

THE ABORIGINAL TREATY COMMITTEE

NEWSLETTER [1]

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20 May 1980

Dear Friends, Supporters,

On 26th April 1979, an informal meeting of six people agreed to form a committee to press for a Treaty which would provide 'a kind of constitutional basis for the relationship of Aboriginal Australians to the Commonwealth and Australian society generally, and to provide a focus for *white* political support for the Aboriginal cause' - to quote from a document prepared as a preliminary statement for the Committee by Dr H.C. Coombs. The meeting discussed a draft of a proposed agreement, and a preliminary list of points to be covered, members agreed to contribute towards the cost of contacting a list of possible sponsors, and that Dr Coombs' forthcoming Guest of Honour broadcast on Aboriginal Land Rights would be a suitable first public announcement of the Committee's formation.

At the second meeting, in May, Dr Coombs was elected chairman, Mr Hugh Littlewood secretary, and three trustees were appointed from the committee. A bank account and post-office box were arranged and letters were sent to potential sponsors from a broad spectrum of occupations and political backgrounds.

At the next meeting in July, the response to these letters, from almost two-thirds of potential sponsors, had already provided over \$4,000, and the meeting agreed to place a full-page advertisement in *The National Times* in the following month. It was noted that in April the National Aboriginal Conference had presented the Federal Government with a request for the negotiation of a treaty, and it was agreed to advise all Aboriginal organizations of our own proceedings.

On 19th August the Committee held a press conference in Canberra as a preliminary to the appearance of the advertisement in *The National Times* of 25 August. This provided useful media coverage, and the advertisement itself, which contained a list of sponsors as well as the names of the Committee members, aroused much interest and correspondence, including requests for speakers -

which, as the Committee is made up of voluntary members with jobs of their own, could not always be provided.

Further advertisements were prepared and sent to a number of independent and professional journals. Some of them have agreed to feature this advertisement without charge, others are being paid.

The Aboriginal Treaty Committee is following up this response with letters to hundreds of organizations throughout Australia, and a number of other initiatives. These include organizing regional committees, seminars at universities on various aspects of the Treaty idea, exhibitions (Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, Fred Williams and Neil Douglas, have already volunteered to donate paintings), in order to try to influence and inform opinion all round Australia. In this attempt Dr Coombs has addressed audiences such as Amnesty International (on Human Rights Day), trades unions, and meetings in Brisbane and Perth. While on a visit to England, he discussed the subject of an Aboriginal Treaty with the Director of the Minority Rights Group (a non-government organization with links with U.N. agencies). Other Committee members have also addressed meetings

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In mid-November, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator F.M. Chaney, put out a press statement welcoming the initiative taken by the National Aboriginal Conference with respect to a proposed national agreement between Aborigines and the Commonwealth, to be titled not a Treaty but a 'Makarrata' (a Yolnu word signifying the end of a dispute between communities and between a community and an offender and the resumption of normal relations). While the Committee welcomed Senator Chaney's statement that the N.A.C. was to get Aboriginal opinion on the subject over the following eighteen months, it feels that any agreement concluded between the Commonwealth and Aboriginal representatives must be seen by the Commonwealth government and people as of a similar binding nature to a formally negotiated treaty between peoples.

The Chairman wrote informing the Chairmen of Aboriginal organizations that more than a thousand sponsors from the white community already supported the work of The Treaty Committee.

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By November the response to *The National Times* advertisement had provided sufficient money to cover the costs of a book being prepared by Stewart Harris

on behalf of the Committee, and for a Progress Report advertisement which appeared in *The National Times* at the beginning of December. John Reid volunteered to design and oversee the production of the book, to be titled *It's Coming Yet ...*. There had been widespread discussion of the subject of a possible Treaty in the media, including letters to newspapers, some by Treaty sponsors.

The Committee's financial statement provided to the meeting on 5th December, 1979, showed donations of over \$13,000, against payments of \$6,890 on advertising, postage, and the production of the book to date. This very encouraging response allowed the Committee to arrange for the book to be launched at the National Press Club in Canberra, on 17th January, by Mr Don Dunstan. A great number of reviews and much useful publicity followed the launching - brief quotations from reviews up to the end of February are given below.

Messrs Angus & Robertson Ltd. agreed to handle the distribution of the book, and copies have been sent to all sponsors. There was a first print run of 5,000. Angus and Robertson reported that sales, by April, had been: N.S.W. - 485; Victoria - 214; S.A. and N.T. - 265; A.C.T. - 43; Queensland - 66; W.A. - 51; and none in Tasmania (amazing! Can Tasmanian sponsors at least attempt to get booksellers to stock it?) Retail price is \$6.95. If you have difficulty getting a copy, write to Mr Jim Collier, Sales Manager, Angus & Robertson, 4 Eden Park Estate, 31 Waterloo Road, North Ryde, N.S.W., 2113, or phone him on 02-8872233. More than 600 complimentary copies have been sent by the Committee to Aboriginal organizations and settlements throughout Australia, and to the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and New Zealand. Many Foreign and Commonwealth Diplomats, including Ambassadors and High Commissioners, attended the launching of the book and bought copies for their governments. The launching was televised and broadcast overseas by Radio Australia. On 26th March, the ABC program *Broadband* devoted 45 minutes to the Treaty idea, interviewing a Committee member, the chairman of the NAC, and Kevin Gilbert, the Aboriginal author and spokesman for the 'National Aboriginal Government'.

