



THE BOOK — TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY – Queensland’s Family Responsibilities Commission

My task was to write a history of a continuing, living organisation with a legislated shelf life. There was not a great body of recorded material to refer to. Nevertheless, there was much important literature available: the Commission’s Annual and other reports for example, and especially the Cape York Institute’s extensive volume *From Hand Out to Hand Up*, in which the philosophies behind, and the model for, the welfare reform initiative entrusted to the Commission are detailed. That model was almost wholly adopted by both the State and Australian Governments.



Author Gordon Dean with Minister Elmes at the launch of ‘TAKING RESPONSIBILITY - Queensland’s Family Responsibilities Commission’

Apart from those resources, the history relied much on personal communications and contemporary reporting. I was able to undertake research where and when I determined and to record both the good and the bad: bouquets as well as brickbats.

The Commissioner had made it clear that he wanted to acknowledge all those who gave so much to the Commission. This living body was inhabited by living people, and if the Commission was to disappear, a record of its work and its people should be preserved, else they risked being cast aside on the scrap-heap of history, and forgotten.

So it is that the book was laid out in three parts. The first is an essay of the historical background to the emergence of the Commission, from the earliest days of European contact through colonisation and the dispossession of the Indigenous people, to the later years of interaction between the original inhabitants of this land and the newcomers. It is not a pretty story but as Noel Pearson, the Executive Chairman of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership has pointed out, it was necessary to understand the reasons for the disadvantage and dysfunction Indigenous communities were experiencing as the 20th Century drew to a close, so as to formulate policies which could effectively bring lasting reform.

The second part traces the life of the Commission itself. The third is that which tells of those people who, so to speak, carried the Commission, who met head on the difficulties of establishing the work of the Commission in the four trial communities of Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge, facing at times almost hostile local reactions.

It is clear that the Commission, its officers and staff and the Commissioner himself, the schools and the various support agencies have made impressive progress in the communities. What is most impressive of all is the dedication and work of the Local Commissioners who, despite a certain innate shyness and reticence, were frank and open about their experiences. They took up and kept alive the ideal that the communities themselves would indeed accept the challenge of taking responsibility for their own welfare and behaviours. To them, in good old Aussie lingo, ‘we dips our lid’.

Gordon Dean