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Tim Rowse
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Introduction

Lao Tsu: 'If the sage would guide the people, he must serve with humility.'[1]
Xavier Herbert: 'To me you are first and last a bureaucrat. You can't help being so. You just grew up like that. But I'm told there's some human grace in you.'[2]
H.C. Coombs: 'It is, let us recall, the little leaven which leaveneth the whole lump.'[3]
Roy Marika: 'How are you getting on there in Canberra? I hope that you are busy in the work, a very busy man.'[4]

'I am often asked how I am enjoying my retirement,' Dr H.C. ('Nugget') Coombs told ABC Radio listeners on 5 January 1969. Always an active man, he was pleased to report a life abounding in physical and mental challenges.

> Last week, for instance, I was being physically jolted around in a day-long jeep ride in temperatures approaching 120 degrees Fahrenheit over a derelict cattle property in the Pilbara region of North-West Australia, which, it is hoped, will be taken up and rehabilitated by a group of Aboriginals. A couple of weeks before that, in Central Australia, I was clambering along a narrow ditch, to examine a fine vein of chrysoprase, a beautiful Australian gem-stone, discovered and being developed by the men of the desert. Not long before that, I had trudged over the rolling slopes and through the beautiful rain forest of Cape York, to see the bountiful flow of the Jardine River, which will be piped to irrigate the lands of the Bamaga Aboriginal reserve, and, I hope, bring independence to its Aboriginal residents. Here, surely, is physical activity enough for any man – although it is somewhat different from the leisurely round on the green fairways of Manly . . .[5]

Coombs was then seven weeks short of his sixty-third birthday, and his life had already been a full one.

Life

Born on 24 February 1906, Coombs grew up in a number of towns in the south-west corner of Western Australia and suburbs of Perth, for his father was a railway station master. During much of his teen years

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(1919–23) he lived away from his family, then domiciled in Busselton, so that he could attend Perth Modern School. Coombs got his first professional training at Claremont Teachers' College, then found himself again on the move, with several postings around the Western Australian 'wheat belt' in the years leading up to the Great Depression.

It was at the University of Western Australia that Coombs entered public life: the Sports Council in 1930, the Student Guild and University Senate in 1931. His MA in Economics told the story of the Commonwealth Bank's development of the functions of a central bank. While writing it, he also tutored in Economics and enjoyed drama and debates. Awarded a Hackett fellowship, the newly married Coombs found the rents of Cambridge University beyond his means, so he wrote his PhD in 1932 and 1933 at the London School of Economics and moonlighted in his former profession – teaching. The Depression in London revealed miseries unimagined in Perth.

Recruited to the Commonwealth Bank in 1935, Coombs joined the young economists of Sydney, all soon poring over the work of J.M. Keynes. Seconded to Treasury in 1939, Coombs gave advice, in the context of a 'war economy', that contributed to the first Australian employment boom ever fostered by deliberate government deficits. War liberated governments from more than one orthodoxy, and Coombs also saw restiveness in the people. As director of Rationing (1942) and then director-general of Postwar Reconstruction (1943–8), Coombs extolled the rationality of Keynesian economics and the people's desire for a better world. He promoted 'full employment' not only to Australian leaders but also, as the leader of a number of diplomatic missions, to the British and Americans. In 1948 he faced three job possibilities: director of the (stillborn) International Trade Organisation, vice-chancellor of the nascent Australian National University (ANU), or governor of the Commonwealth Bank. He just had time that year (with William Dunk) to save the CSIRO from being converted, by Labor leaders hungry for the nuclear secrets of great and powerful friends, into a government department.

Central banker from 1949 to 1968, Coombs attempted to reform the culture of Australian finance. He persuaded the trading banks to temper self-interest to the strategies of full employment, but the surge of non-bank finance, such as hire purchase companies, worried him. The spectre of inflation always haunted his postwar boom. Because bankers tended to be inhuman, he once joked, the universities and the performing arts were his therapy. A co-founder of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and a councillor, pro-chancellor and chancellor of the ANU, Coombs had gathered enormous personal prestige by the late 1960s. In 1972 he was made inaugural 'Australian of the Year' by the *Australian*

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newspaper. Coombs capitalised on this public admiration, not for personal gain, but to bring to fruition his long-standing quest for an economic platform for the performing arts and to promote the recognition of indigenous rights. Arts patronage was established as a government concern from 1968 to 1974, in which time Coombs was chair of the Australian Council for the Arts and of its successor the Australia Council.

