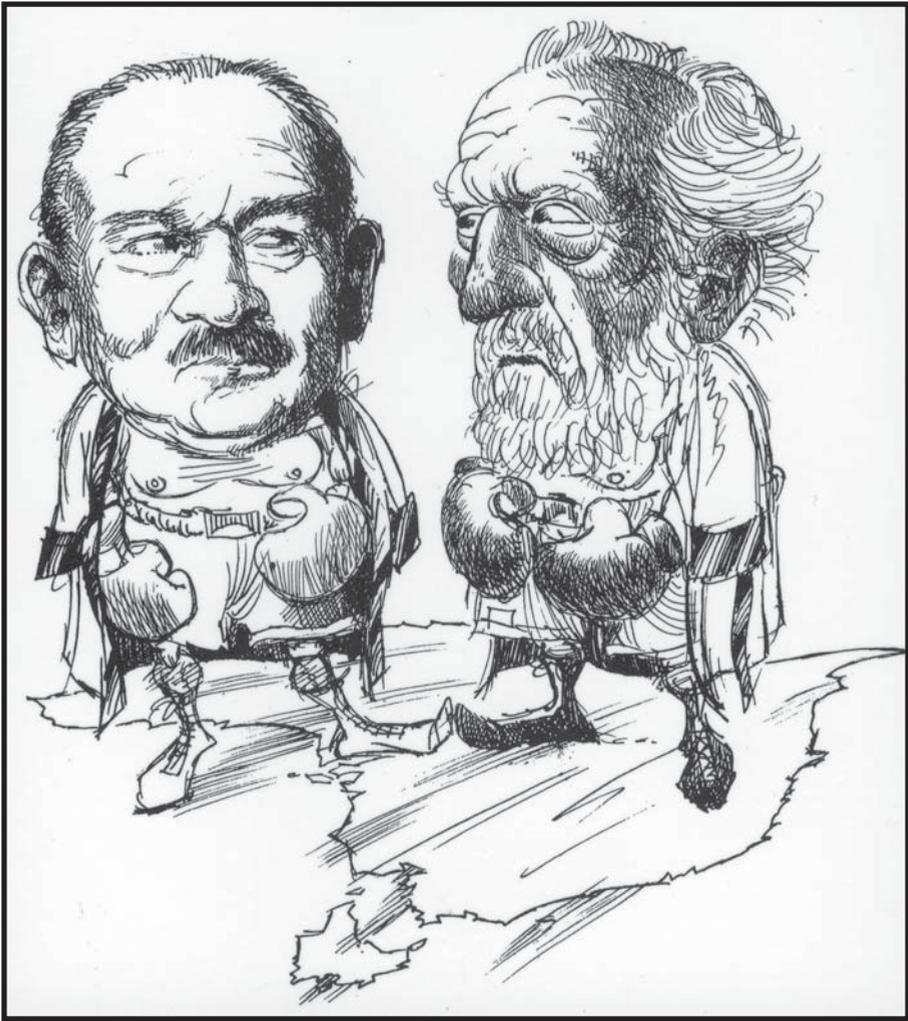


HASLUCK *versus* COOMBS

White Politics and Australia's Aborigines



Geoffrey Partington

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Preface to the 2012 Edition

Geoffrey Partington's monograph *Hasluck versus Coombs* was first published by Quakers Hill Press in 1996 and is now out of print. The Bennelong Society and *Quadrant Online* are delighted to make it available in an electronic edition.

Geoffrey Partington's study of the two dominant themes in Aboriginal policy—assimilation and separation—and their best known advocates—Paul Hasluck and 'Nugget' Coombs—is vital reading for those with an interest in Aboriginal people and policy. Hasluck's approach meant that,

for the future there must be opportunity and encouragement for the coming generations of aboriginal people to become like all other Australians.

By contrast, Coombs' approach reflected

the new post-sixties radicalism [which] found unexpected virtues in traditional Aboriginal cultures and sought their preservation rather than their transcendence.

A great deal has happened in the decade since the book was published. Many academic careers have been built on championing the cause of separation. Many Aboriginal leaders have grown powerful and wealthy because of their 'assimilated' education and their involvement in a 'separate' politics. Fortunately, there are limits to the extent to which others involved in Aboriginal policy can suspend reality.

Once more, Aboriginal policy has started to lean toward the assimilationist path. The path is not, however, like that which characterised earlier phases. Australia is more diverse, so that there is no single identity with which to assimilate. Aborigines have achieved equal legal rights, secured the protection of anti-discrimination legislation and benefited from a myriad of programmes to make good their legal equality. Following 30 years of the struggle for land rights, many also possess land. Aborigines have new powers and possessions.

The path toward assimilation, or more accurately, integration, is unmistakable. It is driven by two factors—intermarriage, and the

triumph of economics over politics. First, nearly 70 per cent of Aborigines marry into the dominant society. Aborigines are choosing to integrate. Second, no amount of political organisation for the defence of culture and rights can overcome a deficit of the skills required to generate wealth.

Too much of Aboriginal policy has been dominated by politics and power, the pinnacle of which was the establishment of ATSIC. Its demise—superficially because of the appalling behaviour of some of the Commissioners, but fundamentally because its purpose was to disburse public funds as political favours—has left the door ajar for the demobilisation of Aboriginal political associations across the board. Land councils and service associations, which serve the same purpose as ATSIC, have proved the downfall of ‘organised’ Aboriginal society. There is an alternative Aboriginal society. It consists of autonomous individuals, their families and any of their associations and networks, operating, not as a siphon for public funds or as a compulsory forum for communal decision-making, but as an expression of unencumbered individual and collective action.

Where Aborigines have been ‘ghettoised’—whether in Redfern NSW, Aurukun Queensland, or Punmu Western Australia—the result has been the same: appalling physical and moral degradation, and entrapment in a culture of despair. The path out of the ghetto lies in changing the behaviour of individuals, not the dominant society.

The question for policy-makers is where and how to assist the process of escape, and, of course, this will take a great deal of assistance from the dominant society. In some cases, the ‘escape’ may be *in situ*. People may find a life that is satisfactory where they live. Others, especially those in remote locations where the prospects for employment in the real economy are poor, will have to leave, or remain poor. The difficulty in such a strategy is the enormous strength in the attachment of individuals to the clan. As one tries to move on to make a better life, others pull the individual back, demanding an excessive share of the spoils. Overcoming the culture of clan and family obligation is an intimate part of integration. Lauding interpersonal obligation as somehow culturally sacred is no different to lauding the culture of poverty which, in the 1960s, the Left denounced, but decades later conceded is a principal cause of intergenerational poverty. Welfare payments have intensified the insularity of Aborigines.

Moving to taxpayer ‘mutual obligations’ as a tool to provide an

incentive to change behaviour is a worthy beginning. The challenge is to reintegrate or integrate Aborigines into the economy through real jobs. Those who perform intellectual gymnastics by arguing that there is an 'indigenous economy', consisting of a mixture of welfare support, mining royalties, community volunteer work and the occasional entry into the labour market, are the enemy of Aboriginal progress. There is no moral basis upon which one group of people should have a different contract with the taxpayer. The receipt of taxpayer funds comes with an obligation to try. Moreover, while taxpayers' funds can be used for a time to keep a group in a separate existence, the laws of economics cannot be suspended indefinitely, or at least not without damaging those caught in the hiatus.

More difficult is to take a strategic view of the future of Aboriginal policy. Where is the next dollar to be invested? Too often, all problems are given equal weight—health, housing, law and order, schooling—as if each is an effective tool for change. For example, the Australian Medical Association regularly demands further health funding so that further interventions may be made into the lives of Aborigines whose behaviour destroys their own health. Housing associations and advocates demand more funds for houses, especially in remote locations, because previous houses have been destroyed. And educators demand more schools in remote locations, when such schools are poorly attended. These and many more demands are made without properly considering whether they will overcome the underlying problems in the communities in question.

Although governments will spend no less on Aborigines, they must think seriously about how best to spend what they have. A recurring amount to each programme is a waste, and 'evening up' provisions and infrastructure to communities of equal population is wasteful and misguided. If the aim of policy is to give Aborigines the means to integrate into the dominant society, it will take positive (funding) and negative (de-funding) incentives to achieve it. Barriers to change—cultural insularity—will have to be dismantled, and gates of opportunity—training and education—will have to be opened. The one has to re-inforce the other. Schooling in a remote location, where the local culture is strong and negative will have little positive impact on the lives of the children. Each small remote Aboriginal settlement cannot be serviced indefinitely if it is the cause of the next generation of despair. To do so is a weak response to need. It is a typically programmatic response of governments to throw in resources across

the board in order to avoid real decisions.

Those Aborigines who have been integrated are healthier and wealthier than those left behind by the experiment in separatism. Permanent taxpayer funded 'choice' is a ruse. Short-term, taxpayer-funded choice as a means to change, on the other hand, is an acceptable investment.

Geoffrey Partington's study has done a great service to the debate on Aboriginal policy. I trust that others will now join in that debate.

January 2012

Dr Gary Johns

Associate Professor

Public Policy Institute

Australian Catholic University

Preface to the 1996 Edition

In looking back over nearly a century of Australian nationhood we can discern some key decision points where a particular protagonist in the enduring political battle scored a decisive victory and swung Australia onto a new (and often impoverishing) path. Some examples of such events are as follows:

1. Sometime after 1907 Sir George Reid, formerly Prime Minister and Premier of NSW, decided that the battle for free trade (and a free labour market) had been lost and that Deakin, Higgins, and their collaborators within the Labor and anti-Labor parties had won. That decision of Reid's led to the fusion of the non-Labor forces, but on terms that meant that free trade was a defeated issue. The consequences of Reid's decision were 80 years of economic decline. The decline was imperceptible at first but it became clear by the 1980s that Australia had lost its ability to compete on world markets, and, slowly, a bipartisan consensus developed that protectionism had to be abandoned.

2. A statute with very great implications for the future of Australia, the *Racial Discrimination Act*, was finally passed by the Whitlam Government in May 1975, despite the Government's lack of a majority in the Senate. It is quite clear from the late Senator Ivor Greenwood's speech (he was then Shadow Attorney) that he would have much preferred to see the Opposition kill the entire Bill. However the Opposition was, at that time, frightened by the idea that if they blocked the Bill, they would have been portrayed by the Government as supporting racial discrimination. So their tactic was to amend the Bill to try to render it harmless.

One part of Ivor Greenwood's speech was prophetic in its foreboding. The date was May 15, 1975:

This is a Bill which seeks to make unlawful conduct which may be described broadly as conduct involving racial discrimination. The Commonwealth, in enacting this legislation, is relying primarily, if not wholly, on S.51, P 1.29 of the Constitution. That is the power to make laws with respect to external affairs.

There is no express power in the Constitution to make laws with respect to race relations, or racial discrimination, or the conduct which is proscribed by this Bill. What the Government is doing is relying upon the fact that there is an international convention for the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination which Australia is ratifying and which, because of the obligations which it is said flow from that ratification, enables it to exercise its powers to make laws with respect to external affairs. If that is the position the external affairs power is becoming a plenary power with virtually no limit whatsoever. It would mean that the external affairs power could be invoked to virtually ignore or repudiate the divisions of power which are contained in the Constitution.

Ivor Greenwood also referred to the likelihood of a High Court challenge to the Bill, Clearly the Opposition, not wanting to kill the Bill dead, in toto, in the Senate, hoped that the High Court would do the job for them.

But the High Court, in *Koowarta* (1982), declined to do so. Stephen, Mason, Murphy, and Brennan JJ outvoted Gibbs CJ, and Aickin and Wilson JJ by the narrowest of margins, 4 to 3, in support of the unlimited plenary nature of the external affairs power.

3. In February 1968, the Federal Liberal MPs chose John Gorton rather than Paul Hasluck as party leader and therefore Prime Minister. It was a decision with long-lasting consequences. One of the most difficult, intractable and expensive social and political problems facing the Australian community today is the problem of increasing Aboriginal poverty, mendicancy, alcoholism, unemployment, domestic violence, suicide, imprisonment, and shortening life expectancy. These indicators of social morbidity have increased greatly in recent times. As Geoffrey Partington points out in this remarkable book, even Dr Colin Tatz has come to admit that there is a crisis in Aboriginal policy Dr Tatz has recently written:

Welfare funds, housing and jobs don't necessarily produce an inner sense of meaning. The oppressive and paternalistic mission and government structures have gone. But so too has much of the reign of social and traditional law, of belief and loyalty systems, of kinship and reciprocity systems, of incest prohibition, of what used to be the best child-rearing and extended family system on earth.

Many communities are not really communities. The social cement has crumbled. Societies have become disordered, and in that milieu, traditional values—of affection, care, respect—have disappeared, replaced by maiming and killing others or self. What can restore coherence, centrality in their lives?...

An enduring answer may be the example of Islam in black America, a movement that did more to bring coherence and pride to Afro-americans than all the millions spent in health, education and welfare.

One does not have to accept Tatz's romantic fantasies of childhood life in Aboriginal Australia, nor his proposal to encourage Australian equivalents of Louis Farrakhan to assume the mantle of Aboriginal leadership, to understand the significance of his comments on the state of Aboriginal society.

The evidence in this book shows that this tragic state of contemporary Australian Aboriginal society is in large measure due to the abandonment of Hasluckian policies of unforced assimilation, patiently pursued with steady success from 1950 until 1968, and the introduction of policies of Aboriginal separatism, which H.C. Coombs was able to persuade a succession of governments to adopt from 1968 onwards.

If Hasluck had been elected Prime Minister, he would have ensured that his Aboriginal policies, which had produced so much success, would have continued. But Hasluck went off to Yarralumla as Governor-General and Coombs was able to supplant him in power and influence with respect to Aboriginal policy. This has had tragic consequences.

In this important book Geoffrey Partington looks at the available materials relating to the policies and ideas of these two important Australians and discovers a rich lode of conflicting ambitions, intellectual contradictions and deep-seated confusions. It is a book we sorely need at this time.

Peter Howson

Federal Minister for the Environment,
Aborigines and the Arts, 1971–72

About the Author

Geoffrey Partington is a history honours graduate and M.Ed. of Bristol University, a sociology and economics honours graduate of London University, from which he also received the Post Graduate Certificate in Education and the Academic Diploma of Education, and a Ph.D. in politics from the University of Adelaide. He was a teacher, headmaster and Local Education Authority education officer in England before he came to Australia in 1976 to join the School of Education of Flinders University of South Australia. Since retirement from there in 1994 he has been a visiting scholar in the University of the South Pacific in Fiji and carried out major surveys in New Zealand of the proposed social studies syllabus in the new national curriculum, and of teacher education there. Dr Partington has seven books and over 200 published articles to his credit since he left England in 1976. His most recent book before this was *The Australian Nation: Its British and Irish Roots* (Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Press), published in 1993.

A Note on this Edition

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Introduction

Before 1788, the great continental island we now call Australia contained many peoples, with different languages and much reciprocal hostility, even though they all shared a similar way of life and culture. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody acknowledged that before contact 'Aboriginal Australia was not one "nation", it was many'.¹ By contrast the principal slogan behind the Australian Federation movement at the end of the nineteenth century was 'one nation for one continent'.

This book examines changing government policies since Federation towards the accommodation of Aborigines within that 'nation'. Three main phases are identified. In the early part of the century, as in the late nineteenth century, most other Australians thought Aboriginal groups were disappearing as a result of unstoppable historical forces—demographic, political, economic and cultural—and advocated segregation to ensure protection against exploitation and undue suffering. During the middle third of the century, as it became clear that Aborigines were not becoming extinct, assimilationist policies were widely adopted which sought to provide common laws and conditions for Aborigines and non-Aborigines wherever this was feasible. During the final third of the now almost completed century since Federation, there was a reaction against assimilationism in favour of what its advocates termed Aboriginal autonomy and self-government and its critics termed separatism and discrimination of a new type. In the 1990s the most important questions in Australian political life are still whether the Australian continental island should comprise one nation, two nations or many nations, and, if there is to be one nation, what amount of diversity within it is most just and proper.

Sir Paul Hasluck and Dr H.C. ('Nugget') Coombs are taken here as key exponents of the policies which prevailed in the middle and final thirds of the century. The contrast between their policies is all the more striking for the fact that they had much in common person-

ally. Coombs and Hasluck were Western Australians of similar age, born in 1905 and 1908 respectively, and in addition were old friends. They were both intelligent and talented men, who became, in their different ways, paragons of 'white politics'.

The book first considers the overall careers and general outlooks of these two men. Separate treatment is given to their very different perspectives on the Aboriginal past. Then follows an examination of ideas and policies during the three main phases identified in Aboriginal policy: the pre-assimilationist, assimilation, and post-assimilationist periods. This is followed by consideration of the implications of assimilationism and its rejection in key areas such as land rights, economic activity, education, health, and law and order. The book concludes with some reflections on the implications of past policies, assimilationist and anti-assimilationist, for the future.

Endnote

- 1 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, 1991, volume 2, page 26.

1. Backgrounds and Outlooks

Hasluck's parents were full-time members of the Salvation Army and of very conservative social and political, as well as moral and religious views, but Hasluck disassociated himself early from his parents' opinions, although without occasioning any major family conflict. He continued throughout his life to respect the great positive contribution made by Christian belief to the development of an Australian nation. According to Lloyd Ross, a leading thinker of the Australian Left, Hasluck was described by Coombs in 1942 as 'just another one of those nineteenth-century liberals'. Hasluck realised that 'Coombs used the term as one of disparagement', but was happy to apply it to himself.¹ Hasluck had a deep respect for the liberal-constitutional society developed pre-eminently in Britain after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. He was very conscious that this was one of the few societies to combine political power and economic efficiency with individual freedom, to find ways of replacing rulers without violent revolution and the imprisonment, exile or death of those replaced, and to make possible ongoing debate between conservative 'forces of order' and liberal 'forces of change'. He appreciated that there was much that was worth conserving and much that needed to be changed. He believed that the rule of law in a civil society had been developed by the British comparatively recently and by trial and error. Hasluck had confidence that other peoples, including Aborigines, could in time follow in the same path. When a prominent journalist in Perth during the 1920s and 1930s, Hasluck was considered undogmatic and middle-of-the road politically. There was little surprise expressed when John Curtin, then Leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Federal Opposition, but also a former journalist colleague of Hasluck, urged him to enter the public service in the early years of the War.

Hasluck provided several authoritative articulations of the assimilationist approach to Aboriginal questions, most notably his 1988 *Shades of Darkness: Aboriginal Affairs 1925-65*.² His great influence as a Commonwealth minister, especially as Minister for Territories,

in Menzies' Governments from 1951 until 1966, together with his formidable intellectual capacities, enabled him to advance assimilationist policies in the Northern Territory, and to encourage similar steps in the States, even though his constitutional powers were limited. On 17 December 1967, Harold Holt, Menzies' successor, was drowned at Portsea. Sir John McEwen took over as Prime Minister until the Liberal Party could find a new leader, and on 9 January 1968, the Liberal Party entrusted the Prime Ministership to John Gorton rather than Hasluck. According to Alan Reid, Hasluck might well have become Prime Minister had he been willing to make one telephone call during the frantic lobbying that preceded the ballot.³ Had Hasluck become Prime Minister, assimilationist policies might have been pursued for a significantly longer period.

Like Hasluck, Coombs was a graduate of the University of Western Australia. After graduation he studied economics at the London School of Economics and enjoyed leisure time with Hasluck, also studying in London, and his recently married wife, Alexandra. Coombs was appointed, just before the War broke out, as Economist to the Commonwealth Bank. The two men joined the public service in the early years of the War, Coombs becoming Economist to the Commonwealth Treasury, while Hasluck, on the recommendation of John Curtin, joined the Department of External Affairs in Canberra. Hasluck and Curtin had both been active members of the Western Australian Branch of the Australian Journalists' Association before the War. As a result of following Curtin's advice, Hasluck spent the war years under Dr H. V. Evatt, largely occupied in drawing up possible Australian policies once the war ended. Hasluck worked amicably with Evatt in Canberra and accompanied him to the San Francisco Conference which drew up the Charter of the United Nations Organisation. Evatt appointed him as head of Australia's United Nations Mission, which entailed his speaking for Australia in several UNO organs, including the General Assembly. During his two distinguished years in this role, Hasluck found his work frequently frustrated by what he regarded as devious tactics employed by Evatt in Canberra and decided against a permanent career as a diplomat. Hasluck returned to the University of Western Australia as a Reader and was soon invited to serve as the Commonwealth's War Historian. Then in 1949 he was invited by the Liberals in Western Australia to offer himself for pre-selection for the seat of Curtin, named after his recently deceased friend, for the House of Representatives. Evatt's

rise to the leadership of the ALP may well have contributed to Hasluck's decision to enter federal politics on the opposite side, despite his previous distance from party politics. Over thirty years later, in memoirs generally marked by generosity towards people of contrary political opinions to his own, Hasluck was still aghast at Evatt's 'inordinate ambition' and other 'glaring defects, such as his dishonesty, his bitter envy and hate towards rivals, and his "tantrums" (very considerable) when he was disappointed or foiled'.⁴ After election Hasluck soon achieved Cabinet rank and found himself responsible as Minister of Territories for that large proportion of Australia's Aborigines who were in the Northern Territory.

Coombs was advanced by Labor and non-Labor governments alike. After impressing Ben Chifley, Treasurer in the 1941 Curtin ALP Government, Coombs became wartime Director of Rationing and then Director-General of Post-War Reconstruction, and Governor of the Commonwealth Bank. Menzies retained him as Governor of the Commonwealth Bank, despite strenuous opposition from the party room; and, when the Bank was reorganised in 1960, made him Governor of the Reserve Bank and Chairman of the Reserve Bank Board. In 1967, Prime Minister Harold Holt made him Chairman of a three-man Australian Council of Aboriginal Affairs, a position he retained when in 1968 he moved out of the Reserve Bank, but became Chancellor of the Australian National University and Chairman of the Council of the Arts. Alan Reid noted that Sir William McMahon used Coombs as 'ideas man and guru' and hoped he would continue in that role during the 1972 election campaign. When Prime Minister, McMahon took Coombs with him to Washington as special adviser.

Gough Whitlam considered it a major coup when he persuaded Coombs to become his personal special adviser, since, he said:

I've always respected Dr Coombs. I don't think there is any economist in the last quarter of a century who has been so impeccable or infallible. You can't recall an economic issue on which Coombs was wrong.⁵

On the other hand, Coombs failed to impress Sir John McEwen, despite some shared opinions on tariffs and industry policy. McEwen once told Dr Alan Westerman, 'whatever happens in the future, doc, always remind me to disregard Coombs's advice'.⁶ The Arts Council was frequently attacked for inefficiency during Coombs' chairmanship. Alan Reid was not the only observer to consider it 'ironical' that Whitlam subsequently appointed Coombs to head a Royal Commission to probe into the efficiency of the Public Service.⁷

Coombs confessed that in 1967, when he became Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, he 'had no previous professional or administrative experience with Aborigines', although as a trainee teacher in Western Australia he had 'encountered two or three part-Aboriginal children' in his first class. 'other issues soon submerged' the 'embryonic concern' for Aborigines he felt at that time.⁸ He made no mention of Aborigines in the six pamphlets on *Australia in a New World* produced by the Australian Institute of International Affairs in 1944, or in similar publications to which he contributed at that time, and his department made no plans or proposals for the post-War future of Aborigines. Charles Perkins claimed that Coombs, when he first met him in Canberra, 'would have known as much about Aborigines as I know about flying to the moon'.⁹ Yet Michael Dodson, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, has described Coombs as 'the whitefella's most senior Elder'¹⁰ and his energetic attention to Aboriginal affairs since 1967, together with his influence on Australian governments and academic institutions made him a powerful advocate and a suitable representative of the anti-assimilationist position.

Hasluck said of Coombs when they were young men in London:

His conversation was elevated with the incense of Keynesian economics and the tinkling bells of Laski, while the choir chanted of economic and social factors and the swinging censers of modern thought drove off the evil spirits of banking.... The management of this and the management of that were to be our salvation. Social justice would end all disparity.¹¹

Coombs' dislike of 'the capitalist system' was thus of very long standing, but, like most of capitalism's critics before the 1960s, social-democratic or Marxist, his main complaint was that the system restricted technological and economic development. It was much later in life, after he had resigned his leading positions in the public service and the Commonwealth and Reserve Banks that Coombs denounced development as such on social, environmental and resource-depleting grounds. Then he argued that, 'The increased incomes and wealth from development are concentrated among the owners of property and investable funds, and their influence on the pattern of production does not reflect the desires or needs of the community generally'.¹² In so far as there might be any benefit, Coombs held that it 'goes first to those involved in the new production as proprietors, providers of financial capital, organisers, workers, sellers of equipment, materials and specialist services and so on'.¹³

Coombs commended the 'Club of Rome' for drawing 'attention to the limits to growth imposed by the now obviously finite natural resources'.¹⁴ Speaking in 1972 of resource prices he prophesied:

There is certain to be resistance to dramatic increases in prices which would be seen as threatening accepted standards. Furthermore, where resources and the industries using them are privately owned, increased prices limiting their use are unlikely to be imposed voluntarily. However, if the community could be convinced that effective control was essential, the task would not be impossible. Many of the critical resources—oil, coal, minerals—are in most societies already the property of the State, and others could presumably be made so by legislative act and the terms of their use legislatively controlled....

A possible institutional structure would be a legislatively established 'Scarce Resources Corporation' in which were vested, for the purpose of conservation, all supplies of specified resources, known and as yet unknown.¹⁵

Here Coombs expressed his consistent preference for decisions made in the name of the 'community' over those which individuals make. He believed in 1972 that it was not only a fact that in most societies major resources were owned and exploited by the state, but that Australia should join them. There can be little doubt of the sort of person he had in mind to participate in, perhaps to chair, the 'Scarce Resources Corporation' in Australia.

Coombs conceded possible disadvantages to his ideal society of 'stable' productivity and population:

Firstly, that part of the standard and quality of life which is provided by material goods and possessions would almost certainly be poorer. Commodities would be fewer and markedly more expensive. To this extent the transition would involve a loss of standards. To some extent this loss may be reduced by the effects of the ecologist's prescription on population, which would need to be stabilised and in many countries reduced....

At the level of the individual and the family, judgement becomes more difficult. A community with constant or falling population will have many families with no children or with only one child. Families of more than two would be unusual, and more than three would probably have to be regarded as socially scandalous....

The reduction in the quantity of material goods produced would free resources which could be used, for instance, to reduce pollution and to protect other living species.¹⁶

Coombs thus anticipated the family policies of the People's Republic of China, a country whose catastrophic environmental record he was able to ignore, together with those of other command economies world-wide.

By 1985, Coombs conceded that 'We are not, as the 1972 Club of

Rome report feared, within imminent danger of these resources being exhausted',¹⁷ but he still claimed that 'it is impossible not to accept that owners of these resources are in a position to demand higher prices and a greater share of the gross national product'.¹⁸ Yet real prices of most of these resources were then falling rather than rising. In 1979, it was perhaps possible to defend the view that 'Every barrel of oil taken out of the ground makes the next barrel more costly',¹⁹ but not in 1990, when Coombs reproduced that claim without demur or modification. Coombs continued to hold it as 'essential truth that because the world's resources are exhaustible, unlimited growth is as much a contradiction of natural law as perpetual motion'²⁰ and still believed that supplies of oil and comparable resources, are 'uncomfortably close to exhaustion'.²¹

In Coombs' vision, the population of Australia, like the rest of western society, was 'encapsulated into factories, offices, shopping centres, into suburban and city dwellings, with their peculiar forms of personal isolation and loneliness'.²² For Coombs, the mining industry epitomised the evils of Australian society. He denounced 'the agenda of the multinational and national corporate sector, led by resource-hungry pastoral and mining enterprises, which has become the instrument to complete the dispossession of Aborigines'.²³ He claimed, in 1991, after eight Hawke-Keating years, including uranium mines restrictions and bans on mining at Coronation Hill and other major sites:

The Northern Territory legislation was met with great hostility by the mining companies. They resented the impact on their profits of the need to share their proceeds with Aboriginal traditional owners and they especially resented the use of their payments to support land councils which were showing that in negotiations they could mobilise expertise and bargaining capacity to match those of the companies themselves. Highly organised and expensive campaigns based upon material which many observers found distasteful were stark examples of the mining industry's capacity to resort to 'humbug' in defence of their depredations.... An aspect of the political campaigns being conducted on behalf of the mining industry is the frequent misuse of statistical information to exaggerate the contribution of the industry to the Australian economy.... It is characteristic of the skilful use of 'humbug' by our new corporate colonisers that they have been able to dominate our governments, their bureaucracies, the media and political organisations....²⁴

The failure of most Australians to accept this account was because:

...Australians seem mesmerised by the prospects of mineral exploitation. This is despite the obviously finite capacity of these resources, and despite

the appalling history of the mining industry in its damage to the environment: in its contempt for the welfare and values of the people of the regions where it has worked; in the social costs it imposes on the community; and in the hazards of uncertainty to which its activities expose the community's future.²⁵

Coombs warned an audience in 1985 not to 'think that such situations cannot now arise because of improved environmental law and its enforcement', since 'current disputes in the Northern Territory involving environmental issues in both the bauxite and uranium industries would show this belief to be mistaken'. Although Coombs declared it 'impossible to assess accurately, in advance, the seriousness of environmental risks created by large mining projects', he was convinced that 'in many instances there is a real and finite risk of damage of disastrous proportions'.²⁶ In 1985, Coombs was predicting a calamity at Roxby Downs, a mining development he utterly abhorred. No such disaster has yet occurred.

There is, of course, no necessary connection between, on the one hand, belief in managerial socialism and detestation of market-driven societies and, on the other, support for autonomous or separate status for indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. Indeed on a world scale the two positions have been found in conflict with each other as least as often as in conjunction, as will be testified by numerous groups such as Tibetans seeking independence from China. It was only after the Soviet Union and other states of 'real socialism' began in the late 1950s and 1960s to lose their attraction for radical western intellectuals, that large numbers of the latter turned to the rights of indigenous peoples and to environmental protection as major issues in the struggle against the capitalist societies in which they lived. In Australia, the main thrust of the Left before the 1960s was to help emancipate Aborigines from the backwardness imposed by ancient customs and superstition, but the new post-sixties radicalism found unexpected virtues in traditional Aboriginal cultures and sought their preservation rather than their transcendence. It is in this broad context that the transformation of Coombs into a champion of Aboriginality can perhaps best be understood.

The connection between Coombs' dislike of capitalism and his opposition to assimilationist policies was thus contingent, not necessary. It was also an example of the common assumption that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Coombs was opposed to further mining and other forms of economic development and he

assumed that Aborigines were generally of the same mind. He might have supported Aboriginal autonomy even if Aborigines as a whole had adopted pro-development policies, as is very possible many will in the future, particularly if they find themselves with greater self-determination but less financial support from Australian governments. As it happened, he was not faced directly with a choice between them.

