

Booklaunch at ANU Bookshop 26 September 2002

of

***Indigenous Futures* by Tim Rowse**

Speech by Hal Wootten

I have a confession to make. I have never launched a book before. Worse, I have never been asked to launch a book before. Mind you, I can think of many books I am glad I was not asked to launch. Nevertheless it is chastening to realise that it has taken me nearly 80 years to achieve this distinction. My only comfort is that when the call finally came, it was from such discerning people as Tim Rowse and Jon Altman.

What I lack in personal experience of book launching, I more than make up in experience of book launches. Living close to Gleebooks, I have had plenty of opportunity to observe the many kinds of book launchers. One is the celebrity who has clearly not read the book, perhaps has never read any book, but gives such an entertaining performance that all present are in such a happy mood that they buy the book, if only to get the celebrity to autograph it. I cannot aspire to that category. At the other extreme is the conscientious launcher, so anxious to demonstrate their thorough reading that they meticulously summarise the book, even down to noting the typographical errors. The audience goes off thinking 'I now know all about that book and don't need to buy it'. Such a launch is clearly a breach of trust towards the author and publisher, which, as an ethical launcher, I must reject.

A third category consists of launchers who ride their hobbyhorse, saying what they want to say, irrespective of what the book is about. Perhaps by the time I have finished, you will place me in that category, but I am really trying to steer a fourth course. A launcher who has found a book rewarding and stimulating, as I have in this case, can try to communicate some of the intellectual excitement, even if it is in the form of disagreement, that the book has engendered in the launcher, so that the audience will be moved to buy and read it to see what it does for them.

The origin of this book lay in a plan to write a synthesis of the first ten years of CAEPR's published research, containing some 400

items. Clearly if that was all it wanted, CAEPR should not have chosen such a fertile and restless thinker as Tim Rowse. We know from Jon Altman's introduction that as Director of CAEPR he was also looking for 'an element of critical review', but I detect some gentle hints that the horse has bolted in a not entirely expected direction. Tim, Jon notes, 'has used the lenses of political science and history' to focus 'on what CAEPR's research tells us about ...what he terms here "the Indigenous sector"'. 'But these are not the only lenses that could have been used, nor are these the ones through which CAEPR has predominantly oriented or viewed its own work...[O]ne could question whether Tim's lens was wide enough'. There are other passages where Jon reveals anxiety that the book has not adequately captured the scope and varied directions of CAEPR's work or the 'the institutional and political contexts' in which it operates. In a way that I found illuminating of the criticisms one hears of CAEPR, Jon explains the problems of juggling the often-contradictory expectations of its three stakeholders – the academy, the bureaucracy, and Indigenous interests.

I would offer Jon this comfort. One of Northcote Parkinson's laws states that an institution only gets a building worthy of it at the point of its decline. I would suggest another: that an institution only gets an adequate account of its work at the point of its decline, so that we may have to wait a long time before anyone can do CAEPR justice. Meanwhile this book offers a valuable window on CAEPR's work, particularly in relation to employment, land and resources, households, governance and government relations, and is itself a step towards one of CAEPR's major goals: 'to contribute to better outcomes for Indigenous people by... constructively informing public and policy debates' (p x).

Tim might easily have fallen between the two stools of summarising CAEPR's work and focussing on his key interests – choice and the Indigenous Sector, but instead he has managed to stack one stool on top of the other and climb on top to get a view of the *Indigenous Futures* that give the book its title. What does he see from this new perspective? It is a remarkably serene and pleasant landscape. To the rear the nasty parts of Australian history have dropped out of sight, and Aboriginals are coming into view at the benign end of assimilation, their individual choices being enlarged as they are freed from the fetters of protection and discrimination.

At the right moment self-determination kicks in, adding many sites of collective choice through land rights and the subsidisation of the Indigenous Sector, which consists of thousands of publicly funded organisations with multifarious functions. They include statutory authorities like the Northern, Central and NSW Land Councils and

ATSIC, incorporated councils performing local government functions, CDEP schemes, health and legal services, housing associations, schools and sporting clubs (p 1). This Indigenous Sector, although consisting of mechanisms for collective choice, is found on Tim's analysis to enlarge individual autonomy, and is therefore acceptable under his liberal criteria. Meanwhile the choice between the Indigenous Sector and the mainstream is always available. It would seem that all that remains for the future is to entrench the Indigenous Sector so that it will be financially supported as a permanent part of the political scene. This will ensure that Aboriginals will be able to go on making choices about what kind of lifestyle and culture they prefer.