As well, from 1967, Coombs' interest in the development of the peoples of Papua New Guinea was refocused and brought to bear on the injustices to black people back home. Liberal Prime Minister Harold Holt, impressed by the size of the 'Yes' vote in the 1967 constitutional referendum on Commonwealth powers to make policy about Aborigines, asked Coombs to chair a Council for Aboriginal Affairs, to develop policies. In 1971, Coombs told his fellow councillor Barrie Dexter that he had at first refused. Holt:

> pressed me, and in the end I said I didn't want to take it on unless I was sure he was dinkum, because if I took it on and he wasn't, I'd be obliged to be very difficult. He replied that he was indeed dinkum, that he really wanted to solve the problems of Aborigines of which the Referendum had made him aware, and that he knew how difficult I could be and therefore wouldn't be inviting me if he weren't genuine.[6]

I doubt that Coombs imagined, in 1967, just how difficult he would be obliged to become.

The Establishment's non-conformist

What sort of man was 'Nugget' Coombs in 1967? Hugh Curnow profiled him for the *Sunday Telegraph*, after talking an hour in 'his spacious Sydney office on the 12th floor of the Reserve Bank (overlooking the Opera House) . . .' The story's headline quoted Coombs: 'I like people who *don't* conform.'

He did not draw his morality from any Church, and the things he disliked most were 'cruelty, intolerance and unkindness of any sort'. Long hair on men did not worry him, and he enjoyed the sight of young women in mini-skirts. He spoke warmly of improvements in the Australian performing arts, declaring himself an enemy of stuffiness in opera. 'I think the most characteristic operatic work of the twentieth century was *West Side Story*.' Breadth of interest was essential to a central banker, he believed: 'A banker's finger ought to be on the pulse of the community as a whole . . .' So he read widely. He was in favour of birth control as one measure towards lifting the living standards of Asia. He was 'against all forms of censorship' but admitted to being upset by 'the

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undue concentration on violence on TV and films these days'. He found today's youth lacking in 'exuberance' and social concern.[7]

In short, Coombs was a man of liberal and humanist sympathies, a hard worker, perhaps more an admirer of hedonism than a sybarite himself, but dedicated to the sustainable enjoyment of life. And he was used to wielding power and to mixing with others who wielded it. The 'Long Boom' had been good to him.

In the 1960s, a critical consideration of Australia's economic structure led some economists and others to argue that investment must diversify and look more to mining. In particular, it was attractive to tap the recently discovered mineral wealth of the continent's remoter parts. In the year of the referendum on Aborigines, Coombs made a quick tour of northern Australia, from Cape York to the Kimberley, to see for himself the incipient boom in the north. Upon his return, he enthused to senior Reserve Bank officers about the north's potential. 'One has the impression that the whole of the north of Australia that isn't bauxite is iron ore.' However, he closed his briefing by admitting that something on this trip had disturbed him.

> I can't say I find the future of the Aboriginal people other than depressing. Genuine attempts are being made. We heard about the activities of the company at Weipa to try and establish a basis for the Aborigines who live there. They are much better housed now. An attempt has been made to use them in the operations of the company but not very successfully. Similarly, I didn't find myself very greatly encouraged by a visit to the mission, where we saw a large group of Aborigines living under the guidance of mission fathers. They were full of good will but didn't really understand the problems they were trying to handle. The school didn't seem to be grasping the fundamental issues involved. It is difficult to see the answer to this but it is clear that, even in these places where the Aborigines are living in close proximity to white people, the strength of their own traditions and way of life is much stronger than most people are aware of and there is a clear unwillingness to accept the white man's way of life. I think a policy of offering them solely the opportunities of entering that way of life will mean physical and social deterioration of these people. I can't say I can think of any simple answer to this but it certainly is very worrying.[8]

The problem of the north

Coombs' attraction to the struggles of indigenous Australians in the remote north and Centre lasted for the rest of his life – the next thirty years. That *all* indigenous Australians faced problems, he would not deny, but in the remote parts of Australia he came to see political possibilities which, for historical reasons, the indigenous Australians of the longer colonised regions seemed no longer to face. In a 1991 lecture given at the National Library of Australia, he depicted the political opportunities of remote indigenous Australia as the outcome of an historic 'compromise':

