

## Foreword

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Five years ago, I had the privilege of hosting a small group of Indigenous Australians – leaders of their communities and organisations – on a visit to North America. They wanted to see first-hand some of the governance solutions being developed by Indigenous nations there. Over two or three weeks we visited three American Indian nations in the southwestern United States and three First Nations in western Canada. We met in each case with senior Indigenous leadership to learn how those nations govern their own affairs.

Which is exactly what they do. Drawing on long traditions of decision-making and collective action, they control much of what happens on their lands – making law, managing resources, building relationships with other governments and delivering services to their peoples. Some do better than others. None has had an easy path. But they are effectively addressing social and economic problems that once seemed intractable. Engaged with the non-Native world around them, they also have managed to remain distinctive cultural communities.

Their achievements are impressive, but they have been dependent to some degree on the essential – if often grudging – willingness of the United States and Canada to get out of the way: to give them the policy space to develop their own solutions to governance challenges and the necessary support to implement those solutions.

On the last day of the Australians' visit, we took time to debrief. I asked them, among other things, what a similar group of North American Indigenous leaders might learn if they had the opportunity to visit Indigenous communities in Australia.

One young woman, the CEO of an Indigenous NGO, said something along the following lines: 'They would learn what's possible

under much more hostile conditions. They would learn that even with few collective rights and with obstacles being placed before them every step of the way, Indigenous communities can still do extraordinary things’.

This book offers ample evidence of her point.

The English-speaking Settler State – whether Australian, Canadian, or American – has long had the hope that Indigenous peoples would somehow go away. Going away has usually been envisioned as happening in one of two ways. Perhaps they would die out, not as a consequence of war or disease but because of their supposed incapacities in the face of European cultures and the attendant rigours of transformative change. Tragic, to be sure, but ultimately unavoidable, a necessary result of the march of progress.

Alternatively, they would assimilate. Weaned from ancient practices and beliefs, schooled in the ways of the colonisers, and introduced to cities, jobs and opportunities for individual advancement, they would become fully-fledged – if perhaps handicapped, for a time – participants in the new societies being built around them. As the generations passed, their peculiarities of thought and action and even their physical distinctiveness would gradually disappear, and they themselves would soon be no more than a memory, embalmed in books, photographs and museums.

In some cases, these hopes were rooted in racist antagonism to those who were different, inscrutable, and in the way. In other conceptions, these hopes were high-minded and altruistic. Western civilisation, by this account, was a gift that only the ignorant would resist. And in still others, such hopes reflected simply a failure of the imagination: what other options were there?

To the consternation of the Settler State, neither of these outcomes has come to pass. Some did die out while others disappeared, often into the lower ranks of urban populations. But despite the predictions and the best efforts of the assimilators, Indigenous peoples and communities – urban, rural, remote – have not gone away. Instead, many of them have gained new voice. They are demanding that the Settler State accept their aspirations to survive and prosper, not only as individuals but as *Indigenous communities* with values and dreams of their own. Most importantly, some of them are taking steps to solve their problems for themselves, moving back into the governance role that was theirs in the past but that the Settler State so long denied them.

## FOREWORD

This is as true in Australia as it is in North America. If you do not think so, read this book. It is a record of resistance, assertion and accomplishment, and it is all the more impressive for the 'hostile conditions' that my visitor pointed to. Is it the only story out there? Of course not. The road is long and hard. For each story of success, there's a story of disaster. Governance, while a fundamental activity in any human community, is seldom easy, and still less so where colonialism has done so much damage and its legacies are so deeply entrenched.

Nonetheless, these stories – and a growing number like them – offer hope. They offer hope to Indigenous peoples struggling to reclaim their right to make decisions for themselves and to take responsibility for what happens in their communities. But they also offer hope to the Settler State, struggling to find an Indigenous policy that works. That policy has too often been a response to failure – in particular to the perceived failures of Indigenous peoples. Should it not also respond to success? Should it not build on the evidence of what works?

Some of that evidence is in these essays. They tell a tale of Indigenous communities that have stepped up to the governance challenge and are improving the welfare of their peoples. They argue that the fundamental challenge is not to control Indigenous peoples, nor to assimilate them, nor even to consult with them. It is to grant them the power to govern themselves and then support them in developing the capacity to care for Country, care for people, and care for the future in ways of their own choosing.

*May 2011*