Coombs was among the first Australians to look outside the country for a force capable of correcting the ways of elected Australian governments, on whose legitimacy he frequently cast doubts. He considered that Australian governments have merely *de facto* power, since 'no act ceding that right to govern' has been made by Aborigines. He asserted that 'many Aborigines and other Australians believe that in the absence of such an act of cession, [Aboriginal] sovereignty persists morally and in international law'.²⁷ Many more do not believe this, but he has been prominent among those who do. In June 1979, he said in an Australian Broadcasting Commission Guest of Honour series that until the Australian Government negotiated a treaty with the Aboriginal people of Australia, 'our occupancy of this land, our very right to be here, is tainted by the aggression against the Aborigines by which it was established'.²⁸ He also claimed that 'a series of reports by internationally respected bodies, including the World Council of Churches and agencies of the United Nations, shames us before the world. Our name is linked with South Africa and other nations whose lack of respect for human rights is widely condemned.'²⁹ With respect to Australia he was happy to find that 'the Commonwealth's sovereignty and consequently that of the States' was 'qualified also by Commonwealth acceptance of the right of the International Court of Justice to adjudicate certain matters, and by the Crown becoming party to a number of internationally negotiated covenants addressing a wide range of social and economic commitments'.³⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Sir Paul Hasluck, *Mucking About: An Autobiography*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1977, pages 281–2.
- 2 Sir Paul Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness: Aboriginal Affairs 1925–65*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1988.
- 3 A. Reid, *The Gorton Experiment*, Sydney, Shakespeare Press, 1971.4 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991, volume 2, page 26.
- 4 Hasluck, Sir P. (1995). *Light that Time Has Made* (with an introduction and postscripts by Nicholas Hasluck). Canberra: National Library of Australia, page 122.
- 5 A. Reid, *The Whitlam Venture*, Melbourne, Hill of Content, 1976, page 62.
- 6 Reid, 1976, pages 63; 65, n. 19.
- 7 Reid, 1976, page 63.
- 8 H.C. Coombs, *Kulinma: Listening to Aboriginal Australians*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1978, page 3.
- 9 C. Perkins, *A Bastard Like Me*, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1975, page 107.
- 10 H.C. Coombs, *Aboriginal Autonomy: Issues and Strategies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, page ix.
- 11 Hasluck, 1977, page 176. Hasluck refers only to 'a friend', but it is wellnigh certain that Coombs was this friend.
- 12 Coombs, 1994, page 92.
- 13 Coombs, 1994, page 90.
- 14 Coombs, 1994, page 91.
- 15 Coombs, 1990, pages 47–48.
- 16 Coombs, 1990, pages 56–57.
- 17 H.C. Coombs, *The Return of Scarcity: Strategies for an Economic Future*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1990, page 104. This is a collection of papers written over the years 1968 to 1980.
- 18 Yet he sometimes denounced the concept of GNP as spurious. He declared in 1971 (1990, page 56) 'This concept of the gross national product has a specious air of objectivity and, despite its usefulness as a tool of economic management, begs more fundamental questions than it answers.'
- 19 Coombs, 1990, page 28, quoting Barry Commoner's *Human Welfare: The End Use for power*, 1975.
- 20 Coombs, 1990, page 145.
- 21 Coombs, 1994, page xiii.
- 22 Coombs, 1994, pages 4–5.
- 23 Coombs, 1994, page 159.

- 24 Coombs, 1994, pages 103–5.
- 25 Coombs, 1990, page 100.
- 26 Coombs, 1990, page 101.
- 27 Coombs, 1994, page 206.
- 28 Coombs, 1994, page 143.
- 29 Coombs, 1994, page 143.
- 30 Coombs, 1994, page 207.

2. Perspectives on the Aboriginal Past

Hasluck, who accompanied his Salvation Army parents into the West Australian bush, had among his earliest playmates Aboriginal children such as Billy Boolardie, 'Butterballs' Cox, 'Nigger' Chance, 'Kanga' Latham and Paddy Kumunkas, who were respected by Hasluck and the white children because they 'could do so many things better than any of us'.¹ It was to his knowledge of these children, and later of 'more elevated company later', such as Charles Perkins, Sadie Corner, May Miller and Ken Colbung, as persons that Hasluck attributed his basic attitude as a politician and administrator which he defined as follows:

I did not think about a policy for Aborigines as a separate race but rather about the circumstances of various groups of human beings, each of whom had his or her own life, hopes, fears and difficulties and both the right and the capacity to choose.²

As a young man Hasluck, first as a journalist on *The West Australian* and then as a university student, avidly studied all available materials on Aboriginal life, past and present. Among authorities he read on pre-history was the Australian Marxist, Vere Gordon Childe, who became an expatriate in the University of London. As well as his informative articles, Hasluck 'compiled a book, *Winjani's People*, from rough notes and reminiscences of Jesse Hammond', which was published in 1933.³

Hasluck, like Marx, was concerned not only to understand the world but to change it. He was a founding member of the Australian Aborigines Amelioration Association and was active in the State Nomenclature Committee, which advised on suitable Aboriginal place names. He also collaborated with Kate Clutterbuck, a Sister of the Anglican Church who worked in the Parkerville Children's Homes, in setting up additional Children's Homes to provide mixed-race orphans and children at risk with the opportunity to gain full membership of Australian society. For his MA degree, awarded in 1938, he submitted a thesis, later published in 1942 as an influential book, *Black Australians: a survey of native policy in Western Australia*,

1829–1897, which did much to stimulate interest in Aboriginal ways of life among other Australians.⁴ Professor A.P. Elkin, Professor of Anthropology in the University of Sydney and president of several organisations concerned with support for Aborigines, such as the Association for the Protection of Native Races and the Aborigines' Welfare Board of New South Wales, was external examiner for Hasluck's thesis. Elkin described the book as an 'outstanding contribution to Australian historical research'.⁵ One of Elkin's leading colleagues, I. Hogbin, praised it as 'lucid and scholarly'.⁶ The most distinguished Western Australian anthropologists of the next generation, the husband and wife team of Ronald and Catherine Berndt, later described it as a 'classic historical study on Aboriginal-European relations'.⁷

Hasluck warned later against 'discussing the present as though we were still living in the past or as though we could go direct from the past into the future without regard to present conditions'. He urged that 'the question is no longer one of resistance to invasion but of sharing life in a land in which both peoples [Aborigines and white Australians] have legitimate possessions' and that 'we are not faced today with the problems that arose with first contact between the two races, as two distinct peoples', since so much genetic and cultural admixture had taken place.⁸ Nevertheless, he was profoundly interested in the history of relationships between Aborigines and colonists. His overall analysis of typical phases of contact throughout Australia was:

A brief first period relatively free of trouble was followed by a second period, involving clashes of interest and bloodshed and depredation suffered by both peoples. Assertion of supremacy on the part of the new settlers, and the subordination of Aboriginal interests, was followed by a movement toward a policy of protecting Aborigines from further injury and a rather indefinite concern about promoting their welfare.⁹

In his *Black Australians*, Hasluck explained that in the settlement of Western Australia in 1829, as earlier in New South Wales, the British Government hoped that Aborigines would become British subjects under the protection of British law and with rights equal to those of the colonists. This did not take place, largely because of the indifference and sometimes the hostility of white settlers, but even more because Aborigines found it very difficult to understand British laws, civil or criminal. In practice, settlers and Aborigines could not be treated alike. Hasluck noted that 'out of that situation, and in an attempt to deal more fairly with the Aboriginal offender, the pretence

of equal legal status was tacitly abandoned'. For example, lighter sentences were inflicted on Aborigines, or whites, convicted for the murder of Aborigines than for the murder of whites by whites, or by Aborigines. Hasluck reminded a later generation that 'social justice was a potent phrase' for humanitarian sympathisers with Aborigines during the 1930s as well as forty years later. Key components of social justice as perceived then included the need to protect Aborigines against the ravages of disease, drunkenness and prostitution, all of which contributed to high mortality rates and miserable existences.¹⁰ He also realised, however, that protective laws, even if humanely intended, placed Aborigines in a separate and inferior class, and argued that 'Protection was a negative policy which showed neither faith nor hope in their future'.¹¹

In the 1920s, in the south-west of Western Australia, the young Hasluck met no Aborigines who were 'angry or resentful' and was struck by their 'sense of fun'. He described them as 'a generation which had grown up in close association with white people after the adjustment between settler and Aborigine' and considered that most had 'settled into an easy relationship with the whites, perhaps what Elkin calls "intelligent parasitism"'.¹² Sally Morgan's Aboriginal grandmother, Daisy, when recalling her own youth under the stern supervision of the first Mrs Drake-Brockman, spoke in terms of the 'good old days ... I never seen days like that ever again'.¹³

Coombs, on the other hand, tended to lack Hasluck's sense of the ambiguities in Aboriginal cultures. He admitted in 1995 that he had for many years 'oversimplified' on matters Aboriginal. He added: 'friends tell me that I am inclined to romanticise about Aboriginal society and, to a degree, that's true'.¹⁴ But he did not appear to grasp the extent of his romanticisation. Coombs believed:

The Aboriginal people of Australia lived, and some still live, in a society of extreme material simplicity. They found both security and challenge in winning a reluctant livelihood from an inhospitable land.... From Captain Cook onwards, those who have known them have wondered at their freedom from the tyranny of things and at the steadfastness of their moral and spiritual values.¹⁵

Coombs was right about the 'extreme material simplicity' of Aboriginal life. Cook wrote: 'their houses are mean small hovels not much bigger than an oven ... their canoes are as mean as can be conceived ... we see this country in the pure State of Nature, the industry of Man has had nothing to do with any part of it'.¹⁶ Banks wrote that they 'seem to have no fixed habitation but move about

from place to place like wild beasts in search of food', and 'of Cloths they had not the least part but naked as ever our first father was before his fall, they seemed no more conscious of their nakedness than if they had not been the children of Parents who eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge'.¹⁷ It was on the basis of such observations that Cook and Banks classified Aborigines as savages and New South Wales as a *terra nullius*.

But Cook, Banks and later commentators were not conscious of any 'security' in Aboriginal life. In fact the apparent insecurity of Aboriginal life was frequently invoked to explain why there had been no accumulation of property or significant advances in technologies or sciences among them. The only response successive Aboriginal generations seemed to have made to environmental 'challenge' was to perpetuate what had gone before. Not all the land was inhospitable and within a century of the arrival of the British Australia was helping to feed and clothe the hungry and cold of every other continent, as well as its own increasing population. Coombs has claimed that 'European occupation' of Australia 'seriously reduced its productive capacity',¹⁸ but he may have intended to refer to potential capacity, since he could hardly have supposed there was higher actual productivity in 1788 than 1988.

Nor is it true that from 'Captain Cook onwards' there was wonder at the 'steadfastness' of the 'moral and spiritual values' of Aborigines. The radical historian, Henry Reynolds has attacked nineteenth century Australian colonists as racists because, far from expressing admiration for the moral and spiritual qualities of Aborigines, they described them as savage and primitive. Reynolds is undoubtedly right that this was the predominant opinion. Whether the colonists were misguided in their condemnations is another matter.

Two themes seemed to Coombs 'to dominate Aboriginal society, their ways of thought and their plans for the future. These are, firstly, the autonomy which they see as vital to their own personal existence and, secondly, the reciprocal obligation to nurture and care for others within the social groups in which their Aboriginal identity will emerge'.¹⁹ He commended 'anthropologists and others' who have 'commented on the evidence of a general sense of well-being, of real satisfaction being derived from their lifestyle'.²⁰ After lengthy passages that extolled the harmonious co-operation within and between Aboriginal groups, their deep spirituality and concern for responsible inter-personal relationships, Coombs conceded:

There were aspects of the society which were brutal and ruthless. The means by which population growth was limited seem callous and inhuman and the treatment of women was often degrading. Violence in personal and family feuds and in inter-clan strife occurred and was often destructive. Apart from such violence, relations between different tribal groupings were more often marked by suspicion and distrust than by cooperation and friendliness.²¹

In this passage Coombs clearly indicated some of the main problems in establishing a legal system which embraces Aborigines and non-Aborigines alike. On many occasions, however, his criticisms of law-enforcement have not been modified by this understanding.

Coombs condemned the creators of the new Australia that began life in 1788 as perpetrators of 'a ruthless genocide in the face of prolonged and courageous resistance'. He claimed that 'the Aboriginal inhabitants who resisted their entry were subdued ruthlessly ... and Aborigines eliminated or beaten into subjection and despair.' There was no good to be found: 'Even when overt violence was not used', he argued, 'the impact of white invasion was invariably destructive'. This vision of a genocidal past informed his vision of the present. 'The process begun in 1788', he wrote, 'continues inexorably in our times ... in the Northern Territory, in north Queensland and in the north and east of Western Australia, white aggression against Aboriginal territory continues'.²²

Yet Coombs made a strange exception to this blanket condemnation. It was perhaps republican sentiment that drove him to exclude some earlier Australians. He praised 'the first generation of native-born white Australians', or 'the currency lads and lasses', for being 'the first to reject the nostalgic and dependent ties with the Old Country and to identify and see their future wholly with the new.... It was among this generation also that the first signs of a distinctively Australian culture began to emerge—in the songs of protest, in the ballads of the bush and the camp fire tales'. Then entered the Eureka Rebels as the worms in the bud, the outriders of the dreaded miners and developers, even though they produced their share of songs of protest: 'Unfortunately, the influence of the currency generations was overlaid by that of successive waves of new arrivals; here not as refugees but hungry to exploit the opportunities the land offered'.²³ Yet there is no evidence at all that the 'currency generations' were differently disposed to Aborigines than were later immigrants and their descendants. Coombs' unpersuasive analysis also contradicts the evidence that the main sympathisers with Aborigines in mid-nineteenth century Australia

were Whitehall officials, Westminster politicians and Exeter Hall evangelists. Dangers to the traditional Aboriginal life came not only from miners and squatters but from selectors, bullockies and other bushmen, including 'currency' Australians, pushing into central Australia from the coastal settlements.²⁴

Coombs' misreading of the realities of Australian history was also evident in his discussion of a proposed treaty between the Australian government and Aborigines. Although under the law Aborigines are Australian citizens and not an alien body. Coombs was among the forefront of those who called for such a treaty. In doing so, he wrote:

The critical issue for Aborigines in their consideration of such a proposed treaty must be how far they will feel able to rely on the Australian Government and non-Aboriginal people to accept the commitment to partnership and to act in good faith....

In their view, the proper starting point is the status before settlement began; as if Captain Cook had obeyed his instructions and negotiated with the various Aboriginal land-owning groups for the acquisition of land for the purposes of the British Government.²⁵

Coombs has acknowledged, however, the absence of any clearly defined political authority even at the present time among Aborigines living closest to traditional ways. He found after many meetings with the most influential people of many groups that 'individual Aborigines, even when they are members of a nominally representative body, feel in no way committed to any decisions it may reach or views it may express'.²⁶ Yet, regardless of his own experiences, Coombs castigated Governor Phillip and his successors for failing to find Aborigines who appeared to be representative or authoritative and with whom the Crown could make a treaty.

Endnotes

- 1 Hasluck, 1995, pages 47.
- 2 Hasluck, 1995, page 50.
- 3 Hasluck, 1995, pages 48-9.
- 4 Sir Paul Hasluck, *Black Australians: a survey of native policy in Western Australia, 1829-1897*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1942.
- 5 A.P. Elkin, 'Native Policy in Australia (A Review of *Black Australians: a survey of native policy in Western Australia, 1829-1897*. By Paul Hasluck.)' in *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, 1943, 2 (8), page 274.
- 6 I. Hogbin, 'Our Native Policy' in *The Australian Quarterly*, June 1943, XV (2), page 100.

- 7 R.M. Berndt and C.H. Berndt, 'Addendum to Revised Edition' in R.M. Berndt and C.M. Berndt (eds), *Aborigines of the West: Their Past and their Present*, Perth, University of Western Australia Press, 1980, page xx.
- 8 Sir Paul Hasluck, 'The Situation today: An Historical View' in R.M. Berndt and C.M. Berndt (eds), *Aborigines of the West: Their Past and their Present*, Perth, University of Western Australia Press, 1980, page xxii.
- 9 Hasluck, 1980, page xxiii.
- 10 Hasluck, 1988, pages 25–8.
- 11 Hasluck, 1988, page 86.
- 12 Hasluck, 1977, pages 202–3.
- 13 S. Morgan, *My Place*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 1990, page 332.
- 14 H.C. Coombs, Address to a symposium at the St. James Ethics Centre, Sydney, April 1995.
- 15 Coombs, 1990, page 59.
- 16 J. Cook, *The Journals of Captain James Cook: The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768–1771*, (J. Beaglehole ed.), Cambridge, Hakluyt Society, 1955, pages 396–7.
- 17 Banks, 1962, page 123.
- 18 Coombs, 1990, page 99.
- 19 Coombs, 1994, page 220.
- 20 Coombs, 1994, page 56.
- 21 Coombs, 1990, page 115.
- 22 Coombs, 1990, pages 136, 137.
- 23 Coombs, 1990, page 141.
- 24 See G. Partington, *The Australian History of Henry Reynolds*, Perth, Australian Mining and Exploration Council, 1994.
- 25 Coombs, 1994, pages 148–149.
- 26 Coombs, 1978, pages 44–5.

3. Before Assimilationism

During the first half of the twentieth century, Aboriginal policies throughout Australia were based on the assumption that there was no long-term problem. Before the age of television, few Aborigines were visible to the vast majority of Australians who lived in towns and cities on the seaboard from Brisbane to Adelaide. It was not until the 1960s that Aborigines moved in significant numbers to these areas. The lack of political importance of Aboriginal issues was reflected in the Constitution which, until 1967, excluded the Commonwealth Government from any direct involvement in them. During the debates in the Commonwealth Parliament in 1910 on the *Northern Territory Acceptance Bill*, which transferred the Northern Territory from the control of South Australia to that of the Commonwealth, there was virtually no discussion of any implications for Aboriginal policies. For the next 40 years the Commonwealth had so poor a reputation for its care of Aborigines in the Northern Territory—especially in comparison with the industry and effectiveness of J.W. Bleakley, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland between 1911 and 1942—that even avid centralists rarely advocated amending the provision in the Constitution that gave exclusive responsibility for their Aborigines to the States. The exclusion of Aborigines from full Australian citizenship did not seem an injustice to most white Australians, irrespective of political beliefs, since they believed that tribal Aborigines could not sustain the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic community, and that people of mixed descent, or half-castes, were ‘passing over’ at a rapid rate into full formal membership of that community.

The official estimated Aboriginal population as at 30 June 1926 was:

	Full blood	Mixed race	Total
New South Wales	1,031	6,035	7,066
Victoria	55	439	514
Queensland	13,604	4,047	17,651
South Australia	2,531	1,452	3,983
Western Australia	22,222	2,420	24,642
Northern Territory	19,853	689	20,542
Total	59,296	15,102	74,398

Source: CPD, *H of R*, 13 October 1927, vol. 116, page 528.

The official 1937 estimate was of 52,835 ‘full-bloods’ and 23,950 part-Aborigines. The change in the proportion may indicate changes in how people sought to be classified rather than in the actual composition of the groups. The seemingly low numbers may indicate that many ‘part-Aborigines’ had passed over fully into the mainstream community and were not enumerated as Aborigines at all, and that some tribal Aborigines were beyond the reach of census takers. However, disease, sexual mixing and the influence of white culture had in their different ways reduced the number of ‘full-blooded’ Aborigines leading anything like a traditional tribal life and those processes were expected to continue. This assumption proved accurate, but not the anticipation that overall Aboriginal numbers would continue to fall. Medical advances, especially penicillin, turned the tide of population loss, even though disease remained much worse and life expectancy much lower among Aborigines than among other Australians. Just how and on what terms people of mixed descent, or for that matter ‘full-bloods’, might join the wider society posed problems which had been inadequately considered. Both the third and the last quarters of this century saw massive changes in the Aboriginal policies of Australian governments.

Hasluck was one of the first people in Australian public life who determined to end as rapidly as possible all exclusions of Aborigines from full citizenship, although he, too, considered that Aborigines living in traditional near-tribal conditions were not yet in a position to carry the responsibilities of full citizenship or enjoy its benefits. He thought it wrong that all Aborigines in Western Australia, irrespective of individual attributes, should have a legal status which,

he said, had 'more in common with that of a born idiot than with any other class of British subject'.¹

Hasluck accepted the good faith of A.O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines between 1915 and 1940 in Western Australia, who 'became benefactor and guardian of Aborigines', but 'gathered more and more of them into the fold and allowed very few of them to leave it'. Neville, like his equivalents in other States and earlier in the nineteenth-century colonies, sought to protect Aboriginal women against seduction, and both men and women against exploitation, but he did so in the belief that Aborigines and non-Aborigines were forever different and separate: 'that anyone with an aboriginal ancestor must be treated as an aboriginal and regarded as being different in nature, in entitlements and in way of life from all other Australians and all other human beings'. There were occasional reminders of earlier conflicts, such as the 1927 Royal Commission into the alleged killing in the East Kimberley of Aborigines and burning of their bodies by a party of police and white civilians after the murder by Aborigines of a white cattleman, but even these incidents were regarded as 'remote from politics and public concern',² as mere throw-backs to situations which would soon have ended for ever.

This anticipation proved to be correct. Hasluck and those who thought like him 'did not think of race conflict or occupy our minds with race issues', and 'had no disposition to regard all Aborigines as being the same and as being necessarily a separate race requiring separate treatment'. They saw them instead as 'a small underprivileged minority of Australians at all stages of transition to the civilised habit'.³ Hasluck's fundamental criticism was that such people as Neville, genuinely solicitous as they were about Aboriginal health and welfare, 'had not yet awakened to the fact that there was a problem not only of protection of Aborigines, but of their future relationship to the whites and their position in the Australian community'.⁴ In a mid-1930s monograph published by the Native Welfare Council in Perth, Hasluck was scathing about the failure of Western Australian governments to advance the living conditions of Aborigines in reserves and urban areas. He attacked their typical accommodation as 'rather worse than the poorer class of suburban fowl house'⁵ and argued that in such conditions it was 'impossible for them to be anything but pariahs, dwellers in huts, breeders of a separate caste'.⁶ In 1936 he considered it 'impossible to find any evidence that in recent years the Government has taken any positive

action to better the condition of the people living on reserves', which had become 'so many rubbish tips for humanity'.⁷ His general view of the conditions of life of part-Aborigines was that they constituted 'a reproach to the State, an outrage to human beings, and a waste of material'. He urged that 'if there are any feelings of humanity in the community the present order will not be allowed to continue'.⁸ He did not believe that the way forward lay in increased segregation between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, but, unlike some later critics, he was acutely aware of the obstacles facing every attempted solution.

Hasluck and those like him:

...had no thoughts about separateness. We grew up in a place and in a period when conflict was over and reconciliation and absorption had apparently begun. We did not think or talk about race conflict.⁹

In 1934, when a Royal Commission was appointed by the Government of Western Australia to investigate the social and economic conditions of Aborigines, the laws relating to them and the administration of the Aborigines Department, Hasluck wrote a series of articles on the historical background. Subsequently, he was invited to accompany the Royal Commissioner, H.D. Moseley, on his investigatory travels in the northern areas of Western Australia. There, Hasluck's experiences were very mixed. On the one hand he found that many problems were far greater than various government agencies in Perth admitted, especially the incidence of leprosy and venereal diseases. On the other hand he enjoyed wonderful moments of companionship with Aborigines, such as Unambun and Booramulpul. Unambun showed him at Kunmunya, Port George IV Mission, the cave paintings first described for non-Aborigines by George Grey in 1838. Booramulpul took Hasluck by boat around the islands of Collier Bay. Hasluck felt they shared a common patriotism with as they both affirmed about the land, 'him proper good place'.¹⁰

Despite his admiration for some Aborigines living in near-traditional ways, Hasluck considered that the inevitable tendency must be towards increased mixing of the races, which he regarded as the best solution to any 'Aboriginal problem', although there were both whites and Aborigines who strongly disapproved of any 'miscegenation'. Hasluck especially deplored the use of the term 'mongrel' to describe people of mixed race. Hasluck noted that many people of mixed descent had already 'passed over' into the general community and were not classified as Aborigines. He knew personally three part-Aboriginal men who were students in the University

of Western Australia, even though years later others were hailed as the first Aborigines to attend that institution. He also noted that more than a third of the people classified as Aborigines were of mixed descent. Several of these, such as Mercedes, who described herself as the town whore of Broome, told the Royal Commission that they should be accepted as part of the general community, not regarded as different from the whites. Naturally enough, the grandchildren of Aborigines who were discriminated against during the 1930s may believe that discrimination in their favour merely recompenses for past injuries. Hasluck was not opposed to helping hands as temporary expedients, but feared that in the long run all forms of legal discrimination must work against Aboriginal and general national interests.

The entry of part-Aborigines into the wider Western Australian society was often successful, as is demonstrated by the 'stories' of her great-uncle, grandmother and mother given by Sally Morgan in *My Place*, despite the many difficulties they faced. Morgan makes many references to the Parkerville Children's Home, an institution strongly supported by Hasluck, where Sally's mother, Gladys, was brought up for several years. Alice Drake-Brockman, whose husband owned the station on which Sally's grandmother was born and whose brother-in-law may have been Sally's great-grandfather, was perhaps a partial witness, since she had some responsibility for Gladys being placed in Parkerville. Mrs Drake-Brockman told Sally that her mother 'was so well brought up by those Church of England sisters', that 'she grew up with just as nice manners as anybody could wish'.¹¹ However, Sally's grandmother also thought that 'Parkerville wasn't a bad place, there was plenty of kids for her (Gladys) to play with and there was bush everywhere'. Gladys herself described Parkerville as 'a beautiful place ... surrounded by bush and small streams. In the spring there were wild flowers of every colour and hundreds of varieties of birds. Every morning I awoke to hear the kookaburras laughing and the magpies warbling. That was the side of Parkerville I loved'.¹²

Even the less attractive side was not too oppressive. Gladys' main complaints were that the air was always cold in the early morning when the children had to make their beds and brush down the verandah, that the boys got out of most domestic duties, that the bigger and stronger children 'stood over' the smaller and weaker, and that Sister Kate, Hasluck's friend, left to set up her own Children's Home. In Gladys' recollections 'One of the most terrible punishments

they inflicted on us was depriving us of our Friday night picture', the Western being Gladys' favourite genre. She enjoyed occasional visits from her mother and Alice Drake-Brockman—who, Gladys conceded, thought she was doing a good thing sending her to Parkerville—and went on outings to the cinema, concerts and the zoo. The children also presented little plays and concerts. Gladys enjoyed chats with the 'office lady' and with other adults who gave her biscuits, cakes and other treats, and she was adopted as a needy child by the Northam Country Women's Association, which sent her gifts at Christmas and on her birthday. On holidays she visited her mother at the Drake-Brockman's Ivanhoe home, at another house when her mother worked there for a time, or at a holiday house which the Parkerville Home had at Cottesloe. Miss Moore, her House Mother whom at first she feared, became a friend and lent Gladys her magazines and radio. Gladys was entrusted with helping to look after the little children in the Babyland wing of Parkerville. Overall, the life of Gladys and the other children at Parkerville was secure and reasonably happy. Although the education provided was limited, it was certainly far more extensive than most of the children, especially those from the Reserves, would otherwise have received. Gladys 'passed over' into the general community and it was not until Sally was at university that she realised that she was partly of Aboriginal origin.¹³

In the 1930s, most people of part-Aboriginal descent sought to be classified as European rather than Aboriginal, largely, no doubt, because Protectors could impose restrictions on the freedom of movement of full-blooded Aborigines, but also because of positive attractions in joining the wider Australian society. The fact that many part-Aborigines considered that 'passing-over' would enable them to avoid discrimination and prejudice, and that this expectation was often confirmed, suggests that Hasluck was right in considering that it would be possible in the future to overcome barriers of race and colour. Aborigines seeking to evade the Protectors were aided by many non-Aborigines. For example, many teachers in rural areas were keen to attract Aboriginal children to their schools, if only to make up the minimum numbers needed to avoid mergers under Education Department regulations, although some white parents raised objections to the admission of Aboriginal children to primary schools in the towns. The official policy at that time was that attendance at school was not compulsory for the 'part-coloured' children, but they

could be admitted at the discretion of the headmaster. Hasluck described the main single element discernible in occasional white hostility as 'suburban respectability'.¹⁴

Hasluck wrote:

In those days most of the mixed-race people were living apart from Aborigines, and the popular belief among the whites and the common hope of the mixed-race people themselves was that they should live in the white community. As a body, half-castes were rejected by the aboriginal people as not being true Aborigines at all. It seemed that they were moving in one direction away from the aboriginal side of their ancestry. Some were already in the white community and all except a few were on the fringes of it.¹⁵

Hasluck claimed that by 1934 in the south of Western Australia not only people of mixed descent but many full-blooded Aborigines had few direct links with their grandfathers and grandmothers. He cited a press report of a March 1928 deputation to the Premier of Western Australia led by William Harris, a part-Aboriginal, 'speaking in perfect English' and showing 'no small signs of erudition', who complained mainly that 'educated natives' were treated as though they were 'wild blackfellows'. Harris considered that all natives educated up to the standard of white men should be exempted from the *Aborigines Act*. Hasluck commented:

In short, this deputation (which has been publicly commemorated in recent years as an historic event) was not speaking for all Aborigines but was claiming that their own sort of people should not be treated as though they were Aborigines.¹⁶

The outstanding leaders of Aboriginal public activity during the 1930s in other States were also strongly assimilationist and sought educational, employment and other policies which would further that aim through 'the removal of all disabilities, political, social or economic, now or in the future borne by aboriginals and to secure their uplift to the full culture of the British race'.¹⁷ Typical viewpoints expressed included:

We have no desire to go back to primitive conditions of the Stone Age. We ask you to teach our people to live in the Modern Age, as modern citizens.¹⁸

We want to be absorbed into the Nation of Australia, and thus to survive in the land of our forefathers, on equal terms.¹⁹

These Aboriginal assimilationists were not ashamed of their ancestors or of Aborigines still living in traditional ways, but they wished to advance to modernity, just like the British. William Cooper, a leading spokesman for Victorian Aborigines and initiator in 1938 of the Aboriginal 'Day of Mourning' on Australia Day, wrote:

Actually the culture of our primitive brothers is not all that callous or crude. In its purity it may not be very desirable but in its corrupted state (not corrupted by us) it is something we civilised folk have grown out of and which we wish to see our brothers abandon.²⁰

Cooper insisted: 'We are not an inferior race, we have merely been refused the chance of education that whites receive.'²¹ He asserted that what educated Aborigines consciously sought was also the unarticulated wish of Aborigines living in near-traditional conditions:

There are certainly primitive people, living the life of their fathers, but I venture to doubt if one of these is ignorant of the white man and his wonderful new world. These will not be kept in their present conditions short of compulsion so complete as to be impracticable, without an enormous policing force. Whether the white man likes it or not, every native is headed toward the culture of the white man.²²

In a letter to the Prime Minister, Cooper did 'not ask that community services be given to all natives for we know that many are not able to understand these matters and as little able to benefit from them', but he insisted that 'in respect of that number who are civilised on the average standard of their equivalent stratum in society, and often much more highly, we protest that it is not consonant with British justice that we should continue to be treated as Stone Age folk'.²³ Cooper argued that 'the British were once as we are now. The conquering power of Rome, whatever else it did, lifted the British to culture and civilisation. We want that same uplift'.²⁴ Cooper claimed that 'it has been fully demonstrated that aboriginals of both full blood and mixed blood can do anything a white man is able to do'.²⁵ Far from seeking, except as unavoidable interim measures, a distinctive education for Aborigines that related to traditional beliefs and customs, Cooper asserted:

We want the right to full education, academic, cultural and industrial, and to be able to take our place beside the white race in full equality and responsibility. We ask the right to be fully British.²⁶

Other organisations of Aborigines, such as The Aborigines' Progressive Association, New South Wales, and The Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, Sydney, advanced similar views. As McGregor commented, 'The Aboriginal political leaders of the 1930s based their demands for human rights not on any concept of Aboriginality, but on an ideal of civilisation'.²⁷

Despite the many obstacles erected both by white Australians and Aborigines, many of the latter had by the 1930s moved much closer to the culture of the former than of their own pre-contact way of life. Hasluck wanted to speed up the process of assimilation, which he

regarded essentially as extending to Aborigines the advantages of the majority population. He saw assimilation as an anti-racist policy that was especially needed in the international context of the rise of Hitler. Reactions such as his to Nazi racial ideology seemed to him later as:

...the beginning of a trend that eventually made it a shameful heresy to suggest that even biologically there was a difference between one breed and another. The practical outcome in discussion of Aborigines in Australia in the 1930s was that the old tendency at the beginning of the century to regard the Aborigines as an inferior and primitive people from whom little could be hoped started to give place to more frequent assertions that, given the chance, they could do anything the white man could do.... We who were active in public discussion of the Aborigines undervalued race as a factor in the situation—indeed rejected race as a determinant of relationships.²⁸

Hasluck added that in the 1930s the person of liberal outlook who reacted against racialism 'argued in effect that the Aboriginal, given a chance, could become just as good as a European or, in the case of many part-aboriginal persons, was already as good as a white man. His biggest handicap was not his race but white prejudice'.²⁹ The most consistent element in his outlook on Aboriginal policy was that it should not be based on an essentialist view that there were genetically determined and permanent racial traits and characteristics. He considered, regretfully, in 1980, that 'Australians now are much more strongly racist (in the sense that they make race the most significant element affecting relationships between different groups in our population) than were the Aborigines and the early European settlers over a century ago'. He also suggested that 'those who apply the term "racist" most frequently to other persons are themselves the active proponents and perpetuators of racial division'.³⁰

Indications that assimilationist ideas were making headway in several States included changes of the negative titles such as Chief Protector to more positive ones such as Commissioner or Director of Native Affairs, or Superintendent of Aboriginal Welfare. An early assimilationist initiative at Commonwealth level was the motion on 7 June 1937 in the House of Representatives of C.A.S. Hawker, the member for Wakefield, South Australia, and himself a pastoralist, to remove the exclusion of Aborigines, regardless of their way of life or educational qualifications, from the provisions of the *National Health and Pensions Insurance Bill*. Hawker was supported by J.J. Clark (Darling, ALP), who argued that 'all Aborigines, whether full-blooded, half caste, quarter caste or three quarter caste, should be

included if they are earning their own living'.³¹ For Hasluck, 'the most striking feature' of the first Premiers' Conference on Aboriginal issues, in Canberra in 1937, was that the Premiers 'did not have a common experience nor had they formed a common view either of present conditions or future prospects'.³² The Premiers were nonetheless able to agree upon a common declaration that 'the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not of full blood lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth' and that the policy for full-bloods should be:

- a. to educate to white standard the children of detribalised natives living near centres of white population and subsequently place them in 'employment in lucrative occupations which will not bring them into economic or social conflict with the white community',
- b. to keep the semi-civilised under a benevolent supervision in regard to employment, social and medical services in their own tribal areas, and
- c. to preserve as far as possible the uncivilised native in his normal tribal state by the establishment of inviolable reserves.³³

With regard to the first point it should be borne in mind that Australia was still in economic depression and unemployment remained high.

