

'Decolonisation' not the way to go

I was very interested to read Kevin Savage's letter on "Self-determination for Torres Strait" (*Torres News*, 13 June) and his invitation for comment.

Mr Savage urges Indigenous Torres Strait Islanders to think about what is best for the future of Torres Strait and its families and children and argues that "decolonisation" is the pathway to a better future.

I would like to make the case that decolonisation is not the way to go in today's struggle for greater autonomy.

In 1978 and 1979 this path was taken by the Torres United Party (T.U.P.). Its submissions to the United Nations Special Committee of Twenty Four on Decolonisation foundered in 1981 after the Australian High Court rejected the T.U.P.'s claim that the 1879 annexation of the islands of Torres Strait to Queensland (and their subsequent incorporation within the Commonwealth of Australia) was illegal.

Perhaps more to point is that the United Nations Resolution 1514 (XV) containing the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* (1960) referred to the United Nations Trust Territories and Non-Self-Governing Territories mentioned in Chapters XI and XII of its 1945 Charter.

New territories have not been added since 1945, although the status of New Caledonia was changed in 1986. In fact, the numbers have diminished so that in 1994 the Trusteeship System was wound up, having completed its historic task. Today, there are 16 non-self-governing territories remaining.

Mr Savage writes, "Most of these (remaining) territories are small island nations that are similar to our own islands". This is patently not the case. Six of the 15 Island territories have no Indigenous history, being uninhabited at the time of European colonisation.

These are Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, St. Helena, Turks and Caicos Islands and Pitcairn. Of the others, New

Caledonia, Guam, United States Virgin Islands, American Samoa and British Virgin Islands have significantly larger populations than the Torres Strait. For example, New Caledonia has a population of more than 215,000.

The fact that Torres Strait has been part of Queensland since 1879 and part of Australia since 1901, and that the High Court of Australia has upheld this point, makes Mr Savage's arguments that decolonisation is the way forward difficult to sustain.

Torres Strait Islanders today are full citizens of Australia with the same access to the democratic processes of government as other Australians. A United Nations Declaration that refers to a process for achieving self-government for colonized peoples at the end of World War II has little to offer the Indigenous people of Torres Strait in 2003.

It is erroneous to claim that "the type of government that we have over us today is known as "Integration with an Independent State", and that the "(Mabo) High Court judgement has clarified that the Torres Strait can be defined...as a non self-governing (colonial) territory."

When considering that most important and complex question of the future quality of lifestyle and environment for the Torres Strait Islands Indigenous peoples, as the movement for greater autonomy picks up momentum, we need to compare the Islanders' potential future as Australian citizens with a potential future as a non-self-governing territory just embarking on the track to self-determination (if indeed that were possible). Here it is constructive to look at the present day situation of some of the former United Nations Trust territories and non-self-governing territories that have taken the road suggested by Mr Savage.

If we think of a strong economy as crucial to maintaining living standards and environment, what is happening to our Pacific neighbours? How many Torres Strait Islanders look with envy at the lifestyle in the western province of our nearest

neighbour Papua New Guinea, a country that achieved self-determination in 1975?

If we consider the economic indicator of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or the total volume of all goods and services produced within a country in a given year, Papua New Guinea has a gross domestic product (GDP) per head of just \$US489 whereas Australia has a GDP \$US21,000.

The GDP of some other former territories, now island states, include Solomon Islands (\$US574), Kiribati (\$US460), Western Samoa (\$US1409), Vanuatu (\$US 1095).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), whose goal is to reduce poverty in Asia and the Pacific, lends to developing member countries. A list of former UN territories and Pacific neighbours which receive aid from the ADB include Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Is this the future desired for the Torres Strait?

These are all nations who have followed the path to self-determination under the United Nations Declaration on Decolonisation. Many of these nations also depend on aid from the World Bank and countries such as Australia and New Zealand.

The question we must ask is whether these nations, having achieved political self-determination, are now victims of economic colonization. Are their children to be burdened with a debt to the outside world that can never be repaid?

In the past I have heard Torres Strait leaders refer to the Cook Islands as a model for Torres Strait self-determination. The Cook Islands, as a former United Nations Non-Self-Governing Territory, chose the status of "Free Association with an Independent State" (New Zealand) in 1965.

Today, apart from tourism, the economy of the Cook Outer Islands is largely a subsistence one. The country is heavily dependent on the New Zealand Government and the Asian Development Bank for aid

assistance after having been almost bankrupted by hosting the 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts.

I would urge all Torres Strait Islanders to look carefully at supposed models of successful self-determination.

The same issue of *Torres News* that carried Mr Savage's letter also detailed the coming year's Queensland budget for projects in Torres Strait.

Other people could obviously provide detailed information about how much money is expended annually in the Torres Strait by state and federal governments; however a quick calculation from the report indicates more than \$13.5 million will be spent on infrastructure projects listed for the coming year.

This does not include education, health, housing or employment initiatives, but the education budget must be at least \$5.5 million alone. Somebody may be able to provide readers with the full details, as well as a summary of the value of production provided by Torres Strait to Queensland and Australia.

These are the facts which the people of Torres Strait need to have to provide a context for the debate around the movement for greater autonomy.

I believe that to focus on Decolonisation today as a context for Torres Strait self-determination is to be weighed down by the dead hand of the past. Overlooked by Mr Savage in his letter is a significant United Nations Draft Declaration and Forum which may provide a strong foundation for debate about the nature of greater autonomy.

This is the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the 1993 Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Last month the Second Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was held at United Nations headquarters in New York.

The Forum's work and the articles of the 1993 Draft Declaration may well provide a framework for progressing the debate on greater autonomy in Torres Strait.

Ken Dun
Kubin Village