

## 7 'Learn to Live Together in a New Way, With Real Equality at Last'

It should be made clear that, in general throughout Australia, Aborigines do not see a *lasting* merit in any political party, when Aboriginal issues are at stake. The records of all political parties have been disappointing indeed. Very often the Aboriginal issue has been used for party political advantage. When the cause has been espoused with idealism and some determination, as by Labor in 1972, it has produced an electoral reaction in the end, and the responsible political party has suffered. So the only real hope for Aboriginal Australians is not in political parties, but in the conviction of their fellow Australians. Political parties will only then be able to make Aboriginal policy bi-partisan. To this end the Aboriginal Treaty Committee is working.

There are hopeful signs, everywhere. Rowley has reported how a committee of neighbouring pastoralists volunteered to assist without cost the Aboriginal management of Noonkanbah cattle station in WA. They have done this, although other pastoralists feel that 'good land shouldn't be wasted on black fellas'. As Galarrwuy Yunupingu told the National Press Club in Canberra on 10 November 1977, 'These are difficult days for all of us, Aboriginal Australians and European Australians, as we learn to live together in a new way, with real equality at last. We Aborigines want to share this land with you and we ask you to share it with us, openly, and without fear or secret dealings'.

This is a common, deep concern among Aboriginal Australians, who have good reason to distrust all other Australians. Negotiations for a Treaty, even the Treaty itself will not be the end of the long life which all Australians will have to live together. An old Aboriginal once said what he thought of white people: 'very clever people, very hard people, plenty humbug'.

Another Aboriginal, Mula, who was a Murinbata in the Northern Territory, said:

'White man got no dreaming,  
Him go 'nother way.  
White man, him go different.  
Him got road belong himself.'

Must it really be like this, after all these bitter years? There has been, and there is much real friendship and love between Aboriginal and other Australians. We do less than justice to many men and women, past and present, if we do not recognise their personal experience of our common humanity.

Rowley believes 'the Aboriginal case rests almost completely on the universal ideas of justice and morality. A "Treaty" could be no more than a declaration of intent to legislate for compensation and for transfer of property in accordance with just principles, with the details to be negotiated'. (*Aboriginal Policy 1978*, an appendix to the Australian Labor Party's discussion papers,

**Photograph** Joseph Watt Bunbidgee, a Lardil clansman from Mornington Island, explains his dancing to children at Red Hill Primary School in Canberra, in October 1974. *The Canberra Times*

published in 1979 by the Australasian Political Studies Association.)

In the final chapter (written in 1972) of his new book *White Man Got No Dreaming*, Stanner asks himself 'After the Dreaming — Whither?' and he concludes:

If you study carefully the words used in any one of our formal statements of policy towards them you will not find anywhere two things said simply and clearly. The first is that we injured Aboriginal society and owe just recompense to its living members. The second is that what we will do now for them we will do in recognition of their natural rights as a distinct people, not in expression of our sufferance of them, or of our acceptance of them if they will copy our ways. I think these words, if said in the Parliament of the Commonwealth, on behalf of the whole nation, might make a difference.

The effect could be to make more negotiable what we will have to negotiate, anyway, if there is ever to be a true settlement. I wonder why we hesitate?

Perhaps one fundamental reason for our hesitation is the entrenched belief that, whatever we do, Aboriginal society will remain hopeless, in all senses of that word. This widespread belief needs to be recognised and accepted as one based on evidence. The writer has been in enough settlements, on Aboriginal freehold land, which are self-governing, to know that land, autonomy and a regular income are not enough to make any Aboriginal society either perfect or even 'better' than our own general Australian society.

If there is one person more damaging to the position of Aboriginal Australians than a racist, it is the person who idealises and romanticises them.

It is dangerous, and wrong, to imply that if Aboriginal Australians now negotiate a satisfactory Treaty, with firm provisions for land, compensation and self-government, all will be well. Such a belief is far too ingenuous and it will cause profound disillusion. Not even independence brings perfection to any society or individual. We live in a fallible world and it needs to be remembered that Aborigines too are fallible, with the usual quota of unpleasant people. In addition, they have an unusual quota of people who have been crippled, emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically. So their recovery will be difficult and slow.

Moreover, just as Australians in general disagree in often damaging ways about how to organise their society and may be Liberal, Country Party or Labor, or anything else in their political views, so do Aborigines disagree. Their disagreement may well increase, as they get more power over the organisation of their own society. Their leaders, like ours, will criticise each other, often harshly.

