on how the Aborigines could become ‘worthy’ of the title of ‘British Subject’.

In 1838, Captain Maconochie R.N., Private Secretary to the New South Wales Governor, Sir John Franklin, prepared a report on the treatment of Aborigines. In this report Maconochie made a number of suggestions on how the status of the Aborigines could be ‘raised’ to meet the standard of ‘British Subject’. His philanthropic views were bound in humanitarian idealism popular in Britain at the time, but not a consideration in a struggling new colony. Nonetheless his views were taken seriously in New South Wales and also became a matter of public debate in South Australia. Essentially he espoused the notion that Aborigines should be ‘liberally’ employed in the public service as Native Police and regimented on similar lines to India and Africa. The Native Police Force would be commanded by European Sergeants and Corporals, with Commissioned Officers to ‘keep them in line’. Maconochie believed that this would enhance the status of the Aboriginal people and thus cause European attitudes towards Aborigines to mellow. The role of the Native Police would be 'preventative' rather than 'remedial'. He thought they should be kept in the field for as long as possible, their uniform should be 'light convenient and somewhat ornamental' and they should be exposed to more education and military style regimentation. Those fortunate enough to be thus exposed would be able to bring to their tribes, to be located in villages, the benefits of European civilisation.

Maconochie’s views were published in The Register on 31 September 1838. His ideas were considered by some to have merit. The Register referred to an Aboriginal constable called Onkaparinga Jack and noted that he had been relied upon by the police on more than one occasion for tracking assignments. In agreement with Maconochie’s views, The Register stated:

We are quite satisfied that a useful body might be raised from among our friendly blacks, at trifling comparative expense and that habit of order might be gradually imposed in the adults, while their children receive the benefit of instruction in schools wherein mechanical and agricultural operations should constitute prominent features.

The adjective ‘useful’ is used to denote the considered worth of the Native Police. The benefits which would flow from such an association, it was thought, could be passed on to others.

Although a Native Police Corps as suggested by Maconochie never eventuated in South Australia, Aborigines were continually employed as Native Police when the need arose. Onkaparinga Jack was not the only Aboriginal man so employed. Another example was a constable called Jimmy Snook. In 1841 Snook was called upon to track some ‘troublesome natives’ in the Rufus River area that the regular police had little hope of capturing. It appears that Jimmy Snook was not fully committed to his role as constable because he was later seen in the company of a group of Aborigines and when told to lay down their spears Jimmy ‘bolted for town taking a woman from the Bungaree tribe’ with him. On other occasions recommendations would be made to the Police Commissioner to have certain Aborigines, such as ‘black Tommy’ and an ‘intelligent black called Jimmy’, perform the function of native constables specifically to help the regular police with tracking suspects, missing people and, sometimes, lost sheep.

Although such employment was encouraged, the message from the Commissioner was clear, that these Native Constables could not be sworn in and execute the duties of regular police. It may have been this ad hoc approach to the employment of Aborigines as constables and the later knowledge of the New South Wales Native Police experiment, that prompted Lieutenant Governor Young to seek further advice on the subject.
In a letter to Commissioner of Police Tolmer from Charles Sturt, the Colonial Secretary, dated 9 March 1850, Sturt referred to the use of Native Police in Sydney and Port Phillip where they had been:

...... successfully employed and have been of infinite use to the police force of these colonies and I am requesting your opinion on this important subject as regards to the employment of the natives in a similar manner. 12

It appeared the initial thought was to establish a dedicated Native Corps along similar lines as formulated in New South Wales:

His Excellency is anxious to know if there are not certain localities where natives could he employed as constables so far as to enable you to dispense with the services of European police at the same place.

The natives might, in the first instance require training but there appears no ground for doubting their fitness for such duties or the value of their services where an exercise of the faculties they possess of keen vision and facility of transversing the country are called for.

