

# **The Origins of the Bennelong Society**

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## Foreword

Aboriginal questions, whether those impinging on Aborigines themselves or on the whole nation, are amongst the most important facing the Australian people.

Long-term solutions to some of these questions will not easily be found. Some questions—even with an abundance of goodwill on all sides—will still be confronting the nation in half a century's time.

They are difficult matters because their roots lie deep in the past—not only in events since 1788 but also in events happening maybe tens of thousands of years ago.

There is widespread disagreement on what are the causes. Even if there were no such disagreement, there would be disputes and arguments about the likely solutions.

Neither the Aboriginal people on the one hand, nor the non-Aboriginal people on the other hand, agree amongst themselves on some of the important matters.

It is vital that genuine differences of opinion and interpretation should not be swept away. Even if swept aside, they will eventually re-emerge. Full and fair discussion is the sensible route towards progress. Sometimes the route which seems the slowest is the fastest.

Meanwhile in the writing of the history of Australia and in the teaching of that history, it is important that justice be done both to the long Aboriginal history and the short European history of this land. Even to do justice here is proving difficult at present.

To discuss frankly and constructively these and similar questions a forum was held in December 2000. The forum papers, I understand, will appear on the Bennelong Society Website. Meanwhile, Dr Geoffrey Partington has offered this thoughtful summary of the main lines of discussion.

**Geoffrey Blainey**  
April 2001

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## An Evaluation of A Workshop: Aboriginal Policy—Failure, Reappraisal and Reform

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### Preface

This Workshop, which resulted in the formation of the Bennelong Society, highlighted the immense range in the circumstances and needs of Australians today who regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as Indigenous or Aboriginal. A significant minority of these live in circumstances very like those of non-Indigenous Australians and have similar needs. The Workshop gave much of its attention, especially in the contributions of Father John Leary, the Rev. Steve Etherington and Pastor Paul Albrecht, to the acute and increasing problems faced today by those Indigenous Australians whose way of life is most unlike that of non-Indigenous people, but its central conclusion was that the best hope for the improvement of their conditions was that they, too, should be enabled as quickly and thoroughly as possible to master the skills and types of knowledge needed to become genuinely autonomous in the modern world. Nobody at the Workshop underestimated the obstacles many Indigenous people face in acquiring such skills and knowledge, but comfort was drawn from the knowledge that so many persons with Aboriginal identity have already fully mastered them and have entered the 'inner circles' of Australian life with great success, whilst maintaining a respect for many distinctive Indigenous traditions.

When reviewing past policies of Australian governments, the Workshop generally endorsed the view of earlier *Quadrant* conferences that Separatism, whether that of the Protectorates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or that adopted since the 1960s under the influence of Dr Coombs and other non-

Indigenous advisers, did not and cannot provide solutions to the real needs of Indigenous Australians.

When looking backwards, most Workshop participants also held that the assimilationist policies associated with the name of Sir Paul Hasluck had aimed at the betterment of the lives of part-Aboriginal children at a time when provision of adequate educational opportunities in the Bush, or adequate protection for children at risk, was a logistical impossibility. The attention of the Workshop was, however, mainly focused on the future, not the past, and its recommendations are based on emphasising the needs for better health, housing, education, employment and material goods—needs that Indigenous people share with their fellow Australian citizens. These needs cannot be met by treating Indigenous Australians as an homogenous group which is clearly different from other Australians. What is needed is encouragement by governmental and other agencies of initiatives at local levels—employing, wherever possible, surviving Indigenous authority structures—combined with full support to ensure that such initiatives have a good chance of success. There is no single overall best policy, since circumstances and needs vary so much but, given genuine co-operation between local groups and central agencies, there is every hope that successes will be achieved that can prove beacons of hope for other Indigenous Australians in difficult situations. A main concern must be to avoid ‘the kindness that kills’ imposition of intended solutions, whether by international agencies, mainstream government departments, or Indigenous bureaucracies such as ATSIC, which only further entrench dependency.

## Introduction

During the weekend of 1–2 December 2000, a workshop took place in Melbourne at which a number of papers were given, and intense debate and discussion ensued. The workshop was organised by Peter Howson, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the McMahon Government of 1970–71, who observed from very close quarters the rapid rise to pre-eminence of HC (Nugget) Coombs in the formation and direction of Commonwealth Government policy in Aboriginal affairs. As Peter Howson noted in his introductory address, this Melbourne Workshop was a follow-up to the conferences organised by *Quadrant* in Sydney in August 1999 and in September 2000 on key issues in Aboriginal policy during the British colonisation of Australia and then under the Australian colonial, and subsequently State and Commonwealth, governments, up to the 1970s. The Melbourne conference concentrated on the broad historical record, on ideas underlying post-1960s ideas favouring forms of Aboriginal self-determination and separation, and on the effects of the resultant policies. However, as Ray Evans put it, ‘the central issue in Aboriginal Policy, from the earliest days of settlement up until the present day’ has been ‘exclusion versus inclusion’, so that there was considerable continuity between the main themes of the Melbourne and Sydney gatherings.