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Recently, Professor Stanner had to resign from the Committee because of ill health and pressure of work. He was succeeded by Dr Diane Barwick, another anthropologist. Dianne has written a paper entitled 'Making a Treaty: The North American experience'. Write (enclosing a donation to cover postage if possible) to us if you would like a copy. It is now our intention to get together lists of 'resource' material for our supporters. More about this in future.

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Some of the sponsors and supporters are already doing effective work where they live. Local work of this kind is just as important, of course, as anything attempted nationally. In fact, it is the local work which impresses MPs, as they assess how far they can go to support real negotiations and firm commitments in the final terms of a Treaty. Local work, changing opinion in the constituencies, is the best way to overcome the federal/state clash, because federal and state MPs share the same electors. Mrs Betty Thatcher of Tathra has, for example, had a long letter published in the *Bega Daily News*, on the south coast of New South Wales, and Dr Donald Finlay of Tweed Heads has had advertisements for the Committee and its book inserted in three newspapers covering the Queensland Gold Coast and the Northern Rivers of New South Wales. We really appreciate this help and all the other work being done, unknown to us, by sponsors and supporters throughout Australia.

Would you be interested in following Dr Finlay's example? We are sure that many of our supporters have access to local newspapers and newsletters where they could get our message across either as an advertisement or in the form of a letter. If that is not possible why not place a copy of the text (two are attached) on a noticeboard, at your local hall? meeting room? even supermarket!

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We now have four 'bumper' stickers available - these read:

IT'S COMING YET - AN ABORIGINAL TREATY

A MATTER OF JUSTICE - SUPPORT AN ABORIGINAL TREATY

AN ABORIGINAL TREATY HAS MY VOTE

A TREATY NOT CHARITY FOR ABORIGINES

All are authorised by the Committee. They have cost us 10¢ each. Write to us, enclosing at least a 50¢ stamp, for a set. Maybe you have a bright idea about distribution?

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Our sponsor lists have now been organized into general geographic groups (based on postcodes). If you would like a list of the sponsors in your area in order to set up a support group, please let us know.

Thank you all again for your great and encouraging support. We have a long way to go but we are confident that our views shall prevail in this matter of justice.



The Aboriginal Treaty Committee

Here are some quotes from reviews of Stuart Harris' book:

The Advertiser, (Adelaide) 24.1.80: *It is sad but true that Aboriginal Australians are still outcasts in their own land... Their culture has been plundered. Most live in pathetic circumstances, clinging tenuously to what remains of their heritage or to the tinsel and trappings of white civilization. Yet with remarkable dignity and tolerance, they battle on for a place in modern Australia... Committee member, Stewart Harris, succinctly sets out the case for a treaty in a new book, 'It's Coming Yet...' in the rational way of the good historian and journalist which he is.*

The West Australian, (Perth) 21.2.80: *Mr Harris, a former Australian correspondent for The Times of London, has written this brief but telling argument for such a treaty on behalf of the committee as part of a growing campaign... at the very least, the book should stir readers to a thorough re-appraisal of the treatment of Aborigines by white settlers over about 200 years.*

The Courier-Mail, (Brisbane) 2.2.80: *This tract is an impassioned plea to the European to try to redress the wrong he has done to the Black - to enter into a treaty with the Aboriginal to restore not only his land rights, but his dignity... But the message of the book is that it will not come voluntarily from governments, that it will have to be demanded by an enlightened white community.*

The Northern Territory News, (Darwin) 9.2.80: *The best hope for justice where it is denied rests with the Aboriginal people themselves. Where goodwill does not exist, it must be obtained. 'It's Coming Yet' deserves the widest possible readership for that objective alone.*

The Newcastle Morning Herald, 2.2.80: *It is the thesis of this book that only a treaty negotiated and concluded between the Commonwealth and Aboriginal people will give Aborigines a future free from the vagaries of political, bureaucratic and private interests which have affected their lives in ways most other Australian would find intolerable.*

The Canberra Times, 4.2.80: *White Australia's uncaring exploitation of the Aboriginal population from the outset has been matched by a guilty conscience, albeit one that usually has been manifested in insulting paternalism, or the belief (which suited vested interests) that the extinction of the Aborigines as a culture, through assimilation, was in their own best interests... Mr Harris has produced the arguments that will provide the moralistic underpinnings for the essentially political deals that are about to be struck. And perhaps that is as much as can be expected of any such booklet as this.*