Tim is aware that there are people who take a less positive view of what has happened and of future prospects. He acknowledges that some have judged the self-determination era the most destructive in Australia's colonial history because it saw the emancipation of Indigenous people into welfare dependency, but he himself writes 'from a more hopeful perspective', emphasising 'the rise of new legal and political capacities, manifest in the Indigenous Sector and in land rights legislation' (p 231). At page 2 we the readers are asked to 'suspend for a moment our judgment about whether Indigenous welfare has been raised, lowered or left the same by the policy and programs of the last thirty years'. Tim finds it unnecessary to formally terminate our suspense, but he argues at various points that the statistical differences on which pessimists rely to show that Indigenous welfare has not improved or has even worsened can be understood as the result of choices to be respected rather than as deficits to be remedied (p 236).

Instead of seeing a high unemployment rate as a failure to achieve employment equity, we can see it as a success in respecting Indigenous peoples' choice not to be educated, employed and rewarded in the same ways as non-Indigenous Australians. Overcrowded housing may reflect a choice to live with kin, substandard housing a choice to spend money on things other than rent, poverty on outstations a choice of lifestyle (p 11), and so on. Equity and equality must yield to choice.

Tim is also aware of the reports of communities that not only suffer the standard forms of disadvantage, but have very high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, family and other violence, sexual abuse and child neglect. Whether it is because the principle of respect for choice extends to these situations, or because of scepticism about the reports or for some other reason, they do not impinge on his optimistic account of Aboriginal futures. The closest I could find to an acknowledgement of them is a double negative reservation in

brackets: '(This is not to say that he [Noel Pearson] has no cause for alarm)' (p 234). Otherwise they receive only tangential mention, as in a reference to 'the ways that our apprehensions for...the ways of life of Indigenous Australians are conditioned by the circulation, in public debate, of vignettes of pathology...'

The picture of Indigenous futures that I have tried to summarise is supported by a typically close-grained Rowsian argument, in which issues are analysed and objections anticipated on the basis of a wide-ranging acquaintance with political theory and policy history. I am grateful, as I am sure many others will also be, for the clarity of Tim's analysis. In my case it has not only taught me much but has forced me to examine my own views, and ask why I take a much less sanguine view of the achievements of the last thirty years, and of prospects for the future.

Thirty years ago, as a young fellow of Tim Rowse's age, I had my first intensive contact with Aboriginals, through working with them to establish in Redfern Australia's first Aboriginal Legal Service, and visiting and staying with their families and communities in rural New South Wales. It was for me a visceral experience that I had to interpret for myself, unaided by the great body of Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders, thinkers, writers, anthropologists, historians, cultural studies scholars and others who have lived, researched, theorised and illuminated the subject in the last thirty years. My gut reaction spilled out in a submission to a Senate Committee that ended with these words about an Aboriginal population that was then officially numbered as 140,000:

If 140,000 of our countrymen were prisoners of war in a foreign country, we would not rest until they were released. Yet within this land a large part of 140,000 of our countrymen are prisoners of an historical injustice and its consequences – ignorance, malnutrition, poverty, discrimination, disease, lack of opportunity, destruction of their individual personality and their social fabric. Many live in conditions that would be considered appalling in a prisoner of war camp, and are subjected from birth to a brainwashing about their inferiority that no military power has yet attempted on its captives. To liberate these our countrymen we have only one enemy to overcome – ourselves – our apathy and indifference, our selfishness, our turning of the head.

In my uninstructed innocence, I thought the task was to tear down the walls and open the gates of that prison camp, and give its inmates whatever help they needed to come out and recover from their injuries and disabilities and take part on genuinely equal

terms, and in whatever way they preferred, in the world outside the camp. It was as a contribution to that end that we established the Aboriginal Legal Service. It was to that end that I welcomed the Whitlam revolution that became a bipartisan consensus for the following 25 years, and was in turn supported by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody of which I was a member. A very great deal has been done, and I have no patience with those who ignore this.