### 1. The sorry plight of many Aboriginal communities

Many contributors drew attention to the appalling physical and moral condition of many Aboriginal communities. Frequently cited was Richard Trudgen’s *Why Warriors lie down and die*—a distressing but all-too-accurate account of Aboriginal demoralisation in Arnhem Land. A key feature of the Workshop was the personal anguish of contributors such as Father John Leary, the Rev. Steve Etherington and Pastor Paul Albrecht, when they shared with us their experiences of rapid deterioration in the life of many Aborigines over the last thirty years, a period during which assimilation and integrationist policies were abandoned and separatist solutions applied.

Helen McLaughlin quoted figures showing the dire straits of many Aborigines: a suicide rate in Queensland for Indigenous males aged 15 to 24 of 112.5 per 100,000 compared with 30.8 per 100,000 for the corresponding non-Indigenous population; 79 per cent of total deaths in the Northern Territory were Aboriginal females; and so on. Of course, the Politically Correct, who currently dominate national debate on Aboriginal issues, especially in the press, radio and television, would agree with participants in the Workshop that many Aboriginal communities are in a grievous condition in every dimension of life. What the PC will not admit, however, is that there has been an acceleration in demoralisation since their own favoured policies were introduced from the late 1960s onwards. Occasionally, direct descriptions are published by reporters, such as Paul Toohey of *The Australian*, of Aboriginal demoralisation and family violence, but these do not reduce the euphemistic praise heaped upon Aboriginal culture by organisers of 'Reconciliation' walks across metropolitan bridges. Listening to them, one might imagine that the achievements of a few Aboriginal athletes, football players, dot painters, dancers and musicians constitute the public face of healthy and flourishing Aboriginal cultures. Yet in terms of suicides, family violence, alcoholism, petrol- and glue-sniffing and a range of drug dependencies, the situation in most Aboriginal communities is significantly worse in 2000 than it was in 1970. In addition, Hasluck's education policies of the 1950s and 1960s produced a large number of able leaders for Aboriginal Australians, whereas, despite high levels of State, Commonwealth and private charitable funding, Aboriginal education systems are currently in deep crisis.

## **2. Why do so many Aborigines remain marginalised and disadvantaged?**

There was strong support for Pastor Albrecht's argument that several currently fashionable Politically Correct explanations for Aboriginal disadvantage are fundamentally flawed. Ron Brunton quoted a typical fashionable view, that of Professor Janice Reid: 'Aboriginal suffering is a direct result of European political repression and indifference, institutionalisation, alienation of land and national prejudice'. Pastor Albrecht pointed out that several

ethnic groups which have flourished in Australia faced equal or greater racial prejudice or dislike than Aborigines have ever experienced. He noted, too, that large numbers of Aborigines were separated from their ancestral lands through their own decisions to join white settlements, but that subsequently these groups displayed just as wretched a condition as those which had been forcibly displaced and dispossessed. Thirdly, the provision of Land Rights has in itself had little or no positive effect on Aboriginal conditions of life. In fact, as Ron Brunton and others observed, specific evils such as high mortality rates, drunkenness, petrol-sniffing and extreme family violence, as well as general welfare dependency are currently most pervasive among communities situated on land held by Aborigines under Native Title. 'Self-management' by Aborigines of housing, health or education has been in Pastor Albrecht's words 'singularly unsuccessful in helping them to ameliorate their own conditions'. On the contrary, there are many examples of substantial deterioration in Aboriginal standards of life following the introduction of 'self-management' and the removal of non-Aboriginal support. Finally, Pastor Albrecht, Gary Johns and several other speakers were insistent that 'lack of reconciliation' or the absence of a 'Treaty' or the sufferings of 'stolen generations' have no validity as explanations of continuing Aboriginal disadvantage. Gary Johns noted that 'inflammatory and inaccurate terms like invasion, massacre, genocide and stolen generations' to typify the general post-contact experiences of Aborigines only became fashionable 'some three decades after Aboriginal policy changed from assimilation to self-determination'.

Helen McLaughlin, speaking from an Aboriginal perspective, explained how blaming colonisation itself as the key problem facing Aborigines confirmed in many people a victim mentality which inhibits their capacity to help themselves. She rejected, too, the claim that Indigenous Australians 'do not have a voice in their own or national affairs'. Others also noted that Aborigines have a far greater influence over national issues than do most other comparable minority groups. Helen McLaughlin castigated those who allege that ATSIC and related organisations are starved of government funding. Like the founders of nineteenth-century women's movements, such as Emily Pankhurst or Catherine Spence, she

identified excessive drinking as a key cause of Aboriginal demoralisation and she called for stronger measures to curb the sly-grog trade.

Father John Leary cited with approval Geoffrey Blainey's suggestion that 'the very co-existence of the two cultures, the traditional and the dominant' was a 'fatal blow' to the traditional, but Fr Leary also thought that Stanner was right in holding that traditional Aboriginal law and religious beliefs had an 'all powerful and pervading influence'. Others suggested that the rapid disintegration of so many Aboriginal communities in the face of European contact, even when no forcible dispossession took place, proved that traditional culture was fragile rather than powerful, but there was general agreement with Fr Leary's view that the complete lack of 'experience of adaptation' over many millennia made Aborigines highly vulnerable to cultural malaise once they encountered a very different way of life. Peter Harris was the only participant who accepted the view of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody that past government policies have been 'postulated on the basis of the inferiority of indigenous people'.

