

The future of the committee

By Dr. H. C. COOMBS

The ATC was established at a time when the impetus for progress towards justice for Aboriginal Australians seemed to be flagging.

The enthusiasm generated by the work of the Woodward Commission on Land Rights and the legislation for the Northern Territory which derived from it seemed, so far as the Commonwealth and State governments were concerned to have been exhausted. The confidence among Aborigines and their friends that increased funding would be steadily forthcoming for self-management programs directed to their improved health and economic independence was being seriously impaired by the budgetary policies of the Fraser Government and the hostility or indifference of most of the States. Among the concerned members of the non-Aboriginal community it seemed that the lack of specific and practicable objectives for which they could work in support of Aborigines could lead to decreasing involvement and a weakening of electoral pressure on governments.

It seemed to those who formed the committee that it was important to find an objective around which enthusiasm, especially among non-Aboriginal Australians, could be generated. In the circumstances of the time such an objective would need to be comprehensive and long-term in character.

It was at this time we became aware of positive proposals emanating from indigenous peoples in other parts of the world for treaties or other forms of agreements with the governments of the nation states within which they lived. Proposals made by the Inuit people of Canada for a kind of treaty which would have established important political social and economic autonomy for those people within their own territory were of special interest. Similarly proposals for a treaty between the Commonwealth and Aborigines had been made in Australia by both Aboriginal and other Australians.

It was these and similar influences that led us to believe that a campaign for a treaty offered a focus for work in the long-term interest of Aborigines — work with which non-Aborigines especially could identify themselves, work which would raise the general level of consciousness about the need for justice to Aborigines and counter the disillusion and apathy the governments' neglect and hostility was generating. Accordingly, after consultation with the NAC and other Aboriginal organisations and groups, it was decided that the committee would be formed to work for a treaty, especially among the non-Aboriginal community but should also act to support initiatives by Aborigines themselves.

Throughout its history the pattern of the committee's work has been the same: first to have the various major issues with which Aborigines are concerned studied by academic and other professional experts — usually through the organisation of conferences, seminars, workshops in universities and similar institutions

bringing Aboriginal leaders and representatives into touch with their work; secondly to make widely known the results of these studies to Aboriginal and other concerned organisations; thirdly to prepare and publish factual statements about major Aboriginal policy issues and developments in the various states; fourthly to mobilise non-Aboriginal support for specific Aboriginal initiatives and campaigns; fifthly to work through parliamentary, departmental and other enquiries to increase government and official understanding of the need for a treaty or a similar instrument with constitutional-like authority as a basis for the status of Aborigines in Australian society.

Generally the committee believes that its work has been valuable: that it has influenced non-Aboriginal attitudes significantly and favourably; that the platforms and programs of all political parties give greater weight to Aboriginal issues; that it has been able to mobilise greater support for independent Aboriginal initiatives. However, the committee believes that the time has come for it to bring its work as a committee to an end.

This is partly because it is no longer possible for its members to sustain the effort they have devoted to the committee's work over the last five years. Also, the resources available to it are limited and we cannot continue to make demands on those who have supported us financially in the past.

The committee plans therefore to wind up its affairs at 30th June, 1983. The next issue of Treaty News will be the last and will present a statement of the committee's financial affairs and outline the arrangements for the control of material, publications, etc., which it has prepared.

We believe the present is an appropriate time for this winding up. With the change of government in the Commonwealth and a number of the States the prospects for a resumption of the impetus that was lost after 1976 are good. Aboriginal organisations, the NAC and the Land Councils in particular have developed political and administrative capacity. In particular the interest of the present Commonwealth Government in exploring the potential of a treaty means that work which the committee has struggled with inadequate resources to perform can now be more effectively undertaken.

The committee believes, however, that its work and experience can and will exercise a continuing influence on events which could lead in due course to a freely negotiated treaty. Accordingly it will publish later this year a book in which its contribution to the ideas and processes involved in the achievement of a treaty will be distilled. While several members of the committee will take part in the preparation of the book it will be written by Judith Wright, one of Australia's greatest writers and a foundation member of the committee.

Aboriginal Treaty Committee Papers

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