Another important landmark was the statement by John McEwen in February 1939 on behalf of the Commonwealth Government that the Aborigine 'irrespective of his race or colour, was entitled by right to eventual full citizenship',³⁴ but Hasluck considered that overall the Depression years had very negative effects on the informal movement towards assimilation. Many people of mixed descent who had worked in the wider community, if and when they applied for relief, found themselves classified as Aborigines and in need of protection on a reserve. Looking back later on the 1930s in Western Australia, Hasluck believed that a great opportunity to do better had been missed, and that the post-War task was more formidable than ever, because the combined effects of the economic depression and the War brought a wider separation between the main body of Australians and Aborigines.³⁵

Hasluck never believed that there was any certain way to improve conditions of life for Aboriginal people and admitted later to his own 'muddled hopes' in the 1930s, as well as those of others.³⁶ Looking back on the 1930s, he suggested that 'it would be salutary for those who, in later years, have made confident generalizations about Aborigines and about the faults in past practice' to take account of the great diversity among Aborigines, related to different climates,

economic circumstances and cultures.³⁷ He never glibly assumed that what was appropriate in one place would be best in others. His assimilationism was of a pragmatic character.

Hasluck may have underestimated the stimulating aspects of wartime experience on some Aborigines. The influx of troops, who were generally more egalitarian than local white people, into areas such as the Pilbara, increased employment for Aborigines, and with superior wages and conditions of work than had been common. Aboriginal labour was more important than in the past because so many whites had gone to the war, while some families were evacuated after Japanese bombing of Broome and Port Hedland. Several men of mixed descent joined the armed forces. On the other hand, Port Hedland was declared a prohibited area for Aborigines, partly because of a fear of mass prostitution and ensuing problems and partly because of fears that some Aborigines might welcome the Japanese if they landed. This prohibition aroused Aboriginal opposition under the leadership of the non-Aboriginal Donald William McLeod, local cartage contractor, prospector and communist sympathiser, who was described by Coombs as 'patriarchal'.³⁸ Hasluck was right that, in the fluid conditions of wartime, important opportunities for Aboriginal advancement were neglected.

This was also true in the Northern Territory, where, as Minister of Territories, Hasluck inherited the social consequences of the crumbling of traditional Aboriginal life: 'pauperisation and parasitism, not constructive assimilation or integration, had generally followed the further disturbance of the traditional pattern of nomadic life'. Controls on Aborigines established in the name of protecting them from exploitation had been codified in the Aborigines Ordinance of 1918. This placed restrictions on Aborigines in respect of movement, the right to co-habit with a non-Aborigine, and access to alcohol. 'Half-castes' came under the jurisdiction of the Ordinance unless granted an exemption certificate, which would have to be produced in order to buy a drink in a club or hotel.

These consequences were not, Hasluck believed, the simple and direct consequences of dispossession of territory, but were evident in the large Aboriginal reserves as well as in the regions where pastoral leases had been granted and cattle introduced. In Darwin and Alice Springs he inherited the problem of 'town natives', consisting not only of peoples traditionally centred where those towns were built, but also groups who 'had moved out of their traditional territory

and away from traditional authority and attached themselves to the urban store of goods they coveted'.³⁹

In the south-west of Western Australia, Hasluck could see nothing that could be recognised as a homogeneous and coherent Aboriginal society, so that the problem for him was not one of finding ways in which two or more societies could live side-by-side in the same continent, but of finding ways in which 'the remnants of the aboriginal race could best become members of a single Australian society'.⁴⁰ He included himself among the great mass of Australians who 'had few if any doubts about the forward movement of mankind towards higher civilisation', and who believed that 'the life of Australians would become better as the years passed—better in the sense that conduct would be nobler, the artistic achievement finer, and that the standard of living would be improved both in respect of the material blessings of food, health, shelter, social service and recreational facilities and in the level of education, cultural pursuits and personal ideals'. He noted that 'even in the minds of those who did not profess or practise Christianity there was little doubt about the superiority of Western civilisation, predominantly Christian in its scale of values, over the uncivilised usages of the pagan Australian Aborigines'. He argued that most white Australians who were most closely in touch with Aborigines, 'whether they looked at them sympathetically or contemptuously—saw them as a people for whom there was no hope of improvement in remaining as they were'. Those who criticised governments, missionaries, pastoralists, or anyone else who could be blamed for the condition of the Aborigines, 'used such words as "neglect" of the Aborigines and drew a vivid picture of their wretched state'. It seemed obvious to Hasluck that 'for the future there must be opportunity and encouragement for the coming generations of aboriginal people to become like all other Australians'.⁴¹

Endnotes

- 1 Hasluck, 1942, pages 160–1.
- 2 Hasluck, 1977, pages 210–1.
- 3 Hasluck, 1977, page 217.
- 4 Hasluck, 1977, page 213.
- 5 Native Welfare Council, (no date), *Our Southern Half-Caste Natives and Their Condition*, Perth, page 7.

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- 6 Native Welfare Council, (no date), page 4.
- 7 Native Welfare Council, (no date), page 15.
- 8 Native Welfare Council, (no date), page 27.
- 9 Hasluck, 1977, page 204.
- 10 Hasluck, 1977, page 217–8.
- 11 Morgan, 1990, page 169.
- 12 Morgan, 1990, page 210. In a recent article (*The Weekend Australian*, 8–9 October 1994), the headline ‘Stolen children end their silent suffering’ was provided for a story about 82-year-old Marie Burke, born in 1915 of an Aborigine mother and a white father who enlisted in the Australian armed forces. Marie was left by her father, when he went to war, with the Church of England mission at Roper Bar. Despite the headline and allegations of cultural genocide made in the article by David Nason and Ron Merkel QC, words attributed to Marie included: ‘the missionaries wanted us to learn better things than what the Aborigines were learning, and I reckon it was good’. She remembered ‘fondly the years of hard work and discipline on the missions’.
- 13 One of Sally’s sisters had apparently known this for some time from her mother or maternal grandmother, but was not very interested in the discovery and never told Sally. As children, Sally and her siblings had been told they were ‘Indian’ in origin, but their origins seem to have had little effect for better or worse on their education and career prospects. According to Sally, her brother Bill and sister Jill regularly got ‘drunk as skunks’ when taking Junior Certificate at High School, but this did not seem to affect their education either. Neither did ‘the high noise level and general chaos’ which Sally claims pervaded their home. Sister Jill became a law student at university. Any discrimination against the Morgan children must have been of a very subtle and elusive character. Repatriation scholarships were available for them, because their white father had served abroad during the Second World War. When, after she started at the University of Western Australia, Sally discovered that she was of part-Aboriginal descent, she applied successfully for a special Aboriginal scholarship instead.
- 14 Hasluck, 1988, pages 41–2.
- 15 Hasluck, 1988, page 69.
- 16 Hasluck, 1988, pages 18–9. The account he cited was from *The West Australian*, 10 March 1928.
- 17 Letter of William Cooper, Honorary Secretary, Australian Aborigines League, to Minister for the Interior, 22 February 1936, cited in R. McGregor, ‘Protest and Progress: Aboriginal Activism in the 1930s’ in *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 101, October 1993, page 556.
- 18 J. Patten and W. Ferguson, *Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights! A Statement of the Case of the Aborigines Progressive Association*, Sydney, 1937, page 8, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 555.

- 19 *Abo Call*, no. 3, June 1938, page 1, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 555.
- 20 Letter of William Cooper to Minister for the Interior, 10 January 1937, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 562.
- 21 *Abo Call*, no. 1, April 1938, page 2, cited in *op. cit.*, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 561.
- 22 Letter of William Cooper, 21 January 1939, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 563
- 23 Letter of William Cooper, 3 December 1939, cited in McGregor, 1993, pages 556–7.
- 24 Letter of William Cooper, 25 June, 1937, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 557.
- 25 Letter of William Cooper, 31 October 1936, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 563.
- 26 Letter of William Cooper, 16 June, 1937, cited in McGregor, 1993, page 565
- 27 McGregor, 1993, page 568.
- 28 Hasluck, 1988, page 6.
- 29 Hasluck, 1988, page 24.
- 30 Hasluck, 1980, page xxvii.
- 31 Cited in Hasluck, 1988, page 32.
- 32 Hasluck, 1988, page 67.
- 33 Hasluck, 1988, page 68.
- 34 Northern Territory of Australia, *Commonwealth Government's Policy with Regard to Aborigines*, February 1939.
- 35 Hasluck, 1988, page 76.
- 36 Hasluck, 1988, page 31.
- 37 Hasluck, 1988, page 67.
- 38 Coombs, 1978, page 51.
- 39 Hasluck, 1988, page 80.
- 40 Hasluck, 1988, page 131.
- 41 Hasluck, 1988, pages 7–8; 11.

4. The Assimilationist Period

Hasluck saw both Aborigines and white Australians as in a state of constant change and, indeed, transformation, whereas Coombs placed much more emphasis on what he conceived as permanent in Aboriginal ways of life. Hasluck wrote:

The working out of a relationship with the Aborigines in Australia took place while the Australian community was itself growing in size and complexity and being re-shaped and while the Aborigines were in transition through all stages from the food-gathering nomads who had never seen a white man to those who had never known any life except in some kind of association, good or bad, with the white majority, and who lived in dependence on the goods, materials and means of production provided by the white majority.¹

Hasluck considered that the policy of assimilation:

arose from the observation of two happenings. The 'fringe-dwellers', including both persons of mixed race and those detribalised Aborigines who were living in close association with Europeans, had no prospect of returning to the aboriginal way of life. Many of the young Aborigines who were still under some measure of tribal influence were being attracted more and more towards European settlements and towns. The lure of tobacco, white man's tucker, sweets, cowboy movies, rodeos, the life, dress and gear of the outback stockman, automobiles, playing cards ... and, in some cases sport ... had a stronger effect than 'old man's talk'.²

In his first parliamentary speech on Aboriginal affairs, on 28 March 1950, Hasluck argued:

[T]he nation must move to a new era in which the social advancement rather than the crude protection of the natives should be the objective....

We must either work for the social advancement of the aborigines or be content to witness their continued social degradation.³

His central aim as Minister was to replace the idea of protecting Aborigines with that of advancing their welfare as Australian citizens possessing the same status and rights as other Australian citizens, unless they were committed to the care of the Welfare Branch because of their need for special assistance. He wanted such situations to be regarded as temporary expedients, not as long-term solutions.⁴ A logical extension of this approach was to cease using a racial classification for Aborigines. The first step was his statement in

Darwin on 25 August 1951 that it was the Government's intention to extend full citizenship to all Aborigines and part-Aborigines capable of looking after themselves. Hasluck followed this up with a proposal for a Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance which would remove reference to race in legislation for protection for 'wards' held to be in need of 'special care or assistance'.⁵ Hasluck wished to remove racial terms from the legislation, but this could be done only by extending to non-Aborigines the possibility of being placed in wardship. By 1960, of over 15,000 Aborigines in the Northern Territory brought under the provisions of the Welfare Ordinance less than 1,300 had not been declared wards, whereas only one non-Aborigine had been declared a ward.⁶ It may therefore appear that Hasluck's changes were merely cosmetic, but a major principle was involved: that individual need, not racial classification, should be the basis of government policy.

At least there were a few exceptions, whereas by the 1990s the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody felt entirely comfortable in recommending that all Aborigines should be entitled to preferential treatment, irrespective of whether there was any evidence of individual disadvantage. Hasluck was moving away from racial and cultural stereotyping. It was entirely unfair of Charles Rowley to describe the 1953 Welfare Ordinance as 'one of the last big efforts to use authoritarian legislation to control the processes of social change'.⁷ Hasluck wanted to remove restrictive legislation as quickly as possible, but not at the cost of exposing large numbers of Aborigines to new forms of exploitation. When in 1990 Colin Tatz, an immigrant from the old racist South Africa, radical sociologist and a long-term activist in Aboriginal causes, identified twelve 'phases of attitude, belief, or philosophy that have underlain and motivated Aboriginal policy and administration these last twenty years', he depicted the third one as 'the equality phase' and defined it as that 'all men and women are born equal in their natural and human rights; and so it is time for equality in all things in the "land of the fair go"'.⁸ Tatz added. "this was the essence of Paul Hasluck's assimilationist [and equalitarian] doctrine of 1951'. Even more recently Peter Read, in assessing changes in Aboriginal policy in the Northern Territory, has described Hasluck as 'the innovative and idealistic historian and politician' who believed that 'for good or ill, the future of Aborigines ... lies with the white community'.⁹

In 1951, Hasluck's defined assimilation as a process by which Aborigines would gradually, over a period of years, 'live like white Australians'.¹⁰ In a more extensive definition in 1952 he anticipated that:

all persons of aboriginal blood or mixed-blood in Australia will live in the same manner as white Australians do ... they will have full citizenship and ... will, of their own desire, participate in all the activities of the Australian community. Full assimilation will mean that the aboriginal shares the hopes, the fears, the ambitions and the loyalties of all other Australians and draws from the Australian community all his social needs, spiritual as well as material.¹¹

Hasluck declared, in 1956, that 'there can be no doubt that the only possible future for the very small minority of aboriginal people in Australia today is to merge into and be received as full members of the great community of nine million European persons which surrounds them'.¹² Subsequent events have shown that this was not the only possible policy, but not that a better one was or is available.

The States followed Hasluck's lead at varying paces. In 1955, for example, Charles McLean, a retired chief stipendiary magistrate, was appointed by the government of Victoria to investigate the condition of Aborigines and to recommend policies 'directed to the social and economic uplift of the Aborigines throughout the State, to the end that they may take their place in the ordinary life of the community'. Recently Richard Broome has described this as 'a hopeful policy' and noted that 'it mirrored Hasluck's assimilationist efforts at the Federal level'.¹³

In 1961, Hasluck helped to establish an all-party Committee on Aboriginal Voting Rights at Canberra, in which bipartisan support for extended assimilation and integration was spearheaded by Peter Howson for the Coalition parties and Kim Beazley Snr. for the ALP. At the Darwin Conference of 1963, Hasluck persuaded the Commonwealth and all the State governments, irrespective of party, to agree on the following statement:

The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. Any special measures taken for Aborigines and part-Aborigines are regarded as temporary measures, not based on race, but intended to protect them from any ill effects of sudden change and to assist them to make the transition from one stage to another in such a way as will be favourable to

their social, economic and political advancement.... The whole tendency in Australia ... is to eliminate laws that apply especially to the Aboriginal people.¹⁴

This policy was virtually re-stated at the Commonwealth and State Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs meeting at Perth in 1965:

The policy of assimilation seeks that all persons of Aboriginal descent *will choose* to attain a similar manner and standard of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community—enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities and influenced by the same hopes and loyalties as other Australians.¹⁵

When citing this passage, Coombs italicised the words 'will choose' as part of his argument that Aborigines as a whole would not choose to be members of a single Australian community, but would instead emphasise their distinctiveness and claim a separate status. Yet it is clear that Hasluck's policy was not to force a common Australianness on Aborigines, but to enable them to share that Australianness on something like equal terms if that was their choice, as indeed he considered it would be for most Aborigines. It was then, as it is now, a matter of judgement whether or not Aborigines will be better off within a unified Australian community or as a distinctive and separated community, or for that matter as many distinctive and separated communities. Hasluck thought that Aborigines would be better off in a unified Australia. Coombs did not.

The policies which Coombs advocated as Chairman of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs were more similar to Hasluck's than to those Coombs himself adopted after he left that Department and was no longer restricted by official responsibilities. In 1976, Coombs commended William McMahon for 'an important and courageous official statement of government policy' on 26 January 1972, in which McMahon said 'The Government recognises the right of individual Aborigines to effective choice about the degree to which and the pace at which they come to identify themselves with [Australian] society'.¹⁶ This was little different from Hasluck's policies, which fully recognised that assimilation could, among other things, only take place successfully if and when Aborigines wished it to take place. Nor was it, as Coombs claimed later, a 'break-through' when the Liberal-Country Party Coalition Policy for the December 1975 Federal Election stated: 'We recognise the fundamental right of Aborigines to retain their racial identity and traditional life style or where desired to adopt a partially or wholly European life style'.¹⁷ The real break-

through, or break-down, took place when the former Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs could assert without rebuke that 'so-called practical and ideological reasons have been used to justify usurpation and replacement of the indigenous culture and people, often by violent and almost always by oppressive means'.¹⁸ In his many later violent denunciations of the Australian past, Coombs lumped together pre-assimilationist and assimilationist policies and disregarded the distinctions he had made earlier between Hasluck's aim of assimilation and Elkin's of integration.

Radical critics during the 1950s generally held that Hasluck was too timid in pushing assimilationist policies. He countered:

Too frequently sympathisers with the Aborigines, or advocates of their cause, are ignorant of or put aside the stark fact that large numbers of them are not at this moment capable of entering the general community at an acceptable level or of maintaining themselves in it.¹⁹

In 1991 Elizabeth Eggleston was cited approvingly by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody for Western Australia as follows:

Only when the social and economic status of Aborigines has been raised to a level comparable with that of the majority of the community, will it be possible to abolish all preferential legislation conferring on them a special legal status'.²⁰

This is, of course, just what Hasluck held, but that did not modify the attacks made by that Royal Commission on assimilation. It is of no credit to the Royal Commissioners that the Bibliography for the Western Australian volumes cites only one work by Hasluck, his *Black Australians, 1827-97*, and none of his accounts of the assimilationist policies which their reports condemn.²¹

On the other hand, Hasluck faced the opposite criticism from his erstwhile ally, A.P. Elkin, a prominent foe of protectionist and separatist policies during the 1930s. Many of Elkin's earlier pronouncements were almost interchangeable with Hasluck's, such as this on education:

The barrier between the Aborigines and civilization is not simply one of ignorance, nor is there any satisfactory proof that it arises from a degree of biological incapability. But there is a barrier, namely, that of a different way of thinking, and a different content of knowledge.... The Aborigines have *their why*, as well as *their how*, and they take for granted that this applies also in our case, and that therefore our ways are 'good' and 'true' for us. Consequently, in leading them on and into our way of life, we must share with them our *why*, our purpose and so make our *how* seem 'rational', and not just 'White man way'. In other words, policies and methods should

be based on the principle that the Aborigines are rational beings, just as capable of logical thought as ourselves.²²

By the 1950s, Elkin had been a principal source of advice on Aboriginal issues to many Commonwealth and State ministers for over a decade and was perhaps too sanguine about the beneficent effects of his policy advice. He seemed to resent Hasluck's claims, as Minister, that Aborigines were objectively worse off than before the War. A biographer of Elkin who is consistently hostile to Hasluck notes that, 'determined to see the progress of Aboriginal affairs in a positive light', Elkin 'cut down all who dared to suggest it was not rosy'.²³ Elkin was infuriated when Hasluck spoke in the House of Representatives of Aborigines 'crouched on rubbish heaps throughout the nation', although Elkin earlier, and other critics of Hasluck later, denounced the living conditions of Aboriginal communities, both bush and urban, in similar terms. Elkin entered into correspondence with the Berndts after Hasluck had spoken of 'primitive savages whose lives are haunted by fear and whose main occupation is hitting one another on the head'.²⁴

Elkin decided to confront Hasluck at the 1959 ANZAAS Conference in Perth. In his address there, Hasluck, after considering some of the very negative aspects of the process, claimed:

Looked at from one point of view, the weakness of the old Aboriginal society and of the present day groups of Aborigines is an advantage. The more it crumbles, the more readily may its fragments be mingled with the rest of the people living in Australia.²⁵

Hasluck added:

If a person of Aboriginal descent is to be accepted as a full member of the Australian society, he has to cease to be a primitive Aboriginal and change in outlook and habit.²⁶

These seem highly defensible statements, even truisms. Neither Hasluck nor Elkin, Coombs nor anyone else, has been able to prevent the continued crumbling of traditional Aboriginal groups in the face of modernity. To achieve full membership of Australian society and to have any chance of equality of condition, Aborigines will have to abandon some ancient ideas and customs. This does not entail discarding all dimensions of Aboriginality and Hasluck did not suggest that it did.

Elkin asserted in reply:

The full-blood aborigines will become literate and educated, skilled and more fitted to play parts in our economic life, but they will remain in the

foreseeable future Aborigines in their social and kin relationships and in the their appreciation of values.²⁷

Elkin argued that 'Aborigines themselves will observe a partial and voluntary segregation—an apartness for an unpredictable period'. Of course, some would and have, but not all, and, indeed, he acknowledged that there will be those who 'turn their back on everything Aboriginal and become European'. He added:

This apartness is a sense of belonging. It is through their own group life that continuity with the past will be retained, social security in the present be experienced and assurance for the future certain. These are essential principles for a people's wellbeing.²⁸

The last sentence suggested that all peoples might have a similar need for group solidarity to the one Elkin attributed to Aborigines. Overall at Perth in 1959 Elkin appeared to the public to have renounced his previous convictions and to have become an advocate of separate development, although hostility to *apartheid* in South Africa ensured that a more congenial term, 'integration' was employed instead. Hasluck deplored this new development and claimed to detect 'in the new fashion for speaking of integration rather inexactly in Australia an idea of preserving something of the separate cultural identity of the two races.' He added:

I think there is a rather romantic foundation for this—the same sort of thing which, with all due respect to the tradespeople who benefit, is expressed in the Moomba festival in Melbourne, in the vogue of the Central Australian painting and in the sale of factory-made koala bears and boomerangs.²⁹

Elkin's change of heart undoubtedly weakened Hasluck's position and policies. Hasluck was long concerned about the rift with Elkin, which he supposed to be based on the latter's misunderstanding of what he had meant by 'crumbling' of traditional Aboriginal societies. Hasluck therefore defined later more clearly what he meant:

When I speak of 'crumbling' I am thinking of such signs of change as the presence of mixed-race people, the more regular employment of Aborigines, the congregation of dependent Aborigines in various kinds of settlement in contrast to nomadic life, the breaking down of tribal authority (whether as a result of the beneficent intentions of missionaries or the attraction that various modes and manners of the white people had for a younger generation), the movement of Aborigines out of their tribal territory towards the towns, and the steady process of pauperization or parasitism that followed the disturbance of the traditional pattern of nomadic life.³⁰

As foreshadowed by the 1967 Referendum, Aborigines in 1971 became full Australian citizens and were counted in the census as

part of the Australian population. That represented the high-water mark of Hasluck's assimilationist policies, although by then he had been appointed Governor-General. Hasluck, however, doubted the wisdom of a constitutional amendment in 1967 which laid the basis for greater Commonwealth involvement in Aboriginal affairs in the States. He commented several years later, in his last public address:

Late in the nineteen sixties an amendment to the Constitution was made of the power to make laws with respect to Aborigines. I would doubt myself whether this was a well-considered judgement of the Australian people on the constitutional question alone. Rather it was an expression of opinion that we should do more to help the Aborigines and to redress the wrongs they had suffered. I would also suggest that the eventual historical judgment on whether it was either a necessary or a wise decision will be made on what has happened to the Aborigines since that redistribution of powers. Now, in the early nineties, are the prospects for the future of Aborigines and for the Australian nation better than they were in the early seventies?³¹

He added, however:

The amendment to the Constitution certainly does not appear to me to mean (or in the new language of the interpreters of the Constitution) to imply that there shall be two systems of law in Australia, or two different classes of Australians.

He held that, after 1967, even before the end of assimilationism, Canberra went astray in two other ways in addition to too much Commonwealth intervention: disregard of experience gained in the Northern Territory; and misrepresentation of earlier policies as paternalistic and based on inadequate genuine grassroots consultation with Aborigines.³²

Coombs soon extended Elkin's attacks on assimilationist policies.

He argued that assimilationism implied that:

Aborigines will in due course speak the same language, be educated in the same schools, find a livelihood by employment in white-owned or administered enterprises and institutions, play the same games and have the same heroes as white Australians. All were based on an end to Aboriginal autonomy. Differences in language, religion, values and culture were in theory to be tolerated and in some instances encouraged, but only in so far as they were decorative, and did not encroach upon the time, the energy or the dedication demanded by the mainstream and particularly, by its economic system.³³

One possible explanation of why Hasluck and Coombs developed such different perspectives on what policies would most benefit Aborigines may be that their formative personal experiences were very dissimilar. Although Coombs was born into basically the same

community as Hasluck, that of south-west Western Australia, as a young man he had little to do with Aborigines there, most of whom had moved a good distance along the road from tribal hunter-gathering to conditions more akin to those of mainstream white society, whereas Hasluck's intimate knowledge of those conditions led him to believe that what had taken place there foreshadowed the likely pattern of development throughout Australia. It may well be that assimilationist policies were much easier to apply in conditions such as those in south-west WA, but more difficult in the place where Hasluck as Minister of Territories had the opportunity to implement them: the Northern Territory, where the majority of Aborigines still lived according to tribal customs, with only marginal contacts with white Australians. In Coombs' case, when he first developed an in-depth interest in Aboriginal issues in the late 1960s, it was mainly in the Northern Territory that he gained his knowledge. It was in the Northern Territory, too, that W.E.H. Stanner, the anthropologist who most influenced him, derived most of his detailed knowledge of Aboriginal customs and contemporary difficulties. On the other hand, it was late in life and after his years of close association with Stanner had ended that Coombs adopted radical policies of Aboriginal autonomy and self-determination.

It is only fair to Hasluck, however, to note that he did not seek to thrust assimilation and a common way of life onto Aborigines in the Northern Territory or elsewhere, but to give those who wished to move down that path the opportunity to do so with a fair chance of success. He always argued that he had inherited pre-War inter-governmental decisions rather than personally inaugurated the policy of assimilation. Although he was convinced assimilation was the right path to take, he was not dogmatic and saw it as a long-term aim, not an immediate objective to be secured by coercion. He considered that he 'saw more clearly than the founders of the policy of assimilation had seen that the applicability of the policy to Aborigines was uneven', since some 'had already moved a long way towards assimilation in the dominant white community but others had experienced only slight modification of aboriginal life'. As a result he held that 'we might have one objective and one policy but we would not have one administrative practice'.³⁴

Endnotes

- 1 Hasluck, 1988, page 5.
- 2 Hasluck, 1988, page 126.
- 3 Sir Paul Hasluck, 'A National Problem—Speech Delivered in the House of Representatives on 8 June 1950' in *Native Welfare in Australia. Speeches and Addresses by the Hon. Paul Hasluck, MP, Minister for Territories*, Perth, Paterson Brokensha, 1953, page 6.
- 4 Hasluck, 1988, page 86.
- 5 This became *An Ordinance to provide for the Care and Assistance of Certain Persons. No. 16 of 1953*.
- 6 CPD, *H of R*, 25–26 August 1960, pages 506–7 (cited in R. Porter, *Paul Hasluck: A Political Biography*, Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 1993, page 206).
- 7 C.D. Rowley. (1970). *The Remote Aborigines*. Melbourne: Penguin, page 296.
- 8 C. Tatz, 'Aboriginal violence: A return to pessimism' in *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 1990, 25 (4), page 247.
- 9 P. Read. (1995). 'The Northern Territory' in A. McGrath (ed). *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines and the British Crown*. St. Leonard's, NSW: Allen and Unwin, page 285.
- 10 Hasluck, 1953, page 16.
- 11 Sir Paul Hasluck, 'The Future of the Australian Aborigines. The Second Part of the Presidential Address to Section F of the 29th Meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, Sydney, 22 August 1952', pages 16–17 (cited in Porter, 1993, page 197).
- 12 Hasluck, 1988, page 135
- 13 R. Broome. (1995). 'Victoria' in A. McGrath (ed), page 149.
- 14 Hasluck, 1988, pages 93–4.
- 15 H.C. Coombs, *Aboriginal Australians 1967–1976: A Decade of Progress?*, Perth, Murdoch University, 1976, page 3.
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- 19 CPD, *H of R*, 18 October 1951, page 874.
- 20 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Regional Report of Inquiry into Underlying Issues in Western Australia, (1991), volume 1, page 86
- 21 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: Regional Report of

- Inquiry into Underlying Issues in Western Australia, (1991), volume 1, page 958.
- 22 A. P. Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigines: A National Aboriginal Policy*, Sydney, Australasian Publishing Co. Pty Ltd, 1944, page 28.
 - 23 T. Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist: A life of A.P. Elkin*, Sydney, George Allen and Unwin, 1985, page 215.
 - 24 Letter from Ronald Berndt to Elkin (cited in Wise, 1985, page 229).
 - 25 Cited in Wise, 1985, page 230.
 - 26 Cited in Wise, 1985, page 230.
 - 27 Cited in Wise, 1985, page 231.
 - 28 Cited in Wise, 1985, page 232.
 - 29 Sir Paul Hasluck, 'The future of the Australian Aborigines' in *Dawn*, 8 (1), January 1959, page 12.
 - 30 Hasluck, 1988, page 80.
 - 31 Sir Paul Hasluck, 'An Address Launching *Upholding the Australian Constitution*, Volume 1' in *Proceedings of the Third Conference of the Samuel Griffith Society*, Melbourne, 1993, page 168.
 - 32 Hasluck, 1988, page 125.
 - 33 Coombs, 1994, page 21.
 - 34 Hasluck, 1988, page 79.

5. The End of Assimilationism

By 1969, when Hasluck moved from an active role in government to the largely ceremonial duties of Governor-General, Coombs had been a major player in Aboriginal affairs for about two years as Chairman of a three-man Council for Aboriginal Affairs that he persuaded Holt to establish. Hasluck was puzzled by Holt's role, because during 16 years in Cabinet Holt had never shown any interest in Aborigines, and when he was Treasurer from December 1958 to January 1966 had been much less responsive than Fadden before him to Hasluck's bids for funding for Aborigines. Coombs wanted the new organisation he controlled to be 'small but powerful, seeking to influence policy and administration widely' and thought this could be ensured through a 'close association with the Prime Minister and his department'.¹ Since Coombs had no apparent special knowledge of Aborigines, and Barrie Dexter, previously Ambassador to Laos, little more, the expertise of the Council was provided entirely by the third member, Stanner. Coombs contributed something more important still: administrative wiles and behind-the-scenes contacts with successive Prime Ministers which enabled him to bypass successive Ministers with responsibility for Aboriginal affairs, irrespective of whether the Coalition or ALP was in government and irrespective of changes in the administrative structure, such as the transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal affairs from the Prime Minister's Office to a Department of the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, and then to a separate Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Liberal Ministers W.C. Wentworth² and Peter Howson and the ALP's Gordon Bryant were all unable to prevent advice contrary from their own and that of their departments reaching Holt, Gorton, McMahon or Whitlam.