### **3. Aborigines: one or many?**

Much of the fervour expressed in support of a Treaty between Aborigines and the rest of the Australian people relies on a belief that the groups who currently describe themselves as Aborigines constitute something resembling a unified and coherent body with a large amount of shared common interests and problems. There was full agreement at the Workshop, however, that there are very substantial differences among Australians who describe themselves as Aborigines. Gary Johns suggested that the 'Aboriginal struggle for identity in the political realm is a struggle between the establishment of a pan-Aboriginal politics and the recognition of 'the enormous diversity of Aboriginal Australians'. Aboriginal policy, Johns contends, is 'a struggle between separateness and sameness—separatism and assimilation'. Pastor Paul Albrecht identified three distinctive groups: 'those whose lives are still shaped, to a large degree, by their indigenous culture', 'those who have lost their indigenous language and culture but without

substituting the values of Mainstream Australian society', and 'those largely indistinguishable from Mainstream Australian society'. Helen McLaughlin held that, different as the conditions of different Aboriginal groups may be, on the whole 'Indigenous Australians have needs similar to other Australians ... the ordinary person at the community level hopes that all members of their family will be healthy, housed, educated and employed, and ultimately economically independent'.

There was then wide agreement about Aboriginal diversity and the likelihood of further rapid fragmentation, as different groups and individuals make different choices. There was less agreement in the Workshop as to whether Aborigines at any given point on the continuum between traditional life and modernity should seek to regain something of the past or seek to come to terms more effectively with the new. Several contributors distinguished between self-determination as a desirable attribute of individuals, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and the unfeasibility, and negative results if it were feasible, of self-determination by an entire national Aboriginal constituency of uncertain composition. In addition, Gary Johns suggested that both for individuals and groups, 'in the end Aboriginal self-determination means self-determination within limits'. Just what constitute the most sensible limits of choice was widely seen as the crux of the matter.

Harking back to historical debates at the earlier *Quadrant* conferences, Keith Windschuttle argued that current separatist policies constitute a reversion to the ideas of some of the nineteenth-century Christian missions and, subsequently, those of State-funded Aboriginal reserves. He cited further examples of ways in which missionaries Lance Thredkeld and Ernest Gribble grossly exaggerated, and in some cases entirely fabricated, accusations of undue violence by British colonists against Aborigines, the aim of the reverend gentlemen being to justify control of Aborigines in reserves. The current successors of Thredkeld and Gribble are more likely to be radical anthropologists or historians, such as Henry Reynolds, but some clergy remain among them. Windschuttle praised the efforts during the 1960s of black activists such as Charles Perkins, backed by many white students, who emulated the American civil rights movement by their attacks on Aboriginal

segregation, but during the 1970s much of the Australian Left reverted to the old separatist position. Other contributors urged that many nineteenth-century missionaries had acted from far better motives than had Thredkeld and Gribble and that, however mistaken and regressive in their outcomes, provision of reserves had generally been the result of genuine benevolence and a sincere desire to protect Aborigines against exploitation and abuses.

Windschuttle emphasised the importance of the continuing tendency of Aborigines to integrate with the rest of the population by marrying into it, despite the rhetoric in the media, parliament and the courts about land rights, Aboriginal sovereignty and treaties. By 1996, 73 per cent of the total Indigenous population lived in urban centres; in over half of Aboriginal households at least one adult was married to or cohabiting with a non-Aborigine; and 71 per cent of Aborigines professed Christianity, as against fewer than three per cent claiming to adhere to traditional Aboriginal religious beliefs. Windschuttle is confident that most Aborigines want to live like the rest of us, although this is not acknowledged by most of the academic historians who write on these matters or by Aboriginal bureaucrats.

Although counter-productive for most people currently regarded as Aborigines, attempts by the ATSIC leadership to try to create a bloc of Aboriginal Australians which is permanently not only distinctive but separated from the rest of the population have at least a short-term justification in terms of *realpolitik* for those who engage in them. It is more difficult to find rhyme or reason in the attempts of many among the non-Aboriginal Politically Correct to create such a permanent division. For some, it may possibly be a throw-back to their past Marxist hatred of capitalism and their identification of contemporary Australia with that social construct. Such people sometimes think in terms of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', so that they see themselves as natural allies of Aborigines who they conceive to be inevitably and eternally hostile to the modern western order. Other adherents to Aboriginal sovereignty and separation who have no known record of fellow-travelling may simply be overwhelmed by feelings of guilt about past Aboriginal policies of Australian governments, policies whose evils are ever more exaggerated with each passing year. But even if

Australians had in the past been as wicked as they are now portrayed by people such as Sir Gus Nossal, Malcolm Fraser and Robert Manne, none of whom has a record of sustained hostility to the basic political order, it is hard to see what they imagine can be the benefits to Aborigines of separation from common citizenship with the rest of us.

## **4. What can best be done?**

Participants in the Workshop were agreed that the separatist policies originally proposed by HC Coombs and adopted during the last three decades have proved disastrous. There was also substantial agreement that there was little or no possibility of returning to traditional ways of life, even were this desired by most Aborigines, which is by no means the case, and that the best solutions, however fraught with difficulties, required that Aborigines are equipped to take advantage of modernity and the opportunities offered by contemporary Australia. Nonetheless, there were important disagreements about how these solutions might be devised and put into effect.