I desire, if possible to organize corps of natives to act as policemen not replacing regular police at any outstation or homestead but as auxiliaries to the regular police and both to be paid, fed, clothed, armed mounted or to perform static duties as watchmen under the supervision of Inspectors or sergeant at Headquarters and when efficiently disciplined and their dependence can be placed on their intelligence, fidelity and esprit de corps attached to the service and employment on criminal duties at outstation. 13

Opinions were also to be sought from Sub-Protectors E. B. Scott and George Mason and from the Protector of Aborigines, Dr Matthew Moorhouse, on whether there were any reasons why an Aboriginal force could not be established. 14

Tolmer responded to Sturt’s letter and whilst acknowledging that the Aboriginal police of Port Phillip and Sydney were found to be of ‘infinite use’ in those colonies, he expressed doubts about the usefulness of such a Native Police Corps in South Australia. He stated:

There would have been great benefits if such a force had been organised years back when the settlers were in constant dread of the blacks and daily outrages were committed on them. The districts were however quiet and peaceful and the blacks entirely subdued. In New South Wales it is different.

With respect to his Excellency’s query as to whether they could be employed in certain localities as to enable me to dispense with the services of European police my opinion is that where an existence of the faculties they possess of keen vision is required they are of the greatest service in assisting the European constables but I think they cannot he entrusted with an important duty such as the charge of an outstation. 15

Young could not agree and reaffirmed his opinion that a Native Police Corps could be established. He thought the Native Police could ‘act as policemen’ but rather than supersede the regular force, should act as auxiliaries to it.

Moorhouse responded on 13 April 1850. 16 He thought Aborigines would be of ‘great service’ when properly trained and could be provided with plenty of work, and he believed that there would be no problem finding a sufficient number of recruits. However, he thought their duties should be restricted to running messages and tracking offenders, and suggested that it would be some time before they could be employed on ‘important duties’ except as assistants to the European police. Moorhouse also suggested that Aborigines from different districts be recruited in order that the police force would have available to it Aborigines with local knowledge if and when the need arose. The recruits should be able to understand English and:

......... previous to joining the force they should be made fully acquainted with the regulations under which they would be expected to serve, the duties they would be required to perform and the benefit they would bring from the proper performance of those duties. 17

Sub-Protector Mason, at Wellington, was aware of the establishment of an Aboriginal force in New South Wales and was of the view that such a force would prove useful in South Australia. He listed a number of duties which he considered they should not perform. These included being able to arrest Europeans, conduct any criminal enquiry or to handle cash. He considered the following duties appropriate: the tracking of Aboriginal offenders, or missing sheep and cattle. 18

Scott’s reply was far more brief: he thought Aboriginal police should only be used to assist the regular police. 19

To further examine the proposal, Tolmer sought the opinions of Corporal Geharty, at Port Lincoln, and Sergeant Major McCulloch, at Mt. Gambier; Geharty because of his local knowledge of Port Lincoln and the Aborigines there, and McCulloch because of his knowledge of the Native Police at Port Phillip. The opinion of both these men and Tolmer was the same:

A native force being unable to perform the ordinary duties of police constables would be of little or no service to the settled districts. 20

It was acknowledged that the Aborigines were skilful at tracking and the recovery of straying livestock. However it was felt that their integrity could not be relied upon when investigating crimes of a serious nature. As far as Tolmer was concerned, if these were the only qualifications the Aborigines possessed, there was some doubt as to whether they should be employed as constables in the districts. He cited the success of Corporal Geharty in solving crime at Port Lincoln by ‘ingratiating himself’ 21 with Aborigines with the offer of bribes in exchange for information. Armed with this
information and a local Aboriginal constable he would invariably track down the offender. Tolmer did not recommend the establishment of a distinct Native Police Corps.

Tolmer did not have his way and a Native Police Corps was established. Initially 12 Aborigines, mainly from the ‘Moorundie tribe’, were employed and were to be stationed at Venus Bay under the command of a Corporal Cussack. 22 Port Lincoln had been the source of much friction between the Aborigines and settlers and it was thought a Native Police presence would ameliorate the situation. There had been calls on an earlier occasion to establish such an Aboriginal police presence near Port Lincoln to act as an ‘efficient adjunct’ 23 to the regular police, as had been so successful in Victoria.