Three non-Aboriginal males, ostensibly united in the belief that all decisions about Aborigines should be made by Aborigines alone, were frequently able to get Prime Ministers to listen to their opinions rather than those of officially consulted Aboriginal groups. Charles Perkins, then the senior Aborigine in the Department, complained of

inadequate consultation by the three-man Council, especially by Coombs, whom he described as 'somewhat of a mystery man' and an 'economic phantom'. Perkins found 'some contradiction at times between his ideals and the eventual results' and noted that Aborigines did not permeate the Department of Aboriginal Affairs 'to the extent one would expect Coombs to feel satisfied with, considering his presumed philosophy on Aboriginal self-determination and decision-making in their own affairs'.³ Perkins found it 'a bad reflection' on Coombs that in the four years that Coombs, Stanner and Dexter met as the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, 'only twice did they ever call me (for example) into that meeting' and 'never brought any other Aborigines in either'. Perkins described it as 'absolutely disgusting' that 'these three white men made all the decisions' and 'thought they knew what was good for Aborigines', whilst using the Aboriginal officers as 'cattle dogs' and 'black messenger boys'. On the other hand, Perkins considered that Hasluck, the Minister for External Affairs, 'wanted to help us', was 'a nice bloke in many ways', 'has been very good personally to me' and 'has always been sympathetic to the Aboriginal question'. Perkins considered Hasluck 'would have made a great Prime Minister' and that 'the Liberal Party were stupid to discard him'.⁴

Coombs justified by-passing the Department of Aboriginal Affairs partly on the grounds that the sympathies of ministers such as Peter Howson lay more with the mining and pastoral industries 'than with Aborigines for whom he had ministerial responsibility'.⁵ It is true that Howson had some sympathies with miners and pastoralists, without whose efforts he did not consider Australian prosperity could be secured, but he was also deeply concerned about Aboriginal interests. Coombs, however, was an early exponent of the system explained in *Yes, Prime Minister* by Sir Humphrey Appleby to Prime Minister Jim Hacker, by which ministers, instead of presenting the public interest to various interest groups, act as advocates in cabinet for one or more of those groups. When Coombs was in a position to devolve responsibility to Aborigines he did not do so, presumably because he considered himself the best guardian of Aboriginal interests, and kept as much power in his own hands as possible. It was only after he was no longer an official force in Aboriginal policy that he advocated Aboriginal self-determination, even though he found great wisdom among Aborigines he met in his capacity of

Chairman of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. For example, Coombs commended Daymubalipu Mununggur of the Djapu Clan in Gove Peninsula as a 'natural aristocrat' and added:

The small communities of Aboriginal societies, like the city states of ancient Greece or Renaissance Italy, seem to provide a context from which such "universal men" can emerge—men who are at once warriors, hunters, artists, scholars and statesmen'.⁶

Daymubalipu Mununggur was no doubt a highly admirable person, and one feels some confidence that he would have resisted Coombs' suggestion that 'some Aboriginal leaders could evolve something equivalent to the Nyerere's (sic) Ujamaa Socialism as a guide and rallying point for their political action.'⁷ The Nyerere government was a curious choice as a guide, since it speedily brought Tanzania to the brink of mass starvation, even though at the time of independence but a few years earlier it had been a prosperous land.

While head of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Coombs argued that the choice was between the assimilationist view and an 'integrationist' view, not a separatist one. He defined assimilationism as the attempt to incorporate 'Aborigines into white society to produce one homogeneous social structure', even though Hasluck and other assimilationists clearly believed in a pluralist society and approved of Aborigines retaining whatever cultural modes did not handicap their achieving genuine equality of condition. Coombs then defined the integrationist view as being 'that Aborigines should be enabled, to the extent that they wished, to build on the remnants of their own culture and traditions and to maintain a separate and distinctive social and racial identity within the Australian community'.⁸ It can be argued that this position was not entirely dissimilar from Hasluck's. Both apparently accepted that for the foreseeable future many, most, or even all Aborigines would be influenced by many western ways, but at the same time retain significant features of custom and belief which clearly differentiated them from other Australians. The differences then between Coombs and Hasluck may be seen as those of degree, rather than kind. Degree is important, however, and there is no doubt that Hasluck's general disposition was to believe that, ultimately, Aborigines would be better off to become more like other Australians, whereas Coombs believed they would benefit most by remaining as distinctive and different as possible.

During the 1970s, Coombs became increasingly concerned to help create 'a separate identity as Aboriginal Australians'.⁹ He was

delighted that the ALP and the Coalition had become formally committed to enabling Aborigines to achieve 'self-determination' and 'self-management' respectively, but feared that the political parties did not understand what was required for these objectives to be realised. For Coombs, the essence was the emergence of a 'sense of common identity, the institutions of political action and the intellectual and spiritual leadership which will give increasing authority to their claim to move along this way by their own efforts and at their own pace'.¹⁰ Apparent again was the paradox that every gain Aborigines made was ascribed by him exclusively to their own efforts, despite his own contributions (and that of many other non-Aborigines). Most important of all, the sense of common identity he wanted to emerge was not one all Australians could share. It was the direct opposite: this Aboriginal identity could only come into existence if all Aborigines from hundreds of different groups, which before 1788 had no common bonds, saw themselves as having distinctive needs, beliefs and ways of life defined by their difference from those of other Australians. Instead of 'one people for one continent', Coombs envisaged at least two peoples. Some of the more extreme forms of emerging 'multiculturalism' envisaged many more.

Coombs' influence on white Australians was more important than on Aborigines. In particular, his emphasis on the collective guilt of white Australians for all the many negative features of Aboriginal life, past and present, facilitated acceptance of symbolic policies which seemed to break away from a *damnosa hereditas*. However, expressions of remorse, coupled with massive expenditure on Aboriginal welfare as attempted recompense, did not seem to improve Aboriginal conditions appreciably.

Coombs helped to bring about official acceptance of the definition that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander 'is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he lives.'¹¹ This definition raises as many questions as it resolves. It is not only non-Aborigines who have difficulties identifying as Aboriginal people who in no way resemble physically most people they think of as Aborigines. Roberta Sykes is among many Aborigines who have made a similar point. Sykes considers that 'the black community does have a problem ... just thinking about coping with a flood of white-looking and totally deculturalised people

poised to demand Aboriginal rights for themselves'.¹² The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody had a few dollars each way. On the one hand it recognised Aborigines 'as a distinct people', but on the other drew attention to 'the extraordinary diversity of Aboriginal life styles and cultural experience' in the past, since 'Aboriginal Australia was not one "nation"; it was many' and was aware of the huge variations in genetic make-up and cultural formation among people currently defined as Aborigines, including many with one Aboriginal ancestor at the third or fourth generation level.

During the 1980s, Coombs was highly critical that so much of the assimilationist past remained and that there seemed so far yet to go before Aboriginal autonomy was achieved. He paid a tribute to 'the brief period of the Whitlam government, during which assimilation policies appeared to be yielding to humane influences and giving way to policies designed to recognise Aborigines as a separate and respected component in Australian society...', but he added, it 'was merely an interlude. The objective became to transform Aborigines into the drably uniform and acquiescent labour force demanded by economic rationalism'.¹³ If that was the objective of Aboriginal policy under the Fraser, Hawke and Keating Governments, they all pursued it in highly oblique ways and with a total lack of success.

The 1990s brought developments that delighted Coombs: he rejoiced that the 'Aboriginal right to autonomy and self-determination is recognised in international law by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as we have been reminded by the recent report of the Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner'. Coombs proposed 'an Act of Self-Determination in a form recognised by the United Nations and ... binding on future Australian Commonwealth and State Governments'.¹⁴ To Coombs, any white or non-Aboriginal interference in affairs in which Aborigines play any part, even if not an exclusive one, seemed an abomination. He asserted that 'it is neither desirable, nor useful, to impose constraints upon Aboriginal communities based on non-Aboriginal priorities and expect the outcome to be good'.¹⁵ Coombs considered that only Aboriginal opinion should count in these matters: 'The critical matter is whether the structure is determined, and accepted as appropriate, by Aborigines and their chosen and accountable representatives'.¹⁶ He demanded that Aborigines should have 'unquestioned authority ... without veto

by any agency outside their own community' over matters which affected their welfare. He conceded that there might be problems as to who were the appropriate chosen Aborigines and to whom they should be accountable, and that 'Aboriginal inexperience' may expose them to 'exploitation and incompetence, whilst advisers often didn't know how to represent Aboriginal interests'.¹⁷ These seemed to him, however, to be merely teething troubles, caused by past white usurpation of power and authority.

Coombs' ideas won further ground when the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was replaced first by the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC), then the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC) and finally by the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC). ATSIC was conceived as an Aboriginal organisation in which Aborigines themselves could make their own decisions, leaving other Australians, through the Treasury, to foot the bills. Coombs believed that if ATSIC became 'accountable at its various levels to Aboriginal communities and organisations', this would 'enable it quickly to become accepted by Aborigines generally, as their legitimate mouthpiece and as their potential negotiator' for independence from the Australian state.¹⁸ He was, however, very sympathetic to any criticisms of ATSIC from even more radical or separatist positions than its leadership held. He claimed:

Aboriginal activists have consistently been suspicious of official advisory, consultative or representative bodies. With some justice they see them as composed of 'tame cats' and designed to quiet Aboriginal discontent....¹⁹

Coombs added:

Contemporary Aboriginal politics can be said to be characterised by factionalism and segmentation.... activists coming to leadership through Aboriginal-controlled organisations seek to mobilise these into personal or family empires.²⁰

However, this caused him little concern, since:

...this divisiveness should not necessarily be seen as a negative quality; indeed, it would seem to be in character with the long-term nature of Aboriginal social and territorial organisation in general....

To the extent that factionalism has a recognised political and social value, the leaders of factionally or family-controlled organisations are unlikely to be attracted to proposals which would bring them and their empires under official control or influence, even if that control is apparently exercised by Aborigines.... as one perceptive Aboriginal observer commented ... militant leaders will continue to be influenced by the knowledge that Ministers and governments have in the past responded

'more frequently, faster and more sincerely to black militant protest than to organised approaches through the correct channels'...²¹

The attractions of direct action to zealots of the right and the left are well known. Furthermore, the tendency to base political power on extended family connections survives in several parts of Europe, let alone the rest of the world. Yet in non-Aboriginal contexts most Australian political commentators at least profess to deplore street politics and nepotism.

Coombs attributed problems among Aboriginal groups which adopted his recommended structures to past white policies:

...Aboriginal mechanisms for accountability and autonomy between the various social and kin categories have been, to some degree, impaired by decision making and structures imposed or significantly influenced by white authority;... Thus, Aboriginal people face the problems of abuse of alcohol, of increasing male domination of family and clan matters sometimes by violence, and the encroachment of men into matters previously regarded as the primary (but not exclusive) responsibility of women...²²

He found 'evidence that active initiatives to resolve these problems are already underway and there is much progress'.²³ He claimed, for example, that 'In predominantly Aboriginal communities such as Homelands, antagonism to grog is almost universal, strongly felt and expressed'.²⁴ He admitted that '...among the young participation in group drinking sessions sometimes seems to develop as an alternative cult where achievement of manhood status is marked by acceptance into a drinking group',²⁵ but this caused him no alarm. After all, Coombs maintained, 'Aborigines, both as individuals and as groups, have shown at least as successful a capacity to come to terms with the abuse as white Australians where they wish to do so'.²⁶

Coombs has shown some awareness that concepts of Aboriginal autonomy were confused, but his advice was rarely helpful. He commended Clyde Holding, when Commonwealth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, for drawing an analogy between the Aboriginal organisation he envisaged and the ACTU. Coombs noted that the 'ACTU model' may be 'closer to traditional Aboriginal processes than those based upon the models of representative parliamentary institutions'.²⁷ There was truth in this, although unintentional. Indeed, Coombs added that 'While Aborigines follow processes which are, I believe, basically democratic, the European concept of representative government seems incompatible with their culture'.²⁸ Coombs' resolution of this supposed incompatibility was that representative

government should be abandoned, not that traditional Aboriginal culture should be modified. He noted that 'Aborigines who work for an Aboriginal "boss" of an area of land or of a ceremony, expect that person also to "look after" them in the sense of having an obligation to advance their interests and welfare when called upon'.²⁹ They looked to pastoralists and missionaries to look after them in a similar way and the attitude continues to some extent in respect of contemporary bureaucracies. To describe such a way of life as autonomous indicates a curiously inverted notion of autonomy. The fundamental contradiction in Coombs' position was that he attributed to Aborigines a great capacity for making autonomous decisions, yet excused them of any genuine responsibility for their actions on the grounds that they are permanent victims of forces outside their control. Faced with Aborigines who dissented publicly from his policies, Coombs resorted to the old Marxist conception of 'false consciousness'. For example, he commented in 1976 on some Aborigines he found to be in error:

These, lacking the guidance of a continuing tradition, frequently come to accept unconsciously the values of the dominant majority....³⁰

By 1994, Coombs was confident that the 'time has come' for several ideas he had propounded for many years. One such idea, he believed, 'sweeping through Aboriginal communities of Australia and their organisations' was for those communities 'to group themselves within regions to negotiate directly with the Commonwealth Government'. Such agreements could then 'become the instruments of a step-by-step achievement of independence and self-government'. One advantage of the scheme would be to 'enable the Commonwealth Government to bypass those states or territories unwilling to cooperate in a workable application of the Mabo judgment and to test some ideas for constitutional reform'. That is, presumably, unless the ALP, and/or other parties even more favourable than it to separatism, lose office in Canberra and gain office in some States and Territories. Coombs did not wish to restrict regional groupings that could negotiate directly with Canberra to Aborigines, but suggested that 'such experiments could concern matters important to the non-Aboriginal community', except, of course, that in his sense of a community there is no such thing as 'the non-Aboriginal community', but a series of ethnic 'communities' comparable to those of Aborigines, such as the Greek, Italian, Chinese and so on.

Coombs raised again a question close to his heart: 'whether and at what point, if any, there will be serious conflict between the fulfilment' of 'cultural and ceremonial commitments and family and clan obligations' and 'accepting the rewards and commitments of entry into the economic system'. Coombs would have been delighted if Aborigines totally spurned the spurious rewards of capitalism, but they may themselves view the matter very differently. Not many Aborigines are pleased when services and goods they desire are not available and might not be any more pleased if they were in an autonomous and self-government region in which other Aborigines were sole suppliers of those goods and services, but failed to supply them because of their 'cultural and ceremonial commitments and family and clan obligations'. In 1994 Coombs expressed the hope in 1994 that Aborigines and comparable peoples in the 'Fourth World' would rise and overthrow 'the antipathetic forces of the military industrial complex' and 'the capitalist objectives of the transnational corporations',³¹ but Aborigines seem as eager to acquire many of the products of such corporations as do any other Australians. Their complaint is often that these products are not available to them in sufficient abundance.

Hasluck continued to advocate the principle of assimilation, as in a 1970 lecture to the Lawyers' Committee of the Captain Cook Bicentenary Celebrations:

My own view of what is the best end attainable is clear. I have held it and worked for it for a long time. I think that the advantages of civilisation in Australia should be shared by all who live here. The rights, the privileges, the responsibilities and the material benefits of an Australian subject and citizen should be enjoyed by all. There should be one legal status both in respect of the rights and in respect of the obligations of the citizen. There should be an equal chance for all in Australia to live in respect and dignity.³²

He regretted that after his time 'decisions were made deliberately to treat Aborigines as persons racially distinct and socially different from all other Australians. The government started on a course of separate development.' He warned:

Temporarily it may seem that advantage will be given but let us consider that even a law which extends special favour is a law which says that the aboriginal is not as good as other Australians and I say that is a bad law. Any law that implies that an aboriginal person is always to be treated in a different way from other Australians is a discriminatory law, creating separateness.³³

He said sorrowfully:

At one time segregation into separate communities was the solution urged by those who thought poorly of the aboriginal. Today, it seems to me, some of those who profess to be most deeply concerned about their welfare are promoting policies which will have the same results of keeping them apart in a different group at a lower level of hope.³⁴

Looking to the future, Hasluck suggested that the basic questions to be faced were:

Whether Australians of Aboriginal origin are to live together with other Australians or apart from them; are they to have the same opportunities or different opportunities; are they to bear the same responsibilities and be subject to the same laws or are they to be regarded as a 'lesser breed' from whom less should be required? Is Australia to have one society or two societies?...

Are they to be a minority living an artificial, pampered and separate life, not supported by their own participation in what all other Australians are doing but by the bounty of those who earn the national income? Or are they to be living museum pieces? Or a sort of fringe community whose quaint customs are stared at by tourists.... [I]s it intended that their separate development will be carried to a point where they become virtually a nation within a nation. That seems to me to be a dangerous absurdity... It is an idea that makes separate development not merely a transitional method but the permanent solution. That is abominably racist thinking.³⁵

These remain questions of central importance.

In his later years, Hasluck was increasingly disappointed that assimilationism as a policy had apparently been so widely rejected, even by his own party, and increasingly fearful that this might portend the dissolution of Australia. He was, however, confident that in spite of the change in direction, assimilation continued to take place to a much greater extent than was generally acknowledged. He noted in 1980 that 'Aboriginal spokesmen ... derive a great deal from European ideas' and that 'in the case of some of those of mixed race who were reared wholly separate from any Aboriginal society, their claim to know about Aboriginal customs derives mostly from what Europeans recorded in the past'.³⁶ He argued that 'often the invoking of what is popularly called "the law of the Aborigines" and the use of such terms as "rights" have connotations closer to the ways of Europeans than to the ways of Aborigines'.³⁷ He was amused that damper and brawn made from kangaroo meat were described as 'traditional Aboriginal dishes' and noted that 'in boxing, cycling, athletics and most ball games Aborigines hold their place without anyone suggesting that there should be one set of rules and interpretations for Aborigines and another set to apply to the rest of

the players'. He suggested that arguments in favour of an Aboriginal title to land and the form of the title derive from white man's practices, that both the arguments and methods employed by Aboriginal 'activists' are those of the European society into which they have moved, and that even the idea of designing an Aboriginal flag and raising it as a symbol of something called an Aboriginal nation is the outcome of assimilation to European ways.³⁸ Despite shortcomings and disappointments in the implementation of assimilationist policies, Hasluck held in 1983 that 'as a result of ministrations and care during the past half century, most of the Aborigines in Australia are closer to European standards of physical and social acceptability than they were in the 1930s' and that 'a very large proportion can communicate their views readily to other Australians', whereas 'fifty years ago only a few could do so', and that 'most of them are clothed, clean and well fed'.³⁹

That a significant advance took place sometime during the second half of the twentieth century was common ground between Hasluck and Coombs, but they placed the improvement in different quarters of the half century. To Coombs it was after the 1970s that Aborigines 'made by their own initiatives, intelligence and dedication, remarkable progress in the achievement of a lifestyle more healthy, more creative and more characteristically Aboriginal than has previously been possible since their dispossession'.⁴⁰ Hasluck considered that the 1950s and 1960s were decades of greater Aboriginal progress and feared that during the 1980s there was regression, despite massive expenditure. An impartial examination of the outcomes suggests that Hasluck's fears were justified.

Endnotes

- 1 Coombs, 1978, pages 2–3.
- 2 Wentworth established the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which made distinguished contributions to scholarship and the revival of Aboriginal art and music.
- 3 Perkins, 1975, pages 165; 172–3.
- 4 Perkins, 1975, pages 110–111; 161
- 5 Coombs, 1978, page 171.
- 6 Coombs, 1978, page 69
- 7 Coombs, 1976, p. 15.

- 8 Coombs, 1978, page 7.
- 9 Coombs, 1978, page 217.
- 10 Coombs, 1978, page 243.
- 11 This was formally adopted in Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Constitutional Section. (1981). *Report on a Review of the Administration of the Working Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 1981*. Canberra: AGP, page 8.
- 12 R. Sykes. (1989). 'There may be more Aborigines than many whites care to admit'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February, cited in Brunton, 1993, page 10.
- 13 Coombs, 1994, page 158.
- 14 Coombs, 1994, pages 226 and 227.
- 15 Coombs, 1994, page 180.
- 16 Coombs, 1994, page 184.
- 17 Coombs, 1994, page 173.
- 18 Coombs, 1994, page 185.
- 19 Coombs, 1994, page 135.
- 20 Coombs, 1994, page 136.
- 21 Coombs, 1994, page 136.
- 22 Coombs, 1994, page 223.
- 23 Coombs, 1994, page 223.
- 24 Coombs, 1994, page 18.
- 25 Coombs, 1994, page 19.
- 26 Coombs, 1994, page 67.
- 27 Coombs, 1994, page 132.
- 28 Coombs, 1994, pages 132–133.
- 29 Coombs, 1994, page 78.
- 30 Coombs, 1976, page 8.
- 31 H.C. Coombs, 'A way towards black self-rule' in *The Canberra Times*, 13 December 1994, page 8.
- 32 Sir Paul Hasluck, *An Open Go*, Melbourne, Hawthorn Press, 1971, pages 70-1.
- 33 Hasluck, 1971, page 72.
- 34 Hasluck, 1971, pages 79–80.
- 35 Hasluck, 1988, pages 143 and 145.
- 36 Hasluck, 1980, page xxi.
- 37 Hasluck, 1980, page xxii.
- 38 Hasluck, 1988, pages 139–140.
- 39 Hasluck, 1988, page 20.
- 40 Coombs, 1994, page 221.

Part 2

Outcomes

6. Land Rights

Hasluck observed that, although some white Australians 'might say broadly that the whites had taken the land from the Aborigines, the majority had a conception that the immigrants had simply occupied waste land ... and turned it into farms, gardens, orchards and pastures and had stocked it with animals and brought to it structures, implements and skills previously unknown.'¹ He did not suggest that this simplistic view was historically true, but noted that during most of the half-century from 1930 onwards the question of land rights was seldom raised by Aborigines or whites. He held that 'the concept of land belonging to the Crown was valued by most Australians because in the history of land settlement it had been the principle by which land-grabbing had been checked, the squatter had been restrained, the free settler and small selector had been given a chance to obtain land, and citizens had found security of tenure'.² Hasluck also noted that a title to land brought with it obligations such as payment of land tax, municipal rates and other dues imposed by statute for particular purposes, such as making firebreaks, eradication of vermin, observance of laws on sanitation and drainage, and so on. Furthermore, titles did not carry a right to any undiscovered mineral wealth that lay beneath the surface or an unrestricted right to the water that flowed through the land. The titles to land could be of various kinds, such as freehold, pastoral leasehold, mining tenement, and conditional purchase. In all cases, land could be resumed compulsorily by the Crown for public purposes on just terms. Irrespective of any legal title to a defined plot of land, Australian citizens also had the expectation of access and use in respect of public lands—public open spaces, parks and gardens, recreation reserves, national parks and so on—but the nature and extent of such 'rights' were also not a simple matter of going wherever they wished and doing whatever they felt like doing, but were surrounded by various legal limitations.

Thus landholding was a complex matter, and Hasluck considered it simplistic to talk of the 'land rights' of any subject of the Crown. He thought it beyond the realm of the possible or desirable, however, that there could be different systems of landholding for various sections of the population defined by race or culture. Hasluck was insistent that his approach did not derive from any idea that Aborigines had rights in land different from those of other Australian citizens. He argued that, even it were conceded that the Aborigines had an interest in land different from the interest of all other residents of Australia, the popular understanding was that the interest of Aborigines in land was not the same as an interest in a proprietary title given under the Torrens system, because it did not lead to or require continuous and exclusive occupation of a tract of land, but was satisfied by occasional and seasonal visits.³ He added:

So far as I can recall any case made for setting aside more land for Aborigines in the pre-war years was generally a claim based on their need. Sometimes it might also have some element of compensation for wrongs they had suffered. Claims that grants be made to fill needs or to compensate for wrongs are not the same as recognition of rights in land.... I knew there was an attachment of the Aboriginal to his land and a special relationship between him and the land but it was not ownership.⁴

His later doubts about the campaigns for 'land rights' arose not from lack of concern about the needs of Aborigines, but because these claims separated them from other Australians and constituted a form of 'separate development'.⁵ Indeed, his basic strategy was to identify as needs whatever was necessary for Aborigines to achieve genuine equality with other Australians and then, if possible, to satisfy them, although he did not intend to force European standards on Aborigines, but rather to make it possible for all those desirous of achieving them to do so.

Hasluck did not share Coombs' hostility to extended mining, forestry, pastoralism and urban development. In some cases he was satisfied that encroachments on Aboriginal reserves were justified, especially if and when the policy of assimilation was reducing Aboriginal reliance on particular reserves. He was determined, however, that development should never be at the expense of basic Aboriginal interests. He aimed to ensure that the Aborigines' prospective as well as immediate needs should be taken into account in all disposal of land. His basic principle was that 'No excisions from reserves or abolition of reserves are to be made for purposes of settlement or subdivision unless the circumstances are such that the aboriginal

wards can themselves take part in the settlement or benefit from the subdivision'.⁶ He stated bluntly:

It is not the policy of this Government to throw open Aboriginal reserves or to reduce them thoughtlessly; nor should any prospector, miner or any other person be misled into thinking that he will be encouraged by this Government to enter on reserves.⁷

The Menzies Cabinet accepted Hasluck's submission that, in granting prospecting and mining rights on Aboriginal reserves, the Administrator should lay down conditions to protect the interests of Aborigines, that any recommendation to resume or revoke land on reserves should be accompanied by a statement regarding the effect on Aboriginal welfare, and that royalties should be paid into a trust fund for the general benefit of Aborigines. He insisted that the royalty should be a percentage of the value of the product, not a flat rate, so that Aborigines could gain full benefit from the most successful ventures, and that the rate should be double that normal outside reserves, so that mining on them would not be undertaken lightly.⁸ He personally ensured that the level of royalty from mineral extraction in the Northern Territory was 2.5 per cent of gross value, 2 per cent higher than in New South Wales and significantly higher than in Victoria or Queensland. His cabinet colleague W.H. Spooner, Minister for National Development, complained that this level was 'excessive', but Hasluck stood firm.⁹ Hasluck anticipated some problems which have recently arisen in the post-Mabo situation, in which Aborigines who cannot demonstrate any continuity of occupation of land may well be seriously disadvantaged in comparison with those who can. He wished to place mineral royalties into a trust fund for Aborigines at Territory level, but the case brought by the Yirrkala people on the Gove Peninsula in 1963 showed, among other things, that some Aboriginal groups would seek exclusive control over such royalties.

It seems strange to brand Hasluck's policies as paternalist and protectionist, when in the 1990s Commonwealth land rights policies prevent Aboriginal owners from alienating land in the ways open to most non-Aboriginal land-owners. The prominent Christian Aborigine, Bob Liddle, has argued that these restrictions arise 'because paternalists do not think the black man is sufficiently mature to behave responsibly'.¹⁰ Ron Brunton has observed that Justice Brennan's formulation in the Mabo Case 'would seem to preclude virtually any kind of economic transaction involving land held under native title, including dealings with even an Aboriginal company wishing to

develop the land.¹¹ If the majority of the judges in *Mabo* are right in considering that Aborigines must be protected against themselves, in case they make mistaken decisions about how to use or dispose of their land, it seems inconsistent to condemn Hasluck for the same view, especially when he sought only temporary restrictions on Aboriginal owners, whereas currently the policy is that restrictions should last in perpetuity.

The conditions which Coombs has required of any enterprise seeking permission to conduct a mining development include submission of 'detailed estimates of the economic, financial, social and environmental costs and benefits to the region, Australia and to the rest of the world'. In addition, he required that any mining enterprise wishing to explore within lands in which Aborigines had interests would have to 'apply to the relevant ATSIC regional council for permission to negotiate with the responsible Aboriginal group or community'. The elected members of that council would then, in conjunction with the group or community concerned, satisfy themselves that 'the appropriate traditional owners' had been 'fully consulted', that it was the wish of the group or community that the negotiations should proceed, and that the group or community would be represented by 'an appropriate Aboriginal-controlled organisation, such as a land council or other independent body with access to a range of professional advice'. If the ATSIC regional council was satisfied these requirements had been met, it would then have to inform the appropriate Aboriginal land trust of its recommendations, 'for their consideration of any application for a permit to enter the relevant lands'. 'Any agreement between a mining enterprise and an Aboriginal group or community' would then have to be 'registered with the relevant regional council ... accompanied by a statutory declaration on behalf of the enterprise that no payments or other benefits have been made, delivered or promised to any person, for any reason, in respect of the agreement other than those specified in the agreement'. Any Aboriginal person or group believing that an agreement had been improperly reached, or denied them natural justice, would be able to lodge a complaint with the regional council concerned.¹²

Coombs welcomed 'land rights' as the basis on which separate development might take place:

The land rights movement basically expresses the desire of Aborigines to acquire title to, and control of, land which they regard as theirs by

traditional right and with which they identify in a complex and spiritually charged manner. *By logical extension* it comprehends their desire, when links with their ancestral lands have been broken or cannot be demonstrated, to gain title to other land.... *Accordingly*, it also includes calls to be compensated for the loss of land which was taken from their ancestors by force and without treaty or compensation, and for the destruction of the way of life which had sustained those ancestors for more than 40,000 years. (Emphasis added.)¹³

Thus, according to Coombs, all Aborigines have land rights, including those who have no recollection whatsoever of any particular land. Coombs noted that, 'While Aboriginal land-owning groups are predominantly made up of those who share a common patrilineal descent, this is not always so. There will also be real, if imprecise rights vested in a range of other persons outside that group'.¹⁴ He was prepared to concede that 'much of the politicking of Aboriginal society seems to have been and probably still is concerned with the development and extension of claims to the land of other groups'.¹⁵

That claims to land rights may well be 'imprecise' and involve much 'politicking' was revealed in the Gove and Finniss River cases. Basil Sansom, the anthropologist who acted as consultant anthropologist for one of the contending Aboriginal parties in the Finniss River case, divided the history of land rights before 1989 into 'two periods of official time'. Phase I 'was the period of the Interim Land Rights Commissioner', while Phase II 'belongs to his successor, the Aboriginal Land Commissioner appointed in terms of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act of 1976. The transition between Phase I and Phase II was marked by the simple deletion of a set of proposed provisions', which was 'devastating in its effects'.¹⁶ Justice Woodward recommended in 1974 that Territory Aborigines be ceded rights to land on two separate and distinctive sets of grounds. In the first place, traditional ownership was to be recognised and Aborigines who could refer to tradition to establish the fact and right of claim would be ceded those ancestral lands which could be resumed by the state. In the second place, Woodward proposed a second rubric: claims should be entertained on grounds of *de facto* occupancy, long association and need. The Commonwealth Parliament dropped the second of the Woodward rubrics, but in the first period the Interim Commissioner addressed claims of need as well. It was of course easier to recognise 'need', an immediate if contestable category, than to establish traditional claims, many of which were uncertain and disputed among Aboriginal groups. *De facto* occupancy, long association with land

and need are all creations of Western law, whereas in 1975 'traditional ownership' was not part of common law.

In the Finnis River case, claimed Sansom, for the first time the Aboriginal Land Commissioner heard a case in which separate and rival groupings of Aborigines pressed claims to the same tract of land and 'this was a fractious business'. Sansom explained:

There were two opposed Aboriginal groupings, the Maranunggu and the Kungarakany/Warai, each claiming exclusive traditional ownership of a defined area of land....