### **The Land**

John Reeves' review of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* (the 'Land Rights Act') is entitled 'Building on Land Rights for the Next Generation'. Reeves argued that, as things stand, 'the land held by Aboriginal land trusts under the Land Rights Act is highly unlikely to supply the necessary economic base for Aboriginal Territorians to achieve economic independence—to rid them of the welfare dependency and poverty that is the lot of the vast majority of them at present'. He noted that a considerable majority of Australians wants 'to shift the focus from Government welfare to economic independence', as do many prominent Aborigines such as Noel Pearson, but how to make this shift is the crux of the problem.

Reeves estimated that current financial benefits accruing from the Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory amount to about \$1000 per person a year and over the first twenty years of its operation total over \$600m, and over \$1000m in current values.

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Much of this money (over \$200m) has, however, gone in the administrative costs of the four Land Councils themselves, about \$70m was 'distributed in small grants to Aboriginal people and bodies' in the Northern Territory, and most of the balance was 'distributed through the Land Councils as "areas affected" monies or as negotiated royalty payments to various Aboriginal bodies that are generally referred to as Aboriginal Royalty Associations'. Reeves and his colleagues had found it 'quite difficult' to 'obtain reliable and complete information' from these Royalty Associations as to how they had disposed of these monies. He had been forced to conclude that 'a large proportion of these monies' had been 'expended on short-term consumption', topping up welfare payments and compounding 'the dependency of the recipients on Government welfare'. Although a proportion had been invested, sometimes in beneficial programmes, the 'information provided does not show that these monies have been targeted to produce lasting benefits to Aboriginal people'.

Reeves argued that, just as land granted under the Land Rights Act is inalienable, so that it cannot be sold and the proceeds used for short-term consumption, the bulk of the monies that accrue under the Land Rights Act should be treated as 'payments of a capital nature' and should be immune to use for short-term consumption. Instead, he held, 'the financial benefits accruing under the Land Rights Act' should be used 'to improve the knowledge and skill of Aboriginal Australians', since 'the lynch pin is education and training'. Reeves cited the findings of the Collins Report on Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory that 'many indigenous students are leaving the school system with the English literacy and numeracy ability of a six-to-seven-year-old mainstream child', and that most Aboriginal school-leavers are 'almost unemployable outside their own community and even there are largely employed in unskilled jobs and are reliant on others from outside their community for important aspects of their lives'. Reeves did not suggest, nor had the Collins Report, that lack of funding was responsible for high truancy, empty classrooms and low achievement in Aboriginal education, but he hoped that somehow the devotion of Land Rights monies in addition to existing grants would encourage Aborigines to 'take a financial stake in the

education and training of their younger generation'. Other participants at the Workshop were unable to see why the different source of ample education funding would in itself change Aboriginal attitudes towards education and training one way or another.

Ray Evans argued that 'land, within western societies' has over the centuries become 'nothing more than just another factor of production'. He noted that 'the argument which lay at the heart of the Aboriginal Land Rights Movement' was that Aborigines 'have a special affinity for the land and suffer first in a spiritual sense, and then in a physical sense ... if they were unable to perform the ceremonies which they believed were causally connected to the production of food on the land—both animal and vegetable'. He suggested that, if this were held to be the case, the logical conclusion which the Woodward Report and its successors should have reached was that there should be 'compulsory resumption of leaseholds where necessary, or alienation of crown land where possible, and the allocation of freehold titles either to tribal elders as individuals, or incorporated tribal groups'. Evans' answer to his own question was that the supposed best friends of Aborigines were afraid of giving them freehold title because some might dispose of the land were it alienable. Whereas John Reeves argued that monies accruing from Land Rights should be as inalienable as Aboriginal land itself, Evans urged that Aboriginal land should be as alienable as Land Rights monies or as any other freehold property in Australia. In this way it could be used as collateral for mortgages and loans for setting up enterprises under genuine Aboriginal control and might be the key to enabling large numbers of Aborigines outside the towns and cities to participate successfully in the general Australian economy. He held that the price for continuing exclusion from such participation is 'a terrible price, a price counted in suicides, in domestic violence of the most horrific kind, in drug and substance abuse and so on'. Gary Johns fears that 'other than for the fortunate few, the future of Aboriginal homelands is likely to be ghettos in the wilderness'.

There was considerable discussion on the underlying conflict between the Reeves and Evans positions on freehold and availability of alienation. Common ground seemed to be that alienation of land

should be possible, but that subsequent Aboriginal access for ceremonial purposes should be guaranteed. Some participants, however, argued that, in those cases in which Aborigines with freehold decided, after becoming fully familiar with the consequence, to alienate land, then this would be conclusive evidence that Aboriginal attachment to land had been exaggerated, whereas other contributors feared that the result of land alienation might be further Aboriginal demoralisation, or a refusal to accept later that alienation had taken place with full legal and moral effect.