It is likely that Australian doubts about the wisdom of a Treaty will increase as

**Photograph** Notices on board in the Daly Waters Hotel, Northern Territory, in 1978. Evidence of the white "Back Lash" against Aboriginal land ownership.  
*Arthur Palmer c/- Northern Land Council*

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the debate develops on both sides, Aboriginal and Commonwealth, about what the Treaty should contain. Some will deliberately magnify the doubts and exploit the differences and divisions, because they will remain hostile to the whole concept. Then Members of Parliament, upon whom the Commonwealth's resolve depends, will become anxious, hesitant, even hostile. In the last resort, MPs, both state and federal, must become convinced that a very large number of their constituents want a good Treaty. MPs must become convinced that their seats will not be in danger simply because they support a Treaty. (They remember that Labor failed to win one single seat in the Northern Territory's Legislative Assembly election in November 1974, because of the hostility against its Aboriginal policy.)

This means that there must be a change of heart within Australia, and it must be a heart beat which our political representatives can feel and hear. Nothing less will do, if negotiations are to have purpose and the settlement is to be sound. The Aboriginal demand for justice remains insistent. On 7 August this year a group set up tents on Capital Hill in Canberra, site of the new federal Parliament House. They called for a Bill of Rights and a Treaty.

Readers of this book are asked by the Aboriginal Treaty Committee to support with determination paragraph 5 of the draft resolution for the consideration of the Commonwealth Parliament, namely that the Treaty 'should contain provisions relating to the following matters:

- 1 The protection of Aboriginal identity, languages, law and culture.
- 2 The recognition and restoration of rights to land by applying, throughout Australia, the recommendations of the Woodward Commission.
- 3 The conditions governing mining and exploitation of other natural resources on Aboriginal land.
- 4 Compensation to Aboriginal Australians for the loss of traditional lands and

**Photographs Above:** Early in the morning of 7 August 1979 a group of Aborigines pitched a tent on Capital Hill, Canberra, on the site of Australia's new Parliament House. They called for a Treaty and a Bill of Rights and described themselves as 'The National Aboriginal Government'. From right to left, Kevin Gilbert, poet and author, Cec Patten, son of the shearers' leader, Jack Patten, Kevin (who refused to give his second name) and George Rose. Today there are several tents and an office structure. *The Canberra Times*

**Centre:** The National Aboriginal Conference in session in Canberra. Fifth from right is Lyall Munro, the present Chairman. *The National Aboriginal Conference*

**Below:** The first Aboriginal delegation invited to visit China reports at a Sydney airport press conference on its return, 19 November 1972. Chicka Dixon, Lyn Thompson and Ruby Hammond were part of the delegation of nine which spent 26 days in China. They showed films of the violence which occurred when police twice pulled down 'The Aboriginal Embassy' outside Parliament House in Canberra four months earlier. *The Canberra Times*

*'It's Coming Yet...'*

for damage to those lands and to their traditional way of life.

5 The right of Aboriginal Australians to control their own affairs and to establish their own associations for this purpose.

(See Appendix II)

We ask you to take your determination into your work places, into your clubs and societies and churches, into your union and political organisations, into your towns and cities. Take it with you always and talk about it. Form your own committees for a Treaty. Write to your MPs. Write to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Write to State Premiers. Organise petitions to the Commonwealth and State Parliaments.

Many years ago the great conservative political philosopher, Edmund Burke, wrote: 'Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom'. So, a Treaty would be wise, magnanimous and by no means radical.

As the manifesto of the Aborigines Progressive Association declared on 26 January (Australia Day) 1938, after 150 years of European settlement, 'We ask you to be proud of the Australian Aboriginal and to take his hand in friendship'.

William Ferguson, the Aboriginal shearer from NSW, was secretary of that Association. Three years later, in June 1941, when Aborigines were fighting in the AIF and yet many were not even citizens of their country, he addressed the conference of the Australian Labor Party which had just taken office in NSW. He told the conference of the condition of his people and he concluded:

'If there is to be a new deal coming, we want to share it. For God's sake, brothers, don't let us down'.

Ferguson's call still waits for an answer.

As the Scots poet, Robert Burns, wrote (and Ferguson was Scot as well as Aboriginal):

'It's coming yet, for a' that,  
That man to man the world o'er  
Shall brothers be for a' that'.

Are we in Australia to be any less?

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"Its coming yet... : an Aboriginal treaty within Australia between Australians",

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