



Peter Jull

Indigenous Internationalism

New adventures in Indigenous Governance

Like May flowers, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues website springs to colourful life each year before the two-week session in New York. Now in its fourth year, the 2005 forum has new members, with Australia's former indigenous rights ombudsman, barrister and Australian National University chair in Indigenous Studies, Mick Dodson, newly representing the Pacific.

The handover from the first Pacific representative — energetic and popular indigenous Hawaiian, Mililani Trask — took place in April in Brisbane.

Mick Dodson is an ideal representative. He is at home in a range of overseas and domestic territorial, legal and political experiences. He has been struggling to apply them, and like others, has spent more time looking at comparative practicalities than simply the annual festivals of carefully crafted resolutions that accumulate in Geneva or New York.

Returning from his first UN foray in the early 1990s, Mick gave a fresh enthusiastic talk on indigenous internationalism in Darwin, full of the sense of new discovery that has struck most us venturing into that field. His intellect, and breadth and length of experience at high-level political work and advocacy are ideal qualities in his new role.

At April's Pacific caucus, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives plus a large group from Aotearoa/New Zealand and Pacific islands spent several days in semi-rural retreat talking through procedures and issues. A representative from Rapa Nui (Easter Island) captured the meeting's frustration and determination on the last day: 'We are the richest people in the world, *with that ocean!* And yet we are the poorest people in the world!' For instance, there was concern about APEC interest in Pacific Ocean and resource management. Are countries like the US and Canada likely to remember what they have been learning from indigenous peoples about marine and coastal rights, and putting Islanders first in such coastal areas?

Thirty years ago the international 'native rights movement' was spawned across and around the North Atlantic, primarily because developed countries and Big Oil were overreaching for offshore oil and other 'frontier energy' as if indigenous peoples had no rights.

'Globalisation is about to hit us like a tsunami!' said Queensland elder Peter Smith, reporting back from a workshop session. Economics aside, reading the Pacific Plan consultation papers from the Pacific Island Forum, and the UN Millennium Goals to which the Permanent Forum must respond, reveals that even they largely fail to capture the needs or realities of indigenous continents and islands. A major theme of the caucus was how to assert the indigenous realities of a vast region that has been too often seen as a mere appendage of populous Asia.

Trying to fit into the pre-ordained schemes of others has a bad history for indigenous peoples everywhere. The other theme of the Brisbane caucus — the Pacific experience of and determined response to colonisation — may be the best guide. Strong recent indigenous networking and co-operation offer hope for success.

Within Pacific countries, including Australia, the distance and division between official industrial-world forms of governance on one hand and indigenous collective tradition on the other is a major problem. Do the politico-cultural forms of Europe in recent centuries really suit the older and very different indigenous societies of the Pacific? The recent Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies conference in Brisbane heard case after case of politico-legal problems between systems in the Pacific, and they raised questions urgent for the Northern Territory and elsewhere here at home: who are 'the people' — 50,000-year residents or majority eighteen-month transients? And whose 'system' should prevail in NT?

The Pacific caucus themes were colonisation, globalisation and marginalisation. Torres Strait has the problems

of both Continental Australia and the Island Pacific. With so much inspiration among island neighbours and cultural kin, Torres Strait may yet see striking novelties in practical indigenous governance. But the Islanders will have to do their own work because governments in Australia are just not up to it.

The newly tender attention from Australia to the Pacific region may reassure some local powerbrokers but many others are sceptical. Australia's domestic indigenous record is well known. Meanwhile, the Brash opposition speech in New Zealand on 26 April last year was a virtual declaration of war on indigenous peoples. Although few in number, those peoples inhabit most of the Australian Pacific region.

Inuit had the same problem of small numbers and wide dispersal, but have managed to create strong autonomous governments in their nation-states. They have also re-created the Arctic as a unique international region, with distinct political, social and environmental imperatives. Perhaps the environment can equally serve the Pacific as an issue intelligible to the White Man!

Meanwhile, ignoring indigenous people remains too easy. Norway is leading advocacy for human rights, but in May the Oslo city council sneered at the idea of flying the Sami flag for national Constitution Day celebrations, which are tied closely to one hundred years of regained national independence and sixty years since the Nazi Occupation's end. Few suffered as much from crude 'Norwegianisation' campaigns or from Nazi Occupation, dislocation and devastation in the North as Sami. A constitutional amendment in the 1980s recognised Sami and Norwegians as two equal peoples in one nation-state. But Sami are not valued as a cultural asset or even recognised as more than an annoying and clamouring interest group to capital city worthies. Not yet a national unity to celebrate

Peter Jull is Adjunct Associate Professor at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS), University of Queensland. With thanks to his colleague Jennifer Laakso.

For information on the United Nations Permanent Forum, visit: www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/index.html.