Pastor Albrecht noted that, in traditional Aboriginal belief, *Tjurrunga* and other charters to the land 'were given by the ancestral beings', so that 'they cannot be altered by human beings'. He suggested that 'consensus among Aborigines is only possible on the basis of these "constitutional documents"' of traditional belief. Yet Pastor Albrecht also complained that none of the current Land Rights Acts in the Northern Territory and several States 'actually grant Aborigines who by tradition have rights to discrete tracts of land, title to their lands', but these Acts have been supported by many persons who identify themselves as Aborigines and who clearly have altered what he holds to be unalterable ideas. Pastor Albrecht believes that 'the easiest and most effective way of giving recognition to many Aboriginal legal systems is to grant individual title to clans whose lands are situated on Aboriginal Land and who can define the boundaries of their land to the satisfaction of their Aboriginal neighbours'. His conviction that 'this can be done quite easily within the parameters of Australian law' was doubted by other participants, who drew attention to the frequency and intensity of disputes between Aboriginal groups about which group holds particular traditional rights. In any case, his proposal of individual title, which received considerable support in principle, is itself a significant change from traditional Aboriginal relationships to land.

### **Authority within semi-traditional Aboriginal communities**

Pastor Albrecht argued that the 'process of defining boundaries and receiving Australian title to traditional land' would 'also return to legitimate leaders the status and authority that is rightly theirs'.

He wants governments and social agencies to 'talk and discuss matters with the people who have a right to speak on behalf of their group, and, when necessary, make decisions on behalf of their group/family'. But such a restoration of authority, even were it deemed preferable to modern democratic conceptions of equality of political rights among adult males and females, would be very difficult to bring about. Could non-Aborigines restore traditional authority among Aborigines? Do the Aborigines most likely to bring Aborigines more fully into the modern Australian economy and health and education systems support such an attempted restoration? Ron Brunton argued that if Pastor Albrecht's advice were followed, 'it might be necessary to explain to traditional leaders that the authority and status returned to them may be temporary, to be undermined even further if their people achieve a standard of living enjoyed by other Australians'. This explanation might well prove difficult to make.

Father John Leary, who has spent 47 years working with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, made it clear just how severe the crisis is in respect of authority in Aboriginal communities and how hard it is to help them find solutions. He illustrated some of the problems with the experiences of the Aboriginal Pastoral Council of the Catholic Diocese of Darwin, which includes a range of different Aboriginal communities. Its minutes in recent years largely concern disputes, feuding and payback between traditional and urban peoples, and within each of these, the devastating effects of alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment and poor educational standards, and a breakdown in traditional authority, with many parents and older people fearful of violent and irresponsible adolescent males. Fr Leary suggested that 'reconciliation' was needed even more among Aborigines than between them and other Australians.

Fr Leary described how rapidly destructive changes had overwhelmed the Aborigines in Wadeye, Port Keats, with which he has been well acquainted for 45 years. With help and leadership from Fr Richard Docherty, in whose footsteps Fr Leary followed, tribal antagonists had been separated, some men had gained employment as stockmen, and the women saw to the cooking and the running of a productive vegetable garden. An Aboriginal

carpenter helped newly-weds to build a place to live. He recalled that 'discipline was exercised by appropriate Elders in each group' and that entertainment was of their own doing, especially corroboree and story-telling. The men still retained at that time all their traditional skills as trackers and hunters. Within a short time of the introduction of a money economy, there was a 'dramatic decline of discipline throughout the group', 'traditional authority was blatantly flouted', 'parents admitted they were afraid of their own children', and 'there was a constant stream of young men being taken off to gaol'. The young had no time for the old hunting and tracking skills, as 'the Toyota replaced the legs'. Many of the older people admitted that they bore much of the blame, since 'they were drinking too much and so earning the disrespect of the young'. 'Learned helplessness' became common to each generation and sex.

The provision of basic services depends now on outside non-Aborigines much more than when Catholic and other missionaries exerted considerable influence. In Fr Leary's view 'the term "self-management" became a pretence, a piece of window dressing'. Initiatives such as establishing a local Council have failed. At first, this Council consisted solely of the Murrinh-Patha, the local traditional land holders, then representatives were voted in by all the tribal groups, including relative newcomers. Soon young men who spoke English became more influential than traditional Elders. Finally the 'whole idea ground to a halt' because, in Fr Leary's view, 'the council presided over a community that did not exist...' Fr Leary and Pastor Albrecht noted that claims to be the 'true Elders' are often part of internal Aboriginal power struggles. Gary Johns argued that the role of 'gate-keepers' asserted by some Aboriginal community organisations is often more important *vis-à-vis* other Aborigines than against miners or pastoralists.

Fr Leary does not believe that the old order can be restored, since 'the young men, with money available, are free to travel and escape any restraining influences' and 'the ceremonies no longer have both their significance and their indirect power to discipline the youth'. Yet he believes that 'authority must be concentrated on the parents and the extended family'. Just how this is to be achieved he did not explain, other than by suggesting that 'mixed unnatural communities such as Port Keats must at least be reduced to a

cultural basis that is compatible, or preferably be abolished and given to the land owners'. But a return to 'natural communities' as they once existed seems impossible to achieve, even if cultural separation were deemed desirable.

The Rev. Steve Etherington explained that many non-English-speaking Aborigines (amongst whom he has worked for many years) believe they have no power to influence their lives, and therefore feel little sense of personal accountability. Etherington noted that every mainstream structure assumes an understanding of procedure which few non-English-speaking Aborigines share.

Many Aborigines are held to have taken part in complex decision-making processes, even though they are forced to leave their credit cards and PIN numbers with trusted white people such as shop managers, charter aircraft operators or outstation managers, because they cannot operate within these systems.

