

**Torres Strait Islanders and Autonomy: a Borderline Case**

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## **Declaration**

Unless otherwise stated, the ideas and the approaches utilised and explained in this thesis are mine alone.

William Stewart Arthur

### **Acknowledgments**

In wish to thank all of the Torres Strait Islanders I have known and worked with both in Torres Strait and on the Australian mainland. In particular I thank Victor McGrath and Josephine David-Petero of Torres Strait, and Maureen Newie of Cairns all of whom worked with me on earlier research that I have drawn on for this thesis.

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## **Abstract**

During 1996 and 1997 an Australian parliamentary committee conducted an inquiry into greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islanders, but by 2000 the future of the issue seemed unclear. This thesis explores what the notion of autonomy has meant for Torres Strait and for Torres Strait Islanders in the past, and what it might mean in the future. The thesis uses material from the period before European contact to just after the end of the parliamentary inquiry.

Several analytical tools were utilised to explore the concept of autonomy. Major among these to propose and then analyse the relationship between autonomy's economic and political components. The thesis also introduces the paired concepts of negative and positive autonomy to provide a counterpoint to ideas of welfare colonialism. Cross cutting these economic and political elements is a consideration of both regional and corporate forms of autonomy. The thesis argues that it is necessary to consider the factors which people can use to legitimise a case for autonomy and these are identified and discussed.

Although previous research and historical material are utilised, unique parts of the thesis include an analysis of: the formal submissions and hearings associated with the parliamentary inquiry; the Torres Strait's location between Australia and Papua New Guinea; and the Strait's small-island make-up. In this latter regard, comparisons are made with models and examples of autonomy found in small island states and territories in the Pacific.

The findings include that we must consider two groups of Torres Strait Islanders, those in Torres Strait and those on mainland Australia. Whereas those in the Strait have been able to legitimise a case for a form of autonomy those on the mainland have not. Islanders in the Strait have achieved a degree of regional autonomy; those on the mainland are unable to make a case to be part of this regional autonomy, or to achieve a form of corporate autonomy. The status of Islanders in the Strait is influenced by several factors including

the Strait's location on the border with Papua New Guinea, the associated Treaty with that country, and the nature and the accessibility of the in-shore fishery. A major finding however is that although Islanders have achieved a degree of regional political autonomy, which may be progressed yet further, they have been unable to embrace non-Indigenous people within this. Their present aspiration for regional political autonomy therefore is limited to one that would apply only to Indigenous-specific affairs. This stands in some conflict with their aspiration for regional economic autonomy which would include their control over the entire regional fishery which they presently share with non-Islanders.

Though Islanders have achieved some degree of political autonomy, they depend on substantial government financial transfers to the region. Despite this they have also achieved some economic autonomy, particularly through being involved in the region's fishery. Juxtaposing negative and positive autonomy with political and economic autonomy shows that a dependence on government economic transfers does not preclude gains in political autonomy. This can be contrasted with the notion of welfare colonialism.

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