
Interview: Susan Woenne-Green

Handing national parks to Aborigines

A collaborator of former Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) head Philip Toyne, Woenne-Green is the key individual conducting the studies and pilot projects (such as turning Ayers Rock/Uluru over to Aboriginal control) to justify ultimately turning over the vast areas of Australia under "conservation," "World Heritage," or "wilderness" designations to Aboriginal control, thus cutting these areas out of the nation of Australia forever. An American by birth, she moved to Australia in 1967.

Q: Donna Craig mentioned an interesting report that you had done on the co-management of national parks by Aboriginal people, in conjunction with the state or federal governments. I would like to get a quick idea of what the study was, what it showed, how it came about.

Woenne-Green: The volume that was produced was called "Competing Interests." You could get a copy from the Australian Conservation Foundation in Victoria. Several things caused it to happen. One is that I have had a lot of experience working with Aboriginal organizations and in the attempts with government to gain some position of equity with respect to management of nature reserves, national parks.

Even under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, which is Commonwealth, the issue of national parks was a matter of dispute—well, not dispute, but it was a matter that the Act could not in fact deal with the on-the-ground lands reserved to the state or Commonwealth national park service which were not available for claim.

So, with quite a lot of work under my belt, and also one of the other authors whose name is Russ Johnston, he and I both, coincidentally, have had a lot to do with Ayers Rock, Uluru National Park. Then, through some other contacts at that time, the Australian Conservation Foundation had just developed a policy, a pro-active policy, which supported joint management arrangements between state and Commonwealth bodies and Aboriginal "traditional owners." (Although Aboriginal people use that term, only in very few places is that backed up by legislation.)

And so the ACF hired us, with funding from the Commonwealth, to do basically a national survey of how Aboriginal people were getting on in attempting to deal, with governments in various jurisdictions, with land which Aboriginal people considered their own, but which had been

reserved by the state for their own conservation or tourist uses in the name of the Australian people.

Q: This co-management idea, to the extent it is successful, could it lead to increasing Aboriginal claims or rights to areas which are now dedicated to conservation as a state or national park? Is that one possible outcome over time? Most of these parks are land that Aborigines do not own now, right?

Woenne-Green: Absolutely.

Q: So, to the extent they establish a precedent in handling these places well, would that give some legitimacy to them over time, reasserting their traditional land rights?

Woenne-Green: That is a good question. Absolutely.

Interview: Michael Dodson

Regional agreements will lead to autonomy

Michael (Mick) Dodson is the Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. He is an associate of Nugget Coombs, and wrote the foreword to Coombs's 1994 book, Aboriginal Autonomy. Dodson is also a collaborator of Nobel Prize-winning terrorist spokeswoman Rigoberto Menchú of Guatemala.

Q: I am doing a study on Aboriginal rights, particularly the question of regional agreements and moves toward autonomy. Maybe you could give me an overview.

Dodson: We are going far too slowly. I work for the Human Rights Commission in Australia. My primary task is to monitor and report on the exercise and enjoyment of human rights by indigenous Australians.

Now things have not improved. And in some quarters the indicators are that we are going backwards, particularly in relation to health. We just had two significant reports released nationally, one is an assessment of what was known as the National Aboriginal Health Strategy, which was agreed upon between the Commonwealth and the members of Federation, states and territories, and Aboriginal leaderships, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and Aboriginal Medical Services, back in 1990. The assessment of that strategy is that it by and large has failed, primarily due to lack of commitment by government, particularly in terms of financial resources put in.

The government said that it would respond in three ways.

One of the things they did was to enact the Native Title Act. The next response, the second tier, was a national land fund. The government had dedicated Aus \$1.4 billion to that over a ten-year period. They have already put aside \$200 million the first year. . . .

The third response is where the regional agreements idea comes in. The government requested ATSIC to put proposals to the government about this so-called Social Justice Package. They also requested the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to put proposals to the government. They are due perhaps early next month, to catch this year's budget cycle.

