Assimilation versus Self-determination

NO CONTEST

MICHAEL DODSON

DISCUSSION PAPER No. 1/1996
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North Australia Research Unit
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The Australian National University

The North Australia Research Unit (NARU) was established in 1973 — a time when The Australian National University (ANU) itself was fairly youthful. NARU is primarily a research and academic support base. The Unit’s frontier days are as much a part of the history of northern Australia as they are of the history of The Australian National University and this is what gives NARU its unique status within the rest of the Australian university network.

NARU occupies a relatively large site — 4 hectares within a 10 kilometre drive from the centre of Darwin — with boundaries contiguous with the more recently developed Northern Territory University. Since opening its door to the north, NARU has expanded its portals into a modern, well resourced complex with strong links to universities, indigenous communities and a continuing political and economic focus on regional issues relevant to the top end. NARU provides an outlet for research through a successful public seminar series and through general academic publications. The Unit’s own publications include a discussion paper series and, over the years, a number of well known authors have published their monographs through NARU. Also, the Unit’s library specialises in northern issues — NARU expertise has become known to many researchers over the years.

Physically located in the remote top end of Australia, NARU has been something of a frontier research post but, in terms of its scholarly output, it has a record of academic research which is anything but remote. The aggregate of scholars over the years, and even today, is a reflection of the interdisciplinary nature of the people who have carried out their research while based at the Unit.

A large chunk of that research has focused on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia and on the social, cultural, political, economic and development issues which are part of northern Australia. The range of research projects which are underway at any particular time depend very much on the priorities of the individuals who are engaged in the actual research. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues are of continuing importance in northern Australia and, consequently, to NARU. The reasons for this would be obvious to anyone who visits northern Australia — outside of Darwin, indigenous people comprise the majority of the population in the north.

The academic content of NARU is, of course, its central purpose and, presently, there are five ANU academics on staff and several visitors from other universities. NARU offers its services to a small number of university graduate students who require a base in the north. The students are from universities around Australia and their research reflects the cross-disciplinary nature of NARU itself. Student research is supported wherever possible by the academics at NARU and by the Unit’s administrative contingent. Like many other centres at the ANU in Canberra,
NARU regularly publishes academic research which has particular relevance to the Unit’s work.

In 1995, NARU underwent some restructuring within the Institute of Advanced Studies at the ANU, and now comes within the jurisdiction of the National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) which, itself, remains a key part of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. From a research perspective, the shift to NCDS reflects an additional strengthening of the emphasis on the nature of relationships between traditional institutions and the political and economic structure of modern governance — particularly from a public policy perspective.

NARU’s close alignments with the main campus of The Australian National University are extended not only through the coterie of research networks but through civic outreach activities. Civic outreach is important to every tertiary institution but perhaps, because of the distance — including the distance between the political culture of the north and the Canberra culture — between the ANU in Canberra and NARU, there is an added imperative to keep all channels open.

Guidelines for contributors

Papers should not exceed ten thousand words. The Harvard system of referencing is recommended, and footnotes, rather than endnotes is preferable. The styling method of this paper can be used as a guide. Authors are requested to send three copies of their paper and one copy on disk to Publications, North Australia Research Unit, PO Box 41321, Casuarina, NT 0811. Please include an abstract and short profile of the author. All enquiries regarding sales should be addressed to:

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Introduction

H.C. (Nugget) Coombs is known as the whitefella's most senior elder. In the Foreword to his book, *Aboriginal Autonomy*, in 1994 I wrote the following:

On the morning just prior to the commencement of the meeting, Nugget Coombs, who had been invited to attend, arrived to wish us well and briefly renew acquaintances with many old Aboriginal and Islander friends. There were warm greetings and well wishing until shortly Nugget departed ... A young Aboriginal man of perhaps 16 or 17 years inquired of me as to 'who was that old man?' My response was, 'that old man must be respected; he is the whitefella's most senior elder.'

