

Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities
(ed) Nicholas Peterson and Will Sanders
(Cambridge University Press, Melbourne 1998)

Radhika Withana-Arachchi*

In Australia, the final decade of the twentieth century has witnessed some exceptional developments in relation to Aboriginal rights. The landmark High Court decisions in *Mabo* (1992) and *Wik* (1996) recognising indigenous land rights have marked the high points of Aboriginal activism, whereby recognition was granted to indigenous social orders for the purpose of establishing a property right of Native Title. In light of these developments the publication *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians* makes a timely entry into indigenous rights scholarship. It begins with the premise that Aboriginals are still at a disadvantage since indigenous social orders, in general, are not recognised. The central question that permeates the text is whether, given this disadvantage, it is possible for Aboriginals to be members of a common society on equal terms with others.

The book is organised into three parts, including essays from prominent commentators in diverse fields. Part One (chapters 1-3) deals with the historical conceptions of citizenship, Part Two (chapters 4-8) deals with more contemporary struggles for indigenous rights and Part Three (chapters 9-12) considers future issues relating to recognition of indigenous rights and possibilities for the development of 'multicultural citizenship'.

In light of this, the introduction is nicely tailored to provide a useful and cogent entry to the argument and general structure the book assumes. The introduction also provides an indication of the inter-disciplinary nature of the project, which is one of its chief strengths. Topics covered include: historical conceptions of indigenous citizenship; self-determination; the 1967 referendum; international law; and sovereignty.

Given the complicated nature of citizenship in general, and indigenous citizenship in particular, analysis from one perspective alone is impossible and ineffective. The historical, sociological, political and legal aspects need to be explored in order to achieve a thorough analysis. For this reason the diverse fields covered are a

* BA (Hons) Graduating 1999, School of Political Science, University of New South Wales.

testament to the usefulness and uniqueness of this book.

In addition to the inter-disciplinary nature of the analysis undertaken, a further commendable feature is the final section of the book: future developments. This section, like the two preceding sections, is both engaging and illuminating. Especially commendable is the attempt made in this section to examine how a reconceptualisation of citizenship may be undertaken in light of knowledge about existing social orders and demands for recognition by indigenous Australians. Given recent political controversies about what constitutes 'being Australian', this analysis is especially germane.

In general, the book is immensely readable both intellectually and stylistically. This is not a complicated treatise on the nature of indigenous citizenship — it is therefore especially useful for those unfamiliar with the area. However, even for those more conversant with the issues discussed, this book proves to be a useful new addition to the area of indigenous rights analysis. Indeed the final section on the reconceptualisation of citizenship provides some new and exciting arguments to digest.

Given these strengths it is disappointing that the book is missing a concluding chapter that could have successfully drawn together the various essays and themes explored throughout the study. Although such an absence does not detract from the epistemological utility of the book it does hinder the smooth flow of the thesis, as it ends abruptly with the final theme of sovereignty in Part Three.

In general then, this book can be considered a useful inter-disciplinary attempt to explore the complicated notions of Aboriginal citizenship. Drawing from a number of fields, *Citizens and Indigenous Australians* provides an interesting elucidation of past and current issues relating to citizenship and a new reconceptualisation of citizenship in general. For the novice and expert alike this is a useful publication to possess. ●