Apart from the Venus Bay Corps, there were similar, but smaller corps, to be stationed at Wellington, under the command of Sub-Protector Mason, and at Moorundie under the command of Sub-Protector Scott. Mason was recommended by Tolmer but received his commission only after complaining he had not received any instructions or authority to form a Corps. 24

On 29 November 1853 Tolmer was sacked as Police Commissioner and Peter Warburton took his place. In March of 1854, Warburton sought clarification on what type of uniform the Native Police should be given. The response from Young was short: to check with Mason and Scott and he would approve whatever the outcome. 25 Again on 24 March 1854, Warburton sought advice on the degree of connection between the regular and Native Police. 26 That is, he wanted to know whether the Corps at Moorundie and Wellington should be included on his returns. Young replied on 28 March 1854:

| Native police should be under your general supervision both as to management and expenditure but the Inspectors should not liable to be removed from the station they occupy on the Murray, nor to perform police duty apart from the direction of the native police; and as the general regulation of the regular police force cannot be applied to the native constables they should be subject to no orders and instructions, but such as being approved by you emanating from the officers in immediate command of them. No native constable which be employed in any police duty are allowed in any way to act as a constable, except in the presence of an Inspector or constable of, or the supervision of ordinary police. The individuals who as Inspectors have undertaken the charge of the native police, should be left as unfettered as possible by interference, because their practice of receiving the obedience of the natives is acquired by an intimate knowledge of their habits and personal influence determined by a long residence among them. 27 |

It seems that, although the Native Police were to be counted as police, the actual control of these Corps outside of Venus Bay fell to the Sub-Protectors in charge of them. Warburton had no right to interfere.

By 1854, the expenditure for the Native Police Corps as distinct from the regular police began to appear in the Gazette and Observer newspapers. By 1856 it was apparent that the Native Police Corps was costing the colony a great deal of money with very little return for that expenditure. The Observer on 17 November 1856 levelled criticism at Warburton, pointing out that the estimate for the Native Police Corps for 1856 was £2,700, while that for the regular force was £11,643:

| We have carefully read through the last seven quarterly reports; but with the exception of the casual allusion to the opinion of Sergeant Eyre, Mr. Warburton has never wasted one drop of ink on the subject. The idea of a native force is undoubtedly commendable and the money voted for the service may be wisely spent; but although the quarterly reports of the Commissioner are very expansive they never vouchsafe the smallest modicum of information on the matter. 28 |

The facts seem Lu suggest that the Native Police did not do very much at all. This view is supported by Inspector Holroyd of the Mounted Police, who had been posted to the Port Lincoln district in 1855. He had a great deal of respect for the Aborigines who acted as trackers for him when on mounted patrol. However he describes his meeting up with 12 Native Police and two troopers a few miles from Venus Bay, recounting the historical background:

| It has been considered that the smart and intelligent Murray black would be valuable assistants in the police duty among the troublesome natives of the west coast. 29 |

According to Holroyd, these Aborigines:

| were issued with uniforms and carbines, taught a little drill, found in horses and saddles and in receipt of regular pay and provisions. As they fell in on parade and went through their carbine exercises they had a very smart appearance and were at all time obedient, well behaved and respectful. However, I soon found that they were quite useless on police duty. Away from their own district and speaking a different dialect they seemed to lose all their native genius and it was endless trouble looking after them and their horses. One smart native in his own district used as a tracker and confidential adviser was infinitely more valuable. After a years trial I recommended their dismissal and they were paid off and sent back to their own country. |