In the end the case was to hinge on a single major question: is the takeover of land by an incoming group possible in Aboriginal tradition? On the one hand there was documentary evidence to show that the Maranunggu were interlopers ... The Kungarakany on the other hand were indisputably descendants of a group who had held the contested area in traditional ownership from the time of first contact and for whom there was no documented history of desertion of homeland. A further and important fact of evidence was that only the older members of the Maranunggu claimant group were aware of the Maranunggu removal.¹⁷

Sansom showed that 'the essential issue in the takeover of land in Aboriginal Australia is the process by which *de facto* use and occupancy by an incoming group are converted into ownership as of right and by which *de facto* use and occupancy can be converted into ownership as of right from time immemorial.'¹⁸ Warner noted as early as 1937, 'a clan does not possess its land by strength of arms but by immemorial tradition, and as an integral part of the culture', but one clan can absorb the territory of another and incorporate the sites of the absorbed country into its clan mythology.¹⁹ Sansom observed that 'the anthropology of Australian land rights' has recently become 'less an applied anthropology of authoritative citation, and more a creative anthropology of inventive interpretation'.²⁰

If a sense of place is relatively strong among Aborigines, their sense of historical time is, contrary to Coombs' claims, very weak. Human groups vary immensely in this respect, leading Evans-Pritchard to pose the question, 'Why among some peoples are historical traditions rich and among others poor?'²¹ Almost 70 years ago Codrington noted that 'A point of difference between the Polynesian and Melanesian sections of the Pacific peoples is the conspicuous presence in the former, and the no less conspicuous absence in the latter, of native history and tradition.'²² Sansom noted that 'Aborigines join with Melanesians as a people of little legend, a hesitant oral history and a truncated sense of time'.²³ He argued:

In Aboriginal Australia shallow genealogies, groups of small-scale and cultural injunctions that positively discourage the reawakening of historical disputation all combine. The result is that the structurally determined time span for Aboriginal historical memory is notoriously short. This, in turn, means that events of the order of Warner's unconscious absorption of one clan's territory by another can occur quite soon after the actual dispossession of the original owning groups. What is required is a lapse of about two generations, together with the absence of surviving counter-claimants. With the efflux of time, uncomfortable facts concerning the prior and original rights of now-defunct groups can finally become irretrievable ... The 'normal process' involves the non-transmission of items of historical information between Aboriginal elders and their juniors.²⁴

Ron Brunton has noted

instances of people who are known—from unassailable documentary sources—to have occupied new lands within the life-time of their elders, but who flatly deny that they, or their ancestors, lived anywhere else.²⁵

Brunton observed that 'this kind of denial is much easier in a culture based completely on oral traditions. It is much harder for cultures possessing written records which can always act as a testament to what has gone on in the past'. The rewriting of history is also often an obstacle to knowing the truth. Aboriginal claims to 'ownership' of their own history are a further obstacle, although Australia is not yet in the parlous condition of New Zealand, where a friend of Henry Reynolds 'was actually fire-bombed through a window because it was felt she shouldn't be writing Maori history'.²⁶

Almost as soon as the British settlement of Australia began, many Aboriginal groups showed a willingness, indeed an eagerness, to leave their traditional areas in order to have access to the wonders introduced by the newcomers. Reynolds noted that

European goods like steel axes and knives, pieces of iron, tins, cloth and glass were all eagerly sought and used by Aboriginal tribes even before contact had been made with settlers on the advancing frontier. Western food, tobacco and alcohol also exerted a tremendous attraction.²⁷

Stanner described the voluntary mass movement, a century later, of Aborigines from the Fitzmaurice River area of the Northern Territory. He reported that their 'appetites for tobacco and to a lesser extent for tea became so intense that neither man nor woman could bear to be without' and as a result 'individuals, families and parties of friends simply went away to places where the avidly desired things could be obtained'. Stanner considered that 'voluntary movements of this kind occurred widely in Australia', so that 'we must look all over again at what we suppose to have been the conditions of collapse

of Aboriginal life'. The reported arrival of Europeans 'was sufficient to unsettle Aborigines still long distances away' and 'for every Aborigine who, so to speak, had Europeans thrust upon him, at least one other had sought them out'. Stanner concluded that 'disintegration following on a voluntary and banded migration is a very different kind of problem from the kind we usually picture—that of the ruin of a helpless people, overwhelmed by circumstances'. One idea Stanner thought needed 'drastic revision' was that 'to part an Aborigine from his clan country is to wrest his soul from his body'.²⁸ Berndt also wrote of discontinuity in Aboriginal occupation of land, combined with subsequent changes in myth to justify the new situation. For example, in 1912 there seem to have been no Gunwinggu people at Oenpelli, but by the 1950s they had become the predominant group. The lateness of their arrival did not inhibit their establishing Dreamtime links with their new territory.²⁹ The speed with which Aborigines can establish 'timeless' links with the land was also shown at Elsey Station, where an Aborigine named Gudir (or Luganin in Algwa) came as a Native Policeman, but was within a generation thoroughly incorporated into local Aboriginal society and its kinship system.³⁰ Despite the fact that Gudir was known to have come from a distant and unrelated clan, he was said to have been brought to Elsey by a 'wild wind', the totemic property of the semi-moiety to which he was allocated.

In several Pilbara pastoral stations, it was at first the custom for Aborigines to return annually to their former home territories to carry out ceremonies, but as settlement became permanent many Aborigines frequently neglected the old and tried to develop new rites related to the new area. This often led to antagonism with later arrivals from the deserts who retained more of the traditional lore and sought to use it to establish superior status on the stations.³¹ Several conflicts of the 1990s have their roots in that type of antagonism, often sharpened now by the huge prizes available for successful land rights claims. Over the last 200 years many breaks in continuity of occupancy of once traditional lands have been the result of voluntary Aboriginal decisions to relocate. Timeless links with land are not, as Coombs supposed, universal among Aborigines. Where strong links exist, it has often been very difficult for anyone else to know about them, mainly because of the unwillingness of many Aboriginal groups to divulge information about their beliefs and customs, including those concerning land. Such reticence may in some

instances be justifiable, but it ought logically to preclude censure of non-Aborigines because they are ignorant about aboriginal beliefs and customs.

Kenneth Maddock explored the failure of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, the *Aboriginal Sacred Sites Ordinance 1978*, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Act 1984* and subsequent legislation to define clearly what is meant by either sacred or site in 'sacred sites'.³² Maddock identified as a basic problem, as did Justice Woodward in his 1974 Report, the reluctance of Aborigines to 'disclose the whereabouts of sacred sites to strangers'. Berndt, on whom Woodward placed great reliance, oscillated between a restricted definition of sacred sites as 'secret-sacred' places believed to be dangerous and only to be visited by fully initiated Aborigines, and an extended one of land shaped by spirit beings. The extended one readily covers the whole of the continent. The political strategy favoured by Coombs and the Land Rights movements has been to present as extended a definition as courts or governments will accept at any given moment and, if it is accepted, to use it subsequently as a launching-pad for further expansion.

Coombs considered the Mabo judgement to be an insufficient and inadequate compromise. He alleged that it granted an Aboriginal native title 'engineered to suit white proprietary interests'. He denounced 'the claim that uncertainly for miners and other development interests is intolerable' as 'the product of the continuing unwillingness of many resource-exploiting enterprises to concede that they will have to negotiate with Aboriginal people and accept their right to hire expertise to secure reasonable equality of bargaining power'.³³ Coombs endorsed the claim of Michael Mansell that 'the policy approach of the Mabo case appears to protect those fortunate Aboriginal groups least affected by white contact'.³⁴ Yet in general Aboriginal groups least affected by white contact are by far the worst off, in terms of life expectancy, health and education. Persons classifying themselves as Aborigines who live in areas of long contact with whites, such as Tasmania, Victoria and urban centres in the other States, enjoy on average much better education, living standards, health and life-expectancy than those living in areas of shorter contact in Northern Australia.

Coombs has acknowledged that the idea of a single unified Aboriginal people is a recent one and admitted that 'it is well known that Aborigines rarely identify themselves simply as Aborigines, but

rather as Nyungah, Wiradjuri, Warlpiri, Yolngu, Murri, Koori and so on'. Indeed the concept of a nation, with all its attributes, is clearly derivative and a sense of common Aboriginality developed only out of a shared difference from white Australians. Because of Aboriginal diversity, Coombs argued that 'at least one major reserve should exist within the territory of every significant tribal or language group', since reserves identified with particular groups and with their territory 'would command valuable Aboriginal involvement and management and help express the cultural diversity on which Aboriginal society is built'.³⁵ These considerations did not prevent him from on other occasions invoking a single Aboriginal Nation, with which other Australians should make treaties.

Endnotes

- 1 Hasluck, 1988, page 21.
- 2 Hasluck, 1988, page 103.
- 3 Hasluck, 1988, pages 103–5.
- 4 Hasluck, 1988, page 107.
- 5 Hasluck, 1988, page 115.
- 6 Hasluck, 1988, page 110.
- 7 *CPD, H of R*, 9 October 1952, page 2851.
- 8 Hasluck, 1988, pages 112–3.
- 9 Cited in Porter, 1993, page 212.
- 10 B. Liddle. (1988). 'Aborigines are Australian, too' in K. Baker (ed). *A Treaty with the Aborigines?* IPA Policy Issues number 7, Melbourne: Institute of Public Affairs, page 14
- 11 Brunton, 1993, page 36.
- 12 Coombs, 1994, pages 114–6.
- 13 Coombs, 1994, page 39.
- 14 Coombs, 1994, page 41.
- 15 Coombs, 1994, pages 41–42.
- 16 B. Sansom, 'Aborigines, Anthropologists and Leviathan' in N. Dyck (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples and the Nation-State: Fourth World Politics in Canada, Australia and Norway*, Social and Economic Papers no. 14, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1989, page 76.
- 17 Sansom, 1989, pages 79–80.
- 18 Sansom, 1989, pages 80–81.

- 19 W.L. Warner, *A Black Civilization*, New York, Harpur and Brothers, 1937, pages 18–9.
- 20 Sansom, 1989, page 75.
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- 22 Cited in Sansom, 1989, page 78.
- 23 Sansom, 1989, page 79.
- 24 Sansom, 1989, page 82.
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- 27 H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: An Interpretation of the Aboriginal response to the invasion and settlement of Australia*, Townsville, James Cook University, 1981, page 39.
- 28 Stanner, 1979, pages 46–9.
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- 30 F. Merlan, "'Making people quiet" in the pastoral north: reminiscences of Elsey Station' in *Aboriginal History*, 1978, 2 (1), pages 84 ff.
- 31 Wilson, 1980, pages 156–7.
- 32 K. Maddock, 'Sanctity in Aboriginal Landscape: Problems of Ascertainment and Definition in Australia' in H. Reynolds and R. Nile (eds), *Indigenous Rights in the Pacific and North America: Race and Nation in the Late Twentieth Century*, London, University of London, Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 1992, pages 111–122.
- 33 Coombs, 1994, page 210.
- 34 Coombs, 1994, page 217.
- 35 Coombs, 1994, page 169.

7. Aborigines in the Economy

In the 1930s, Hasluck found that the general view of white station people was that the Aborigines were a useful but not always dependable source of seasonal labour as stockmen and around the station homestead. A permit had to be obtained from the Aboriginal Protector before an Aborigine could be employed. The conditions of the permit required the employer to 'supply to every Aborigine employed by him substantial, good and sufficient rations, clothing and blankets, and medicine and medical attendance where practicable and necessary'. Hasluck argued that, although no wages were paid, 'as regards rations and clothing, the employers did more than the regulations required. To secure the services of a score of workers a pastoralist might issue full rations to as many as thirty other blacks and in addition give liberal dry rations (flour, tea, sugar and tobacco) to "bush blacks", either for the sake of their friendly influence on the station "boys" or to secure his cattle from harm. There was no stinginess on rations'.¹ Hasluck found that the typical pastoralist:

did not believe in teaching the black anything except the job he wanted him to do, and on many stations there was noticeable a decided prejudice against the mission-trained boy. He was regarded as 'spoilt'. Perhaps the general attitude of the station owner or manager might be summarised as follows: Learn how to handle them. Be firm and don't let them get cheeky. Treat them well ... Don't interfere with their tribal life. Allow them to live as far as possible in their natural conditions. You can never understand them so be satisfied if you can simply get them to do what you want in return for their tucker.²

Hasluck wished to change that mode of thinking, but observed that 'one odd feature of the growth of opinion in the twentieth century has been that at one stage those who said that the Aborigines should be left alone to live their tribal life were condemned as being unenlightened and repressive and at a later stage exponents of the same view were praised as being liberal and advanced thinkers.' Other old pastoralist stereotypes once denounced by progressive opinion as redneck and reactionary were also advanced by new progressives in the 1980s, but in euphemistic terms. Instead of the old 'once an

abo, always an abo' from pastoralists, there was instead from social workers, 'Most people don't realise that Aborigines have inbuilt differences in terms of values and attitudes and nothing will change that'.³

The strongest feeling against Aborigines in the older pastoral areas, Hasluck argued, was not shown by the 'bosses', but by employees who resented any use of 'cheap labour' or would not work alongside persons of different habits.⁴ Hasluck found that the traditional Aboriginal way of life was being broken down, but the gradualness of the change hid from governments and employers the need to prepare Aborigines to handle problems that change would inevitably bring. He recognised that there were arguments, both social and economic, for not paying Aborigines standard white wages for their work on sheep and cattle stations, but he saw this as a temporary situation. He criticised the failure of pastoralists to understand that Aborigines were moving into a society in which money was used and that they needed help in its proper use.⁵

Although there were very considerable variations within States and between States, in general the employment of Aborigines in rural occupations held up in numbers, or increased, during the assimilationist years of the 1950s and early 1960s, until the 1966 application by the North Australian Workers' Union to bring Aborigines within the Cattle Station Industry Award. A similar application had been rejected in 1950, but in 1967 the decision was taken to put Aboriginal workers on the same rates of pay and conditions of work as white workers as from December 1968. Coombs has generally been less dismissive of pastoralism than of mining, and conceded:

...despite its exploitative character, the relationship between some individual white pastoralists and Aboriginal groups resident on the land concerned was often more respectful of Aboriginal priorities and values than many of the better-paid alternatives which have succeeded it... Humane and intelligent pastoralists like the Parkinson family of Willowra ... provided food for resident Aboriginal families, cared for the sick and the injured, and helped when Aborigines sought a school for their children and various other services.⁶

An interesting feature of Maggie Brady's investigation of petrol sniffing among Aborigines in the 1980s was that 'the regions where the cattle industry was, or still is, part of Aboriginal life have a low or non-existent incidence of petrol sniffing', whereas its incidence was high in some areas in which there had been very few intrusions of

white ways of life, such as rearing cattle, and in which groups lived on land guaranteed by land rights legislation.⁷

Coombs has recognised that there were losses when 'the accommodation reached between Aborigines and pastoralists was shattered', but he was unwilling to blame the fall in Aboriginal employment on the Cattle Station Industry Award. He attributed it instead to 'declining viability and structural change in the pastoral industry', although he agreed that this coincided 'with legislative change requiring the compulsory payment of award wages'.⁸ Hasluck took a more realistic view. Despite his general support for the ending of discrimination against Aborigines, he appreciated that the award of standard wages might prove a Pyrrhic victory, as it proved to be.

Coombs considered that during the 1980s Aborigines were 'progressively attempting to Aboriginalise the circumstances of their work. For example, they accept contracts for the performance of rural work on the basis of a fee for the whole job which allows the timing of the work to be at the discretion of the contractor'.⁹ On the other hand, few Aborigines wished to 'Aboriginalise' the payment of cheques and provision of other benefits such as medical services, but expected them to arrive on time, just as they expected shops and hotels to open on time. This made nonsense of claims that Aborigines have no sense of time. They may be highly selective in the application of the concept, but so are many non-Aborigines. Coombs was himself no mean performer in the art of re-definition. He endorsed the view of Altman and Taylor that if 'employment were re-defined to include informal activities and recognising that adult work participation rates were 100 per cent, then the people at Momega outstation were fully employed, even by the standards of wider society'.¹⁰ Given such imaginative inclusions, practically everyone throughout Australia might be deemed fully employed.

Evidence from the Northern Territory over nearly a quarter of a century suggests that land rights as such do little to make Aboriginal people more autonomous. In fact, in many areas Aborigines have significantly less employment than before land rights were conceded. Royalties combined with welfare payments are often sufficient to make wage labour or self-employment on the land unattractive. Unfortunately, most of the small Aboriginal businesses set up with massive government subsidies had little chance of success, even when Aborigines were eager to make them succeed, because they were situated in remote locations in which the most resourceful

entrepreneurs would have found it difficult to survive. Large groups of Aborigines in country towns remain unemployed, not only because many refuse any work, but because such communities cannot provide the number of jobs required. Most other Australians when unemployed finally move, even if reluctantly, to places where there are jobs, although they would otherwise prefer to stay where they are. If Aborigines will only take jobs which they really like and which permit them unlimited time off for ceremonial and family occasions, and only in places where they most want to be, they may simply commit themselves to unemployment. That would be a strange path towards autonomy.

Historian and social commentator John Hirst noted that the unemployment benefit was not designed as permanent support for people in areas in which no jobs can be created. What happened in 1973 after the Whitlam government reversed earlier policy and made Aborigines in remote areas eligible for unemployment benefit, without any requirement to seek a job, if necessary by changing location, was just what critics at the time prophesied: most of the existing schemes for Aboriginal employment run by missions and government departments broke down, because they were far less attractive than doing nothing for the dole. Piggeries, chicken runs, orchards, vegetable gardens, sawmills, bakeries, butcheries and brick-making plants were among the small enterprises whose demise in the Northern Territory has been chronicled by Linda Ellanna and her colleagues.¹¹

One melancholy feature of many Aboriginal enterprises has been that early promise has soon been followed by massive failure, but that is not uncommon in small businesses in the wider Australian community. There have been, of course, some negative factors more specific to Aborigines, such as conflicts between different tribal or kinship groups and absences of key people at vital times for the enterprise because other obligations were given priority. This was well demonstrated in the Pilbara during the 1950s, when an Aboriginal mining and pastoral organisation seemed likely to succeed and to be a source of inspiration for many other Aboriginal groups. As Hasluck appreciated, conditions were comparatively propitious in the Pilbara, where numerous Aborigines developed skills in mining alluvial gold and tin during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and others, especially women, became skilled divers in the coastal pearl-fishing industry. In 1952, over 700 Aborigines were participants

in a mining operation directed largely by Donald McLeod. To make business transactions easier a company was formed. There were soon disputes about differences in earnings. An attempt was made to resolve these by centralising and equalising income on an 'all-found' basis. This did not prove an incentive to individual effort. By 1954 the company was involved in litigation related to claims that it had breached its contracts, and it was liquidated. The Western Australian Native Affairs Department, which had no expertise in mining, attempted to revive the enterprise by forming the Pilbara Natives Society to run it. Within a few years this organisation split into tribal factions: the 'Nomads' group based at Strelley pastoral station, and the Mugarinya based at Yandeyarra.¹² Experiences of this type did not discourage Coombs from continuing to claim that Aborigines are naturally co-operative or to advocate community cooperatives that could work only if there were a very high and rarely found level of mutual obligation. In 1993, ATSIC suspended funding to the Strelley Company's five Pilbara cattle stations, which had received substantial funds for more than two years after the stations had been abandoned by the Strelley people. In April 1994, ATSIC cut funding to the Nomads Charitable and Education Foundation and the Strelley Organisation after allegations of serious breaches of funding conditions.

Hirst observed that if for non-Aborigines 'it was proposed that the operation of businesses and shops, the repair of houses, the provision of water and the collection of garbage, should be the responsibility of a neighbourhood committee, the proposal would be rejected as lunacy. Yet in Aboriginal Australia millions of dollars and hundreds of bureaucrats are pursuing this phantom'.¹³

Coombs argued:

Because of our insistence on accounting for the expenditure of public moneys, and because of the importance earning money and 'doing a good day's work' have for people in our society, we see our time as something that is hired by our employer. The Aboriginal attitude to time is far closer to that of the independent entrepreneur, whose time is his own.¹⁴

Yet it is hard to conceive of a wider gap between what Coombs stereotyped as the Aboriginal attitude and that of the typical independent entrepreneur. When discussing Commonwealth Development Employment Projects (CDEPs), particularly the so-called 'sit-down money' schemes, Coombs expressed surprise that 'some local Aboriginal and white administrators' managed to use them as 'a means to advance their own personal and family monetary advant-

age and as an instrument of social power'.¹⁵ The really surprising thing would be if ample opportunities existed for undetected speculation and no, or even very few, persons, Aborigines or non-Aborigines, were corrupted. This is one reason, although not the prime one, why a high level of public accountability is essential. This is also true in respect of the constructive suggestion that Coombs made about the roles that Aborigines might play in National Parks and wildlife sanctuaries. He conceived of 'a chain of parks and sanctuaries' which would provide 'not merely opportunities for employment and contract work related to the parks, but income in the nature of rent and royalties for access to them.'¹⁶ Standard accountability procedures developed in the wider society are needed if such ventures are to succeed.

Coombs played a significant role in the Turtle Farms affair, which led to the dismissal by Whitlam of his first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Gordon Bryant. Aboriginal policies in the Whitlam Government were in general bedevilled by a puzzling distribution of authority and responsibility in Canberra. On the one hand, the Minister was formally responsible for the overall direction of government policies in so far as they affected Aborigines. There also existed a Council for Aboriginal Affairs, with Coombs as chairman and the permanent head of the Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Barrie Dexter, among its members. This Council reported directly to the Prime Minister and by-passed the Minister. Alan Reid claimed that, 'Coombs had the Prime Minister's ear to an extent that Bryant could not match'.¹⁷

The turtle farms project started under the Liberal-CP Government, partly as a result of Coombs' recommendation. The project was initiated by Dr H.R. Bustard, then of the Australian National University, and aimed to enable Torres Strait Islanders to breed turtles for an international market. One of Gordon Bryant's first tasks on becoming Minister for Aboriginal Affairs was to deal with an application, early in 1973, for a far larger sum than ever previously envisaged to meet expenditure carried out in 1972-73. Bryant's first investigations alarmed him—he told the Joint Committee of Public Accounts:

If I had accepted the departmental advice on the turtle project a very large sum of Australian money would have been wasted.¹⁸

Bryant appointed Senator George Georges, a radical ALP member from Queensland well known for his sympathy for Aborigines,

together with Ray Thorburn, an ALP MHR from Sydney and Mr J. Neill, a prominent Canberra accountant, as directors of the companies supposedly supervising the turtle farms. Georges subsequently told the Senate that his 'appointment was resisted by the head of the Department (Dexter)', who 'at every stage ... endeavoured to frustrate my appointment'.¹⁹ Georges found that from 1970–71 up to April 1973 nearly half a million dollars had been advanced and that a further million and a half was being sought for 'a project that was apparently failing in the field'. The Australian National University denied that it had any further interest in the project as part of a research programme and declared that Dr Bustard was no longer in its employ. Georges feared that Dr Bustard had unsupervised control over large sums of money and that those moneys were being unwisely spent. Georges told the Senate:

I informed Dr Coombs on August 24 exactly what I feared, the subject of the allegations I made in this Senate about the misuse of public moneys and the other matters which concerned me greatly. On August 24 Dr Coombs listened to me for an hour and took notes of allegation after allegation which I made based on information which I had received but it appears to me that Dr Coombs did nothing further about it.

Georges asserted:

The permanent head of the Department, Mr Barrie Dexter, deliberately frustrated the decisions of his Minister and in fact worked for and succeeded in obtaining his removal. I regret to say that the chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr H.C. Coombs, cannot escape some of the responsibility.²⁰

In another account Georges stated to the Senate:

I went to Dr Coombs and said 'Look, we are getting to a position of complete confrontation'. I told him there was certain evidence that showed clearly that there was a case for the Auditor-General to look at the books of Applied Ecology.²¹

Barrie Dexter sought to dismiss Georges' concerns as 'assaults on the native fauna farming projects'.²²

Both as Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, and subsequently, Coombs was hostile to 'outside' interference with Aborigine-related projects. His point of view seems largely to have prevailed. Whereas the turtle farm affair was a significant political issue, in the 1990s far larger sums of public money devoted to Aborigine-related projects are lost without creating major political scandal. There are, of course, large numbers of frauds committed in other fields, but a particular problem in many Aboriginal organisations is that administrators are under strong pressures from kinsfolk to give them

preferential treatment. These circumstances should be taken into account in both moral judgements and legal responses, but the aim should surely be to enable Aboriginal organisations to achieve a satisfactory level of public accountability. This is even more important for Aboriginal communities than any other people, since they suffer most if funds provided for their welfare are misused. Coombs' legacy to Aboriginal organisations, however, was to suggest that they were uniquely free from pecuniary temptations and that, even if they showed some of the corruption found among the rest of humanity, 'outside' supervision of their financial affairs would undermine their autonomy and even constitute a racial slur. This has been a recipe for disaster, as is now recognised by many Aborigines, such as those who are demanding that control of health and other government services should be transferred from ATSIC to the main providers for other Australians.

The term 'outstation', or 'homeland', movement, which began during the 1980s, describes the withdrawal of Aboriginal families from larger centres of population into more traditional bush conditions. Assimilationists generally regretted this movement as evidence of far-from-inevitable Aboriginal failures to make constructive use of potentially advantageous facilities of modern society. Assimilationists deplored further widening of divisions between Aborigines and other Australians and noted that it would make Aborigines even more marginal in the overall economy. Coombs, however, described the outstation movement as 'an Aboriginal response to the problems of contact', which he welcomed as 'an attempt to evolve a lifestyle which preserves the essence of the Aboriginal way along with access to chosen elements from white society'.²³ This was true enough in its way, but Coombs failed to point out that the movement was directly away from any genuine Aboriginal control over forces which profoundly influence their lives and to which they want continued access. The chosen elements to which Coombs has referred are far from minimal, as was indicated by his further comment that 'The homelands would be linked by road, air and radio with their focal settlement which would act as a source of supplies and services'.²⁴ This implied an ongoing need for white support and negated rhetoric about autonomy, since Aborigines themselves in these Homelands are very unlikely to develop quickly sufficient knowledge to maintain road, air and radio services. Indeed, the basic idea of the Homeland assumes the continuation of social security payments and other forms

of support from the supposedly rejected white society. The payments seem rarely to be valued for capital formation or development, but simply as a means to gain goods, ranging from flour, sugar, tea and tobacco to television and videos, which were not obtainable in traditional Aboriginal societies. This is not to suggest that Aborigines cannot develop ways of life that combine traditional elements with some advantages of modernity and full membership of an integrated Australian society, but rather that the Homeland concept, among others, is contradictory and very likely to fail.

Coombs claimed that 'homeland settlements, occupied by rarely more than forty or fifty families, are invariably located in territory with which the group identifies and with surrounding locations which would be places of importance to them, visited from time to time as sites of spiritual significance, as sources of food and materials, or simply as good places for relaxation'.²⁵ Territories with which groups now 'identify', however, are not always those over which their ancestors roamed. In any case, Aborigines who are successful in sport, the arts and in representing other Aborigines rarely seek to live in all-Aboriginal communities, let alone in remote ones. The Homeland movement may best be understood as an attempt to withdraw from the conditions of violence, drunkenness and family dislocation prevalent in larger Aboriginal concentrations. It would be an expression of despair to accept it as a long-term goal.

Endnotes

- 1 Hasluck, 1988, page 53.
- 2 Hasluck, 1988, page 58.
- 3 Hasluck, 1988, pages 12; 22. He cited *The West Australian*, 12 March 1983, for the social worker.
- 4 Hasluck, 1988, page 10.
- 5 Hasluck, 1988, page 14.
- 6 Coombs, 1994, page 17.
- 7 M. Brady. (1992). *Heavy Metal: The Social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, page 192, cited in Brunton, 1993, page 31.
- 8 Coombs, 1994, page 87.
- 9 Coombs, 1994, page 80.
- 10 Coombs, 1994, page 166.
- 11 L. Ellanna, et al., *Economic Enterprises in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern*

- Territory*, Darwin, North Australia Research Unit, Australian National University, 1988, page 253.
- 12 Wilson, 1980, pages 164–6.
 - 13 J. Hirst, 'Five Fallacies of Aboriginal Policy' in *Quadrant*, July–August 1994, page 15.
 - 14 Coombs *et. al.*, 1983, page 113.
 - 15 Coombs, 1994, page 163.
 - 16 Coombs, 1994, page 26.
 - 17 A. Reid, *The Whitlam Venture*, Melbourne, Hill of Content, 1976, page 166.
 - 18 Submission by Bryant to the inquiry into the Auditor-General's Report on the financial administration of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Joint Committee of Public Accounts, attachments, page 85, cited in Reid, 1976, page 167.
 - 19 CPD, *Senate*, Vol. 57, October 9 1973, page 1075.
 - 20 CPD, *Senate*, Vol. 57, October 9 1973, page 1075.
 - 21 CPD, *Senate*, Vol. 57, October 23 1973, page 1342. Applied Ecology was one of three interlocking companies running the turtles project.
 - 22 Letter to Dr Coombs and Professor W. Stanner, 14 August 1973, cited in Reid, 1976, page 172.
 - 23 Coombs, 1994, page 24.
 - 24 Coombs, 1994, page 25.
 - 25 Coombs, 1994, page 25.

8. Aboriginal Education

Hasluck was respectful of the traditional ways in which Aboriginal brought up their children:

Aboriginal education had its practical side—how to make weapons, how to hunt, how to track, how to find water or how to locate a wild bee-hive. It also taught the obligations of each person to all other persons and the duties of one towards another. It brought them into relationship with the whole of existence, seen and unseen, and hence it was basically a religious education. It was also a social education. It gave to them in song, dance, ritual and legend the occasion and the meaning for varied communal activities, so that they knew they belonged to each other and to the land that nurtured them. It gave them awareness of their membership of a community.¹

Hasluck considered, however, that an upbringing suitable for hunter-gatherer societies was inadequate for achieving equality in modern societies and he understood that mastery of advanced theoretical structures is very difficult for peoples dependent on biological memory, supplemented by ancient myths. At the same time, he had confidence that Aborigines, as they moved from tribal and near-traditional ways of life, could succeed in doing so, given help and support by non-Aborigines, and effort and determination on their own part.

Hasluck saw the future of Aboriginal education in terms far wider than the economic and vocational. He urged:

In our efforts in the Northern Territory we surely aim at advancement to what is highest and best in Australian life. We want to give the primitive and the under-privileged child something more than an occupation and a few possessions. We cannot argue that his economic advancement is in itself sufficient for assimilation and we have no grounds for confidence that if we advance him that far he will be set fair to attain everything else that civilisation offers.²

Hasluck also held that each Aboriginal child should be 'given a chance' as an individual person rather than as an anonymous figure in a social group. 'Giving them a chance' meant firstly to him that there should be an opportunity for every child to go to school. Yet, given the resistance to regular schooling by Aborigines living in near-traditional conditions and the shortage of non-Aborigines capable of

teaching in those conditions, Hasluck believed that the first priority was to transfer children who gave promise of benefiting from the experience or who faced severe cultural disadvantages, particularly an uncaring family environment, to places where they could gain something like the same education received by other Australian children. He wrote:

When a promising child showed special aptitude in a classroom or gave promise by speech and manners of being able to live in the same way as white people, the prompting of sympathy and fond admiration was that he or she should be 'given a chance' and that meant taken out of the aboriginal environment to grow up with Europeans.³

Hasluck noted that similar sentiments formed the basis of the endeavours of Dr Barnardo's Homes, the Kingsley Fairbridge Child Migration Scheme, the 'Big Brother' movement and the Salvation Army to remove deprived white children to environments in which their chances in life would be increased. Since British and Australian governments pursued almost identical policies in respect of orphans and other neglected children in the United Kingdom who were brought out to Australia, as to Aboriginal children in the Bush, it seems strange to attack the approach as racist, even if could be shown to have been overall disadvantaging rather than helpful to those children. Ted Milliken, from 1955 to 1974 Director of Research, Aboriginal Welfare and Education, and Community and Child Welfare in the Northern Territory and subsequently a senior academic in the Darwin Institute of Technology, has stated that never to his knowledge were any full-blooded Aboriginal children removed from their parents without the permission of the latter, unless the 'well-being of the child' was at stake. Reasonable people might disagree, of course, about what is in the best interests of any child. Transfer of 'half-caste' children from their parents in the camps to government institutions and Christian missions was, however, common. Milliken considered that 'many, even most, of the children transferred to the hostels in the years to 1953 obtained very real benefit from having been "grown up" by the missionaries in that environment'.⁴ Significant indirect testimony to the changes which missions could make may be found by considering the criticisms of pastoralists who alleged that they spoiled Aborigines by encouraging them to be idle and impudent, with ideas above their stations in every sense of the word.⁵ Hasluck claimed that it was mainly lack of resources which prevented him from pushing ahead with his policy of providing all

Aborigines, 'full-blooded' as well as 'half-caste', with an education as like as possible to that of mainstream Australian children. Looking back, 30 years later, he recalled that the main criticism he received from radical opinion in the 1950s was that he was moving too slowly in this direction, whereas in the 1980s the same groups condemned him for disadvantaging any Aboriginal children by separating them from their families and their cultural heritage.⁶ Coombs held that 'the education provided for Aborigines when assimilation was the avowed objective met the test of success in so few instances that they could be ignored.'⁷ Yet it was through these assimilationist policies that the present generation of Aboriginal leaders emerged, critical as they have generally been of those policies.

