



Northern Territory Statehood Revisited

The Northern Territory (NT) Minister for Statehood and the Opposition shadow minister visited Canberra from Darwin in early February 2007 to speak with Attorney-General Philip Ruddock about prospects for NT statehood. Apparently Ruddock, like federal departmental officials meeting with the House standing committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (LACA) the same day, made clear that a consensus proposal on statehood must come from the NT before the Howard Government would consider the issue seriously.

The NT's appeal for some hints, based on federal work done in-house the last time the issue was prominent — in 1998 — was rebuffed. In the committee transcript the officials appear almost comically unhelpful.

In 1998 the Prime Minister had committed himself heart and soul alongside then NT 'premier' (Chief Minister) Shane Stone to a statehood constitution which dismissed Aboriginal interests and aspirations. Aboriginal leaders had in disgust and anger walked out of the stacked constitutional assembly which produced it, and the predicted 'easy win' turned into an embarrassing loss at referendum.

In mid-November 2006 when LACA took soundings in three days of seminar-style hearings in Alice Springs and Darwin, continuing deep divisions were evident.

To oversimplify, there seemed to be three main views. One was that there was no problem, because one could simply vote in the usual majority way and install a copy of the 1890s political settlement enshrined in the 1901 Australian Constitution, a model which left Aboriginal peoples out in the cold and worse — often much worse — in the north, centre, and west of Australia. This studied insouciance seemed hardly credible in light of the 1998 result.

A second view recognised that now things must be done very differently, beginning with a considerable informa-

tion and education program by the wider statehood committee and one of the Legislative Assembly, both headed by Ms Barbara McCarthy, an Aboriginal traditional owner from the Western Gulf country. The proponents of this approach recognised the scale of the difficulty and hoped that they could surmount it.

The third viewpoint was the Aboriginal agenda — a sort of 'native movement' position familiar to all developed countries with indigenous peoples. Dismissed as 'too hard' or 'unrealistic' by many non-Indigenous hard-heads in Australia, it remains too little understood or explored here. It has provided the moral and intellectual base from which indigenous peoples in the other Anglo-American liberal democracies and the Nordic countries — Sami ('Lapps'), Indian nations, Inuit from Greenland, across Canada and Alaska, Maori, and others — have been working to accommodate the reality of ancient 'nations' and modern nation-states within shared political systems.

Sometimes it seems that 'reconciliation' in Australia means 'resignation' by Aboriginal and Islander peoples. Inclusion in contemporary Australia by despair, rather than with enthusiasm, is not a promising start. Few non-Indigenous people recognise how deeply distrustful and wounded are the oral cultures which they would urge to forget the past and just get a job in Sydney 'and get on with it'. 'It' stands for assimilation here.

It is not uncommon to hear Indigenous people engaged in big land claim settlements abroad (mini-constitutions for their regions) compare their journey to Moses' to the Promised Land. I blanched when taking minutes at a large Torres Strait gathering of young and old when the 1611 Bible began to be cited: 'Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions'!

While Anglophone Australians shout and fret about national identity, it is the

people left out — those sorely ignored — who most value and understand what it could mean, what a great step inclusion in a future Australia could betoken.

In other countries with systems like Australia, angrier Indigenous leaders with tougher Indigenous agendas have worked out accommodations with nation-state authorities. One of my Inuit friends and former principals panicked a region's whites when he came to organise the related local Inuit. The whites called upon Ottawa to proclaim martial law; the 'stirrer' was later appointed to the Senate for life for contributions to Canada's national unity!

The NT visitors to Canberra in February certainly had one thing right: it is the attitude and political culture of Australia — of Queensland and Victoria and Western Australia, no less than of Darwin and Alice Springs — that needs to be engaged in any successful political reform, whether in the NT or anywhere else. The NT black/white divide is everyone's business. Just as it is the whole country's elected representatives in the House and Senate in Canberra who must vote the 'terms and conditions' of any NT statehood constitution.

The NT has the Aboriginal leaders of Ms McCarthy and others from the land councils, legislature and other organisations to work out a new dispensation. To take another Biblical turn, the high and mighty, the hierarchs in the capital, like the Gospels' Jerusalem, may be more the problem in the way of consensus, not the rude provincials in the arid lands and wet Tropics, who in a New Testament vision want to make all things new.

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