School Of History Seminar Series

Wednesday 1 June 2011, 4.15-5.30pm, Seminar Room A, Coombs Building, ANU

Aboriginal Sovereignty and the Politics of Reconciliation: The Constituent Power of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Australia

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The formal reconciliation process in Australia sought to redress the unjust colonial origin of the Australian polity from ‘within’ the constitutional order. In his official apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd claimed to enact a constituent moment that would establish a new beginning and transform the identity of the political community. Yet Rudd’s presupposition of the constituted power of the Australian state and his authority to speak on behalf of an already-constituted political community undercut the constitutive power of the apology.

In contrast, the self-authorizing claim to Sovereignty exemplified by the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest in Canberra might be understood as an act of constituent power that breaks into the constituted order of the Australian polity from its ‘immanent outside’.

Inaugurated in 1972 and reinstated in opposition to the announcement of the formal reconciliation process in 1992, the Tent Embassy demonstrates Aboriginal Sovereignty by acting as if it is a form of constituted power.

As such, the Tent Embassy might be understood as a manifestation of constituent power, which makes available the possibility of a fundamental break with the colonial past that has so far eluded the constituted power of the Australian state.

Dr Andrew Schaap is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics, University of Exeter, and the author of Political Reconciliation (London: Routledge, 2005). He is a Visiting Fellow in the Australian Centre for Indigenous History, School of History, ANU.

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