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In the east and south Aboriginal people survived as fringe dwellers, fragments of once vigorous societies on the outskirts of white society, their culture and coherence often destroyed or seriously impaired. In the north the outcome was different. In the face of defeat Aborigines in effect offered a compromise: to share the right of occupation and to accept the role of unpaid but supported workforce. This compromise enabled them to continue, for significant periods during the year, their traditional hunter-gatherer way of life and to continue their religious, ceremonial and cultural life relatively unhindered. Their compromise allowed them to maintain their own sense of identity with the land and its physical and spiritual components.[9]

Describing the 'compromise' as a 'relatively stable quiescent relationship', Coombs argued that it had enabled Aborigines, for many years, to make a 'choice of withdrawing into relative isolation from the white community or being drawn in to live on its fringes.' The 'marginal environments' of the remote regions of Australia hosted the 'relative separation of white and black . . . until the second world war.' Through their involvement in the war, the remote indigenous Australians 'experienced substantial equality in food, working conditions and most importantly, pay . . . [T]his experience made impossible a simple return to their pre-war status . . .'[10]

If the second world war brought remote Australia and its inhabitants to the threshold of an unprecedented integration into the nation, the question to be answered was: on whose terms would the absorption of remnant indigenous groups take place? The policy doctrine of assimilation provided one answer to that question – an answer which held good politically until the late 1960s. Assimilation was predicated on a confident prognosis that Aboriginal culture and society were fast crumbling to fragments; the liberal state's humane duty was to ease the transition of every Aboriginal person from their doomed social order into the common Australian way of life. If that destination was difficult to define, it was easier to condemn, as impediments to their journey, the wreckage of their old culture to which some Aboriginal people stubbornly clung. Government programs found many ways in which to insist on this designated trajectory of advancement.

Dissent from so progressive a cause as assimilation was hard to hear during the Long Boom. It was not easy for an Aboriginal trade unionist such as Bert Groves to sow the seeds of national doubt. Speaking as a delegate of the Aboriginal–Australian Fellowship at the first Federal Conference of Aboriginal Advancement Organisations in 1958, he called attention to the word *assimilation*: '. . . what does it imply? Certainly, citizenship and equal status – so far, so good; *but also disappearance of the Aboriginals as a separate cultural group, and ultimately their physical absorption by the European part of the population*.' He later added:

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'I don't see any difference between "assimilation" and "extermination". "Integration", yes, but not "assimilation".'[11] Here was a voice of nonconformity. Was it ever loud enough to reach the twelfth floor in Martin Place?

A politics of choice

To try to sketch in a few words how the assimilationist scenario of national integration came into question would be to adumbrate clumsily much of the material of this book. But one concept essential to this questioning was choice. When Coombs began to chair the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, he was not critical of the prevailing government policy of assimilation, though he was sure that the performance of its many programs could be improved. However, as he later explained, between 1967 and 1972, the CAA attempted to undermine a coercive tendency in the practices of assimilation. '[T]o persuade successive governments to accept the right of Aborigines to choose the nature and extent of their involvement in Australian society and . . . to act in a way which made that choice a reality . . . was no easy task.'[12]

Critics of the eminently liberal doctrine of assimilation did not have to look beyond the liberal tradition to find the notion that would undo its certainties and question its authoritarian forms. One had only to postulate an indigenous prerogative to *choose* the manner and pace of their integration into Australian society. To highlight choice not only drew on liberalism's essential respect for liberty and autonomy, it also made a practical point about social administration: there were inherent limits to programs of coercive 'advancement'. The radical dynamic of Coombs' liberalism, in indigenous affairs, was rooted in nothing more exotic than this: he insisted that wherever the tasks of national integration remained incomplete their completion must be a matter for respectful negotiation between the colonists and the colonised. The second world war might have terminated what he called the 'compromise' between colonists and colonised, but Australians had yet to negotiate a new modus vivendi with what survived of indigenous Australia.