Church Scene, February '80: *This book represents the direction and perspective of some of the most informed and responsible members of our community. It is highly recommended, for study in church groups as well as individual reading.*

The Age, (Melbourne) 23.1.80:..*The formal legal machinery should come after the event, after the terms of the treaty have been agreed to, and not as so often, dragged in from the beginning as a technique of discouragement and confusion. The treatment of the legal materials in this book is as clear, competent and effective as everything else...I commend this publication to every white Australian. (Professor Colin Howard).*

David McNicoll in The Bulletin, 12.2.80: *I also regard the proposed Aboriginal Treaty as ludicrous. Having said that, may I praise a most thoughtful and interesting book 'It's Coming Yet...', written by Stewart Harris (formerly of The London Times), which traces the long, bitter story of white-black relationships in Australia and presents a touching assessment of Aboriginal aspirations.*

The Australian, 5.4.80: *It's a slim, readable book packed with history, facts and punchy arguments for the rights of a humiliated and exploited race. (Lyndall Crisp).*

OTHER MEDIA COVER:

Dr Rhys Jones, an original sponsor, to the National Press Club, Canberra, 13.6.79: *The enemy to all Aboriginal initiatives on the Australian frontier is what is called the white backlash - a misnomer since it is merely a version of the old front-lash, present within white Australian society since the days of Governor Phillip.' (Reported in The Australian, 14.6.79).*

The Sydney Morning Herald, 20.8.79 lists signatories to original advertisement, gives account of Committee and quotes Chairman.

The Courier-Mail, The Sun, (Melbourne), The Financial Review, The Age, The West Australian, The Canberra Times, The Australian, The Daily Telegraph, (of same date) all give varying coverage to the advertisement, to the setting up of Aboriginal tents on Capital Hill, Canberra and to Aboriginal demands for a just Treaty.

Professor W.E.H. Stanner, (The Canberra Times, 23.8.79) at launching of his book White Man Got no Dreaming: *'We either make between us a new Australia or sentence ourselves to a Botany Bay in perpetuity.'*

Mr Alan Renouf, former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and a sponsor, (letter to The National Times, 1.12.79): *'The proposed treaty appears to be the best means available of further movement towards giving the Aborigines their due. Its conclusion could only benefit the national standing in the eyes of many countries.'*

Southern Cross, 1.2.80: *This beautifully produced book should be compulsory reading for all Australians. (Southern Cross is the Canberra periodical of the Australian Independence Movement).*

AIM, Aboriginal-Islander Message, April '80 by Sharon Smith: *The author brings an awareness of the enormity of the Aboriginal/Islander struggle for justice and equality by comparisons on an international level...I found the book informative - Stewart Harris takes care to explain the concern of the Treaty and makes an effort to open the minds of all Australians to such an important issue. (This is the first review we have seen in an Aboriginal/Islander publication).*

Te Matakite O Aotearoa, (national Maori organisation, Wellington) 6.2.80: *This small book is crammed with facts, with useful references to other relevant publications, and vivid photographic records. It will doubtless become an historic document; it is also noteworthy as a publication of sombre beauty. It is a mine of information on the long development of the struggle for Aboriginal rights.*

ANU Reporter, (journal of the Australian National University) 29.2.80: *One of the chief merits of the book is its brevity which makes it very much to the point and the message is not lost in masses of paper. The book is meant for a wide readership.*

The Sydney Morning Herald, 17.1.80: *The book argues the case for a treaty between the Commonwealth Government and the Aboriginal people as proposed last year by the National Aboriginal Conference...His book is an articulate contribution to that discussion.*

The National Times, 9.3.80 by Prof. Don Aitkin: *I learned a good deal about the Treaty notion from an excellent small book on the subject, 'It's Coming Yet...'....This is an eloquent but restrained plea for Australians to do something about the injustice...I recommend it...*

Mr Don Dunstan, at book-launching (The Newcastle Morning Herald, 18.1.80): *'Australians... continue to be guilty of treatment of the Aboriginal people which must stand internationally condemned.'*

The Medical Journal of Australia, 9.2.80 was kind enough to publish in a prominent position a letter from one member of the Committee.

The ABC radio station 2CN (Canberra) broadcast an interview with Stewart Harris early in April, and so did the radio station 2XX (also Canberra), which is producing a program series extracted from It's Coming Yet. 2XX is also producing for the Committee a large number of brief, recorded statements from sponsors throughout Australia. These will be used by commercial radio stations, with the help of Phillip Adams.

The Age (Melbourne) wrote a major leading article on 3.4.80, titled 'To Right an Injustice', which argued strongly that: *What is needed is nation wide support for the Coombs' committee's proposal for an Aboriginal-white treaty to provide a framework for satisfying the diverse needs, aims and aspirations of the Aboriginal people.*

Aboriginal Treaty Committee Papers

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Aboriginal Treaty committee Newsletter, No. 1 May 1980
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