

A pamphleteer confesses

When people ask me how I came to get involved with the Aboriginal Treaty Committee and in particular with writing pamphlets on Aboriginal land rights, I always reply 'I ticked a box'. They don't believe me, but it's quite true. I saw one of the Treaty Committee's advertisements asking for expressions of support and to tick the appropriate box if you would be willing to do any of the following . . . I ticked the box labelled 'write short summaries'. The next thing I knew I had a letter from Nugget asking me to write a summary of the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Bill*.

The object of the pamphlet was to produce a summary of the Bill in clear English which could be read by people at all levels of education. My experience in converting the legal language in which it was set out into an easily readable form made me realise that there was a real need for simplified versions of Government reports and Acts of Parliament relevant to land rights (and indeed all areas where ordinary people need information on government proceedings).

Next, I was asked to summarise the Report of the New South Wales *Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly* upon Aborigines. This was a hefty volume of carefully phrased recommendations and transcripts of evidence. The idea was that as the pamphlet summarised recommendations rather than actual legislation, the pamphlet should be aimed at providing information which could be used by Aboriginal communities in a discussion group situation.

After New South Wales came the Northern Territory pamphlet. It developed primarily with Northern Territory Aboriginal readers in mind and also served as a convenient summary for Aborigines and white supporters of land rights throughout Australia. It summarised the main points of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*, setting out what Northern Territory Aborigines were being given, the limitations of the Act compared with the recommendations in Justice Woodward's two Reports, and the procedures to be followed in making claims for land grants.

The next two pamphlets, on the situation in Queensland and Western Australia, were different in nature and more difficult to compile. In these States there is no land rights legislation and therefore no legal documents to summarise. They in-

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involved researching government attitudes and past record, existing regulations and institutions controlling and/or limiting Aborigines' rights to the land they live on, and setting out the demands of the land rights organisations in the two States. In Western Australia, the Noonkanbah affair had to be told and in Queensland the sad story of Aurukun, Mornington Island, the people of Weipa and the Mapoon Mission Settlement demanded space.

Queensland "Deeds of grant in trust" are analysed

With the Queensland pamphlet I learned the frustration of trying to write up-to-date information in a rapidly changing situation. After the pamphlet had been proof-read and was ready to print, Premier Bjelke-Petersen pulled the rug out from under me by announcing that he would offer Aborigines living on reserves 'deeds of grant in trust' to the land. This news was duly incorporated and the pamphlet had just come off the press when he released details of what 'deeds of grant in trust' meant. A Queensland legal expert analysed their implications and an extra page headed "Deeds of grant in trust. What do they mean under the present Land Act?" was printed and slipped into the pamphlet as a sort of 'late night extra'.

My next two efforts were different again, and I regret to report that only one of them got through to the printed version. The Governments of New South Wales and Victoria both circulated drafts of the land rights legislation which they proposed to introduce into their respective State Parliaments.

These I duly summarised to form a basis for local Aboriginal community discussion, and also for white supporters' information. The Victorian proposals summary has been printed, but before the New South Wales pamphlet could be prepared for printing the New South Wales

Bill was introduced into Parliament and passed. Aborigines in New South Wales are not pleased with it, and it falls short of many of the recommendations of the Select Committee which were summarised in pamphlet form.

The last of the series was the Tasmanian land rights pamphlet. This again involved historical research and presented a different set of problems. The so-called 'non existence' of Aborigines in Tasmania had to be refuted, and also it was necessary to document how the possibility of good land rights legislation was missed because of a change of government.

In the sense that they have the same lay-out with a map on the front and are printed in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, the pamphlets form a set. Looked at more closely they vary considerably in detail and emphasis. This is mainly because the situation in each State is different. For instance, there are vast differences between the Northern Territory and Victoria in the amounts of land available and also in the kind of land and rights which will most benefit their Aboriginal inhabitants. Equally there are great differences between the situation in the Northern Territory and neighbouring Queensland. There are also differences in the various State's proposals for funding, administrative procedures, mining regulations and a host of other little details.

In fact the complete set of pamphlets reveals the discrepancies between States and highlights the need for Commonwealth land rights legislation. This will be a mammoth task, but one which Clyde Holding, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, has said the Government will undertake. It will demand great tact and negotiating ability on the part of Commonwealth and State Governments, as well as Aboriginal organisations. Let us hope the job is not rushed and that in the process of finding a formula which is acceptable throughout Australia a great deal of the acrimony and racial misunderstanding which has often attended discussion of land rights issues will be dissipated.

I would like to conclude by thanking Nugget for starting me on my career as a pamphleteer, my fellow Committee members for their help and constructive criticism and especially Professor Charles Rowley who has been a never-failing source of information.

Aboriginal Treaty Committee Papers

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