

Black Politics: Inside the Complexity of Aboriginal Political Culture

By Sarah Maddison

Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, New South Wales, 2009, 336 pages

As implied in the title, this book is an exploration of Aboriginal political culture. It is an 'inside' analysis to the extent that it is based on interviews with 30 Aboriginal leaders and activists. However, it is also clearly framed by Maddison's understanding of the key issues and her analysis of the intellectual space that constitutes contemporary Aboriginal politics. The book sets out to investigate the complexity of Aboriginal political culture and, in so doing, it provides an excellent introduction to key themes, debates and issues.

The interviews provide a snapshot of the views of prominent Aboriginal people, including some of the most well-known individuals engaged in Aboriginal political life, such as Warren Mundine, Tom Calma, Larissa Behrendt, Jackie Huggins and Mick Dodson. The reason for the absence of some key political and intellectual identities from the list of interviewees (such as Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Michael Mansell) is also dealt with briefly. Ultimately, what is far more important than who was and wasn't interviewed is the political analysis which forms the basis of the book.

Maddison seeks to demonstrate through the interviews the diversity of Aboriginal political aspirations and demands. She argues that one of the greatest barriers to understanding Aboriginal political culture is the lack of recognition of this diversity. She centres the book around what she describes as 10 key areas of tension: autonomy and dependency; sovereignty and citizenship; tradition and development; individualism and collectivism; Indigeneity and hybridity; unity and regionalism; community and kin; men, women and customary law; elders and the next generation; and mourning and reconciliation. These areas of tension are not simply between Aboriginal politics and 'mainstream' politics, but are also sites of significant tension, disagreement and diversity of views *within* Aboriginal political culture. Indeed, the great strength of this book is that it documents the diversity of Indigenous political thought and provides insight for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers into the dynamics of these various debates.

I want to pick a couple of examples to demonstrate the point. The discussion on autonomy and dependency begins with the widespread acknowledgment that colonisation created dependency. However, a key point of friction both within

Aboriginal politics and between and within non-Aboriginal politics is how to respond to dependency. Arguments for Aboriginal autonomy have a long history, as does the recognition by Aboriginal people that government policy sapped Aboriginal initiative — a point well argued by Aboriginal activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The key debate today is between those (like Pearson, Mundine and Langton) who argue for greater control over Aboriginal individuals and communities to bring about change in patterns of passivity and self-destructive behaviour — for example, through control of welfare payments — and those who argue for greater levels of self-determination in Aboriginal policy and against what they see as a ‘new’ paternalism (for example, Behrendt, Calma and Dodson).

A strength of the book is the breadth of coverage of key issues. However, this also inevitably gives rise to sacrificing greater depth. Each one of the chapters in *Black Politics* could have been the subject of a book in itself. For example, the chapter on sovereignty and citizenship raises and discusses the tension between these two aspirations: how do you marry demands for recognition of sovereignty with the demands for social and political equality encapsulated within the concept of citizenship? I was left wanting more discussion of, for example, some of the legal debates around sovereignty and self-determination — which many of the interviewees are very well-equipped to provide. I wanted greater analysis of the impact (or lack thereof) of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) and other human rights instruments in protecting and ensuring citizenship. I also wished that the interviews had been conducted after the release of Frank Brennan’s report from the National Human Rights Consultation (something completely out of the control of the book’s author!) to see how Indigenous people are responding to the recommendations therein. And, of course, my wish list is a complement to the book. I was left a little dissatisfied because I had unanswered questions and I wanted more — which is an unreasonable demand of a 300-page book designed to provide an introduction to the complexity of these issues! I think the book achieves what it sets out to do and it does so in a very readable and approachable manner. ●

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