The Native Police Corps as an experiment appeared to be heading for failure. In Warburton’s final quarterly report for 1855, there are listed a number of vacancies for Aboriginal constables. Eleven were needed for the Murray District and five were needed for Venus Bay. This, together with Holroyd’s recommendation in 1856 that the Native Police Corps at Venus Bay be discharged, and the report of Mason that his full Native Police compliment were given leave and all failed to return, 30 supports this conclusion. A more official indication came from Warburton himself in 1860 when he was questioned by the Select Committee of the Legislative Council as follows:
Q. Have you any natives employed in your police force?
A. I have a few employed as attached to some of the outer police stations; they do not belong to the force, but are attached to the stations to give assistance in hunting up the natives in the scrub, to help the police in tracking and finding who have committed robberies.

Q. Do you consider that they can be made competent for the police service?
A. No, not by themselves; I think they are useless - I mean that they must always have a European with them.  

Warburton was asked if he knew that the Governments of New South Wales and Victoria had regularly organised Native Police Corps. He stated that he knew that one existed in Victoria. He thought the idea of a Native Police Corps a good one in that it was beneficial to those Aborigines who were involved but ‘as far as the suppression of crime goes they are useless without European supervision’.  

In New South Wales the story was different. In 1856 the Select Committee there reported:  

that although the Native Police Force, then only recently raised, was not, as could scarcely be expected in a recently organized body and so composed, in such a perfect state doubt it might have attained, that body after its introduction into the troubled districts effected a great amount of good in checking the lawless state of outrage on the part of the native blacks that had previously existed.  

Although this force still had many problems, it appears the force was successfully established and found to be useful.  

By 1860 the vision of a South Australian Native Police Corps had blurred. If Warburton was correct in 1860 when he said he had a ‘few employed’, then the Native Police Corps had all but disappeared by this time. If the South Australian idea is analysed it will show that the members of the Native Police Corps were never n–eant to be treated similarly to the regular police. They had no police powers and the work they were to perform was essentially tracking. They were regarded as ‘useful’ when their special skills were required, such as tracking down Aborigines or lost sheep. The idea of using Aborigines as Native Police arose from the New South Wales and Victorian experiments. It seemed to serve the British interests in those colonies but in South Australia the ‘usefulness’ of the Native Police Corps was minimal.
ENDNOTES

1. ‘The Register, September 31 1838.
2. ibid.
4. The Register, op. cit.
5. ibid.
6. ibid.
7. ibid.
8. ibid.
10. ibid.
11. GRG 24/6/1844/1249, November 11 1844, Letter to Commissioner of Police reporting 'depredations committed on flocks by Murray Natives'.
12. GRG 24/6/1850/897, March 9 1850, on the proposed formation of the Native Police Corps.
13. ibid.
14. ibid.
15. GRG 24/6/1850/897, Letter from Tolmer to Colonial Secretary's Office, March 9 1850.
16. Letter to Commissioner of Police from Moorhouse regarding opinion on the formation of a Native Police Force, April 13 1850.
17. GRG 24/6/1850/897, Letter to Commissioner of Police from Moorhouse regarding opinion on the formation of a Native Police Force, April 13 1850.
18. ORG 24/6/1850/897, Letter from Mason to Commissioner of Police, April 13 1850.
19. GRG 24/6/1850/897, Letter from Scott to Commissioner of Police, April 7 1850.
20. GRG 24/6/1851/898, Colonial Secretary's Office letters from Police Commissioner including replies from Mason, Moorhouse and Scott.
21. ibid.
22. The Observer, November 17 1856.
23. ibid.
24. ORG 24/6/1 854/1 244, Letter to Mason from Commissioner of Police, March 30 1854; Reply to Commissioner of Police, April 3 1854.
25. GRG 24/6/1854/708, Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary's Office, March 11 1854 and reply.
26. GRG 24/6/1 854/934, Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary's Office, March 24 1854.
27. ORG 24/6/1854/934, Reply to Commissioner of Police from Colonial Secretary's Office, March 28 1854.
28. The Observer, op. cit.
30. ibid.
33. ibid.