

# SUPPORT A TREATY WITH ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS



In 1979, the National Aboriginal Conference (made up of Aboriginal representatives from around Australia) called for a Treaty to be negotiated between the Aboriginal people and the Commonwealth Government.

Since then, a growing number of white Australians have responded, and the Aboriginal Treaty Committee has been formed, headed by Dr. H. C. Coombs (former Governor of the Reserve Bank). Treaty groups now exist throughout Australia.

The proposal is supported in principle by the Federal Government.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY A TREATY?

A Treaty is –

- an agreement based on a recognition of prior ownership of the land by an indigenous population.
- a signed contract between peoples, signifying their respect for one another;
- a formally concluded and ratified agreement between nations or sovereigns.



Such Treaties were made with the Maoris of New Zealand, the Indians of North America, and the people of Papua. Although they were often broken, the fact that Treaties **were** made provided a basis for later legislation which safeguarded the rights of the original inhabitants.

In Australia, no Treaty was ever made with the Aborigines or Islanders. Prior ownership has not been recognised, and as a result they suffer great disadvantage.

## WHY A TREATY AT THIS STAGE ?

In the next few years, as we move towards our bi-centennial celebrations in 1988, we will be reviewing the history of this nation. We need to own our failures, as well as our successes.

We are all, to a greater or lesser extent, newcomers to this country. However belated it may be we should recognise our debt to the original owners of Australia, and begin now to negotiate with their descendants to ensure for them a hopeful and secure future.

## WHY IS A TREATY NECESSARY?

After two centuries of European oppression, the Aboriginal and Islander people still survive, despite –

- **dispossession** (land, which gave spiritual meaning to their lives, was taken from them);
- **extermination** (out of a population of 300,000 in 1788, fewer than 60,000 remained by 1930 – just 1 in every 5);
- **exploitation** (they have been used as cheap rural labour, and have suffered sexual abuse);
- **exclusion** (they have been confined on reserves for their "protection", cut off from the mainstream of life);
- **assimilation** (they have been expected to deny their cultural heritage and become "like us");
- **discrimination** (they endure rejection at every level of community life);
- **legislation** (programmes seriously limiting their basic freedoms continue to be imposed "for their own good").



Today, the remnants of the ancient tribes are –

- the most economically depressed
- the most unemployed
- the most imprisoned
- the most neglected in health services
- the most powerless
- the most discriminated against

group in the Australian community.

Only a Treaty, which would carry Constitutional authority, can give Aborigines a **measure of compensation for past wrongs, and real hope and security for their future.**

## WHY SHOULD WE TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ACTIONS OF OUR ANCESTORS?

Australia is our home, but we can't close our eyes to the devastating effect our settlement has had, and continues to have, on the original inhabitants.

We have inherited the **ADVANTAGES**:

- **PROSPERITY**, based on —
  - the natural resources of this land;
  - the use of cheap Aboriginal labour in rural industries.

They have inherited the **DISADVANTAGES**:

- **POVERTY**, based on —
  - loss of land, livelihood and culture;
  - subjection to discriminatory white rule.



Prepared by:

Brisbane Aboriginal Treaty Committee,  
(White Support Group), Phone 221 9398  
G.P.O. Box 1474, **BRISBANE**, QLD. 4001.

Canberra address — P.O. Box 1242,  
**CANBERRA CITY**, A.C.T. 2601

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Read: "IT'S COMING YET"

An Aboriginal Treaty within Australia  
between Australians.

Available from the Treaty Committee  
and all leading bookstores.

## WHY AREN'T GOVERNMENT POLICIES ENOUGH?

Despite Government initiatives in recent years, Aborigines and Islanders are still disadvantaged because

1. **Their affairs are controlled by white-imposed structures and laws.** In Queensland, the Acts still control every aspect of life for those on reserves.
2. **Their requests for self-determination are not being heard.**
3. **Their lives are complicated by different and often conflicting policies at State and Federal levels.** The Federal Government has not acted on the mandate from the Australian people in the 1967 referendum to assume total responsibility for Aboriginal affairs.
4. **Their well-being is dependent on the good will of the Government of the day.** Expenditure on Aboriginal and Islander affairs is not based on real need, but fluctuates from one budget to the next.
5. **Their interests do not always prosper under Government programmes.** A significant proportion of funding is used to maintain the bureaucracy; **projects are often inappropriate and introduced without consultation with the people concerned.**

"We can neither undo the past nor compensate for it. The most we can do is to give the living their due."

W.E.H. Stanner

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Write to your Federal and State members and let them know your views;
- Send your donation to the address overleaf;
- Write to the Committee for more information.

Name .....

Address .....

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## WHAT WOULD THE PROPOSED TREATY DO?

- recognise prior Aboriginal ownership;
- take the lives and future of Aboriginal and Islander people out of the uncertain realm of politics, and provide permanent, binding **Constitutional** protection;
- provide a legislative yardstick, and machinery for appeal against discrimination and exploitation;
- admit past injustices and establish the principle of restitution;
- re-direct resources "without strings attached", to give Aborigines and Islanders economic independence and security – thus putting into practical effect the ideal of self-determination;
- halt continuing aggression (e.g., mining development on Aboriginal land without their full and free consent);
- restore dignity and pride to a group of people who have a valuable contribution to make to Australian society;
- avoid growing international criticism.

## HOW, AND WHEN, WILL THIS COME ABOUT?

For a Treaty to carry adequate protection and authority, **there must be Constitutional change**. This can only come about through the Federal Parliament, acting on behalf of the Australian people. It would then be "the word of the nation."

Terms for a Treaty would be drawn up by the Aboriginal and Islander people through their elected representatives (the N.A.C.) and the Federal Government.

However, a great deal of informed community discussion needs to take place before any change can, or should, be made.

The proposal deserves your serious consideration.

## **AIATSIS CENTRAL FILE**

AIATSIS, 80/25

Pamphlet "Support a Treaty with Aboriginal Australians" c. 12/11/80  
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