What I have been proposing is that we not necessarily look at a new round of welfare projects. What we really need to do, is to look at some fundamental restructuring on the way we do things at present, and a redirection in policy. And primarily having an agenda that will underpin regional and local empowerment and autonomy.

My suggestion is the way to do this is through regional agreements, similar to things that have happened in Canada.

In my report to the government, which is forthcoming, I will be scheduling to the report about 300 examples in Australia where there are, already, regional agreements, between state, territory, and Aboriginal people, and Commonwealth and Aboriginal people. A lot of them are not full, comprehensive agreements, but nevertheless they are regional arrangements that have been put into place between governments and people in the Aboriginal communities and organizations. And by and large, the regional arrangements that have been put into place have been highly successful.

A lot of them relate to the protocols that govern community policing, the way the police behave, the way the community behaves, how they conduct the policing of the communities in that region. Others relate to health, housing, community infrastructure, roads, airports, barge landings, things like that, telecommunications. . . .

Q: How far along would you say, or are there any particular areas of the country—I know you have land councils there—is there anyone who is in advance of the thinking along this line and really trying to fight now for some of these regional agreements? Has this idea caught on?

Dodson: Oh, yeah. I am not the inventor of this idea. It has, I think, fairly wide support amongst the indigenous leadership.

We already have the new Torres Strait Authority, which is the Torres Strait Islands. The Torres Strait Islanders are a different cultural group to the Aboriginal people; we're on the mainland. But they've negotiated a new regional authority which is the Torres Strait Authority, which has got a long-term plan of full autonomy, real self-government in the Torres Straits. Now that might come in 10 or 20 years. They are aiming for the turn of the century, the anniversary of Federation. . . .

I could go through numerous examples where arrange-

ments have been put into place. I think that the Torres Strait Islands and the Kimberley Land Council probably, in modern times, are the two examples of the most comprehensive proposals for regional agreements. . . .

Q: What sort of backup are you getting internationally, from the U.N. Center for Human Rights, the Decade for Indigenous People now under way, the Minority Rights Group, the Anti-Slavery Society?

Dodson: For example, I have been going for the last five years to the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Many indigenous North Americans get there. I've met lots of indigenous North Americans through going to Geneva each year for the Working Group.

We swap notes there, and lend each other support. I have just got a request today to send a letter to the Mexican Human Rights Commission in support of Chiapas.

Q: Will you be doing that? That is quite important.

Dodson: Well, I actually have one of my staff at an indigenous meeting in Paris at the moment, the Indigenous Initiative for Peace, which I was a foundation member of, which was founded in Guatemala in 1993. There are North Americans who are foundation members of that.

Q: Rigoberto Menchú played an active role in that.

Dodson: Yeah, well she is still involved in it now. Because of commitments I couldn't get there, but I sent a member of my staff there.

There are a lot of ties throughout the indigenous world. For example, our High Court decision here is being used, it has been used in a couple of Canadian cases. It has been used in Scandinavia, it has been used in Greenland. A lot of the knowledge about that has come from us, talking to indigenous people in international forums.

The Land Council newspaper runs a regular international feature; it talks about indigenous struggles all over the globe. We do a lot in South America. A lot in Asia where the indigenous struggle is just getting off the ground. The indigenous Asians are getting *very* organized. They have been colonized for a lot longer than the Americas and Australia.

Q: This raises the question of the amendment of the constitution. You do have your centenary coming up. Would you be looking to get an amendment to your constitution like the Canadians, to secure indigenous peoples' rights?

Dodson: I think that has to be considered as part of the package of things that we need to do. Certainly, I have been a little cautious publicly talking about it, but many other indigenous leaders have been urging it. There is a Centenary Constitutional Foundation that the government set up, which has been going around the country. It put out a report late last year which was urging constitutional recognition of indigenous rights.