

LAW & CULTURE



SOVEREIGN SUBJECTS:
Indigenous Sovereignty Matters

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (ed);
Allen & Unwin, 2007; 200 pp,
\$35.00 (paperback)

I finished reading *Sovereign Subjects* in bed, wrapped in doonas trying to keep warm in an attempt to fend off the flu. My saving grace was this book. It warmed my soul and fired up my resolve — which worked well at keeping the chills at bay. As a ‘warrior woman’, I often find myself lost in the day-to-day struggle of Indigenous life and work, questioning my ability to change or affect the lives of the Indigenous Australians that come to me with their quite often tattered dreams and aspirations. Tattered by the constant struggle for rights and recognition in a land that belongs to us and that we have not ceded. This book allowed me to reposition my thoughts on the larger picture of sovereignty for Indigenous Australians, to give me power and strength, and to remember why voice and demonstration of difference are vitally important to our struggle. And why not having Indigenous sovereignty leads to tattered dreams.

This book has many great chapters that hit home on the sheer vulnerability of the traditional owners’ fragile existence in a white-privileged nation state. In each section, I found at least one article — often more — that had me cheering. From Irene Watson, to Aileen Moreton-Robinson, to Wendy Brady and Steve Larkin, the authors raise the important issues of country, land, identity, place, community, and heritage, reminding me what we as ‘blak fellas’ in our own land have lost. And it’s this truth of our loss that non-Indigenous Australia needs to understand.

Confronting this loss, Irene Watson, in her opening chapter ‘Settled and unsettled spaces: are we free to roam?’, writes:

... I see that it is not up to me to provide the answers — the responses and resolutions should come from the community. But how problematic is that? What and where is the community, and which community? ... we are diverse, with many languages, different country and ways of being. When Aboriginal peoples’ lives are destroyed, uprooted and displaced, the call to community is to the

gathering of broken and shattered pieces ... what Aboriginal community can be pieced together in this colonising space? (p 15)

Aboriginal activists face these questions, and the grief in communities every day. I am often drawn to the matter of our loss and grief. Indigenous sovereignty and our continued dispossession goes to the heart of our grief. As most people should know, a blak fella torn from country, kin, and tradition struggles eternally to repair the remaining shreds of their identity. As such, *Sovereign Subjects* gives premise to our sorrow and loss, it helps explain the utter importance of sovereignty to Indigenous Australia, and its importance to non-Indigenous Australia. All Australians should read this book. At the very least it should be on the required reading of senior secondary and university students.

In reading *Sovereign Subjects* I was reminded of a recent conversation on ‘Indigenous leaders’ and the apparent loss of a strong leadership voice in the Australian media. Anyone who has read this book will agree that we are not at a loss for strong leaders; the voices here prove that. I understand the fear of ‘mainstream’ media in sharing such strong blak voices but ‘they’ really should not be so recalcitrant in tapping into this great resource. I for one would appreciate reading shorter versions of *Sovereign Subjects* in our daily newspapers — then I could cheer more often, more loudly!

And yet ... I know that all the questions and answers raised here have, in some way, been written or said before. How many reprints of *Sovereign Subjects* will be required before my child, his brothers and sisters, and their children’s children, need not raise them again?

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HUMAN RIGHTS
OVERBOARD: Seeking Asylum In Australia

Linda Briskman, Susie Latham and
Chris Goddard; Scribe Publications,
2008; 448 pp, \$35 (paperback)

Human Rights Overboard is the report, published in book form, of the People’s Inquiry into Detention, a ‘citizens’ inquiry’ into the detention of asylum seekers in Australia. The inquiry was initiated by a ‘small group of academics and activists’ under the auspices of the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work. Volunteers heard nearly 200 verbal accounts and collected a similar number of written submissions from former immigration detainees, health workers, lawyers, advocates, supporters, and former employees of immigration detention centres and of the Department of Immigration. The inquiry also draws on previous research and reports from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and other bodies, backed up by 45 pages of notes.

It is not possible to convey in a brief review the weight of the evidence so collected. While there have been many reports and publications detailing the deprivation, trauma, and abuse imposed on those imprisoned while seeking asylum in Australia, this collection is the most comprehensive and systematic of its kind, drawing on the material previously published, and adding more. The result is 448 pages of indictment of the system of ‘mandatory detention’, detailing physical, emotional, and political violence at the hands of government, private prison operators, and detention centre staff.

The book begins with a memorial, listing after the table of contents the names of those who have died seeking asylum in Australia. This list, printed in very small type, runs for two and a half pages, even though only some of the people who died in the sinking of the Siev X can be named, with the others listed simply as ‘219 more men, women and children’. Others died on boats, in detention, or from suicide — for example Dr Habibullah Wahedy who hanged himself after the government