

ABORIGINAL AUTONOMY: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES.

by H C Coombs (Diane Smith ed), Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 246pp + xv, \$25.00, ISBN 0 521 44097

"Nugget" Coombs' latest book is a collection of old and new essays. Some of the material, the oldest of which dates from 1978, was unpublished previously and some has been abridged from reports and assessments which Coombs prepared for government enquiries. The first chapter of 22 pages ("The Making of Aboriginal Identity") is new and so are the last 78 pages, which together total rather less than half of the book. While the older material is always interesting, thoughtful and well-informed, I wonder why it was necessary to reproduce it here. I imagine that most of the people likely to read this book will be familiar both with Aboriginal affairs and with Coombs' contribution. An alternative publication might have followed the example of *Recovery*, the short insightful publication of Charles Rowley, which was produced by Penguin in a large-print, user-friendly paperback of 169 pages. There is, I think, much to be said in favour of Coombs' most recent thinking to be presented in a short logical argument rather than the more loosely knit series of essays old and new.

Coombs' great strengths are his vast experience and knowledge of disparate fields. Those who understand the economy don't generally understand Aborigines; those who understand Aborigines don't usually understand much about the mechanisms of government, and those who understand government don't have much grasp of international indigenous law. Coombs is thoroughly familiar with all. That he doesn't know southern urban Aboriginal society as well as the north, nor politics as well as a member of the Labor caucus, he would be the first to admit; that matters much less than the extraordinary grasp of what he knows of the thinking, discourse and mentalities of such disparate groups. Coombs can speak with an authority to — as well as about — public authorities in a way probably unrivalled by any Australian of any period of our history.

Some of the essays provide interesting, though reasonably well known, information, such as the commuting of unemployment benefits to Commonwealth Development Employment Projects, by which communities can request that individual unemployment entitlements be pooled into a community fund and paid out again as a wage. Some 19 000 participants now work on such community-initiated work programs, which allows an Aboriginal definition and control of work.

The Aboriginalisation of work is one aspect of the Coombs message that non-Aborigines still do not appreciate just how different are the wider: Aboriginal conceptions of the meanings and purposes of life. Aboriginal consensus government is different; Aboriginal education is different; Aboriginal land-holding and territorial control are different — as well as the better known aspects of Aboriginal religion and spirituality. Partly because the differences are unappreciated, non-Aboriginal society, represented by state and federal governments, does allow Aborigines to follow their indigenous cultural norms. Instead, governments continue to impose their conceptions that what is right and sensible for non-Aborigines must be right and sensible for everyone. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Coombs

maintains, is wrong for Aborigines, not only for the obvious flaws like its tiny voter participation, but because it is in the last resort accountable to the Commonwealth and not to its constituents. Turning photographed black faces on the walls into real black faces behind desks will not alter the fact that ATSIC is not, and cannot, be representative of Aboriginal cultural institutions at variance with standard notions of individual/community values or top down/bottom up decision-making.

There are alternative mechanisms by which Aborigines can form organisations to negotiate with the governments. One is the jointly-based Pitjantjatjara Land Council which, having no direct role in the domestic affairs of the separate peoples which comprised it, was established solely for the "purpose of negotiating a united basis for land rights and their development into a functioning system". The 1981 *South Australian Act* did not require a Tribunal to establish whose land was whose, but merely ascribed the whole region to "those persons who in Aboriginal law and tradition (wherever they may live) have rights in it". Recent events at Maree demonstrate that throwing the ball to Aboriginal groups to determine amongst themselves whose land is whose has its limitations; but Coombs is correct in insisting on the principle that the just, equitable and morally right procedure is to allow Aborigines to choose aspects of European civilisation which they find useful (whether an Act of Incorporation or European schooling) — but also to choose specifically Aboriginal ways of handling disputes or community government both internally and dealing with non-Aborigines.

How optimistic is the author of *Aboriginal Autonomy*? Several non-Aboriginal scholars have reflected that neither the *Mabo* judgment is trouble free in its implications, nor the Native Title legislation in its administration. Coombs argues that the judgment is deficient in a variety of ways, particularly that fiduciary obligations of care and protection might have been unwittingly established by the Crown acquiring sovereignty and radical title — and that national sovereignty itself is not nearly the uncontested and indivisible monolith implied by the judgment. The administration is flawed also, partly because, as Coombs notes, the power of multi-national companies is so great that the strongest national governments must heed their wishes. In Australia, concern for the desires of mining companies has led the government into ill-considered haste, in circumstances where the companies should have been advised to exercise the same patience, and allow for the same degree of chance and fortune in negotiating with Aborigines which they exercise in exploration and predicting future mineral prices. The claim of disabling uncertainty, Coombs argues:

is the product of the continuing unwillingness of many resource-exploiting enterprises to concede that they will have to negotiate with Aboriginal people and accept their right to hire expertise to secure reasonable equality of bargaining power.

This is a wise book underpinned with the continuing theme that non-Aborigines have not yet, despite ATSIC, The Royal Commission, *Mabo*, the Native Title Legislation, and the Social Justice package, come to grips with the *differentness* of Aboriginal culture. We're trying, but we will continue to botch things until we grasp the nettle of cultural difference.

Absent in the book is a theme which Coombs used to ponder at the time of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee in the 1980s. Non-Aborigines may continue

to balk at cultural difference unless they can see gains for themselves. Altruism is a rare commodity in a world of many complex issues besides indigent people, and in a nation (not to mention a globe) of diminishing economic resources, non-Aborigines are likely to ask — is there anything in the *Mabo* judgment for us?

Coombs told me, in an interview in about 1983,

We've become accustomed to think of our occupancy of the land as legal, justified and secure. I think, again, each of those assumptions can be brought into doubt. And therefore I think we have to consider that the kind of security we feel in the occupation of the land at the present time, may very well be called in question, certainly by Aborigines, perhaps by White people here, but also by nations overseas. ...And therefore if we wish to feel secure, and for our children and grandchildren to feel secure, then I think we have to establish the justification, the legitimacy of our occupation. And that means the legitimacy of our relationship with the original inhabitants, the Aborigines.

That argument in favour of the Treaty was lost amidst the wider and well-founded concerns concerns of what might be the benefits of a Treaty to Aborigines. I'm sorry that it was because, from my memory, it was only Coombs who was suggesting that the non-Aborigines were coming to the reconciliation agreement from a position of moral weakness.

In the last decade that position hasn't changed. That worries me and perhaps many others who, while mindful of the many reasons why Aborigines may not want to concede anything in return for wrongs done to them, are also mindful of the precariousness of our own moral position. Can non-Aborigines ever say that we belong here as the Aborigines do? I believe that the question is as appropriate now as it was in 1983, though the answer is no clearer. It is our own elders like Coombs who from their authority and vast knowledge can help reopen this neglected question. Can we call on him for one last effort?

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