The context of these comments was the Eva Valley meeting in 1993, when the Indigenous people met to discuss the proposed legislative response to the High Court's native title decision. That old man wished us well in our deliberations — the High Court recognised our rights to our land under Indigenous law. It was an act of justice that in shaping an entire environment
of thought and understanding to which this man made such a substantial contribution, he was there, still fighting, still holding hope, still with us.

Why does this man, this whitefella, draw such respect and love from all Indigenous Australians who know his story? We honour him as a ‘senior man’, an ‘elder’; we honour him in our terms — because he has always honoured us in ours. He has always seen who we are and listened to our voices.

The greatness of Nugget Coombs lies in the fact that he did this at a time when it was fashionable to simply tell us what to do, to tell us what the whitefella wanted and what the whitefella expected of us.

There has been much discussion of late about assimilation and self-determination and I intend to add to the discussion. The really essential difference between the two tracks — assimilation and self-determination and the difference that Nugget Coombs made to Aboriginal Affairs in Australia is revealed in the following statement by Paul Hasluck:

We do not want a submerged caste or any other social pariahs in our community but want a homogeneous society.¹

Assimilation was then, just as it is now, about what whitefellas want. First, what they want for themselves and second, what they want for us. I believe that the real essence of Nugget’s contribution is that he cared about us, thought about what we wanted, what we saw as our futures, what is our concept of what is our place in our country.

Nugget’s achievements are testimony to this fact. His work is proof of the rewards of developing policy within a broader social context. Nugget’s understanding of the importance of the principle of self-determination to effect and appropriate policy making in Aboriginal affairs is, I believe, echoed in his work in the arts and at the Reserve Bank.

Nugget was responsible, for example, for the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board which was set up in 1973. That signalled the beginning of Indigenous control of public funding for the arts. It was also an example of Nugget’s keenness to see Australians include ‘Aboriginality’ within their sense of national heritage — a genuine act of inclusion.

Nugget’s integrated approach to policy development is also illustrated by his appointment to the chair of the Australian Conservation Foundation. In

¹ ‘Statement of Policy’ presented in statement by leave by the Hon. Paul Hasluck MP, Minister for Territories in the House of Representatives, 14 August 1963.
this position Nugget was informed by his interest in environmental matters and their connection with Indigenous rights. In the current climate of fiscal restraint and the deficit black hole (I sometimes wonder why it has to be black) Nugget Coombs’ approach to public policy has much to offer. Today, Nugget’s ways could well be seen as radical.

Nugget once said that the power of Indigenous elders may not amount to more than ‘… a right to be consulted and listened to with respect’. I am not saying we should all agree with Nugget’s ways — what I am saying is that now, more than ever before, we should listen to what he has to say and take lessons from his understanding.

**The suppression and dominance of our distinct society**

Since white colonisation Aboriginal affairs policy has been dominated by attempts to suppress our difference. Policy for and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has consistently asserted the dominance of the mainstream discourse over the voices of Indigenous peoples. This approach is predicated on fear of our difference, on fear of what is unknown and strange. Such an approach reveals an inability to embrace our difference and be enriched by it.

This approach is a function of a broader and more worrying attitude towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our aboriginality has always seen us defined as ‘other’. Our distinct identity has for the last two hundred or so years been the subject of non-indigenous attempts to define, characterise and reshape it. Every once in a while, though, someone comes along who is secure and confident enough in his or her own identity to recognise and support our difference. Nugget Coombs is such a person.

When Nugget entered Aboriginal affairs in 1967, the year the constitutional referendum recognised the citizenship rights of Indigenous Australians, assimilation was still the official Indigenous affairs policy. In 1963 Hasluck, then Minister for Territories described this policy as follows:

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, as other Australians.²

Assimilation relied on the well-established and widely-accepted view that we were inferior to white Australians and that our way of life, our culture and our languages were substandard. It assumed that we would willingly give up our Aboriginality and adopt the dominant white culture. Assimilation presupposed that the Indigenous people of Australia were a dying race. Embedded within the policy of assimilation was a clear expectation of the cultural extinction of Indigenous peoples.³

As Hasluck’s description illustrates, assimilation linked our citizenship rights to whether or not we could adequately attain the ways of the white people. Aboriginal Australians would only be given status as full Australian citizens, entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship in our own land, if we showed ourselves capable of fulfilling our responsibilities to non-indigenous society and if we embraced its customs and beliefs.

