

FOREWORD to “*Treaty*” by The Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser AC CH

This book promotes a necessary debate about Australia’s relationships with Aboriginal people. It is a debate that some people do not want to have.

There are those who rigidly state that a treaty is an agreement between sovereign states. That is untrue. There is a treaty within New Zealand concerning Maoris. There are treaties within the US concerning Native Americans. There are treaties in Canada concerning their Indigenous minorities. These treaties are not between separate sovereign states.

It is easier to understand this if we try and strip the emotion from the word ‘treaty’. It is really an agreement between a government on the one hand and a part of the population which makes up the people of Australia.

In this case, the idea of an agreement has already been adopted by many people. There are agreements in Cape York – the Cape York Peninsula Land Use Heads of Agreement involves a number of other parties including Cape York Aboriginal organisations, the Peninsula Cattlemen’s Association, the Australian Conservation Foundation, and ATSIC Regional Council, and more recently, the Queensland government.

The current government has promoted the idea of ‘mutual obligation’ involving what are called Shared Responsibility Agreements with local communities. It has thus opened a debate concerning agreements with Aboriginal people. These agreements involve a number of regional arrangements. Will that be all that is necessary, or will an over-riding, all-embracing agreement also one day be consummated?

I support the idea of an agreement or regional agreement which would, above all, recognise the dignity and the self-esteem of the Indigenous population, in addition to providing a framework for self-government, self-management or advancement of opportunity.

Self-government is also a term that can be used to frighten many other Australians. Opponents would allege the impossibility of a state within a state. But that is not what is meant.

Aboriginals need the capacity for self-government of a kind that most other Australians already embrace and enjoy.

It might relate to community health services; to education; to the management of a school; to community services of differing kinds; or the management of a business. In these activities we all exercise a degree of ‘self-government, self-management’.

We should not be frightened by the term. What is very clear is that something new is required. Approaches adopted, especially in recent years, have failed the Indigenous population. The difference in life expectancy in a survey completed 1997-1999 suggested that for Indigenous people it was around 20 years less than for other Australians.

Indigenous people directly feel the consequences of diminished life expectancy, of inadequate health and education and therefore of inadequate opportunity through life.

The fact that these circumstances exist in Australia shames us all.

Why have the New Zealanders been able to do so much better – and also the Americans, and the Canadians for their Indigenous people – than Australia?

In Canada and the United States, over the last 25 years, the gap in life expectancy has been broadly halved to around five years. For Maoris, the gap has also been reduced to less than nine years.

In Australia, the gap is still more than double that figure – around 20 years. This is the simplest measure. It is also the starkest condemnation of Australia’s lack of success. If there were any one single fact that condemns the policy of ‘practical reconciliation’ it is that.

These issues are outside the direct view of most Australians. We need to pay particular interest, if we want Australia to be a cohesive and united nation.

Neither the government nor the opposition has been prepared to confront the majority of Australians with the reality of these issues.

This book is one step that can lead us to a better understanding of what can be done.