Non-Aboriginal managers call meetings and dictate agendas and although Aboriginal people attend and may well take part in discussions, minutes and all other paperwork are in English. The response to any subsequent criticism of decisions is either 'an Aboriginal committee has voted on this matter' and subsequent criticism will therefore be racist in motivation or, if the criticism is from a local Aborigine, 'Oh, you'll have to take this up with your countrymen on the committee'.

Consultation with non-English-speaking Aboriginal people is often replaced with hasty discussion among white people whose pro-Aboriginal motivation, 'they believe', will adequately compensate for lack of real input from the key stakeholders. Furthermore, Etherington noted that when government departments use an English-speaking Aboriginal person to liaise with non-English speakers, the latter often reject them as being basically indistinguishable from white people. He pinpointed the dilemma of those who, like himself, fervently wish to help disadvantaged Aborigines, yet are fearful that their aid may actually perpetuate dependency by usurping the Aborigines' own roles as key stakeholders in their own lives.

So long as many indigenous Australians have inadequate English skills they must remain dependent on English-speaking people to provide services of every kind. Several contributors tackled the

question of how outsiders can enter into partnership with Aborigines and gradually pass over more control to them, instead of prolonging radical dependency.

## **Employment**

A number of speakers agreed with Ray Evans that several measures taken ostensibly to help Aborigines had proved disastrous—the worst being the 1966 Northern Territory Cattlemen's Award, handed down by a full bench of the Arbitration commission, which had effectively led to the disemployment of thousands of Aboriginal stockmen and the virtual end of their participation in mainstream economic life. The Land Rights Acts, however, might prove to be as disastrous as the Cattlemen's Award, since they had seriously reduced mining and pastoral activities which gave, and could give much more, employment both to Aborigines and other Australians.

There was widespread agreement with Pastor Albrecht's view that lack of skills is not the main obstacle to Aboriginal development, since 'Aborigines learn skills as quickly as anyone'. Pastor Albrecht gave startling and depressing examples of how at Hermannsburg a tannery and a cottage industry focusing on leather artefacts such as purses and belts had failed after promising starts to adequately financed ventures. His explanation for their failure was that 'there were no cultural values to support consistent effort' in these ventures. He noted that Aborigines have no difficulty in counting money, but that 'they inevitably fail as store assistants or managers, for cultural reasons', one important one being 'the demands of their kinship system'. In other words, relatives demand goods on the cheap or even for free and demand jobs which they do not intend to invest with serious effort. Pastor Albrecht also argued that 'Aborigines did not, and do not understand the workings of the Australian economy'.

Yet Pastor Albrecht agreed that 'if the Aboriginal people were to have any future in Australia, they would have to change from being collectors to becoming producers' and that 'only when they are participating in the economy' will Aborigines 'have the freedom to pursue cultural differences, as other ethnic groups in Australia do'. No 'must' can ever be based upon a 'can't', so that Pastor Albrecht

had to offer some way which might overcome the 'cultural' obstacles to successful participation in the wider economy. He specifically rejected policies such as 'training an elite as the means of bringing about social change in Aboriginal society, relying on skills as the primary means of giving Aborigines entry into the economy'. Instead, he suggested that 'what is needed is to enter into dialogue with Aboriginal societies at the ideological level, in order to dispel misconceptions about Australian society and explain the workings of the Australian economy in cultural/ideological terms that they can understand'. Yet Pastor Albrecht and his father and many able men and women like them worked hard over the years to do, among other things, just that—but with very limited success.

Pastor Albrecht added that there are, in his view, two pre-requisites if the sort of dialogue he envisages is to succeed. One is 'an acceptance, and accommodation, by Australian governments of Aboriginal legal systems which do not conflict with Australian law', but one would have thought that this is already the *de facto* situation, if not *de lege*. The other is that 'those who are going to do the dialoguing' should 'learn the appropriate Aboriginal language and become *au fait* with the Aboriginal Weltanschauung', since he holds that 'it is impossible to conduct dialogue with Aborigines at an ideological level without the knowledge of their language and systems'. Given the multiplicity of Aboriginal languages, it would be a small minority on the non-Aboriginal side who could take part on Pastor Albrecht's terms and, one suspects, few of the anthropologists recently graduated from Australian universities would carry out the sorts of dialogue he has in mind.

Gary Johns pointed out that 'self-determination may mean lower standards of living'. He cited Richard Trudgen's finding that the greater efficiency of non-Aboriginal house-builders led the Yolnu to ridicule a Yolnu builder who was much slower and who subsequently refused to carry out his trade. If Aboriginal dentists, physicians, maths teachers, motor mechanics, etc. are insisted upon, there will be at best poor standards of service, and often no service at all. The demands of OXFAM and a host of United Nations bodies that ATSIC or other Aboriginal organisations exercise 'direct or explicit control' of health, educational and other services financed

by Australian governments would, if followed, result in further deterioration of Aboriginal conditions of life, which would then lead the self-same bodies to intensify their criticisms of Australian 'racism'. Johns noted that comparably fatal advice is amply bestowed on Aborigines by the local Politically Correct, such as John Altman of the Centre of Aboriginal Economic Policy. Altman opposes significant economic advancement among Aborigines because it may lead to a 'rapid integration of Indigenous people into mainstream economic institutions'. Most Workshop participants would be delighted if Aborigines were able to become integrated rapidly into mainstream economic institutions.