The irony and the tragedy of this for Indigenous people was that although our rights to things like shelter and adequate infrastructure relied on our capacity to show we could live like whitefellas we have traditionally been provided with inadequate housing and infrastructure. We have always been expected to live in places and conditions far below the standard enjoyed by non-indigenous people in this country.

In order to be granted citizenship rights, then, we were required to live like non-indigenous people but in circumstances which made this nigh on impossible and which were entirely beyond our control. We also know that even if, in the face of difficult conditions, we were able to ‘prove our worth’ this did not ensure the automatic delivery of what we were entitled to.

**The impact of substandard citizenship**

The Governor-General, Sir William Deane, on a recent visit to Maningrida in the Northern Territory found that even though Maningrida was, in some respects, an outstanding community, Aborigines are forced to sleep six people to a room because of the ‘hopelessly inadequate’ housing. Poor housing has contributed to the appalling health of Aboriginal people. One in

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³ Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p.22.
every 23 Aborigines at Maningrida suffers from rheumatic heart disease. Deane said,

the incidence is possibly the highest ever recorded in the world... and six times higher than Soweto.⁴

In the wake of World War Two and the horrors of the Jewish holocaust talk about the significance and universality of human rights gained wide currency. Australia enthusiastically embraced the international declarations and spoke out against racism and discrimination. But at a domestic level in Australia the principles of non-discrimination and equality did not prevent assimilation. Indeed assimilation was partly justified on the ground that it was non-discriminatory and that it treated all individuals equally regardless of race. It was interpreted as rejecting the idea that race was a barrier to social ‘advancement’. The ink had barely dried on the newly signed genocide convention and its explicit prohibition against the forcible removal of children when assimilation was introduced in Australia.

Assimilation

In 1988 Hasluck wrote of assimilation:

We rejected the idea that race ... made any difference between human beings. We tried to think of the aborigines as we thought of ourselves, not as another race but as fellow Australians.⁵

The key to the implementation of assimilation was its reliance on equality of treatment. In erasing differences between individuals assimilation hoped to erase disadvantage in the Australian community.

The temper of the time was against racial, cultural or language minorities in the general community. We were all to live in a land of equal opportunity.⁶

But despite this rhetoric of equality and non-discrimination we were still denied rights enjoyed by non-indigenous Australians.

There is perhaps no greater example of the senselessness and obscenity of assimilation than the practice of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from

⁴ The Australian, 5 September 1996.
⁵ Hasluck, op. cit., p.11.
⁶ Graham, D., "Campbell says he is a message to parties", The Age, 4 March 1996, p.7.
their families in its name. Today we have to deal with the consequences of this terrible legacy.

The pain, the grief and sense of loss of mother and child is unimaginable to us. Anyone seriously suggesting assimilation be revisited should spend a few hours in the hearings of the national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children from their families. Listening to the stories of devastation and ruin might just convince them of the stupidity which is assimilation.

Assimilation was and is a massive abuse of human rights. The ridiculous thing is that human rights had no application to Indigenous Australians in 1951 unless they were fully assimilated into the dominant culture. Despite the existence of international human rights instruments human rights did not inherently accrue to Aboriginal people but were, instead, a reward if they would renounce their Aboriginality and embrace the dominant status quo. It was equality based, not on respect for racial difference, but on the denial of your race.

In recent months Aboriginal people have heard much to remind us of the bad old days of the assimilationist era. And we’ve heard it despite a distance of some thirty years and the widely acknowledged abject failure of assimilation. Mr Graeme Campbell, now independent member for Kalgoorlie, has said:

most Australians are Anglo-Celtic and those that aren’t, want to be. This country is not diverse, it’s not a nation of tribes.

