The Commonwealth of Nations Indigenous Project

By Peter Jull

The 54 member countries of the Commonwealth of Nations, i.e., former British Empire, include some of the world’s best and worst indigenous circumstances and related public policies. While world organisations have been increasingly recognising indigenous needs, not so the Commonwealth which only budged when the European Union, no doubt with wry smile, funded an indigenous policy research project run by the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (CPSU), University of London (see website http://www.cpsu.org.uk/projects/indigenous/indigenous.htm). The fairy godmother of Commonwealth indigenous rights was in no small part Hon. Margaret Reynolds, former Australian federal minister and Chair of the Commonwealth Human Rights International Advisory Commission, she who has been so knowledgeable and active in the indigenous field for so long.

The Miner’s Canary by Paul Havemann and indigenous project head Helena Whall surveyed indigenous issues vis-à-vis sustainable development for the UN 2002 world summit, see CPSU website. Invisible lives: Undercounted, underrepresented and underneath: the socioeconomic plight of Indigenous peoples in the Commonwealth, by CPSU director Richard Bourne was made ready for Commonwealth leaders in 2003, while Nicky Jones produced Wrongs and Rights: the economic, social and cultural rights of Indigenous peoples in Australia, in early 2003 for CPSU and the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland.

Although the project has come along just when Australia was becoming chair and host of the Commonwealth for the Brisbane 2001 and actual Coolum (Queensland) 2002 heads of government meeting (CHOGM), the Howard government contributed little and presumably undermined rights initiative. Meanwhile indigenous groups in Brisbane and Australia were largely unable to use the moment for advancing rights agendas. At the end of the Abuja CHOGM in late 2003, the Commonwealth Association of Indigenous Peoples and CPSU commented (8-12-03):

The United Nations’ General Assembly called in 1993 for governments to strengthen their efforts for international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by Indigenous People in such areas as human rights, the environment, development, education and health.

This was the objective of the UN International Decade on the World’s Indigenous People, due to end in Year 2004. The Commonwealth has ignored the Decade and failed to respond to a major area of human rights development.
In the United Nations forums for Indigenous Peoples, it has been the major Commonwealth countries that have opposed the recognition of distinctive rights of Indigenous Peoples. This conservatism appears to be linked to ‘Old Commonwealth’ values and has significant wealth and development implications for the 150 million people living as Indigenous Peoples in the Commonwealth.

The CPSU memo to leaders gathering in Abuja, Recognising and Protecting Indigenous Peoples’ Rights in the Commonwealth, summarised three years of forums, research, and expert consultations around the world, calling on CHOGM to

- recognise that special attention be paid to the needs and rights of Indigenous Peoples;

- acknowledge that many Indigenous Peoples in the Commonwealth continue to be significantly disadvantaged in comparison to other groups in society and that special measures should be encouraged to overcome the continuing effects of colonialism or racism, with the full participation and consent of the Indigenous Peoples concerned;

- foster and develop national, regional and local programmes of action with Indigenous Peoples, in accordance with international human rights standards and Commonwealth values on democracy and good governance; and

- review its processes and programmes to address the issues of Indigenous Peoples and provide recognition and strengthening of Indigenous structures.

Unexceptional as these might seem to ‘first world countries’, indigenous rights, special measures, full participation and consent of indigenous peoples, and providing recognition and strengthening of indigenous structures can sound ‘far out’ to the luminaries of the Howard government who, like their master, dwell mentally in the late British Empire, not the multi-racial Commonwealth. (For the young, Simon Schama’s books and videos/DVD of The History of Britain provide a delicious smorgasbord of the assumptions, touching hopes, and cruel realities of that world.)

On page 4 of the memo comes the challenge to us all:

‘The rights of Indigenous Peoples is part of the unfinished business of decolonisation. While many of the problems facing Indigenous Peoples today are the direct result of colonialism, the Commonwealth has not yet taken full responsibility for their rights. This is surprising since the modern Commonwealth, originating mostly in the 1960s with the independence of former colonies, has been built on the principle of the self-determination of Peoples. Indeed certain countries in the Pacific, such as Fiji, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, are in reality Indigenous. There was an element of luck in the colonisation and independence process, by which some groups came to have recognised statehood, while others became minority and often marginalised Indigenous Peoples within larger polities. Some Indigenous groups were subordinated prior to colonialism, many suffered under colonialism and others have been repressed or marginalised by intolerant versions of national
development since Independence. Many Commonwealth countries continue to
treat their Indigenous peoples unfairly or unjustly. Indigenous Peoples
account for much of the Commonwealth’s cultural diversity and are also
stewards of much of its biological diversity. That Indigenous Peoples play a
vital role in the conservation of biological diversity – the key to sustainable
development . . . However, while the Commonwealth has explicitly
recognised that a viable sustainable development policy has to give equal
priority to the environment and the market, it has yet to acknowledge the
critical role that Indigenous Peoples can play in sustainable development.’

Some Commonwealth governments, indigenous and non-indigenous NGOs, academic
and research institutions, and human rights movements will ensure that indigenous
rights, self-determination, sustainable development, and governance issues will stay
alive. They require active advocacy near and far, not quietism, patience, or lack of
confidence in stay-at-home circles.

***

Peter Jull is Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Political Science & International
Studies, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Q. 4072.