Other speakers, whilst accepting that the change from traditional Aboriginal to contemporary mainstream understandings of economics is a very difficult one to make, pointed out that many Aborigines have adopted attitudes towards the land very different from those based on the Tjurrungas and traditional law. Indeed, both Pastor Albrecht and Father John Leary expressed dismay that there have been very significant but, in their view, highly destructive changes even among Aborigines living closest to traditional ways in attitudes towards land and traditional authority structures.

Pastor Albrecht gave a clue that his fears about the possibilities of Aboriginal change may be exaggerated when he used the expression 'except for Aborigines who have adopted the values and lifestyle of Mainstream Australian society...'. The single word 'except' reminds us that large numbers of Aborigines have left traditional Aboriginal beliefs behind them, whether for good or evil, and there is not the slightest reason to doubt that, given more sensible policies than those of the last three decades, the rate of transition can be speeded up and for good rather than evil. Ron Brunton followed Peter Berger in noting that traditional belief systems may sometimes be adapted in constructive ways to cope with new situations: Confucianism, for example, once cited as a principal cause of Korean economic backwardness, is now considered a powerful influence in stimulating the success of several 'tiger economies'. Brunton noted, too, that regression was possible: the Tanna people of Vanuatu had changed in a relatively short period of time from being regarded as one of the most dynamic groups in the Pacific to one of those most resistant to change, but

their change of view had a rational basis and was itself capable of further change. Brunton surmised that even the aspects of kinship which currently militate against Aboriginal success in the economy might be harnessed to promote Aboriginal welfare, were the right strategies in place, although he did not suggest that this was an easy matter.

As Gary Johns pointed out, there are thousands of stories about the failure of indigenous enterprises, but, as with much empirical data in other fields, the facts do not compel a particular conclusion. The long list of failures led the old 'red-necks' to hold that Aborigines were either genetically or culturally incapable of coping with modernity and, in more euphemistic language, this is broadly the position of many people today who consider themselves friends of the Aborigines but who urge them to stick to traditional ways. Integrationists, well represented in the Workshop, point to the indisputable fact that many Australians of part-Aboriginal descent have passed into the economic mainstream and are successful there, and that the policies of the Hasluck years, whatever may be said against them on other grounds, succeeded in equipping almost all the current Aboriginal leadership in Australia with the political and organisational skills to cope with running modern institutions. The integrationists are sometimes comforted by the relative shortness of the time Aborigines have been confronted by modernity and concentrate on the half of the glass that is full than the half that is empty.

Peter Shergold showed us the extent of the difficulties that lie in the way of Aborigines in remote areas in gaining employment, difficulties which are likely to increase rather than diminish. He also showed us that several of the programmes of his Department have already had significant success in increasing participation of indigenous people in the schemes themselves and in holding down jobs afterwards. What is especially encouraging is that he and others have begun to emancipate government departments dealing with Aborigines from a one-sided concern with inputs and a fatal unwillingness to examine why, as has so often been the case, outputs in terms of training and employment have been so disappointing.

## **Education**

Peter Harris identified several ongoing problems in Aboriginal education, but it was not always entirely clear just which solutions to them he favoured. For example, he noted that at Kormilda College, of which he became Principal, there were seven major languages, as well as 27 dialects, and English was the second language for all, or nearly all, the Aboriginal students. Yet he avoided recommending that the school should teach in each of the seven major languages, choose one or two of them as the media of instruction, or move to English teaching as soon as possible. He said that the policy at Kormilda was 'to develop and establish indigenous culture', but it was hard to see how it could establish in Aboriginal children what they already possessed or how non-Aborigines could initiate Aboriginal children into even a uniform indigenous culture, rather than seven different cultural modes.

Harris considers that Aborigines have different educational aims from those of other people and that their priorities are not amenable to crude measurements of literacy or numeracy. He endorsed the Adelaide Declaration for Schooling in the 21st Century that, for Aborigines:

The potential, then, is beyond test scores or standardised texts, and seeks to claim a spiritual centre, where reading, writing and arithmetic are merely tools to develop human beings, and the emphasis is going to be on encouraging children to develop a relationship with the natural world and the building of community and establishing a cultural efficiency.

Harris believes that, during the last thirty years, Aboriginal levels of educational achievement have increased, but he provided no evidence to substantiate this belief. Retention levels are apparently higher, but these include many students enrolled but rarely present. There are more persons classified as Aborigines in our universities, but this is in part at least because some students once not classified as Aborigines have been reclassified and partly because university entrance requirements have been significantly reduced in order to accommodate groups deemed to be disadvantaged. Just what changes in educational standards have actually taken place is hard

to establish, and one has justifiable suspicions as to why the information is not available.

Harris is at one with current policies in wanting Aboriginal education to emphasise what is different and distinctive in Aborigines and to promote and enhance Aboriginal identity or culture. However, as Geoff Partington and others pointed out, this emphasis seriously reduces, or removes completely, the likelihood of any significant narrowing of the gap in educational attainments between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. Partington argued that Aborigines have shown in sports that they are competitive and capable of high standards and that the real racism is to suggest that they are incapable of applying this simple principle to the acquisition of knowledge. Partington believes that non-Aboriginal teachers cannot and should not try to initiate Aboriginal children into aspects of Aboriginal culture which can only be acquired within families, but should concentrate on imparting a very similar range of knowledge and understandings to that made available to other Australians. He suggested that the best model may be that of an 'inner circle' of language, interests, knowledge and skills shared by all groups in Australia and which are needed to ensure genuine autonomy in contemporary societies, and an 'outer circle' of distinctive beliefs, customs and languages.