For Coombs to affix his reformism to the principle of indigenous choice set him challenges that were more practical than philosophical: he himself had to be nimble, to re-align his own advocacy with emergent indigenous choices. It was a matter not only of winning conservative politicians to the Coombs position, but of Coombs working out his own position as the complexities of indigenous responses revealed themselves. To make sense of Coombs' development and of changes in government policy, we must deal with events, not only with ideas. Coombs' disillusion with assimilation and his evolution into an advocate of what

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he would later call 'Aboriginal autonomy' were provoked by moments of Aboriginal people's conspicuous intransigence: the Gurindji walk-off, the Supreme Court action by Yolngu living at Yirrkala mission, the Tent Embassy. Had the political elites among whom Coombs mixed so effortlessly reacted more flexibly to these indigenous assertions, Coombs would have remained more self-effacing. But that was not to be. In the thirty years following the 1967 referendum, Coombs' dedication to giving indigenous Australians a choice brought him into collision with the fears and reflexes of a settler–colonial society.

Biography and policy

This book is part of a longer project to approach Australia's twentieth century history through a biography of Coombs – an account of his public life. (A later book will attempt to encompass, selectively, the entire length of his career. Coombs' engagement in so-called 'Aboriginal affairs' is of sufficient length, complexity and topical interest to warrant a book of its own.) One of the challenges in writing it has been to find a balance between the task of biography (or career narrative) and the focus on policy development. The emphasis, I now realise, is very much on the 'policy' side, but with particular attention to Coombs' contribution and to the continuities and changes in his ideas about good policy. In one important respect, however, I have attempted to realise the potential of biography.

The 1940s gave Coombs his first and perhaps his best chance to be a reform-minded intellectual close to the levers of power. Coombs was an advocate of what the intellectuals of the Curtin Labor government called a 'new social order'. As director-general of the Department of Postwar Reconstruction, Coombs attempted to harness the restlessness, idealism and hopefulness of the Australian people in the promotion of a new approach to government. Fully to expound his vision and his methods for popularising it is beyond the scope of this introduction.[13] I will restrict myself to sketching some of his orientations to the reform of government, which he continued to cherish during the postwar years, when the opportunities to practise those approaches were meagre.

It was characteristic of Coombs' perspective on postwar reconstruction (and, I will argue, on Aboriginal policy) that he strove for three conditions of work: a collegial, research-oriented milieu for the development of ideas; freedom from direct executive responsibility in the implementation of the resulting policy innovations; and a popular constituency, for whom one acted as a 'channel' to the highest political levels. In the Department of Postwar Reconstruction – a policy agency, with no programs to administer and with an active public relations division

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– Coombs was largely successful in creating those conditions. Yet a fundamental project for the 'new social order' eluded him. Coombs wanted the Commonwealth to be given greater powers, through a referendum in 1944. The referendum was lost, narrowly, and so the machinery of government through which an agency such as Postwar Reconstruction could propound new policies was not to be an enhanced national government but a continuation of the federal compact agreed to in the 1890s.

One of the fourteen powers which, in 1944, the electorate chose to leave with the States was the power to legislate over Aborigines. In the 1967 referendum, just as Coombs was about to retire as governor of the Reserve Bank, the electorate gave the Commonwealth concurrent powers to legislate on Aborigines throughout Australia. When Coombs accepted Holt's invitation to chair the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, he was picking up one of the minor threads of postwar reconstruction, and he revived his 1940s modus operandi as a reforming bureaucratic intellectual. In the Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA) he had (or thought he had) a small group of dedicated, knowledgeable colleagues, in a well-positioned apparatus which eschewed administrative responsibility, seeking a latent constituency of indigenous Australians – the potential interlocutors of power.

Towards an indigenous intelligentsia

In this book's account of Coombs' intervention into the politics of indigenous affairs, the greatest emphasis is given to this third feature of Coombs' political method – his cultivation and encouragement of an articulate indigenous leadership supported by culturally sustainable political structures. From his earliest days as chair of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, Coombs sought to cultivate what he called an indigenous 'intelligentsia'.

Coombs' notion of an intelligentsia was broad; it included not only poets, novelists, painters, lawyers and others with tertiary qualifications to write, speak and think but also those whose work was essential to making things run effectively, such as the executive stratum of the Australian finance industry, whom he attempted, throughout the 1950s, to school in Keynesian ways. An indigenous intelligentsia was made up not only of writers such as Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis but also of the less conspicuous men and women who chaired meetings of the local Aboriginal housing society, the secretary of the Koori football club, the black nurse and the Murri teacher's aide who could help her people understand how to vote in the next election.