The concept of multiculturalism is based on all cultures being of equal value which is bullshit. 7

Mr Campbell’s eloquence makes explicit the belief which underpins all forms of assimilation but which others are too shy or cautious to state. It is the arrogant and crude belief in the superiority of white Australian culture and the belief that Anglo-Celtic culture is the standard to which all Australians should, and must want to aspire.

The idea of equality which relies on homogenisation and sameness of treatment has also resurfaced with a vengeance. The recent trend has been to

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describe an Australia where peoples’ differences are erased in the quest to unify all Australians under the banner of ‘One Australia’.

In his first press conference after the 1996 election, John Howard said:

I stressed — and I’ve stressed for a long time — my desire to focus on things that unite Australians and not things that divide them … I want … the reconciliation process to continue but [it has] to be upon the basis that we are all Australians together, united under a common body of law, to which we [are] all subject but from which all of us [are] entitled to an equal dispensation of justice. My view is that we are one nation.8

In this statement Mr Howard merely demonstrates his confusion over issues of nation, citizenship and race.

Senator John Herron, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (already the well recognised difference of Torres Strait Islanders has been erased from his portfolio) has said that the coalition would aim to make:

Indigenous people comfortable to be a part of the mainstream of Australian society …9

When it was suggested to the Minister in conversation with John Laws that:

the Australian people don’t like to see others treated differently. If we want equality, then it’s got to be equality for everyone, hasn’t it?

He replied:

Yeah, oh you’re absolutely right … the great Aussie characteristic is that we like to give everybody a fair go.10

So the great Australian ethos of the ‘fair go’ is again being used to mask fear of our difference and the difference of other minority groups in this country. It is used to justify the suppression of our unique status as Australia’s first peoples.

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‘That Old Man’ — Nugget Coombs

Nugget Coombs came to Aboriginal affairs somewhat a novice in the field. He was given a job in Aboriginal affairs because of his role in government, in particular his involvement in wartime reconstruction. I find it very apt that Nugget’s work reconstructing the nation after a war was seen as standing him in good stead to take on the difficult area of Aboriginal affairs — we are very well aware that the state of our Indigenous nations after more than two centuries of colonisation has much in common with the state of a country recently engaged in war.

In 1967 the then Prime Minister, Harold Holt, sought Nugget’s advice on the establishment of an appropriate organisation to guide his government on Aboriginal affairs.11 This led to the establishment of the Council, and the Office, of Aboriginal affairs. The Council was made up of three men — Nugget as chairman, professor W.E.H. Stanner, an anthropologist, and Barrie Dexter, previously Australian ambassador to Laos.

The Council survived until 1976 covering the period of five successive prime ministers — Harold Holt, John Gorton, William McMahon, Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser. Nugget himself has suggested with characteristic honesty that the early history of this Council may be perceived as a record of its failure.12 But the Council did clearly reject assimilation as an appropriate basis for Aboriginal affairs policy. Nugget wrote:

... the Council for Aboriginal Affairs became convinced from its contact with Aborigines that they did not wish to be assimilated, indeed that one of the few things Aborigines held in common was a determination to maintain a distinctive racial and social existence within the Australian community; salvaging what was left of ancient traditions and building on their foundation a culture which would preserve for them a separate identity as Aboriginal Australians.13

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Council was unsuccessful in its attempts to persuade governments, in Nugget’s words,

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to accept the right of Aborigines to choose the nature and extent of their involvement in Australian society.\textsuperscript{14}

I believe, however, that the early achievements of the Council were crucial in giving Aboriginal and Islander organisations power and authority over decision making in areas which were relevant to them. The capital fund for Aboriginal enterprises was established under the first legislation recommended by the Council. This fund sponsored and assisted potentially self-supporting economic ventures by Aboriginal people. This decision opened the way for support for Aboriginal organisations of various kinds.\textsuperscript{15}

The Council also urged government to establish incorporated councils representing the interests of Aboriginal people in particular areas. Ultimately the Commonwealth introduced the \textit{Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act} in 1976.