Nevertheless, what worries me thirty years later is that while many of the walls have been razed or lowered, and most of the doors are at least ajar, and a sizeable number of Aboriginals have escaped into a world where they have been able to find genuine opportunities and personal fulfilment, many are still in that prison camp, still imprisoned by the things I noted thirty years ago – 'ignorance, malnutrition, poverty, discrimination, disease, lack of opportunity, destruction of their individual personality and their social fabric'.

Sometimes I wonder if what we have done, instead of tearing the walls down and helping the inmates out, has been to go into the prison camp, a camp full of people who have lost or never acquired the confidence and skills to deal with the very alien outside world, and say, 'Well we see you have been here quite a few years; many of you have been born here and know no other kind of life; you have grown attached to this place; you have developed a specific culture that has a lot more sharing and caring and loyalty and kinship support and spirituality than we have outside. We are enlightened post-modern people who wouldn't dream of questioning your capacities or imposing our culture and values on you. If you want to forsake your heritage, and deprive humanity of this unique experiment in cultural diversity, feel free to leave. But don't feel under any pressure to do so; you have a human right to stay here and be supported here. We will put you all on some form of social services, you can even administer the camp and manage services yourselves provided you set up and register accountable organizations to handle the subsidies we will provide; we will even fund an organization to receive all the social security and redistribute it in a work-for-the-dole scheme, thereby increasing your self-esteem and solving the problem of camp services. There will be no discrimination against you, you can vote in our elections and have full access to alcohol and drugs. We will even let you apply for land rights over any part of the camp with which you can show a particular association, provided you register an organization to hold the title.'

Of course this is a caricature, intended like all caricatures to highlight points by exaggerations. Continuing to caricature, I am afraid more cruelly, one might suggest that this book views the camp thirty years later and says, 'What a fine example of liberal principles – so much choice! Choice of whether to stay or leave, choice of whether to get the dole for nothing or work for it; all the choices exemplified in the establishment of the many organizations that now constitute a distinct Inmates Sector - so many choices in voting or standing for office; the choice of applying for one's own little bit of land; the choice between alcohol and drug addiction and the abstinence that so many favour. So much respect for difference.'

Aboriginals have their own metaphor for the Indigenous condition, found in a joke that they like to tell against themselves. A fisherman leaves a bucket of white yabbies and a bucket of black yabbies unattended for a while. When he returns all the white yabbies have run away but all the black yabbies are still there, arguing amongst themselves as to who will go first, and pulling down anyone who tries to do so. To continue being provocative, should the primary object of policy be the fostering of self-determination through organizations for yabbies in the bucket, in other words increasing choice within the bucket? Or should it be making it easy to get out of the bucket and access the choices available in the wider world, which, I stress, include choices of being different in significant ways? After all, many who have got out of the bucket, or out of the prison camp, depending on one's metaphor, have found it possible to maintain very strong Aboriginal identities.

In Tim's view, the two great achievements of the self-determination era have been the affirmation of Indigenous land rights and the establishment of publicly funded Indigenous organisations, and this leads him to criticise CAEPR's emphasis on paid employment (p 231), and its failure to share his view of the centrality of the Indigenous Sector (p 233 and back cover). My inclination would be to support CAEPR on both issues. In a recent paper to the Native Title Representative Bodies conference, (which is on the AAS website <http://www.aas.asn.au/>), I argued that for most Aboriginal people, education and employment rather than control of land would be the key to opportunity and independence in the 21st century.

I would question the overriding emphasis on the Indigenous Sector. Incorporated organisations and the rules for running them are an alien imposition on Aboriginal society, and coming to terms with them has been a difficult process. Major organisations have been

created directly by Government and struggle for legitimacy. Most others have been set up because that is what you have to do to get funding, and there is an assumption that nothing can be done without funding. Many have been the scenes of individual or family power plays that have left much resentment and alienation. Many have collapsed, often for management or financial reasons. The latest crop, the prescribed bodies corporate, have been established, often unwillingly, because it is the only way that native title can be held. In my experience it is uncommon to hear Aboriginals speak well of an organization in which they do not hold office. While it is not the only criterion by which organisations should be judged, one cannot ignore their failure to make much impact on the statistical indicators of disadvantage

It is not my wish to attack or denigrate organisations, only to suggest that their mere existence is not a matter for celebration, they have to be judged on their merits. Nor can their existence be celebrated as an outcome of choice; it often reflects limitations on choice. Whether most Aboriginals will find their future as members of organisations or as individuals, members of families or unincorporated local or kin groups, remains to be seen.