Paul Coe condemned assimilationism in education on the grounds that it encouraged Aboriginal children 'to aspire towards lower middle class values', as if they were white children, although he was equally disgusted with failure to provide Aborigines with white middle class standards of life.⁸ Kevin Gilbert claimed that the assimilationist schooling he received was useless because at the end of it, all that happened was that an Aborigine 'gains employment digging holes with a brother who has not been educated at all'.⁹ However he did not become a permanent road-worker himself. Michael Anderson rejected it because it 'teaches us to make planes and cars, how to make a lot of money', and claimed that 'adult Aboriginal families have no interest in the present education system'. He added: 'as I came through the school education system, I did *not* see any value in it. They taught me *nothing*, nothing that I didn't already know. The only thing they taught me was how to put two bolts together, how to use electricity and how to make something run'. At first sight these skills and forms of knowledge do not seem useless or insignificant. Explaining his career pattern Anderson explained: 'I go to one job and I get tired of being tied to a clock, being a robot man, so I go walkabout. I leave the job and go to another one to see if that is interesting. I have no reason to settle down. Why should I? All you white men taught me was that my people were nomadic anyway!'¹⁰

Acknowledgment of any benefit derived has usually been very grudging. Chicka Dixon paid tribute to the prison system for giving him a sound education, initially against his will, and noted that many Aboriginal leaders were 'either institutionalised or did jail'. Dixon told of an Aborigine boy who was succeeding well in school in

Darlinghurst and top of his class three years running before his mother 'wasted' him by sending him to work in a factory because 'she wanted tucker and a house'. He also conceded that negative attitudes of Aboriginal children, such as being 'ashamed to invite the white mate home to his filth and squalor' might also be dysfunctional.¹¹ However, Dixon blamed the filth and squalor on the white mate's ancestors, not on the living Aboriginal family, and wrote of 'genocide—assimilation I believe you whitefellas call it'.¹²

Yet it is remarkable how large a proportion of the current leaders of Aboriginal organisations throughout Australia experienced such separation and gained from it knowledge, skills and, ultimately, confidence to cope effectively with the challenges of mainstream society. It is rarely possible to find painless ways by which people can make a transition between totally different ways of life. The fundamental question was, and remains, whether the better objective is to preserve traditional ways of life intact as far as possible, with all the inequalities of condition that entails, or to enable Aborigines to acquire the understandings requisite for genuine personal autonomy in a complex modern society. That remains a problem for Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal decision-makers.

Coombs has never been able to credit Australian governments, including ones he advised, with having been generous in resources for Aboriginal welfare. He claimed: 'There is no doubt that denial of resources and the cultivation of conflict characterise the patterns of official government policies towards Aboriginal education'.¹³ Yet Coombs was little happier when generosity abounded. In 1976, he was critical that:

teaching is done in buildings so elaborate and costly as to contrast violently with the camps where the children live and will often continue to live for years ahead.¹⁴

This shows Coombs once again as a Cardinal Morton for our times.¹⁵ His opponents are damned if they do and damned if they don't. If it's heads, Coombs wins, and, if tails, they lose. In similar fashion, despite earlier attacks on Aboriginal children being taken from the camps to centres where there were qualified teachers, in 1976 he denounced the new policy of taking the teachers to the children. He claimed that as a result Aboriginal children were being 'taught by teachers on short term assignments who know next to nothing of the people whose children they are to teach or the country they live in'.¹⁶ It did not occur to him that the task of those teachers was not to teach children about

their environment or culture, which no doubt their own communities could see to, but those forms of knowledge that could not be acquired from the local community. Furthermore, it is very difficult to anticipate just which Aboriginal communities non-Aboriginal teachers will find themselves teaching, so that it is very difficult to provide them with detailed knowledge of a specific group or area.

If only the main problems in Aboriginal education could be solved by spending money, they would have been greatly reduced, if not completely resolved, by now. Not only have there been high levels of expenditure, but many policies adopted in recent years have been those propounded by Coombs. It would certainly be prudent to re-examine main priorities in Aboriginal education, which were to:

- strengthen Aboriginal identity,
- promote Aboriginal autonomy, and
- foster the use of Aboriginal languages in education.

i. Strengthening Aboriginal identity

Coomb's central idea in Aboriginal education has been that it should strengthen 'Aboriginal identity'. He held that this identity contained 'enduring elements' such as:

being and identifying as a descendant of the original inhabitants of Australia;
adhering to, or sharing, the Dreaming, or Aboriginal world-view;
having an intimate familial relationship with the land and with the natural world; and knowing the pervading moulding character of these in all matters Aboriginal.¹⁷

He commended Marcia Langton's claim that all Aborigines have a 'world view derived from the Dreaming and irreconcilable with the demands of a modern industrialised market economy'.¹⁸

Yet Coombs has not sought to base the education of other Australians on the religious conceptions and attitudes to land of their ancestors. Furthermore, he knew that many people 'being of and identifying as a descendant of the original inhabitants of Australia' do not know about, let alone believe in, Dreamtime myths, and lack 'intimate familial relationship' with ancestral or any other land. In fact, he complained:

the ability of the Aboriginal people to transmit their traditional culture to future generations has been and continues to be undermined by the imposition of a normative 'European' view of the nature of social and economic relationships which is external to the standards, expectations and practices of traditional Aboriginal culture.¹⁹

Coombs has argued that all 'Aborigines throughout Australia value their relationships to land, and those relationships are wide-ranging, a sense of oneness with the land and a most serious sense of responsibility towards caring for it'.²⁰ He has also complained, however, that numerous persons identified by themselves and him as Aborigines do not have such a relationship with land, or any sense of oneness with it, and do not care for any land around them in a responsible way. He attributes this lack, of course, to the evil deeds of colonists and their governments, who uprooted Aborigines from their traditional areas. Coombs tried, although hardly convincingly, to include deracinated Aborigines in belief systems they no longer hold by asserting that 'the Dreaming is still relevant, still a world view shared and recognised by Aborigines, even though mythology and ritual and tribal languages ... are no longer known by some Aborigines'.²¹ This suggests that a world view may be held unconsciously and that Aboriginal beliefs are carried in the genes. Coombs seems to consider Aboriginality to be far more potent than any other genetic or cultural inheritance. He dismissed the idea of 'mixed race' as an error and cited approvingly the opinion of Annie Isaac, an Aboriginal woman from Borroloola, that 'all half-caste people because they come from black mothers are Aboriginal people'.²² Although it is true that more people of 'mixed race' descend from unions of non-Aboriginal males and Aboriginal females, this is by no means invariably the case. Neither Annie Isaac nor Coombs offered advice on how to detect which sex was of which race in the original pairing or what conclusions should follow from the discovery that a person was descended from a union between a non-Aboriginal female and an Aboriginal male. Coombs has also argued that 'the ability of Aboriginal people to manage the process of "becoming Aboriginal" is very much dependent upon the degree to which they can act in relation to it without external interference'.²³ Coombs assumed, but did not demonstrate, that Aborigines need to 'become Aboriginal' or become more Aboriginal. There may be a case for stronger distinctive ethnic or other types of identity, but there are also many objections to ethnocentricity and divisiveness. This would be so, too, with proposals to make, say, Polish-Australians more Polish or more Australian, Australian women more female, feminine or feminist or more Australian, or Melburnians more Melburnian, Victorian or Australian, perhaps through some sort of consciousness-raising that would expel all 'external interference'.

Coombs has claimed that non-Aborigines are unable to understand Aboriginal culture and asserted:

non-Aborigines of European extraction can use terms such as 'England, the Motherland', or 'Germany, the Fatherland', as expressions of nationalistic identification, but they do not understand what Aborigines mean when they say, 'My Mother, the land', or 'The Land, my Mother', except in some vague poetic sense.²⁴

Yet, although a non-Aborigine, he has frequently given detailed analyses of Aboriginal culture. In its classical form, the 'paradox of the liar' was that 'the Cretan claims that all Cretans are liars'. Marx's version was that all thought is ideological, non-objective and conditioned by class, except his own thought, which managed to transcend the limitations to which others were subject. Coombs made his own distinctive Australian contribution to the genre.

Whenever Coombs decided that a belief or practice was part of traditional Aboriginal culture, it became sacrosanct for him, and any attempted interference with it condemned as ethnocentric and discriminatory. For example, on the grounds that avoidance taboos are part of the traditional culture, he castigated as ignorant a non-Aboriginal teacher who criticised the refusal of a brother to help his injured sister in an Aboriginal school.²⁵ Yet he would not excuse any non-Aborigines who claimed that their culture required them to avoid Aborigines. Comparable double standards abound throughout his writings on education. He observed, for instance, that for Aborigines 'drawing attention to mistakes is embarrassing and works against learning correct behaviour',²⁶ but never hesitated to draw attention to mistakes he attributed to non-Aborigines. He rejected the view that in theoretical activities that do not depend mainly on observation and imitation, little progress can be made by learners without their mistakes being pointed out. Coombs also noted that it is also 'simply not part of Aboriginal traditions' that hospitality should be shown to strangers, and considered it sensible that, among Aborigines, politeness as well as charity should begin at home, since 'it is kinship, not some Golden Rule of goodwill to, or sharing with all, that defines the expectations Aborigines have of other Aborigines'.²⁷ He cited comparable non-Aboriginal attitudes as examples of selfishness engendered by capitalism and economic rationalism.

Coombs has accepted the many restrictions on the dissemination of knowledge in traditional Aboriginal societies as an unchangeable cultural fact. He was not alarmed when he found that among many

Aborigines, 'Precociousness is not admired nor allowed to go unchecked', but cited approvingly 'a Yirrkala elder' who said 'We have to hold that young man back. He's going too fast and too smart', and another who said, 'The young women are going too quickly', about a group of women who had plans for activities on an outstation.²⁸ Coombs would not, however, have commended any elderly white Australian male who suggested that younger women were becoming too smart for their own good. He has claimed that contemporary Australian society is very much like the traditional Aboriginal patriarchy: 'just as in our society, control of knowledge is tight and an economic and political matter'.²⁹ He has implied that mining companies and economic rationalists control the air waves and newspapers of Australia and that the Dark Greens and advocates of Aboriginal Land Rights are censored and silenced.

Coombs claimed that 'non-Aborigines, who possess and preserve their one-family car, sewing machine, vacuum cleaner, washing machine, and so on, can appear most selfish and foolhardy to Aborigines, who never accept that preserving the life of a machine or an object and reserving it for one or two individuals' exclusive use is acceptable behaviour'.³⁰ Coombs shared this view of the selfishness and foolhardiness of the non-Aborigines and the wisdom of the Aborigines, but what is everyone's is usually nobody's responsibility and may soon be no good to anybody. Evidence of this truth, in the form of rusted and broken equipment and machinery, is scattered across the face of Aboriginal Australia.

Coombs complained that 'with the exception of a few independent Aboriginal schools, most schools in Australia are almost completely divorced from the social and cultural realities of Aboriginal students who attend them'.³¹ Yet he has also supported radical educators, such as the American Samuel Bowles, who criticise mainstream education on the grounds that it does reproduce social and cultural realities. When Aboriginal children were treated like non-Aboriginal children, Coombs had two very different complaints. One was that 'the process of educating Aborigines to fit into the economic system of wider Australia is imposed by members of an alien society. It is this characteristic which, in an Aboriginal setting, makes the school an agent of internal colonialism'.³² The second is that this process, far from uniquely colonising Aboriginal children, renders them 'like other underprivileged sections of the wider Australian society' whose education is also apparently 'geared to the needs, capacities and

cultural resources of those already privileged'.³³ On the other hand, failure to provide Aboriginal children with opportunities to succeed in the wider society at least as well as 'other underprivileged sections' led to accusations of unfair discrimination and lack of equity. Morton's Fork was exercised once more.

Coombs held that there were once 'strong and effective traditional Aboriginal processes of educating and socialising the young', but 'the historical process of colonisation has seriously weakened, indeed threatened [them] with destruction'.³⁴ He recognised that 'It would be idle to believe that the combined effects of European education and the attractions of our consumer goods, films, advertising and the whole content of our materialist society could leave the young untouched', but hoped such materialistic motives could be overcome.³⁵ Christian missions shared this aim, but their influence was entirely pernicious in Coombs' view:

When different groups were brought together in missions and settlements their internal authority structure was encroached upon by white authority ... Similarly, the nurturing and education of children became significantly a function of white institutions. These changes were invariably destructive. Aboriginal responsibility was impaired, if not wholly destroyed, law and order became difficult to sustain and vandalism and delinquency became characteristic of Aboriginal child and youth behaviour.³⁶

This is an unfair judgement. Take, for example, the Hermannsburg Lutheran mission. Carl Strehlow, in charge from 1894 to 1922, and his successor, Friedrich Wilhelm Albrecht, both took, according to the latter's son, Paul Albrecht, 'a negative attitude to what might be called the more overtly religious aspects of the Aboriginal culture: the tjurrunga objects, songs, stories and rituals, as well as the initiation of boys'. Carl Strehlow, 'in spite of all his anthropological research, never attended a corroboree, as he felt this would compromise not only him as a missionary, but also his teaching and preaching ministry'. Friedrich Wilhelm Albrecht told Aboriginal Christians they should give up their tjurrunga objects and songs, and should not initiate their sons.³⁷ Paul Albrecht commented, with reference to Coombs' arguments:

Given this scenario, the conventional wisdom of today would suggest that Hermannsburg should be a cultural waste land, with the Aboriginal culture totally destroyed. Instead when the FRM staff in the late 70s and early 80s set about mapping the Hermannsburg lease at the request of the traditional Aboriginal owners, all clan land boundaries were established to the complete satisfaction of those concerned. The traditional owners were able to do this because they still knew all the relevant stories and songs which

their forefathers had used since time immemorial to establish their land boundaries. Similarly, in spite of my father's advice to Christian men not to initiate their sons, all boys at Hermannsburg were regularly initiated.³⁸

Hermannsburg has become more of a 'cultural waste land' since the 1970s, when Paul Albrecht and other Lutheran pastors adopted Coombs' policy and transferred to Aborigines decision-making and planning about their future. The Finke River Mission divested itself of its powers and established elected Councils: a Village Council to look after community law and order; a Town Council to make decisions about the operation of Hermannsburg; and a School Council to run the school and determine curriculum. Paul Albrecht's assessment was:

The results were totally unexpected. Aboriginal-white staff relationships deteriorated badly. Demands on white staff increased dramatically. The Village Council would debate matters like the alcohol problem and make rules prohibiting the carriage of alcohol onto Hermannsburg, and then the Councillors would be the first to break the rules. Members elected to the various Councils had no concerns for the wider community. Their focus was their own family and clan.... The first assumption we made was that the Aboriginal people living at Hermannsburg wanted to run Hermannsburg. Wrong. As subsequent events showed, the only reason why the nearly twenty clan groups could live together at Hermannsburg was the presence of an outside authority, the Mission, which was able to function outside of and independently of their kin structure. Aboriginal clans didn't and still don't have any mechanisms for living in one location and cooperating together in day to day matters.³⁹

Coombs conceded that, after paternalistic leadership by the missionaries ceased, Aborigines at Hermannsburg gave preferential treatment to clan members in jobs, rewards and even transport, that vandalism, drunkenness and violence greatly increased, and, more fundamentally, that the elected councils entirely cut across traditional authority patterns. Yet he interpreted the abdication of missionary power at Hermannsburg as follows:

Government acceptance of traditional Aboriginal authority through the family head could be interpreted simply as a device for preserving the power and influence of the white administrators or white missionaries as a divide-and-rule technique exercised by whites.⁴⁰

He attributed to the Lutheran missionaries the belief that 'in Aboriginal society there is not and cannot be community above the level of the extended family group or clan' and condemned this belief as 'unduly pessimistic'. Paul Albrecht and his colleagues did indeed find, with deep regret, not satisfaction, a lack of community beyond the family group, but, like Hasluck, they did not consider the situation

beyond redemption. Their attempt to devolve responsibilities to Aborigines was in no way a 'divide-and-rule technique.'

Coombs often displayed a narrow secular sectarianism towards the significance of Christianity for Aborigines. David Trigger, whose *Whitefella Comin'* is highly critical of missionaries, noted that Coombs and his colleagues in the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project in the late 1980s almost completely ignored Aboriginal Christians.⁴¹ Coombs' approach has prevailed. The Royal Commission on Black Deaths in Custody barely mentions the Christian religion, except to impugn missionary work, even though in the 1986 Census over 150,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents identified themselves as Christians, but only 10,000 described themselves as of 'other religion' and 27,000 of no religion, 36,000 making no response.

Whereas Coombs disparaged the contribution of missionaries to Aboriginal development, Hasluck valued it. In December 1953, when first Minister for Territories, he told a conference at Darwin attended by almost every mission active then in Australia:

Over the past 70 years in the Northern Territory the missionaries have cared for natives at times when many others were neglecting them ... I wish to assure those present that I know and honour the record of the missions ... In achieving its aims the Government wants to go hand in hand with the missions.⁴²

ii. Autonomy and separate development

Coombs considered that preservation or development of a distinctive Aboriginal identity required an educational system separate from the mainstream and one in which Aborigines alone made the main decisions. He claimed that 'Aboriginal communities should have the right to choose to have control over the schooling of their children: of the building, the school organisation, the curriculum and the choice of teachers'.⁴³ He supported what he termed Aborigines' desire for 'authority to design, administer and deliver an education based upon and compatible with the values and purposes of their own society'.⁴⁴ In 1990, he criticised the National Aboriginal Education Policy on the grounds that it lacked 'provision for the development of alternative programs designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities and equip their children for lives which are compatible with and express their own culture. There is no provision for the control of the content of the curriculum by locally-based Aborigines'.⁴⁵ Coombs claimed of Aboriginal parents:

Whatever white attitudes and lifestyle they may adopt or accept, the great majority retain relationships, loyalties and obligations which derive from their perhaps half-forgotten kinship system. In their homes, their children continue to hear at least fragments of dead or dying languages, ancient stories, songs and vocabularies, and to acquire patterns of behaviour and the bases of moral judgements which tie them irrevocably to the Aboriginal world.⁴⁶

This is also, no doubt to a lesser extent in most other cases, true for members of many religious, racial and cultural groups in Australia.

Coombs urged Aborigines to demand that 'no provider of education can enter into an agreement with the Commonwealth without effective negotiation (not just consultation) with them; no agreement will be approved which denies them a choice of educational styles, including schools controlled by local Aboriginal residents'. He claimed:

There are serious doubts about the wisdom of a system which places the highest levels of decision about education in the hands of politicians and their officials who see its purposes almost solely in terms of the needs of industrial and commercial employers for acquiescent employees, narrowly skilled to meet their needs, or who see education as the instrument to impose the drab uniformity of the managerial industrial society on all who pass through the school system. There is need for an educational charter which would establish the right of parents, children and teachers to choice; which would identify the school as an instrument of healthy diversity; and recognise that for Aborigines, it should be seen and developed as a continuation of the traditional educational and socialisation practices of their family-based society.⁴⁷

Coombs thus demanded for Aboriginal parents and/or local communities what the advocates of vouchers and parental choice propose for educational funding as a whole. They would support the extension to all Australians of the principle advocated by Coombs: that educational policy should 'guarantee to every Aboriginal community the right of choice for its children between a government school, a private or religious-based school, or an independent Aboriginal school responsible to the community it serves' and that 'such independent schools should have access to resources, to research facilities and training on a basis fully comparable with those available to government schools'.⁴⁸ Yet Coombs has been hostile to non-Aboriginal claims for greater freedom of choice in education. When it came to the rest of the population, he believed that politicians and bureaucrats, not parents or distinctive communities, knew what was best for children. It is, of course, possible that parental choice is desirable among Aborigines but not non-Aborigines, but Coombs advanced no convincing argument that this might be so.

Coombs has rarely distinguished between group and parental rights in Aboriginal education, but he thought the people at Yirrkala, who in 1984 established a Yolngu educational action group, had the balance about right. This group consisted of all the Yolngu school staff and, according to Coombs, 'from the principal to the janitor, all were to be equal' in the control of the school, which makes one wonder what role a 'principal' might fulfil. Coombs added:

The school would not be a Yolngu institution until the majority of the teachers were themselves Yolngu, until the content of what was taught (the curriculum) and the way in which it was taught (the pedagogy) also reflected Aboriginal life, provided Aboriginal knowledge and met Aboriginal needs—including the need to be skilled and competent in the white aspects of life at Yirrkala—and until Aboriginal autonomy replaced white authority in all aspects of decision making in the school's affairs.... The children must be made aware that there were two cultures functioning within their community: one with which they and their kin identified and one which they must understand, recognising its differences and acquiring the skills necessary to be competent in dealing with it.

To achieve such a transformation was and remains a mammoth task, a fundamental part of which was to develop a philosophy for the school and its management to serve as a guide for action and a basis for progressive reflection upon its outcome. This could be achieved only by having staff of high intellectual quality with a wide grasp of educational theory, establishing links with other institutional centres with comparable interests and relevant resources.⁴⁹

Yet there was little sense in calling both for an all-Yolngu staff and for 'staff of high intellectual quality with a wide grasp of educational theory', when few, if any, Yolngu had as yet had such a grasp. If numerous people of such quality and theoretical insight already existed among the Yolngu, their educational problems would already have been largely overcome. Coombs has offered no guidance about what should be done if there were any disagreements between Yolngu parents and the highly gifted educational staff he envisaged.

iii. The language of instruction

Coombs has followed rather than led political correctness in denouncing the use of a 'metropolitan' language such as English as the medium of instruction for children with non-English mother tongues, whether consciously as a tool of assimilation or for any other educational or social purpose. He called for 'bilingual' education, with non-metropolitan mother-tongues as the mode of classroom instruction. Several Australian legislatures have followed Coombs'

advice and tried to provide Aboriginal education initially and for as long and extensively as possible in the mother tongue. How many Aborigines agreed, however, is not clear. When still an ALP parliamentarian, Graeme Campbell described a visit he made to Yuendumu in the Northern Territory as a member of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Aboriginal Affairs. The School Committee, which 'consisted of these earnest young white teachers from Adelaide and Melbourne and the teachers' aides', argued 'that they must have Walpiri (sic),⁵⁰ the local language, in the school'. When the then Minister, Gerry Hand, addressed the Community Council, he 'put his hand in the air and said "Greetings, we have come to take your message back to the white fathers in Canberra ... we know you want teaching two ways, your way and our way and we will tell the white fathers this"'. Campbell went on:

After what seemed an interminable silence, one of their committee stopped drawing patterns in the sand with his big toe and got to his feet and said 'What we want from you is English, for God's sake, teach us English'. He went on to say that when he went to Alice Springs, he had to talk to the Pitjantjatjara people in English because they did not understand Walpiri and would not learn it and he was adamant that he was not going to learn Pitjantjatjara.⁵¹

Since it was relatively recently that the Warlpiri routinely referred to neighbouring groups as 'cannibals who deserve to be shot', this unwillingness to be instructed in one of their languages is not surprising, nor that the sentiment was reciprocated.⁵²

Coombs himself found that the Pitjantjatjara, like other Aborigines, desire an education 'concentrating on literacy in their own language and in English'.⁵³ Yet, although many Aborigines have a fair working knowledge of at least one Aboriginal language other than their own, few, if any, express any desire that their children be taught in school any Aboriginal language other than their mother tongue. Thus English is more or less universally desired by Aborigines, but each Aboriginal language is only of educational relevance to the small number who are native speakers. This poses a very different situation from the one presented by Coombs, in which English and some kind of unified Aboriginal language stand in juxtaposition to each other. There is no language other than English in which Aborigines across Australia can communicate with each other, and there is unlikely ever to be such a language.

There are obvious impediments to bilingual education with priority being given to the mother tongue. There are several hundred

different Aboriginal languages, but teacher training institutions have little idea which Aboriginal languages student-teachers will require once their professional careers begin. To speak an Aboriginal language well enough to teach in it to native speakers requires considerable expertise and there is a very high rate of turnover of teachers in Aboriginal schools and colleges, so that many leave just as they are becoming fluent in the local Aboriginal language. Researchers employed by the South Australian Education Department found 'numbers of misspellings of Pitjantjatjara words in classrooms, even involving letters that do not exist in the accepted Pitjantjatjara alphabet' and concluded, 'the standard of spoken Pitjantjatjara used by many teachers is also unacceptable'.⁵⁴ Naturally enough, Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) spoke their native tongue better than non-Aboriginal teachers who, reasonably enough given their higher qualifications and the desirability of giving AEWs an incentive to become qualified teachers themselves, were paid more than the AEWs. This disparity exacerbated Aboriginal antagonism to white teachers, most of whom chose that career because of sympathy towards Aborigines and guilt towards the Anglo-Australian past. Ralph Folds, one of the leading younger Australian experts in bilingual education, reported that, instead of fruitful co-operation, situations arose in which 'white teachers, who were usually not fluent in Pitjantjatjara, were teaching this language to children who had a much better spoken command of it than they had. As one teacher explained, "My AEW will not get involved so I am teaching the children to read and write their own language—but I don't speak Pitjantjatjara"'.⁵⁵ Another problem in giving Aboriginal languages high priority or equality with English in Aboriginal education has been that in many cases 'the written form had no currency whatsoever in the community' and had only been devised in recent times by white scholars.⁵⁶ Although English language teaching could draw upon a wealth of appropriate materials, books in Aboriginal languages suitable for children were rare and usually written in great haste by teachers who had limited experience in the language or the culture.⁵⁷ Folds, indeed, accused the Pitjantjatjara bilingual programme of corrupting the indigenous language.⁵⁸

In his own favoured Yirrkala bilingual program, Coombs claimed that 'practical reasons resulted in the Gumatj dialect of Yolngu being adopted as the medium of instruction in the school there, despite the presence of more than a dozen other dialects among residents'.⁵⁹ One

dialect had to be chosen in order to enable adequate teaching materials to be supplied and to train non-Aboriginal teachers in it. Subsequently there was resentment among speakers of other dialects that Gumatj had been chosen, but some Gumatj also complained that their dialect was their own private property and should not be made available to outsiders. The Coombs euphemism for this attitude was 'maintenance of differences'. He was also very sympathetic to the establishment of the Yipiranya town camp schools in Alice Springs, because 'the parents perceived both the government and non-government schools ... as alien institutions, monolingual, in which foreign teachers offered their children foreign content in a foreign manner'. The 'foreigners' were not only other Australians, just like Coombs himself, since some Yipiranya regarded other Aboriginal groups as foreign and wanted to exclude them as well.

Coombs has argued at length, citing Noam Chomsky, that all languages are of equal value cognitively and that only ethnocentric cultural imperialists would think otherwise. Yet Coombs admitted that a summary he submitted to the Yirrkala Community of 'what he understood the elders to want both in respect of community rules and of procedures for the enforcement of those rules, traditional law and *balanda* law', only confused the recipients. He subsequently acknowledged that his own 'first attempt carried over too much of his own cultural inheritance of concepts, language and institutions. This became clear when he sought to have it translated into one of the local languages. The interpreter found much of it impossible to translate and he was forced to revise the text so as to use the simplest possible language and to avoid concepts which would be alien to the elders'.⁶⁰

iv. Curriculum and learning

Coombs claimed that 'Aboriginal views about learning and teaching' include 19 elements which are different from non-Aboriginal learning and teaching, such as:

Knowledge is property and people have defined private, not common, rights in it;...

Aborigines emphasise observation and imitation in learning rather than direct instruction or question and answer;

Aborigines believe people learn by doing, not by learning how to do;...

Aborigines reinforce correct behaviour rather than penalise error;

Aborigines ensure conformity by a number of social mechanisms, especially teasing;...

Aborigines learn by person-orientation rather than information-orientation;...

Aborigines measure both time and space differently from Europeans.⁶¹

Two beliefs here are of particular importance. The first is that Aborigines do not learn as individuals, but as a collective group; the other is that knowledge is not generally available to all Aborigines, but is the restricted possession of defined groups. To his credit, Coombs has not completely rejected individual Aboriginal achievement as an important educational goal, unlike many professional educators who argue that Aboriginal thoughts and actions are entirely of a collective character and that Aborigines, children or adults, do not learn as individuals but as a group. Michael Christie, for example, claimed that 'all teachers know that white teaching practices which make Aboriginal learners stand out as high achievers in contrast to the group will not work'.⁶² Christie added that Aboriginal children 'hate activities directed at their personal learning and development, and love those directed at group unity'. This seems odd when we consider Aborigines who are successful in sport, the arts or politics. Cathy Freeman likes to come first just as much as any non-Aboriginal athlete.

Coombs, however, has often propounded the second notion: that among Aborigines knowledge not only has been, but should continue to be, limited to defined groups who 'own' it. Like Stephen Harris, Coombs feared that if personal or group knowledge is 'open to anybody of any age, then it has cut away one foundation of Aboriginal society'.⁶³ Further limitations were suggested by Paul Coe, who denounced putting different Aboriginal students together as yet another mode of white racism which was 'effective in destroying the black people ... all they had to do was put two black men and two black women together with different cultural values, different cultural norms and they had a tendency to destroy themselves'.⁶⁴

In hunter-gatherer societies, cultural transmission generally took place through a combination of observation and imitation of practical skills and listening to and learning by heart narrations of the mythic lore of the group. On the other hand, the development of theoretical knowledge, especially since the invention of writing, requires not only biological memory but external memory dependent on external storage devices.⁶⁵ The new forms of knowledge can only be apprehended and used with intellectual tools forged in disciplined study, usually including a theoretical component. Often they cannot be derived from everyday experience. Yet Coombs has insisted that

traditional ways of learning can provide Aborigines with sufficient knowledge to achieve genuine autonomy in a complex modern society. He asserted that Aboriginal beliefs form a better basis for understanding the world than 'western science', which, he claimed, 'seeks to examine (things and experiences) in their most basic components; to reduce them to their irreducible atoms', whereas Aborigines 'do not share this reductionist approach, believing that things and events in nature can properly be observed only in their contexts, as part of their environment'. He also described 'The Dreaming' as 'the equivalent for Aborigines of western science with its accumulated knowledge, its hypotheses and accepted paradigms of explanation'.⁶⁶ However, the differences between the two perspectives are vast, which is why it is difficult, although by no means impossible, for Aboriginal children to acquire a scientific outlook. Far from helping Aborigines towards equality, Coombs has helped to lock them into an intellectually subordinate role in society. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody went further down this path, even condemning, on the grounds that it displayed 'assimilationist tendencies', a Queensland Department of Education curriculum document which, the Report conceded, aimed to enable Aboriginal children 'to act effectively in either the main stream or the traditional society', by providing them with 'standard Australian English' and 'the mathematics of mainstream Australian society'.⁶⁷

Children from backgrounds uncondusive to particular modes of understanding require in general more 'time on task' than children from more favourable backgrounds. For genuine equality of educational opportunity to be achieved, the average Aboriginal child will have to work harder and longer than the average non-Aboriginal child. Yet among the 'distinctive developments in education' which Coombs has welcomed in the Homelands was the fact that 'school time has been restricted and the curriculum limited so that while still providing basic skills of literacy and numeracy, scope is left for traditional instruction and to minimise assimilationist influences'.⁶⁸ As a result of these 'limitations' there was little science, geography, history, literature or anything left which challenged traditional beliefs. Coombs claimed that 'some subjects—history, geography, science, language, natural history—surely lend themselves to be learned in the countryside, in the company of whichever kin are free from domestic and employment commitments'.⁶⁹ Again, he failed to understand that only a limited range of understandings, although

important ones in their own right, can be derived in this way. It is unlikely that Coombs would have reached his own position had his education in history, geography, science, language, natural history been that which he recommended for Aborigines.

