THE VOICE OF TASMANIA
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When cultures clash Focus on Aboriginality

Margaretta Pos
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A NEW paper by eminent historian Henry Reynolds will raise the contentious issue that Tasmania's Aboriginal population is a Creole race.

In the battle to remove the pejorative label of half-caste which was forced on them by racist Europeans, Tasmanian blacks have proudly re-claimed their Aboriginality. But the corollary of this is that they have denied being Creole, or people of mixed heritage.

This denial, Professor Reynolds suggests, is one reason for the bitter in-fighting within Aboriginal society about who is a black.

In short, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre has a black and white view about who it accepts as Aboriginal.

But Professor Reynolds, author of many pioneering books on race relations in Australia, says: "Tasmanian Aborigines are of mixed descent and part of colonial history."

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre secretary Jay McDonald rejects the hypothesis that Tasmanian Aborigines are Creole.

"Henry is a brilliant thinker and has been very supportive of us but he's wrong," he says. "In the 1960s and '70s we fought for recognition of who we are. We class ourselves as Aboriginal. I am Aboriginal, not Creole."

But McDonald does say that those who are not accepted by the established community could be considered of mixed origin.

Professor Reynolds says entrenched racism in Australia until the 1960s precluded recognition of a Creole people. Australians had to be black or white. Anything in between was half-caste and considered devoid of cultural identity.

"You had to be one or the other -- it was embodied in legislation in Queensland," he says.

Creole, from the Latin creare, to create, is variously used for a person born in a place but of foreign ancestry. For example, in the US, descendants of French settlers in the city of New Orleans are called Creole. Elsewhere, it is widely used for populations with a mixed racial heritage.

In Surinam in South America half the population is Creole, of Dutch and African descent, while in Mexico, Creoles or Mestizos, are of Spanish or Portuguese and American-Indian ancestry.

In many countries, particularly in Catholic Latin America, Creoles have long been accepted as peoples with distinctive cultural traditions.

"Catholicism was originally a multi-racial faith from the Mediterranean and was always more accepting of colour [than Protestant faiths]," Professor Reynolds says.

"The whole concept of half-caste in Australia was one of shame, associated with myths of racial degeneration.

"Australia was quite unlike Latin America, which always recognised people of mixed race."

The question of just who is indigenous has divided Aboriginal society in Tasmania.

Earlier this month, more than 500 Tasmanians were rejected by the Independent Indigenous Advisory Committee, set up to rule on Aboriginality in Tasmania for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission elections.

Objections to 534 people who applied to go on the ATSIC roll were upheld by the committee. Objections to another 474 people were rejected. The status of 286 people was

yet to be determined.

The committee requires archivalevidence of ancestry, which is all but restricted to families from the Bass Strait islands. Also required is acceptance of people as Aboriginal by Aboriginal communities, again a contentious issue, because the TAC denies some communities are Aboriginal.

Professor Reynolds thinks the findings of the committee may be challenged in court, based on legal precedent.

In 1996, Brian Fisher, an ATSIC regional councillor for nine years, was one of 11 candidates in ATSIC elections to have his Aboriginality challenged. Fisher went to the Federal Court and Justice Ronald Merkel ruled the challenge had failed to prove he was not Aboriginal.

Based on this, Professor Reynolds thinks people whose Aboriginality is rejected by the committee may be deemed as having been treated unjustly by having to prove their Aboriginality rather than having it disproved.

Add to this, the controversy over DNA testing in the US, which was halted recently. The University of Arizona is a partner in the international human genome project and stopped testing after concerns were raised by some Tasmanians over whether their DNA samples were part of a wider study.

McDonald says the need for DNA testing is proof that they are not Aboriginal: "These people are not Aborigines, and trying to prove such through DNA testing plainly demonstrates they have not lived as Aborigines.

"In the 1970s we had to fight to stop scientists treating us like animals and considering us in terms of our blood lines. They called us quarter-castes, half-castes and worse -- anything but Aborigines."

Professor Reynolds likens Tasmania's Aborigines -- particularly those from the Bass Strait islands -- to the Metis in Canada.

The Metis are the descendants of Indian women and French fur trappers, who developed their own way of life and cultural tradition in the west of Canada.

"They see themselves as a distinct race," he says. "Not as Indian or European but as a Creole people. They fought for acceptance and are now recognised as one of three First Nation races -- the Indians, the Inuit and the Metis."