Decolonisation, from the sea-grass roots

By PETER JULL

A series of full-page open letters on Torres Strait autonomy signed by Kevin Savage, Thursday Island, has been appearing in the regional newspaper since mid-2003. These thoughtful and quiet essays ask the Torres Strait public to think carefully about identity issues, aspirations, and the roles and rights of citizenship ahead of 2004 regional elections, given the undecided political status of the region’s c. 20 Islander communities.

Small island communities like Torres Strait provide most of the work of the United Nations ‘decolonisation’ committee today. The letters draw usefully on the UN committee’s principles and standards, and note that the UN process has seen 750 million colonised people reduced to a mere 2 million. While the letters say matter-of-factly that current boundaries, whether ethno-cultural, economic, resource user, or jurisdictional, may require re-alignment, and that current state and administration arrangements may be a poor fit, they explicitly avoid the rhetoric or facile charm of separatism.

I don’t know the immediate background of these letters, or local reactions. What impresses me is their style and content – admirably cool in the sometimes overheated or under-deliberated world of self-determination politics. The letters are confident, comfortable with large issues and institutions no less than local issues, and assume that a conscious active citizenry in the Strait region is necessary for future well-being. Mr Savage acknowledges a preference for an end result with/within Australia.

In June 1993 a Reconciliation and Constitutional Centenary Foundation conference in Canberra brought a large number of non-indigenous and indigenous notables from around Australia together. A consensus emerged that indigenous peoples are distinct political communities with unique needs, and, processes should be established as soon as possible for them to work out the nature and details of their constitutional place in Australia. The February 1998 Constitutional Convention recommended several items in its final statement which presupposed a similar process. The Federalism Forum, October 2000, called for ‘wide-ranging national debate within the framework of the reconciliation process about the representation of Australia’s indigenous population. In this context, Australia should consider as one option the recognition within the structure of the Australian federation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.’

However, Australian governments of all hues seem afraid to initiate practical processes where more than limited administrative outcomes may result. Self-determination or decolonisation is not a white man’s gift, formula, or perimeter fence to impose but an indigenous people’s road to travel. In Canada the last white overseers were frenetic in drafting schemes at the end of the 1960s before the native movement began negotiating political reforms directly with Ottawa, too late for them and for Inuit and Indians. Nunavut and Northwest Territories indigenous demands,
too, were met with a wall of white-designed local government reforms designed to ease them into political citizenship. Not surprisingly Inuit, Dene, et al. were unimpressed and pressed on with their own ‘decolonisation’.

In his second letter Mr Savage says ‘I for one would like to hear about examples where countries were successful with establishing mutually inclusive political systems that did not break territorial integrity. Rather, it preserved it through the arrangements that were agreed on.’ Consent is fundamental. He wants the help of ‘Australian and overseas professionals and specialised agencies that know far more about this matter’, and gently reminds us that Australia’s track record of dealings with its Indigenous peoples is out there on the global stage for all to see – and it is not all good!’

In Torres Strait, as elsewhere in Queensland and Australia, government-controlled structures have become the frame for managing or massaging talk and processes of ‘self-determination’. Both Queensland and federal governments have sponsored regional Torres Strait councils whose elected members represent their island communities vis-à-vis senior governments. Sometimes presented by Australian apologists abroad as implicit self-government, existing structures’ elected Islander leaders speak modestly of their usefulness in working towards genuine self-government. The letters, like much regional and diaspora Islander opinion, express a need for supplemental political activity. In Northern Canada we set up ‘constitutional forums’ of elected leaders to work with the northern territories’ legislature to lead public and expert debate and achieve authentic and legitimised outcomes, for instance.

Indigenous peoples have much talking to do among themselves. At the start of 1992 the Torres Strait Cultural Conference spent several days in workshops and plenaries vigorously arguing the nature of the cultural challenge. Dripping amid record high temperatures and monsoon season humidity at the notetaker’s table in the open-sided Victoria Hall, I was awed by the breadth and courage of the debates. This wonderful forum brought together across generations, gender, life experience. It was never more passionate than when the old mentioned sea rights, or the young cited Biblical prophecy that the old shall dream dreams and the young see visions.

But it was clear that most cultural issues had a major black-white relations component. The ‘self’ in self-empowerment or self-determination or decolonisation was cabin’d, cribb’d, confin’d by white culture, white rules, and white ‘welfare colonialism’ (to borrow Jeremy Beckett’s term). It was not that Islanders were afraid to break out of the square but that white impact was now imbedded.

The recent self-determination letters seek a grounded, confident, articulate, active citizenship for a distinct people, the Torres Strait Islanders – this, mirabile dictu, at a time when the Australian nation-state apparently envisions passive citizens waving our little flags at parades where identical martial mates march past suited nobodies mouthing recycled imperial clichés. Decolonisation, anyone?

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