As an example of ways of making school more relevant to Aboriginal children, Coombs commended Roy Yarrowen, who told Warren Snowdon, later to become a federal parliamentarian on the ALP benches, about the reversion to the traditional mode he helped bring about at Belyuen: 'If you come down to the mango tree there you can see boys there, always working there, making bamboo (didgeridoo) ... making woomera and things like that'. Yet Mr Yarrowen was also sensibly worried 'what they are going to do in the end ... like what jobs they going to have'.⁷⁰ Even with an extended Aboriginal arts programme, not many young men are going to make a living making the didgeridoo or the woomera. Neither will these skills enable them to understand any better the complex world in which they live. Coombs attacked the Western Australian Department of Further Education for the Literacy Booklets it produced for Aborigines. Among his charges were that diagrams of Aborigines hunting games and gathering nuts, seeds or roots, although accompanied by statements that the Aborigines were 'wise and strong', misinformed and misrepresented, because they implied that such activities were part of the past and anachronistic in modern Aboriginal life, whereas Coombs held them to be still 'vital for survival'. It seemed unlikely, however, that Aborigines in further education would have been misled about the extent to which hunting and food-gathering persist. He attacked one booklet for claiming that 'the Government wants to help the Aboriginal people to live like other Australians'. Coombs' objection was not that this was hypocritical and that no such help was being given, but that the objective of encouraging Aborigines to live like other Australians was wrong.⁷¹

It is very difficult to persuade Aboriginal children, or their parents, to accept the settled routine which generally characterises the school as an institution. Assimilationist educators tried different ways of fostering in Aboriginal children the capacity to forgo immediate pleasures for longer-term goals, but met with only limited success. Under Coombs' educational philosophy, the attempt to socialise Aboriginal children into structured study has been rejected as a form of social control alien to Aboriginal identity. Coombs has expressed pleasure that 'young Aboriginal boys traditionally were and still are

encouraged to assert their personal autonomy and initiative; to roam freely in small anarchistic “gangs” acquiring mundane knowledge and skills by observation and imitation, with little formal discipline or instruction’.⁷² In non-Aboriginal education, attempts, admittedly often of a rather perfunctory kind, continue to be made to discourage truancy, which is not widely considered productive of autonomous conduct. However, Coombs claimed ‘it is generally accepted among Aboriginal teachers and parents that attendance cannot usefully be compelled and that the options chosen by those who do not attend may at least possibly be educationally valuable’.⁷³ Yet there is no more reason to suppose that activities of truanting Aboriginal children and young people are any more educationally valuable than those of non-Aboriginal truants. There will almost certainly be a strong correlation between irregular school attendance and low educational achievement.

v. Results

Unfortunately, we have even less accurate knowledge about educational standards among Aborigines than among non-Aborigines. The teacher unions and educational bureaucracies of Australia were very successful during the 1970s and after in dismantling effective monitoring of educational standards at any level or any place. We are forced to rely very largely on hearsay, as was the House of Representatives Select Committee Report on Aboriginal Education, which lamented that ‘secondary education is often neither a satisfying nor beneficial experience for those Aborigines who are able to participate in it... Achievement levels amongst Aboriginal secondary students are generally low and the school dropout rate is high’.⁷⁴ Equally damning are professional educators who follow Coombs’ path. Lovegrove found ‘a state of discontent with Aboriginal education in general and Aboriginal secondary education in particular’ among Aboriginal parents and students and among teachers and school principals.⁷⁵ Harris noted that ‘school attendance in most remote communities is poor and the vast majority of Aboriginal children still plateau at about grades 3 or 4’, and that Aboriginal children were ‘doing poorly’, not only in conditions of physical deprivation but also ‘in schools in communities which suffer fewer of these socio-political conflicts’. Christie asserted that Aboriginal ‘educators are sitting in empty classrooms all over Australia’.⁷⁶ During his years as a teacher of Aboriginal children in the 1970s ‘the school daily

attendance had dropped from nearly 100% to less than 50%. Instead of offering his resignation and seeking another occupation, Christie complimented himself that 'this was maybe the most significant mark of progress in Aboriginal education in all the years I have been working in Arnhemland', although he generously attributed the credit not to himself but to 'Aboriginal initiative' as 'the children silently took control of their own education'. He thought that white children would benefit from similar progress but feared that 'the white world has a lot to learn before we are ready for that sort of decision'.

Coombs' approach to education could be described as euphemistic re-description, but it is based on despair of any significant Aboriginal advance. The old redneck racist slurs reappear in warm and empathetic tones. Aborigines are praised for ideas and practices which would be scorned if displayed by non-Aborigines. Harris claimed that 'Aborigines do not encourage young people to ask why things happen—they are expected to believe the religious history of how they happened ... if Aboriginal people learn a lot about industrial scientific questioning and start asking for proof for things believed inside their culture, then the Aboriginal world view is undermined'.⁷⁷ The old rednecks sneered that Aborigines could never be trusted to do anything on time or to keep a promise. Christie's reworking was that Aborigines 'can't give themselves over completely to study as white students can, without compromising their identity'.⁷⁸ He seemed well pleased with the thought that Aboriginal life is 'defined by true harmony and responsiveness with nature ... planning is irrelevant. In fact long term planning and timing are impediments, they interfere with the true business of Aboriginal life.... If one invented an instrument devised to prevent people from learning a responsive approach to the world, one would have to call it a clock'.⁷⁹

The old racists dismissed Aboriginal understanding of number as 'one, two, three, plenty'. In Christie's progressive version, 'all western notions of quantity—of more or less, or numbers, mathematics and positivistic thinking—are not only quite irrelevant to the Aboriginal world, but contrary to it.... A world view in which land, spirit beings, people and trees are all somehow unified does not lend itself to scientific analysis'.⁸⁰ Instead of calling Aborigines stupid or intellectually backward, modern progressives explain that Aboriginal language 'inhibits the speaker's ability to perceive and therefore to exercise personal control or personal responsibility over his or her behaviour' and that western science must remain alien to Aborigines,

because it is 'directed at controlling nature', whereas 'in contrast Aborigines try mostly to leave the environment alone, and fit in with what happening in nature'.⁸¹ Harris warned that 'aspects of western education such as what we call "critical thinking" perhaps should not be taught as a universally good way to think', since this might result in 'unwittingly widening any generation gap and undermining Aboriginal ways of thinking and problem solving'.⁸² Coombs might well repudiate some of these sentiments, now so influential in Aboriginal education. Yet he helped to create the intellectual atmosphere in which such sentiments flourish and he has never criticised them publicly. He has cited Stephen Harris' work with warm approval.

Endnotes

- 1 Hasluck, 1971, page 64.
- 2 Memorandum of 7 January 1957 cited by Porter, 1993, page 210.
- 3 Hasluck, 1988, page 16.
- 4 T. Milliken, 'The Missionary Contribution to Australian Civilisation (With Particular Reference to The Northern Territory)' in M. Champion (ed.), *The Churches: Native to Australia or Alien Intruders?*, Melbourne, The Galatians Group, 1994, page 25.
- 5 P. Biskup, 'The Royal Commission that never was' in *University Studies in History*, 1967, 5 (1).
- 6 Hasluck, 1988, pages 121–122.
- 7 Coombs, 1978, page 233.
- 8 C. Tatz and K. McConnochie, *Black viewpoints: the Aboriginal experience*, Sydney, Australia and New Zealand Book Co., 1975, page 106.
- 9 Tatz and McConnochie, 1975, page 6.
- 10 Tatz and McConnochie, 1975, pages 16–8.
- 11 Tatz and McConnochie, 1975, pages 32–3.
- 12 Tatz and McConnochie, 1975, pages 45–6.
- 13 Coombs, 1994, page 189.
- 14 Coombs, 1976, page 9.
- 15 As recounted by Francis Bacon, John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor to Henry VII, advised that monarch on how to maximise taxes from the great nobles. When entertained sumptuously by a nobleman, Henry would remark before departing that his host's extravagance showed that he must be very wealthy and would be required to pay therefore a large sum of money

towards the cost of governing the realm. If the entertainment was niggardly, Henry would remark that his host's miserly ways must make him wealthy and should therefore also pay a large sum. This was the origin of 'Morton's fork'.

- 16 Coombs, 1976, page 9.
- 17 H.C. Coombs, M.M. Brandl and W.E. Snowdon, *A certain heritage: Programs for and by Aboriginal families in Australia*, Canberra, Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University, 1983, page 21.
- 18 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 34.
- 19 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 147.
- 20 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 39.
- 21 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 35.
- 22 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 33.
- 23 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 149.
- 24 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, pages 36–7.
- 25 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 56.
- 26 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 104.
- 27 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, pages 57; 70.
- 28 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 76.
- 29 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 89.
- 30 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 107.
- 31 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 152.
- 32 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 157.
- 33 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 186.
- 34 Coombs, 1994, pages 74–5.
- 35 Coombs, 1994, page 29.
- 36 Coombs, 1994, page 47.
- 37 P. Albrecht, 'The Finke River Mission Approach to the Mission Work among Aborigines in Central Australia' in M. Champion (ed.), *The Churches: Native to Australia or Alien Intruders?*, Melbourne, The Galatians Group, 1994, page 33.
- 38 Albrecht, 1994, page 34.
- 39 Albrecht, 1994, page 37.
- 40 Coombs, 1978, page 40.
- 41 D. Trigger, 'Review of H. C. Coombs *et al.* *Land of Promise: Aborigines and Development in the East Kimberley*' in *Canberra Anthropology*, 1991, 1, page 103, cited in Brunton, 1993, page 50.
- 42 Cited Henson, B. (1992). *A Straight-out Man: F.W. Albrecht and Central Australian Aborigines*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, page 210.

- 43 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page xxviii.
- 44 Coombs, 1994, page 71.
- 45 Coombs, 1994, page 72.
- 46 Coombs, 1994, page 190.
- 47 Coombs, 1994, pages 187–8.
- 48 Coombs, 1994, page 189.
- 49 Coombs, 1994, pages 193, 194–5.
- 50 More often known as Warlpiri.
- 51 G. Campbell, 'Aboriginal Mendicancy: Will Land Rights Solve It?' in *Champion*, 1994, page 48.
- 52 M.G. Meggitt. (1962). *Desert People*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, page 43.
- 53 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 324.
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- 63 S. Harris, 'Walking Through Cultural Doors: Aborigines, Communication, Schooling and Cultural Continuity', (Keynote address to the National Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication and Professional Education), Adelaide, 25–28 September 1989, page 5.
- 64 Tatz and McConnochie, 1975, page 107.
- 65 See M. Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991, page 14; J. Bruner, *Actual minds, possible worlds*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986.
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- 68 Coombs, 1994, page 27.
- 69 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 170.
- 70 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, pages 160–1.

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- 72 Coombs, 1994, page 11.
- 73 Coombs, 1994, page 197.
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- 76 Christie, 1988, pages 17; 12.
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- 79 Christie, 1988, pages 8–9.
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- 81 Harris, 1989, page 6.
- 82 Harris, 1989, page 14.

9. Health

Coombs claimed that 'social scientists have shown' that, although the traditional Aboriginal way of life 'was dependent on strict control of numbers and the average lifespan was short, those who survived infancy were usually healthy, vigorous and self-reliant' and their lifestyle 'was compatible with diverse physical and intellectual activity and a rich cultural experience' and so on.¹ The one social scientist cited to sustain this generalisation was Richard Gould, whom he described as 'an American anthropologist who lived with and studied an Australian Aboriginal hunter-gatherer group'. In Coombs' view 'the coming of Europeans' brought 'unmitigated disaster' to the Aborigines, especially in terms of health and mortality: 'For 140 years the Aboriginal population plummeted until the race was within sight of extinction. Since then, as population has risen (in recent years rapidly), the record has been one of infant mortality, shamefully excessive by white Australian or world standards, and levels of morbidity which compare unfavourably with those of most societies in the world for which records are available'.² There is no doubt that the unintended introduction of diseases, such as smallpox and measles, to which Europeans had developed considerable immunity, was disastrous for many Aboriginal groups. It is also true that some colonists, after as well as during the convict period, wantonly killed Aborigines. Yet the number of Aboriginal deaths from white violence and other forms of mistreatment was, in world terms, comparatively small and in many parts of Australia less than Aboriginal deaths caused by other Aborigines. Henry Reynolds admitted that 'Aborigines clung to their own theory of illness, despite the traumatic impact of introduced disease', believing that smallpox and other epidemics were the work of sorcerers from other Aboriginal groups, who were capable of killing, sometimes from a distance, with bullocks' teeth, sheep's jawbones and fragments of glass.³ White medical practitioners could not persuade Aborigines not to drink or swallow the whole of a medicine at once if they were convinced it might have value.

This outlook has survived among some Aboriginal groups to the present day. Grayson Gerrard noted recently:

If someone dies driving drunk along the Darwin road then that is because, perhaps a year or even longer ago, the person was the victim of sorcery, and his assailant made him die on the Darwin road (he might have been killed in a fight also, or had a heart attack). In such an aetiology of misfortune, there is simply no room for such a concept as 'a dangerous drug'.⁴

Maggie Brady and Grayson Gerrard have both reported Aboriginal claims that the capacity of some people to survive severe substance abuse shows that it is sorcery, not the substance, which causes death. Roth found in the 1890s that subincision and other sexual practices which greatly increased the virulence of venereal diseases were too deeply embedded in cultural beliefs to be challenged. Similar problems have arisen almost a century later in respect of AIDS. Coombs could have mentioned that penicillin and other modern medical improvements have given Aborigines, as well as the rest of the human race, the potentiality of longer and healthier lives, given, of course, sense and prudence. The high current levels of Aboriginal sickness and morbidity are much less the result of the neglect or indifference of Australian governments or the medical professions, than of destructive practices persisted in by many Aborigines in the face of much genuine and solicitous advice.

Coombs, however, endorsed the opinion of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs in 1979 that 'the low health standard of Aborigines' is the result of 'unsatisfactory environmental conditions; low socio-economic status; and the failure of the health authorities to give sufficient attention to the special health needs of Aborigines and to take proper account of their social and cultural beliefs and practices'.⁵ He has been reluctant to admit that any of these beliefs and practices might be a handicap to good health and that Aborigines should be encouraged to change them. That would be 'to blame the victim', of course. Coombs has actually condemned some attempts to persuade Aborigines to change habits that lead to ill health. He strongly attacked the Western Australia Department of Further Education for promoting daily bathing, brushing hair and cleaning teeth and nails among Aborigines and even asserted that neatness 'is a non-Aboriginal value'.⁶ In this perverse view, a clean and tidy Aborigine somehow lost some of the essence of Aboriginality. In similar fashion the Royal Commission

into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody attacked a claim by a government representative in 1988 that Canberra now recognised that past policies had been paternalistic and generally mistaken, but that there had been a great improvement since those policies had 'been replaced by the recognition that Aboriginal people should be treated like anyone else'. This was described in the Report as 'problematic', since it had assimilationist undertones.⁷

On the other hand, Hasluck faced squarely the fact that many aspects of Aboriginal misery were the result both of their own fecklessness and the unscrupulousness of whites who exploited it. Hasluck wanted an end to those restrictions on Aborigines which did not apply to other Australians, but he understood only too well that if, for example, all restraints were removed on the supply of alcohol, many more Aborigines would become 'the prey of vicious white men', and that a major cause of prostitution among Aboriginal women was the need to get money for liquor, often for their male kin rather than themselves. With reluctance, Elkin considered in 1944 that 'possibly, complete prohibition is still advisable in some regions, for example, the Northern Territory', but he hoped this would not be permanent and saw it as the lesser of two evils, not as a good in itself. He appreciated, too, that unscrupulous whites often fleeced Aborigines in gambling, although some Aborigines were successful gamblers themselves. Elkin did not think a ban on gambling could possibly be implemented and hoped instead to help Aborigines 'fill their lives, in particular their leisure time, with useful and interesting activities, recreational as well as practical'.⁸ Alcohol abuse and obsessive gambling continue to undermine family structure and health in many Aboriginal communities, and among many non-Aborigines, of course. There are no easy solutions, but Elkin and Hasluck were right in seeking to develop a higher sense of personal responsibility among Aborigines and to provide such additional protection from exploitation as might be necessary for, they hoped, a limited period, rather than absolving Aborigines from all responsibility for their misfortunes and blaming them all on a racist past.

In 1979, Coombs welcomed 'increasing opposition to the demand for strict financial and administrative accountability which has marked the administration of Aboriginal Affairs under the Fraser Federal Government',⁹ although there were many Aborigines as well as non-Aborigines who found excessive ongoing laxity in the disposal of moneys intended for Aboriginal welfare.

Coombs and his co-authors did, however, offer detailed technical advice to the Belyuen Health Centre. The competencies they suggested that Aboriginal nurses need to possess included:

- take and record temperature, pulse and respiration;
- take blood pressure;
- administer oral medications in liquid or tablet form;
- know the correct dose according to age and, if appropriate, weight;
- administer injections, hypodermic and intra muscular; and in an emergency intravenous under radio directions from a doctor...
- estimate haemoglobin;...
- dress wounds major and minor;
- carry out urinalysis, pregnancy tests;...
- suture wounds and remove sutures;
- treat minor eye conditions, and remove foreign bodies; and
- examine ears and remove foreign bodies.¹⁰

It was a very worthy aim to try to equip a large number of Aboriginal health workers with these skills, but no strategy for its achievement was in place and none was offered. Indeed, if a large number of Aborigines had been able to carry out all those tasks effectively, the Aboriginal health situation would have been vastly different from what it was then and still remains over a decade later. Apart from technical difficulties in acquiring the requisite skills, Coombs admitted that Aboriginal health workers might well be absent from duty 'for a variety of personal reasons, and these included ceremonial obligations.... Sometimes a health worker found it very difficult to be at work on time'. Rostering proved difficult, since 'kinship relationships determined which health worker might attend any particular individual' and it was difficult for male health workers to obtain from a woman her own medical history or that of a child. Furthermore, Coombs noted, Aborigines are suspicious of hospitals: they are 'dangerous places, because they are places where people have died'. Thus, the difficulties of ensuring that Aboriginal health workers were available regularly at a hospital or health centre were compounded by the reluctance of sick Aborigines to attend them.¹¹ Yet, Coombs insisted, the main problem was the failure of the health authorities to take proper account of Aboriginal social and cultural beliefs and practices. What would happen if Aboriginal patients died under the Coombs system, if and when the appropriate Aboriginal staff were absent or incompetent, was not considered by him. One can be certain that many litigious friends of Aborigines would sue, and they would not sue any Aborigines who might be nominally in charge, but whichever government or other body had taken Coombs' advice.

It was an important victory for Coombs' policies when ATSIC gained control over most of the responsibilities for Aboriginal health, which were previously in the hands of the Commonwealth Health Department. However, greater responsibility for Aboriginal administrators over Aboriginal health did nothing to improve it. In the Northern Territory, between 1979 and 1991, mortality rates for Aboriginal males improved, although the gap with all-Australian male rates widened because the latter improved more. On the other hand, Aboriginal female mortality rates worsened although all-Australian female rates continued to improve.¹² Lung cancer and other respiratory diseases, heart disease, diabetes and other illness related to poor diet, especially excessive alcohol, and lack of exercise, and sexually transmitted diseases played the major part in the decline in Aboriginal women's health of an estimated 15 per cent over 15 years of an ever-increasing supply of medical services. In this dismal situation, there is no shortage of voices demanding extra funds and denouncing those currently responsible for providing medical services. The combination of financial blow-out, frequent negligence of funded organisations, and higher morbidity and mortality figures has led to new quarrels as to who should control medical services to Aborigines. Those attacking ATSIC included people who had earlier demanded—in the name of Aboriginal autonomy—that it be given far wider powers over Aboriginal health, such as Noel Pearson, director of the Cape York Land Council, who described Aboriginal health as 'a stinking dead cat'. Naturally enough, ATSIC leaders, such as Ms Lois O'Donoghue, defended their territory. The situation was further confused by disputes within the ALP: Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe took the Coombs position that 'there is absolutely no substitute for Aboriginal control and self determination' and that ATSIC 'needed to have its authority enhanced and not diminished', whereas the Minister for Health, Dr Carmen Lawrence, countered that this emphasis was 'myopic and sterile'.¹³

The fundamental problems of Aboriginal health will not be solved by transferring control from ATSIC to the Commonwealth Health Department, although this may well be a helpful move. Harping on victim status and blaming white racism and the colonial past will do no good at all. Autonomy, self-government, self-management, call it what one will, is most needed at the individual and family level. That this is true for all other Australians as well makes it no less true for Aborigines. Disputes as to which governmental agency should

shoulder what share of whatever blame may be justified can lead to improvements in Aboriginal health only if accompanied by higher levels of personal responsibility within Aboriginal communities. To go along with Coombs in rejecting such truths as attempts to blame the victim is to commit deep disservice to Aborigines.

Endnotes

- 1 Coombs, 1990, pages 107–8.
- 2 Coombs, 1994, page 54; cf A. Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, 1994, ch. 10.
- 3 H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: An interpretation of the Aboriginal Response to the invasion and settlement of Australia*, Townsville, James Cook University, 1981, pages 56–7.
- 4 G. Gerrard. 'Use of kava in two Aboriginal settlements' in J. Prescott and G. McCall (eds). *Kava: Use and Abuse in Australia and the South Pacific*. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, 1988, page 56, cited in R. Brunton. *Black Suffering, White Guilt?* Perth: Institute of Public Affairs, 1993, page 54.
- 5 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 278.
- 6 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 179.
- 7 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. (1991), volume 5, page 32.
- 8 Elkin, 1944, pages 32–3.
- 9 Coombs, 1994, page 28.
- 10 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, pages 287–288.
- 11 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, pages 290–1.
- 12 A.J. Plant, J.R. Condon and G. Durling, *Northern Territory Health Outcomes: Morbidity and Mortality 1979–1991*, Darwin, NT Department of Health and Community Services, 1995, page x.
- 13 *The Weekend Australian*, 11–12 February 1995.

10. Law and Order

i. Universal human rights or moral relativism

On matters of basic legal principle, Coombs has oscillated between two fundamentally different and, indeed, incompatible positions. The first is the relativist position that there is no basis for classifying some forms of punishment as abhorrent or unconscionable, since any such judgement can only be ethnocentric. The second is the absolutist position that all human beings possess certain universal rights and that some ways of treating them are abhorrent and unconscionable. When advancing the first position, Coombs claimed:

Protest against the social practices of any society is best expressed within the society itself and justice or reform is rarely achieved by an appeal to external and alien authority.¹

Whenever any criticism was made of any Aboriginal practices, traditional or contemporary, Coombs took up position one. Unfortunately, the argument that no outsiders are in a position to judge or condemn a cultural practice is also available to the Nuremberg defendants and the upholders of *apartheid*. Position one, if held consistently, would also have prevented Coombs from denouncing white Australian policies towards Aborigines on the grounds that they violated universal human rights. Coombs also came to appreciate the potential value of the 'External affairs power' by Canberra, which could use declarations by international bodies in order to set aside provisions of the Australian Constitution.

Consistency is thus generally absent from Coombs' treatment of particular cultural practices and universal human rights. One consistent thread in his thought, however, has been that Aboriginal views on law and order are much superior to those of white Australians. The main reason for this superiority has seemed to Coombs to lie in Aborigines' deep and enduring sense of community; he held that 'Aboriginal living environments retain a richness which other Australian communities have lost'² and that each individual Aborigine 'is included in a wide-ranging network of care and obligation. One's kindred or "mob" performs duties we see as a

family's role, and accepts responsibilities we see as welfare and the State's'.³

On basic issues of law, as well as of education, land rights and the rest, a basic error in the thought of Coombs and others lay in their wrongful applications of the *Racial Discrimination Act* and, through it, of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. That Act admits a category of major exemptions from its ban on discrimination on grounds of race:

Special measures taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms shall not be deemed racial discrimination, provided, however, that such measures do not, in consequence, lead to the maintenance of special rights for different racial groups and that they shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.

Hasluck was willing that there should be significant special forms of discrimination in favour of Aborigines in order to counteract existing inequalities of condition and opportunity, but he held that these should only be regarded as temporary measures and that the success of public policy could be ascertained by the speed with which discrimination and special treatment of all kinds could be eliminated. Hasluck anticipated by several decades the true spirit of the International Convention. Coombs on the other hand has sought to establish for Aborigines separate legal status as a permanency, but Sir Harry Gibbs was surely right in his assertion that the International Convention would not justify the maintenance for an indefinite period of a separate body of law for a particular racial group.⁴

Coombs and his followers bear a heavy responsibility for their rejection of the basic legal principle that all persons are equal before the law. This does not mean that all should always be treated alike, since some are in different circumstances: the rich may pay higher taxes; widows, single parents or war veterans may receive additional benefits; higher standards of conduct in some fields may be expected from members of some professions; and so on. But these exceptions to the principle of equality before the law are based on particular circumstances which do not place a person into a permanent category. Some non-Aborigines require special help, although most do not; similarly some Aborigines do not require special help, although most may still do so.

ii. Aboriginal custom and the Common Law

Sir Harry Gibbs recently considered claims that the Mabo decision implied that the High Court had declared that traditional Aboriginal laws have been preserved and recognised by the common law. He concluded that, whatever might be the argument from common law, 'none of the traditional laws would have escaped the over-riding effects of statute' and that 'no court in Australia has ever recognised that the traditional laws have force as such'.⁵ However, Sir Harry agreed that the question remained as to whether legal recognition ought to be granted to traditional Aboriginal laws and customs, even if that were not now the case.

Coombs would do well to ponder Sir Harry's account of difficulties in applying Aboriginal customary law in the Australian courts. Sir Harry noted that large numbers of persons now classified as Aborigines now live in cities, on the fringes of country towns or even in Aboriginal communities where traditional laws and customs have little or no place. In many cases, Aborigines now living close to each other have significantly different laws and customs. Sir Harry also argued that, because some Aboriginal customary laws are secret and some can only be disclosed to men and others only to women, and because 'it is a fundamental principle of our law that the Court may not hear evidence or receive submissions from one side which are not disclosed to the other', customary law could not apply in Australian courts.⁶ Yet, although Sir Harry is right in believing that this principle ought to be inviolate, it has already been ignored in several recent cases, such as the 1995 Hindmarsh Island Bridge case in South Australia and the *Western Australia & Others v. Minister for Aboriginal Affairs* (the crocodile farm case), in July 1994. In both these cases gender as well as tribal secrecy was involved, the former being deemed 'women's business' and the latter 'men's business' by some of the concerned parties.⁷ Precedents invoked by the Commonwealth in the crocodile farm case included *Foster v. Mountford and Rigby Ltd* (1976),⁸ in which interlocutory relief was granted by Muirhead J. to prevent publication of a book that would reveal Aboriginal secrets, and the *Daly River (Malak) Land Claim Report*,⁹ in which Toohey J. decided that an anthropologist's report should be seen only by female counsel. In *Western Australia & Others v. Minister for Aboriginal Affairs*, Carr J. ordered that the evidence in contention should be available for inspection by counsel for Western Australia, provided that only

one female was among them. This seems a strange compromise, but it was fairer than Mr Tickner's Hindmarsh Island decision, which denied access to evidence deemed vital to the case to all representatives of some of the parties.

Such applications of traditional Aboriginal law follow Coombs' earlier recommendations. Coombs has supported legal acceptance of traditional Aboriginal rules in matters such as 'violence and threats of violence while under the influence of alcohol'¹⁰ and has also expressed sympathy with traditional Aboriginal modes of punishment. He held that 'the "spear through the thigh" could remain as an unofficial component in the settlement of interpersonal disputes' and that 'our unwillingness to tolerate such punishment ... is ethnocentric'.¹¹ He claimed that 'Aborigines who value their rights to be with kinsfolk regard with repugnance our punishment by imprisonment' and that 'their repugnance is arguably better founded than ours, where corporal punishment is concerned'.¹² This may be so and we should recall that 'our' attitudes to punishment have changed only relatively recently. During the early contact period, white convicts received much more corporal punishment than did Aborigines, who could not legally be beaten by whites as other whites could be. Did Coombs favour restoring discarded parts of 'our' traditional punitive system? By no means! Traditional punishments, like every almost every other traditional belief, were favoured by Coombs for Aborigines, but denounced by him as reactionary, sexist and generally unacceptable in respect of the mainstream community.

Many contemporary voices, including those of prime ministers, politicians, judges and church leaders, echo Coombs' sentiments and compare Aboriginal values favourably with those of non-Aboriginal Australians. When the facts about violence within families, for example, are examined, as in the next section, few grounds can be discerned for this judgement. If and when this is conceded, the defence is then commonly offered that moral flaws displayed by Aborigines since contact with Britain and Christianity are the result of negative influences exerted by these outside forces. One cannot deny the negativity of some of those outside forces, yet the moral superiority of many western moral and legal principles can hardly be denied. Examples include the Judeo-Christian emphasis on individuals as moral agents who responsible for their own actions, but not for the actions of others, so that it is seen as unjust to injure or kill persons

who have not themselves committed an alleged offence. Another is the emphasis on intention, especially *mens rea* or criminal intent, rather than on the effect of an action. Claims that non-Aboriginal Australia is comparatively more iniquitous are sustained mainly by prodigal use of double standards. For example, it is rare for an academic year to pass without denunciations of various 'initiation' practices in university halls of residence. These admittedly mindless and childish acts are condemned in the severest terms as barbarous and revolting by people who defend initiation rites of an infinitely harsher and more painful character performed on the unwilling as well as the willing young by Aborigines.

iii. Men, women and family break-down

Coombs claimed that 'the division of function and responsibility between the sexes in traditional Aboriginal society was clear and firm, although it has been affected by contact with white Australian society to the detriment of the status of women'.¹³ Yet even the sympathetic Henry Reynolds noted that the 'array of methods' used to preserve men's authority, especially over women, included 'threats, sorcery, ritual spearing, even execution'. Reynolds conceded:

Aboriginal women may have gone to European men willingly and actually sought them out either to escape undesired marriage or tribal punishment or to gain access to the many attractive possessions of the Europeans.

Whatever the structure of sexual relationships may have been in the Aboriginal past, there is no doubt that violence is endemic now. By far the highest incidence of violence suffered by any group of Australians is suffered by Aboriginal women and that almost all this violence is perpetrated by Aboriginal men. Yet Stephen Harris, an educator of Aborigines who follows Coombs' precepts, supported the 'Strelley people', or more accurately some leading Strelley men, in rejecting the idea that 'just because a girl is over 16 she is free to go around with any man of any culture she wishes'. If males in other Australian ethnic groups sought by force to prevent their female kin from associating with outsiders deemed undesirable, they would be accused of sexism and discrimination, but with Aborigines it is just a matter of maintaining traditional values, deemed by Harris to include, to a unique degree, 'maintenance of harmony within the group, live-and-let-live and individual rights of independent action'.¹⁴ Coombs has expressed sympathy with traditional sanctions against persons unwilling to accept marriage partners chosen for them, although it

is, of course, almost invariably young Aboriginal women who resist forced marriages to older Aboriginal men.