Gary Johns cited Richard Trudgen's discoveries that 'if you visit Yolnu drunks in the long grass in Darwin or Nhulunbury, you will find that a large proportion of them have had college or tertiary education' and that within two months of visiting Singapore as an excursion to stimulate personal development, many Yolnu schoolchildren had become petrol-sniffers. These children 'were angry with their parents for not being able to give them what others could'. Certainly no-one at the Workshop considered that education was a sufficient condition for Aboriginal advancement, although most thought it a necessary condition.

Johns also noted the huge difference between current governmental policies in respect of removing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children from destructive and unsafe conditions. As a result of 'Bringing Them Home' and other assaults on assimilationist policies, Aboriginal children are now left to remain in harmful conditions from which non-Aboriginal children would immediately

be rescued. In the same way, truancy laws are not enforced against the families of Aboriginal children, whereas they are applied to immigrant ethnic groups whose traditions do not include school attendance any more than did Aboriginal traditions.

Fr John Leary gave perhaps the most pessimistic view on the potentiality of current Aboriginal education systems to improve the lives of Aborigines. Whereas it is common to urge that the schools, if well conducted, may help to cure some of the evils of adult society, Fr Leary feared that currently in the Northern Territory 'no matter how earnestly the school works to educate the child, the child succumbs to the confusion of the adult community'. It was with some of these fears in mind, of course, that Paul Hasluck had considered that removing children of mixed descent from highly dysfunctional families was the best, perhaps the only, way to help children in distress and to give them a better future.

## **Overall Conclusions**

No formal resolutions were adopted by the Workshop, but there was widespread agreement on several issues. These are summarised below and are markedly different from those of current Political Correctness.

1. The guiding idea of the last thirty years—that Aborigines are likely to be best served by following their own traditional cultures as closely as possible—has proved disastrous. The reasons for failure lie only partly in maladministration of various sorts. The key reasons are that Aborigines can only gain genuine personal autonomy by gaining skills and knowledge necessary to grapple with the modern economy and political realities, and that the decisive majority of Aborigines at every point on the social continuum wish to acquire the same material goods (cars, televisions, houses) that other Australians possess.
2. Disadvantaged Aborigines, like all other disadvantaged Australians, deserve help to overcome whatever these disadvantages may be, but the wider the gap between government policies towards Aborigines as against non-Aborigines, the more

will Aborigines be disadvantaged. Emphasis on suffering caused by past policies of Australian governments, such as the separation from their mothers of part-Aboriginal children considered to be in need or danger, without any credit for advantages gained by some Aborigines from past policies, results in the further alienation of young Aborigines from the Australian society within which their destiny lies. The conferment of permanent victim or semi-victim status on Aborigines by supposed well-wishers has a deeply depressing effect, especially on young Aborigines who, instead of making good use of the many opportunities open to them, often slip into self-destructive habits.

3. Irrespective of what state or Commonwealth governments, or ATSIC or other Aboriginal organisations, may do or wish to do, large numbers of people of Aboriginal descent will continue to marry out, and distinctions between Aborigines and non-Aborigines will become ever more blurred. Although a minority of Aborigines living on traditional lands may continue for some time to have some needs significantly different from those of most other Australians, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, the notion that there is a clearly identifiable Aboriginal population with interests sharply different from, and even at odds with, those of the rest of Australian society will become ever less tenable with the passing of each year.
4. The provision to Aborigines of education, health services, housing, law and order, and the other aspects of life in which governments can make substantial interventions is best undertaken by the general structures created by governments for the population at large. It is within this overall framework that encouragement should be given to individual Aborigines and coherent Aboriginal groups, traditional or of more recent origin, to help determine priorities and participate in provision of services.
5. A decent respect should be shown to many aspects of traditional culture which survived for many millennia, but equally so

## *The Origins of the Bennelong Society*

should decent respect be shown to individuals, religious bodies and governments in Australia who have tried to share with Aborigines what they thought were the best things in their way of life.

6. Respect should be paid to traditional Aboriginal authority structures wherever these are intact, effective and compatible with contemporary law and concepts of human rights. The destruction of the old without being able to replace it with anything viable can only make worse the breakdown of law and order in many Aboriginal communities, including several which fully possess Land Rights. This being admitted, however, the way forward for most, perhaps all, Aborigines lies in gradual adaptation to the new in terms of the economy, education, housing and health. Such adaptations are very hard to make for many non-Aboriginal Australians as well, but hope for the future must arise from the successful acquisition by so many Aborigines over the last two centuries of arts and sciences unknown to traditional society. Current separatist policies actively hinder Aboriginal advancement, but a renewed emphasis of those many aspects of life and aspiration shared by Aborigines and other Australians will surely strengthen the ability of Aborigines to combine mastery of the new with a proper reverence for their own origins and ancient traditions.

As a consequence of the debates which took place during that weekend it was resolved that an organisation, with the name of the Bennelong Society, should be incorporated which would undertake, as its primary responsibility, the establishment of a Website.