These initiatives, amongst others, were attempts to fundamentally restructure the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments. Writing about incorporation, for example, Nugget has noted that it:

allowed for a new relationship between Aborigines and those in white society who possessed knowledge and expertise; a relationship in which Aborigines were increasingly in control, where they took initiative as employers with the right to hire and fire ... the Aboriginal men and women given authority in these organisations found them a source of administrative experience and a valuable base from which to conduct more widely-directed political campaigns.\textsuperscript{16}

It seems to me that the seats of power in this country are again attempting to fundamentally alter the relationship between Indigenous and non-indigenous people — to deny us our rights, reverse our progress, and return us to the pre-Coombsian era.

In the last few months in Indigenous affairs the language of self-determination has been replaced with the language of self-management. This linguistic slippage is reflected in the government’s approach to Indigenous affairs.

\textsuperscript{14} Coombs, \textit{Aboriginal Autonomy}, \textit{op. cit.}, p.172.
\textsuperscript{15} Coombs, \textit{Kulinna}, \textit{op. cit.}, p.9.
\textsuperscript{16} Coombs, \textit{Aboriginal Autonomy}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp.173, 174.
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

The government’s attack on ATSIC reflects an approach to Aboriginal affairs not seen in Australia for more than twenty years. Before the election in March 1996 ATSIC was already Australia’s most heavily accountable public body. It has its own internal office of audit and evaluation. Reporting requirements for organisations funded by ATSIC are stringent. But in April this year the government, with minimal consultation, imposed even more onerous accountability requirements on the Commission in the thick of claims of nepotism, that the organisation was wasting money and that it was failing to deliver services to Indigenous people. Prejudice, popular stereotypes and hearsay have become the basis for policy.

ATSIC has also been hit hard by the federal budget, and the government has dictated which areas of Indigenous affairs will continue to be funded — health, housing, education and employment — and directed ATSIC as to where cuts will be made. Such an approach, which fails to let elected Indigenous representatives determine funding priorities and which fundamentally alters aspects of the Commission with minimal consultation with its constituents, is strongly reminiscent of an earlier paternalistic time when Indigenous people were regarded as incapable of handling our own affairs and, in particular, incapable of managing money. The emphasis which the government has placed on accountability within ATSIC reaffirms these perceptions.

Proposed amendments to the *Native Title Act 1993* reveal a refusal to recognise and accept the rights which result from our unique relationship with country and now recognised by the common law. Proposals to amend the *Native Title Act 1993* reveal an unwillingness to recognise our difference and protect the rights which necessarily flow from our laws and our unique status in this country.

**A warning!**

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.\textsuperscript{17}

Partington has asserted that policy-makers should again look to assimilationist policy as a mechanism to deal with ‘the Aboriginal problem’:

in times of crisis, no one should refuse to look again at past policies which enjoyed some successes; even modest ones.\textsuperscript{18}

But the policy of assimilation created a dichotomy in which separation and assimilation were the only choices. Hasluck wrote:

the superiority of Western civilization, both on its own merit and in its established position as the way of life of the vast majority ... left only two possible outcomes: separate development or assimilation.\textsuperscript{19}

The recent policy shift we have witnessed in Australia in Indigenous affairs signals a return to the view that recognising and respecting indigenous rights leaves us with only one of Hasluck’s choices — separate development which necessarily divides the nation. It reduces complexity and difference to black and white choices.

An Australia for ‘all of us’ does not countenance special treatment for Indigenous people either because of our disadvantage or because of our unique position within the Australian community or because as Australia’s first peoples we have rights deserving of respect and protection. The implication has been that recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will irreparably damage Australian sovereignty.\textsuperscript{20}

Such ideological straight jacketing is useless to debate in Indigenous affairs. It adds nothing to the development and implementation of appropriate and effective policy. A clean dichotomy between assimilation and separatism has never existed. In the heyday of assimilationist policies


\textsuperscript{19} Hasluck, \textit{op. cit.}, p.8.