In the Northern Territory, the rate per 100,000 of homicide and injury inflicted by other persons increased for Aboriginal females from 953 in 1979 to 1221 in 1988, having reached 1742 in 1984. The corresponding rate for non-Aboriginal women in 1988 was 52 per 100,000.¹⁵ The increased rate for Aboriginal women may in part reflect improved chances of being taken to hospital after assaults, but the situation is certainly grievous. Almost all the assaults on Aboriginal women were carried out by Aboriginal men. Despite criticisms of the police made by Aboriginal organisations, many Aboriginal women would be grateful if police protection were available. Aboriginal police, where available, are often deeply reluctant to intervene in Aboriginal 'family' disputes. The greater the separation/autonomy of Aboriginal law maintenance, as advocated by Coombs, the worse this particular aspect of the problem.

The disintegration of Aboriginal family life in many areas is linked both to increased drinking and increased crime. Ernest Hunter noted:

while citizenship rights did not introduce Aboriginal drinking to the Kimberley (or elsewhere) it clearly resulted in major increases in the number of people drinking and the resources available for the purchase of alcohol (thus the amounts consumed)... Information from the random sample survey revealed that reports of heavy parental drinking were rare among those of 50 years of age, but increased in a linear fashion with decreasing age such that 60 per cent of those between 20 and 30 reported one or both parents (regardless of whether they had been primarily brought up by them) to have been heavy drinkers.¹⁶

In the Kimberley, reported Hunter, is now 'the first generation to grow up in communities characterised by widespread drinking and welfare dependence'.¹⁷ This process followed not only the Citizenship legislation, but 'a withdrawal in the Kimberley of non-Aborigines from caretaker roles for children from the 1960s on', a process accompanied by not an increase but a fall in the proportion of children under the care of a biological parent.

Coombs approvingly cited Sansom's observation that Aborigines 'who transgress accepted codes of behaviour while in an intoxicated state from alcohol are not considered to be in control of themselves'.¹⁸ This attitude is, indeed, widespread, and encourages the practice of simulating drunkenness and lack of control when there is conscious intention to injure particular people during drunken or semi-drunken brawls. In any case, Coombs did not allow non-Aborigines to disclaim

all responsibility for their actions on grounds of drink or drugs. The achievement of genuine equality and personal autonomy entails similar expectations of Aborigines. Coombs could not avoid acknowledging the obsession with gambling of many Aborigines and admitted that card-playing brought together 'groups, composed of quite distant classificatory kin' who 'spend hours in close proximity playing cards, a proximity that has no parallel, even in huge ceremonial gatherings' and that when gambling is impossible because the government cheque has not yet arrived 'these groups do not interact regularly, if at all'.¹⁹

Rosemary Neill cited former Northern Territory police commissioner Mick Palmer, appointed in 1993 head of the federal police, who commented on black domestic violence that 'the vast majority of rapes and assaults against Aboriginal women were not reported to police and that the wider community, including feminists, considered the issue "too hot to handle" or "just the Aboriginal way"'. Judy Atkinson, a Queensland-based Aborigine who has worked in the family violence field for some years, told a Queensland Government minister there were twelve children in Cairns Base Hospital from one small Aboriginal community who had been physically or sexually abused. According to Atkinson, the minister replied: 'Oh Judy, don't talk like that. People will think that self-management is not working'. As part of the 'Through Black Eyes' research, funded by ATSIC in the early 1990s, a survey carried out among 120 Aboriginal households in Adelaide suggested that 90 per cent of the women and 84 per cent of the young girls had been raped at some stage of their lives. A related statistic was that in most States more than 70 per cent of assaults on Aboriginal women are carried out by their boyfriends or husbands. Although there may be some exaggeration in these claims, there can be no doubt that the situation is critical and is not the result of destitution: family incomes were sufficient to make possible a decent life. Yet there continues to be pressure for Aboriginal women not to charge Aboriginal men with assault, because it could result in further jailing of 'disadvantaged men who are grossly over-represented in the nation's prisons'. Isabell Coe, director of the NSW Aboriginal Legal Service, described plans by NSW Aboriginal women to form a legal group to assist black victims of domestic violence as divisive, while Lois O'Donogue, ATSIC Chairwoman, claimed that ATSIC has insufficient money to fund from the early 1970s onwards, legal actions by Aboriginal

women against Aboriginal men. Jane Lloyd, an anthropologist and coordinator of a domestic violence project based at Alice Springs, stated that courts and police continued to cite customary law in cases involving abused women, since 'it is sometimes mistakenly assumed Aborigines will resolve assaults within their community through "pay-back" laws: This is a really false assumption, because unless you have a really functional community that is really cohesive, paybacks do not happen'.²⁰ Of course, a different but hardly preferable set of problems would arise if among contemporary Aborigines paybacks continued to take place in the old way.

The refusal to help Aboriginal women subjected to violence from Aboriginal men stemmed at heart from the determination that all Aborigines must be seen as victims, that no Aborigines can seriously be held responsible for their own actions. Miseries of Aboriginal life—such as high rates of sickness, drug dependence, alcohol abuse and welfare dependency—are routinely attributed under the Coombs philosophy to past evils perpetrated by whites. Furthermore, to suggest, let alone demand, that Aborigines abandon practices which lead to ill-health, or that supplies of drugs or alcohol should be more restricted among Aboriginal communities than elsewhere in Australia, is categorised as paternalism, while any steps to reduce direct welfare payments in money which is soon spent on drink or vehicles of short effective life are denounced as reactionary and devoid of compassion.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody attributed in large part 'the high levels of involvement of young people in criminal offending, the problematic use of alcohol, self destructive behaviour and interpersonal violence' to assimilationist policies,²¹ even though these levels rose more rapidly the more assimilation was rejected. The Report also quoted from a commissioned report which asserted:

It is, at least, arguable that past policies of assimilation, removal of peoples from their lands, and the taking of Aboriginal children from their parents' were genocidal in terms of the Convention on the prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.²²

Hasluck may have died just in time to save himself from criminal indictment.

Whatever may have been the justification of criticisms of 'paternalism' made against non-Aboriginal care-givers in the past, their departure has not resulted in greater genuine Aboriginal autonomy, but merely what Hunter terms 'a transfer of dependency'.

Hunter noted that the greater availability of welfare payments for women with children encouraged high rates of teenage pregnancy, reaching in Western Australia eight and a half times the rate for non-Aboriginal teenagers by 1987.²³ He also argued that for many a man an 'exploitative relationship' with a woman with children 'offered his only chance of obtaining regular money'.²⁴ There is evidence of considerable Aboriginal male resentment at dependency on women, which results not in expressions of gratitude but in increased violence towards them. In Western Australia as a whole convictions for sexual assaults by Aboriginal males on Aboriginal females increased from 48 to 490 per 100,000 between 1961 and 1981.²⁵

iv. The Criminal Law

According to Coombs, 'Aborigines have been executed, imprisoned and otherwise discriminated against, as a result of legislation alien to them'.²⁶ Coombs endorsed the claim of the Australian Law Reform Commission that 'bad Aboriginal-police relations that prevail Australia-wide' are a 'product of a failure on the part of police to understand the values of Aborigines'. He added that 'the same could be said, of course, to account for Aboriginal ill-health, poor educational status and so on'.²⁷ Coombs did not suggest that there may be on occasion good reason to urge Aborigines to understand the values of non-Aboriginal Australia and to appreciate that the duty of the police is in general to secure the observation of the public law as it is and not as the police might wish it to be. Coombs did not hint that there have been, and were then, many members of police forces who sought to understand Aboriginal values and to help Aboriginal communities, just as there were some who did not. The same goes for his own extension to the realms of health and education of the ALRC's blanket condemnation of Australian police forces. Constantly to tell Aborigines that all non-Aboriginal persons, with whom they come into contact, excepting perhaps Coombs himself and a few other chosen spirits, are ignorant of or indifferent to their values and interests does not seem the best way to improve policing, health or education. To his credit Coombs for several years, from the early 1970s onwards, acted in his own words as 'a kind of intermediary' between Yirrkala communities and 'white Australian law enforcement agencies'.²⁸ Whether or not relations between Yirrkala communities and law enforcement agencies improved and provided a model for others to imitate is not clear, but Coombs acted in a disinterested and

public-spirited manner. It is sad that he has rarely been willing to recognise comparable altruism in earlier white Australians, or contemporary ones whose standpoint is significantly different from his own.

Coombs' claim that Aborigines were 'over-represented' in criminal charges and convictions as a result of police prejudice became orthodoxy during the 1980s. For example, Gale, Bailey-Harris and Wundersitz wrote:

Aboriginal youth is over-represented at every level of the juvenile justice system throughout Australia...

...statistics do not prove that Aboriginal youth commit more crimes than white youth, but they do raise the possibility that the law is applied differentially by law-enforcement agencies....

The fact that conventional explanations for the extent of Aboriginal over-representation do not prove to be satisfactory raises an unpalatable question: is racial discrimination such an integral part of Australian society that no justice system can deliver equity to Aboriginal people?...

...it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the discrimination patently suffered by young Aborigines within the juvenile justice system, even one that is highly welfare-oriented, can be explained only by causes lying deep within contemporary society—the unacceptable face of social, cultural and racial bias.²⁹

Many problems of law and order are closely linked with some of the issues about health considered above and also relate to the weakening of Aboriginal family structures. For example, the 1980s saw a sharp increase in what Hunter calls 'non-traditional self mutilation' among young Aborigines.³⁰ Such practices received publicity with the trial in 1982 of Alwyn Peter who killed his *de facto* wife on the Weipa reserve whilst he was drunk,³¹ the incident on which the brutally realistic film *State of Shock* was made in 1989. Peter's defendants presented him in court as a victim of circumstances outside his own control, including alcoholism. Hunter noted that 'ritual mutilation is a process of great antiquity among Australian Aborigines',³² but he found that the large number of suicides linked to self-inflicted mutilation in the 1980s in the Kimberley, where he carried out a detailed study, was not of a traditional character and far exceeded earlier levels of incidence. It was also part of a wider picture in which deaths from motor vehicle and other accidents, homicide and suicide rose from between 2.3 and 5.3 per cent of female deaths and between 4.2 and 6.8 percent of male deaths in the 1960s and earlier to 15.2 per cent of female and 22.6 of male non-infant deaths between 1982 and 1986.

Occam's Razor would entail that the high incidence of death among young Aborigines requires no postulation of police or prison warden brutality. In addition the plain facts presented to and by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody were that 'the alarmingly high Aboriginal death rate is explained, almost entirely, by the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody'.³³ Virtually the same phrase was used in the summary of a further research paper commissioned by the Royal Commission: 'The alarmingly high Aboriginal death rate closely parallels the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody'.³⁴ In other words there is little difference between death rates of Aborigines and non-Aborigines actually in prison and/or in custody. The Royal Commission also conceded that for Aborigines who had dealings with the criminal law, deaths rates may be slightly higher if they remain outside prison or police custody rather than inside.³⁵

The age-adjusted rates for Aborigines in police custody and in prison were respectively twenty-nine and fifteen times greater than the non-Aboriginal rate.³⁶ Whether Aborigines are 'alarmingly' over represented in prisons and police custody is another matter. The differences in the rate at which Aborigines are in prison or in police custody compared with non-Aborigines is somewhat similar to the differences in the population as a whole in the rates of men as against women in prison and police custody. The explanation for the latter is that, in proportion to their numbers, men commit far more criminal acts than women. The explanation for the former is that Aborigines, in proportion to their numbers, commit far more criminal acts than non-Aborigines. It would be absurd and a perversion of the law if police were to decline to arrest any more men for a while until a few more women had been taken into custody or sentenced, so as to reduce the 'alarming' disproportions. It would be equally so if on similar grounds the police declined to arrest Aborigines committing criminal offences.

Coombs has nonetheless endorsed claims that Aboriginal deaths in police custody are the result of police brutality and excessive and discriminatory arrests of Aborigines, He may be numbered among those described by Colin Tatz as follows:

No one learns from the past, no one listens, no one learns and hardly anyone stays long enough to osmose anything.... Each of the following issues has been on and off the agenda for decades: hearing defects in schoolchildren; the ever present but often neglected growth retardation problem; the bottle

versus breast-feeding debate; the existence (and educational value) of Aboriginal English, a Kriol; Aboriginal attitudes to conventional housing; the high incidence of venereal diseases; the deleterious sugar-laden foods and drinks sold in community stores; the misuse of social security moneys; the causes and effects of alcohol prohibition and consumption; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attitudes to the value and validity of the present schooling system; and so on and on.³⁷

Coombs has failed to meet Tatz's demand that we all 'must face up to a set of realities for which there is, regrettably, abundant evidence'. Tatz listed eight of these realities in the field of law and order:

1. the great deal of personal violence within Aboriginal groups, even within families;
2. the great deal of child neglect, as in hunger and lack of general care;
3. the considerable amount of violence and damage committed in sober states;
4. the marked increase in Aboriginal deaths from non-natural causes;
5. much destruction of property, both white-supplied and own acquired;
6. increasing numbers of attacks, often violent, on white staff who work with the groups;
7. the vast amount of alcohol consumed, commonly and generally offered as the sole and total explanation of the above;
8. the constancy about the way Aborigines externalise causality and responsibility for all of this.³⁸

After extensive investigations Tatz concluded that '[Colin] Turnbull's breakdown of values and of systems', among the Ik of Uganda, 'is what I have been seeing across Australia.'³⁹ Whereas Coombs has constantly genuflected before his own warm images of Aboriginal life, Tatz asked:

So where is the construct of community, of people leading a common life according to a set of rules, when such behaviour—sexual assault, child molestation, incest, suicide, self-mutilation, grievous bodily harm, manslaughter, gross domestic violence—not only takes place often, but goes unreported for the most part, seemingly of unconcern, unresponded to (even in mediation) and unpunished, even in traditional centres?⁴⁰

Tatz noted that 'suicide, parasuicide, and self-mutilation are, without exaggeration, rampant in black Australia'. An outstation resource director in the Northern Territory told him that after 11 years experience there he believed that 'Aborigines cannot live together in community' but that the smaller the community the better the

situation is likely to be. Several substantial communities, including the Strelley in the Pilbara and the Daguragu people on Wave Hill in the Northern Territory, which were publicised a few years earlier as trail-blazers of Aboriginal success under self-management, were by the time Tatz inquired, 'staggering, splitting, arguing and barely holding together' (at Strelley) or 'have blown it altogether, [are] in debt, and have given away their cattle lease' (at Daguragu).⁴¹ It remains to be seen whether very small Aborigine communities will avoid similar strains and stresses. Obviously the greater the dispersal, the more difficult and expensive it will be to provide education, health and other services, so that overall inequalities between Aborigines and non-Aborigines will further increase.

Tatz wondered why this wretchedness should increase when 'on the face of it things can be said to be so much better than there were 30 years (certainly 40) years ago'. Among the apparent advances to which Tatz alluded were:

- more money from public budgets
- more money from Social Security
- more actual employment
- more actual housing
- language salvation and language maintenance programmes
- work skills programmes
- strong land councils in many areas
- substantial financial investments
- expanded Aboriginal Legal Aid Services and Aboriginal Medical Services
- the reality of land rights in many areas, including pastoral leases
- Aboriginal radio and television stations
- Aboriginal artists and theatre
- flourishing Aboriginal dance and cultural festivals
- greater local decision making
- growing Aboriginal participation in political party and Parliamentary life
- anti-discrimination legislation⁴²

Tatz cannot be said to have detected new forms of malaise. When drawing attention once more to the 'staggering' scale of some Aboriginal drinking, he repeated his own earlier suggestion that the main reductions in such drinking take place during organised sporting activities, which should therefore be encouraged to increase in number. Yet he also conceded 'excessive, and often gratuitous violence by some Aborigines on the sports field' in much greater proportions than those for non-Aborigines.⁴³ In any case, although an increase in sporting facilities and organised activities might be

helpful, it cannot form the major part of redemptive measures for young Aborigines, any more than bread and circuses could resolve the malaise of the Roman proletariat. Absolutely vital is to create a pride in work and to provide work in which pride can be taken. There can be no lasting pride in one's personal or group identity without a genuine conviction that one is contributing something worthwhile to the present, which is worthy of the best of the past and helps lay a basis for the future. This need for meaning and purpose is common to all Australians, Aborigines and the rest of us. It would be a blessing if rhetoric about Aboriginal identity and tradition could be harnessed to building up such meaning and purpose.

It is certainly not overwork that drives Aborigines to drink, but often boredom is a significant factor. Whatever may have taken place in the past, it is not current discrimination against Aborigines that induces mass drunkenness. Indeed, Tatz suggested:

The equality and positive discrimination doctrines have given Aborigines an enormous agenda of expectations that they haven't the skills to acquire immediately and so the consequent frustrations, alienations and withdrawals from 'life' are manifested in 'appealing violence'.

Yet the lack of skills is not genetic, nor the result of absence of opportunity to gain them. It arises from failure to show diligence and persistence in school or in jobs, a failure made more likely by the educational doctrines described above. When Aborigines' self-proclaimed friends assure them that steady application at routine tasks is not a part of Aboriginal identity, Aborigines need no enemies. The advocates of greater Aboriginal independence leave in their wake ever increasing dependency.

Until a few years ago Tatz expounded very similar doctrines to those of Coombs. Tatz, too, once thought all Aboriginal problems were the result of a 'white problem', or rather a series of 'white problems' such as the 'psychological inability of whites to stop talking about blacks' and 'blaming the black victim'. He held that the 'mainstream society can never empathise with an oppressed minority' and that 'it is highly unlikely that White Australia can swallow the proposition that black progress is, in part, contingent on their rejection of white society'.⁴⁴ In a classic example of the 'paradox of the liar' Tatz once longed to see 'a militant culturalism, one in which Aboriginal writers and Aboriginal professionals will assert their monopoly of truth'.⁴⁵ As S.J. Thiele noted, Tatz's theory denied that white people could do what he himself, a white man, had already

done, and would have excluded his own work from the materials available to Aborigines.⁴⁶ He made his own support for Aborigines part of an ongoing 'white problem', which perhaps at that time it was, but in a way he did not intend. Although Tatz hoped for an ultimate integration on equal terms between black and white, he thought that in order to strengthen their own 'group cohesion ... black people should first close their ranks—as an exclusion of whites and white values for the time it will take to realise their immediate aspirations'.⁴⁷ It is rare that a destination is reached by setting out resolutely in the opposite direction. Tatz's rejection of several propositions on which his considerable reputation in the analysis of Aboriginal affairs had been based, and his doing so when they had become orthodoxy, is evidence of great honesty and courage. Perhaps he will be a role-model for Dr Coombs?

There is massive and overwhelming evidence for Tatz's contention that in many areas the sense of community among Aborigines is weak. Among the most horrific evidence presented to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was an account of the breakdown of law and order in many old reserves and settlements in Queensland which 20 years ago were centres of comparative security and harmony. Especially shocking was the account of the extent of sexually transmitted diseases among very young Aboriginal children, mainly the result of physical abuse (sharp sticks up the anus) and sexual abuse by teenage Aboriginal boys. The report shamed those who peddle false descriptions of co-operative Aboriginal communities by declaring:

Homicide, suicide, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, juvenile offending, alcohol abuse and early death from preventable diseases are hardly a preferred lifestyle for Aboriginal people.⁴⁸

Gillian Cowlshaw described the way of life of some Aborigines in towns in the far west of New South Wales as an 'oppositional culture', which included being regularly drunk, pride in spells in prison, and contemptuous rejection of school by children and jobs by adults. She reported widespread hatred of the police, yet Aboriginal women often called on them for protection against drunken and violent men.⁴⁹ Hirst observed that 'Aborigines in these country towns cannot return to a traditional culture. They are as far from that as we are from a medieval village'.⁵⁰ Hirst was reviled by Cowlshaw when he cited her book as evidence of deep social malaise, but she did not deny any significant claim he attributed to her. Instead she blamed

him for failing to appreciate that the malaise was all the fault of white racism.⁵¹ Cowlshaw has followed Coombs in denying that Aborigines can be racist, since, she maintains, they 'are in no position to practise discrimination' and thus their 'alleged racism, or hostility expressed towards whites, is better understood as a defensive response'.⁵² However, most weapons can be used for defence or attack and racial hatred is basically the same if directed by a minority against a majority or *vice versa*. Attitudes and actions of all Australians, Aborigines and non-Aborigines, must be subjected to equal scrutiny if we are ever to resolve the deep-rooted problems considered in this section.

Endnotes

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- 2 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 92.
- 3 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 51.
- 4 Gibbs, 1994, page 12.
- 5 Sir Harry Gibbs, 'Legal Dualism—One Nation But Two Laws?' in M. Champion (ed.), *The Churches: Native to Australia or Alien Intruders?*, Melbourne, The Galatians Group, 1994, page 9.
- 6 Gibbs, 1994, page 11.
- 7 For the Hindmarsh Island Bridge case see G. Partington, 'The Hindmarsh Island Bridge' in *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 1995, 71 (5), pages 4–13. For the crocodile farm case see E. Willheim, 'Casenotes on *Western Australia & Others v. Minister for Aboriginal Affairs*' in *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*, August 1994, 3 (69), page 17.
- 8 14 ALR 14.
- 9 *Parliamentary Paper* No. 413/1982.
- 10 Coombs, 1994, page 125.
- 11 Coombs, 1994, page 125.
- 12 Coombs, 1994, page 120.
- 13 Coombs, 1994, page 128.
- 14 Harris, 1989, page 2.
- 15 Plant, Condon and Durling, 1995, page 195.
- 16 Hunter, 1990. page 271.
- 17 Hunter, 1990, page 273.
- 18 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 66.
- 19 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 55.
- 20 See *The Weekend Australian*, 18–19 June 1994, Review, page 2.

- 21 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: National Report no. 4, 1991, page 2.
- 22 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: National Report no. 5, 1991, page 34.
- 23 V. Gee, S.M. Webb and C.D. Holman, *Perinatal Statistics in Western Australia: Fifth Annual Report of the Western Australian Midwives Notification System*, 1987. Perth: Health Department of Western Australia, 1989.
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- 27 Coombs *et al.*, 1983, page 202.
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- 30 Ernest M. Hunter, 'A Question of Power: Contemporary Self-Mutilation among Aborigines in the Kimberley' in *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 1990, 24 (4), page 261.
- 31 D. Sturgess and F. Brennan, 'The Health of Alwyn Peter' in *Aboriginal Health Worker*, 1982, 6 (1), pages 42-7, cited in Hunter, 1990, page 263.
- 32 Hunter, 1990, page 267,
- 33 D. Biles, D. McDonald and J. Fleming. (1992). 'Aboriginal Deaths in Police Custody, 1980-1988: An Analysis of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Deaths' in *Deaths in Custody, Australia 1980-1989: The Research papers of the Criminology Unit of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, pages 210 and 234. The same phrase is used in the summary of Research Papers 10 and 11.
- 34 Institute of Criminology, 1992, page 134.
- 35 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: National Report no. 1, page 189.
- 36 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: National Report no. 1, pages 224-5.
- 37 C. Tatz, 'Aboriginal violence: A return to pessimism' in *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 1990, 25 (4), page 249.
- 38 Tatz, 1990, page 250.
- 39 Tatz, 1990, page 245 (see C. Turnbull, 1973, *The Mountain People*, London: Jonathan Cape).

- 40 Tatz, 1990, page 253.
- 41 Tatz, 1990, pages 252-4.
- 42 Tatz, 1990, pages 252-3.
- 43 Tatz, 1990, pages 254-5.
- 44 C. Tatz, *Race Politics in Australia*, Armidale, University of New England Press, 1979, pages 1-4.
- 45 Tatz, 1979, page 89.
- 46 S.J. Thiele, 'Anti-Intellectualism and the "Aboriginal Problem": Colin Tatz and the "Self-Determination" Approach' in *Mankind*, 1984, 14 (3)), pages 165-178.
- 47 Tatz, 1979, page 5.
- 48 Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council, 'Submission to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1990', page 37 (cited in John Hirst, 'Five Fallacies of Aboriginal Policy' in *Quadrant*, July-August 1994, pages 12-13).
- 49 Gillian Cowlshaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- 50 Hirst, 1994, page 12.
- 51 Gillian Cowlshaw, 'Five Forms of Racism in John Hirst's Article' in *Quadrant*, September 1994, pages 66-7.
- 52 G. Cowlshaw. (1988). *Black, White or Brindle?* Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, page 263.

11. The Way Ahead

Looking back in the 1990s on the situations and prospects of Aborigines, Hasluck wrote:

Twenty years ago we had a more hopeful prospect than we have today. One of the reasons may be that we have chosen some of the wrong measures. Another may be that we have talked so much about rights that we have forgotten responsibility. A third fact is that in some quarters the idea that all Australians have equal rights has given way to a view that they have unequal rights.¹

This last point was endorsed by former ALP Finance Minister Peter Walsh, who wrote in 1992 that 'the only discriminatory laws which apply in Australia are those which favour—or are intended to favour—Aborigines'.² This has been the case for many years. Walsh, like Hasluck, distinguished between intention and effect, noting that many anti-assimilationist policies designed to favour Aborigines seem to have had the opposite effect.

This book has examined the main changes in Aboriginal policy during the middle and final thirds of this century, the main thrust in the middle third being towards assimilation and in the final one towards greater Aboriginal autonomy and cultural distinctiveness. Its general conclusion is that the welfare of Aborigines and all other Australians is best served when the emphasis of public policy is on common rather than separate group interests. This was Hasluck's basic stance. He was surely right, too, in claiming that a one-sided emphasis on rights as against responsibility has done Aborigines in general no good. It has also proved damaging for vulnerable groups in the non-Aboriginal population.

Hasluck tried to encourage what he considered positive features in Coombs' thinking on Aboriginal policy. In a 1980 review of C.D. Rowley's *A Matter of Justice* and Coombs' *Kulinma: Listening to Aboriginal Australians*, Hasluck described both as 'valuable contributions to the ongoing argument about policy and administration affecting Aborigines', which 'also deserve serious attention because of the standing of their authors'. Hasluck added

that 'the highly practical intelligence of H.C. Coombs has been applied eminently for nearly 40 years to several phases of policy formation and public administration in Australia and he played an influential part in shaping comment and policy on Aborigines during the 1970s'. However, Hasluck suggested that, although the subtitle of Coombs' book was *Listening to Aboriginal Australians*, 'the reader feels he is listening to Dr Coombs and learns more about the growth of his interest and ideas on this subject than about the mind of the Aborigines'.³ Hasluck added that, although a basic thesis advanced both by Rowley and Coombs was that 'the Aborigines should choose their own future', doubt arises 'when it seems that the Aborigines always seem to want what each of the authors thinks could be best for them to want'.⁴ In that review Hasluck once more emphasised 'the diversity one finds in the group of people now identified as Aborigines' and doubted the wisdom of regarding all people classified as Aborigines 'having a common voice and common future' of a kind separate and distinctive from that of all other Australians.⁵ Despite these criticisms of Coombs' viewpoint, Hasluck listened to the other side of the debate from his own, whether the arguments were put by Aborigines or others. This virtue has been rare among advocates of Aboriginal autonomy.

Coombs' greatest positive contribution to the development of Aborigines has been his support since leaving high office for decisions about Aboriginal policy being in the hands of Aborigines themselves. This is sensible in many cases, although not always, since decisions on matters which directly affect all Australians should be taken by bodies representing all Australians. It is legitimate to demand that people should be able to determine their own way of life, in the sense that they should have full rights of citizenship and genuine access to ways of influencing fellow citizens, but illegitimate to demand that minority groups should have the right to determine their own legal and political status entirely independently of the wishes and interests of other citizens.

When decision-making is in the hands of Aborigines themselves, experience suggests it is most effectively exercised at grassroots level by people aware of their own distinctive needs and with their own priorities. This 'subsidiarity' principle of delegating decision-making to the most basic level is in general a wise one to apply to Aborigines and non-Aborigines alike. This principle is at odds, however, with another which Coombs, perhaps influenced here by his centralist past,

has commended: that there should be all-Australian Aboriginal policy-making bodies that legislate for all Aborigines, despite massive differences in way of life and conceptual framework between individuals and groups categorised as Aboriginal.

Coombs has claimed that 'all Aboriginal societies believe that some middle way is possible' between the attractions of 'the luxury character of white society' and 'a system that maintains those aspects of their lifestyle which are co-operative and mutually dependent, which places an emphasis on their culture, their spiritual beliefs'.⁶ Yet, although many Aborigines wish now, and will wish in the future, to pursue some sort of 'middle way' as adumbrated by Coombs, some may wish to abandon traditional beliefs and ways of life, just as he and most of his non-Aboriginal friends have renounced most beliefs held a century ago in western societies. On the other hand other Aborigines may, as the Homelands movement suggests, seek as much of traditional life as possible. Hasluck knew better than to generalise about what all Aborigines want.

Although there is no magic cure for Aboriginal problems, it must be conceded that the conditions of life for Aborigines after separatist policies have been pursued for a quarter of a century seem unsatisfactory to everyone concerned about them. This applies to education, health, law-abidingness and community well-being as a whole. It must also be conceded that separatist policies have not failed through lack of generous funding by Australian governments, irrespective of party. If increased expenditure could solve Aboriginal problems, they would already be a past memory. In such a situation the best attitude is surely to look again honestly at the options and to be open to modifications in policy.

The logical conclusion of Coombs' approach is now embodied in separatist policies such as those of the Northern Territory Land Rights Council, whose *Land Rights News* carries the message 'One Mob, One Voice, One Land' and the 'Aboriginal Provisional Government', whose slogans are,

Aboriginal Nation
A Nation of Spirit
A Nation with Flag
A Nation with Land
A Nation with Hope for Self-Determination

If asked, however, the overwhelming majority of the Australian people as a whole, and very likely a majority of Aborigines, would agree

with Hasluck that the future of Aborigines ought not to be a matter for Aborigines alone to determine, any more than it would be right to exclude Aborigines from participating in the determination of the future of non-Aboriginal Australians. It is ironical that, together with declarations about the unity of humanity and the global village, we should find such an emphasis on the exclusive right of self-determination of a minority group, or rather of a set of related minority groups, most of whose members live intermingled with non-members. The real challenge that faces us all is to ensure that the living standards and opportunities in life of Aborigines should be broadly comparable to those of non-Aborigines, while at the same time respecting that some Aborigines may wish to exercise different choices from those made by most other Australians. Some choices inevitably lead to different outcomes, some of which may be of a negative character, but that is the nature of choice.

Sir Paul Hasluck devoted much of his public career to trying to provide Aborigines with a standard of living and a range of opportunities akin to those of other Australians, whilst valuing much of what was distinctive in traditional Aboriginal culture. The assimilationist policies he advocated were in place for less than twenty years during the 1950s and 1960s, but, on the basis of the meagre amount of available information about educational standards, employment opportunities, health, family structures, criminal offences, and so on, there is every reason to believe that this was the period in which Aborigines achieved more real progress than in any other, before or since. At the very least it had positive features which it is foolish to ignore on ideological grounds.

Advocates of separatism should look afresh at the results of their own policies and at the assimilationist case they often contemptuously dismiss without thought. The open-minded must surely conclude that there are situations in which it is wise to emphasise the common interests of all Australians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and on which all Australians should be entitled to pass judgement, as well as situations in which the distinctive needs of Aborigines or other minorities should take precedence. In times of crisis, no one should refuse to look again at past policies which enjoyed some successes, even modest ones. Dr Coombs and those who have followed his lead ought seriously to reassess the approach of which his old friend Sir Paul Hasluck was the most distinguished exponent.

Dr Coombs himself would render great service to Aborigines, and to all who live on this great island continent, if, in the ripeness of age and a century after federation, he came forward with a new call that the central aim of Australian polity should be one nation for one continent. Hasluck agreed with critics of the Australian past that such a nation needs better safeguards for the interests and different traditions of Aborigines and other diverse groups than were provided a century ago, but he was confident that there could develop an Australian identity which Aborigines were proud to share and which conferred increasing benefits upon them. Hasluck sought that unity through Aboriginal assimilation. Perhaps new middle paths or compromises may be found between oneness and diversity. There can be no doubt, however, that only an Australia unified in the essentials of sovereignty and law can provide the conditions in which Aborigines and all others can flourish culturally and materially.

Endnotes

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- 5 Hasluck, 1995, pages 171-2.
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