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In May 1968 Coombs addressed delegates assembled at the annual meeting of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). He declared the CAA's objective to be to 'strengthen the sense of Aboriginal Australians as a distinctive group within our society with a distinctive contribution to make to the quality of national life.' To this end, he invited Aboriginal people to 'study and experiment in ways by which their own traditional social organisation can best be adapted to enable them to meet the problems of the modern world while preserving continuity with the past.' Coombs was not always consistent in this rhetoric. As I will show, he thought that the prospects for continuing 'as a distinctive group' were unevenly distributed and that many Aboriginal people were close to 'assimilation'. Nonetheless, in respect of a great many indigenous Australians, Coombs never ceased to evoke and to encourage their creativity, not only in arts and letters but in the organisational instruments essential to their effective political presence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were to learn to be politically effective by being entrusted with responsibilities and powers:

> There are those who would continue to shelter Aboriginal Australians from the need to manage their own affairs until some ill-defined time in the future. I and my colleagues are not among them. We are convinced that only by having to make decisions does one learn to make decisions.[14]

Eighteen months after his FCAATSI speech, Coombs told a Quaker audience of the emergence of an Aboriginal-identified intelligentsia – one that, 'unlike the intelligentsia in many emerging nations', 'maintains its identification with its Aboriginal fellows'. Describing this emergence as 'critical', he continued:

> We should be seeking the potential intellectuals, identifying and helping them . . . into places where they can develop their own capacity, giving them the instruments they need – audiences to speak to, journals to write in and access to media – to film, television and the like. We must open the channels of communication so that they can talk to us, but more importantly so that they can talk to their own people.[15]

In projecting the need for an indigenous intelligentsia, and in seeking to foster its formation, Coombs created two related problems for himself. His attempts to deal with these problems are the theme of this book. There was the problem of handover and the problem of selection.

The handover issue was unavoidably part of Coombs' quest. He was an intellectual, a public service mandarin, a technician of government,

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superbly skilled in the arts of defining issues for his political masters and then eloquently synthesising information into persuasively advocated solutions. Coombs was also tenacious. Barrie Dexter recalls that 'he was persistence personified; he bore up against defeat after defeat . . .; he always drew something out of a defeat on which to build a new approach . . .'[16] The question was: could he gradually abdicate his powers so that they could transfer to the emergent leaders of the indigenous constituency? In the early 1970s, as we will see, this proposition was put squarely to Coombs by indigenous intellectuals who – for reasons that this book tries to explain – did not enjoy his confidence.

The second issue – selection – arose from Coombs' firm conviction that the most important site for the emergence of an indigenous intelligentsia was the local or regional indigenous organisation. Coombs was sceptical of those indigenous Australians who aspired to lead a national constituency. It was not that he saw no need for nationwide representation; rather, Coombs was impressed by the difficulty of developing an effectively representative national leadership. He thought it too easy for articulate indigenous Australians from the cities to project themselves as national figures; it would be more appropriate for such men and women to serve the needs of their particular region or locality. For Coombs the indigenous constituency was an ensemble of *local* constituencies which it was difficult to aggregate. The indigenous political genius was a sensitivity to the unique particulars of local needs and loyalties. In his efforts to promote the political development of indigenous Australians, Coombs thus focused on the local level. Once local institutions were soundly formed, the upward delegation of the representative voice could be effected as the political occasions required.

Needless to say, this was a controversial line to take, especially in the early 1970s, when the Whitlam government initiated the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee and encouraged the hopes of the leaders and products of the postwar indigenous struggle for civil rights. One of those aspirants, perhaps the best known, was Charles Perkins. In his autobiography, *A Bastard Like Me*, Perkins remarked that Coombs had 'always been somewhat of a mystery man to me. He wears a number of hats which I don't think even he could keep count of.' Perkins acknowledged Coombs as an ally – 'I know he has fought for us at many a secret meeting at the very highest government level' – but he found him detached. 'We wanted to lean on him for strength in times of crisis, but how can you lean on a phantom?'[17] It is not hard to see how Coombs' circumspection, the habits of discretion, the aura of the well-connected, would have challenged a polarising political intelligence such as Perkins'.

Indeed, other colleagues of Coombs – fellow bureaucrats, we could call them – have paid tribute to qualities that could come across as

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