\textsuperscript{20} Howitt, R., Reconciliation or alienation: Does dividing sovereignty divide the nation?, School of Earth Sciences, Macquarie University, unpublished, 1996, p.1.
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples resolutely asserted their Aboriginality.
We opposed the forced removal of our kids. We rejected assimilationist policies because they were unable to accommodate our sense of Indigenous identity and we rejected them because they were blind to our beliefs, our values, our cultures.\(^{21}\) As Stanner wrote of assimilation in 1958:

> according to this model, we thus have only to teach and show Aborigines where they made their mistakes and they will quickly become Europeans in outlook, organisations and custom ... this is fantasy. It perishes in a single fact of life. They have to unlearn being Aborigines, in mind, body and estate.\(^{22}\)

The current rhetoric that recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples threatens our national integrity has also strongly implied two things. First, that post assimilation Indigenous peoples have had self-determination and second, that self-determination has been a failure.

The failure, over the last three decades, of increased expenditure on Aboriginal affairs to achieve meaningful outcomes is most often cited as evidence of the failure of self-determination. Partington wrote in mid-June, that,

> conditions of life for Aborigines after separatist policies have been pursued for a quarter of a century seem unsatisfactory to everyone concerned about them.\(^{23}\)

The good work of Nugget Coombs which set the tone for much of the Indigenous affairs policy which followed did not give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples self-determination. We have received some limited capacity to determine our own futures through some structures often at a local level. But we do not and have not freely exercised and enjoyed a right to self-determination.

To imply the failure of self-determination in this country when it has not yet existed for Indigenous Australians is disingenuous. It denies the reality of our day to day existence.

Geoffrey Partington has recently denounced self-determination. He argues that it is,


\(^{23}\) Partington, *op. cit.*
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.\textsuperscript{24}

Partington and many others continually blur the line between self-determination and separatism implying that recognition of the right to self-determination will inevitably lead to secessionist movements by Indigenous Australians. That it will result in challenges to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Australian nation.

It is completely naive to assume that self-determination equates with separatism. A people may choose separatism or be forced into it because of the conditions under which they exist within a nation state.

Self-determination within the parameters of a modern nation state \textit{is} possible. In international circles such a position is countenanced and was strongly supported by the previous government in discussions and negotiations on self-determination for Indigenous peoples.

The achievement of self-determination for indigenous peoples within a nation state requires first, that those in power have the capacity to recognise our right to determine our own futures and next, that they are not afraid to do so. Australia can never achieve complete nationhood without the respect of, and for, the Indigenous peoples.

In this, the Government and all Australians could learn from Nugget Coombs.

Nugget has lived without fear in encountering difference, without fear in encountering our peoples: listening to us, arguing with us, contending with us in the difficult task of finding a path forward together.

Nugget is a man with an immense heart and intellect.

He has earned and holds our love.

\textsuperscript{24} Partington, \textit{op. cit.}
Dr HC (Nugget) Coombs is one of our most distinguished Australians. For over half a century he has challenged governments and bureaucracies in the shaping of economic and social policy and has dedicated a lifetime to achieving social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

He has been adviser to seven Prime Ministers, from Ben Chifley to Gough Whitlam, and after the 1967 referendum he became an activist and a fierce advocate for the rights of Aboriginal people to land, ownership of natural resources, autonomy and self-determination.

In retirement, Dr Coombs lived and worked for half of each year at the North Australia Research Unit in Darwin, remaining active as a Visiting Fellow of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University. His time has been devoted to writing, liaising with friends, research associates and students. He has produced a continuous flow of papers and publications on a wide range of issues affecting Aboriginal people including the Treaty, or makarrata, in which he has a particular interest. He remains optimistic about the future of Aboriginal people provided mainstream society will allow them to be free.