Tim celebrates CDEPs as 'one of the outstanding features of the burgeoning "Indigenous Sector"' (p 19), enabling 'Indigenous Australians to choose a work environment in which they are socially comfortable' (p 13). It is true that CDEPs cover a great range of achievements, some have created successful businesses, some have engendered community esteem, some have provided the only possibility of employment in their area, and some have provided a passage into mainstream employment, but for many Aboriginals they are proving a dead end, not a way out of the prison camp or the yabby bucket.

I found chilling a recent account of research amongst high school children around Newcastle. When asked what they would do when they left school, non-Indigenous children typically nominated an occupation, trade, profession or business; Aboriginal children typically said that they would go on CDEP. Choice perhaps, but choice constrained by low self-esteem, educational deficiency, fear of an alien or hostile world, and low family and community expectations; a choice of retreat into a world where there are higher than average rates of poverty, mortality, juvenile delinquency, imprisonment and disadvantage, perhaps the beginning of an institutionalised underclass. A choice of culture, but is it a rich indigenous culture or the culture of a marginalised part of modern society? I know that in underprivileged groups there is often great warmth and loyalty and mutual support and humour, and all the

other things that a group under siege develops to make life bearable. Men at risk of death in the trenches of World War 1 were an example. However I don't see many of those who extol the virtues of these ways of life seeking to embrace them.

I don't think that the yabbies got into the bucket by choice, or that the prisoners got into the camp by choice, or that many of them stay there as a matter of free and informed choice. They are in the bucket or in the camp because they were dispossessed of their territories, and placed in the bucket or the camp for purposes of protection and control, and they are still there because buckets and prison camps are bloody hard to get out of, and the world outside is a very unwelcoming place unless you are adequately prepared for it. And perhaps because many of us, instead of offering a hand to get out, talk about their human right to stay in the camp and the bucket, even about the contribution the camp or the bucket makes to the rich cultural diversity of mankind.

What are the conditions that enable individuals or families or communities to escape the imprisoning factors and make real choices among the opportunities the world offers? Perhaps that is something that CAEPR might study, for there are many individuals and families that have done it, and there are communities that have had some degree of success. There is already something to be learnt from mining companies, and other employers, who in contrast to governments have a reason to concentrate their efforts on one area for an indefinite period and the capacity to offer employment or business opportunities. Sometimes they show a surprising degree of commitment to making things better for their Indigenous neighbours. They are finding that Aboriginals queue up to get out, or at least get their children out, into the world, when they are given adequate help and welcome.

It would also be good to know more about what is happening in Cape York as a result of the commitment to public and private sector partnerships with Indigenous communities, backed by a remarkable Indigenous intellectual. It is in such things that I would seek for hope, rather than in the usually meagre resources of native title lands, the resignation to working for the dole, or the proliferation of the Indigenous Sector.

No doubt I have convinced some of you that in my dotage I have become a conservative, right wing, culturally arrogant if not indeed racist, assimilationist redneck. My only comfort is that I am increasingly finding Aboriginal people sharing similar views. Be that as it may, I hope that I have convinced all of you, whether you see things Tim's way or my way or some other way, that you should

read this thought-provoking book. It deals with fundamentally important issues with scholarly elegance and detachment. You will find that it engages with the views I have put here, and indeed engages with them in a detailed and theoretically sophisticated way that I cannot attempt to match in a short speech. I believe it overstates one position, as I have overstated another, and I have no doubt that given time and opportunity we could find common ground. It is in pursuit of the common ground that I hope you will read the book, and treat as serious and urgent the issues with which it deals.

In a passage quoted and criticised in the book, Robert Manne says that 'If contemporary Australians allow what remains of the traditional Aboriginal world to die, we will be haunted by the tragedy for generations'. I have already been haunted for generations by the tragedy of hundreds of thousands of men and women losing twenty years of their possible life spans, hundreds of thousands of children missing out on education that could have enriched their lives and opened many doors of opportunity, hundreds of thousands of lives crippled by disease, bitterness, limited opportunity, addiction, uncontrolled violence, and incarceration. An awful lot of individual choices have been forfeited while we in our comfort and privilege have debated the future of, and sent conflicting messages to, the prisoners whose plight moved me 30 years ago.