

The Eddie Koiki Mabo Lecture 2009

Climate change from the perspective of the Torres Strait

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Eddie Mabo occupies a large place in the history of relations between Indigenous and other Australians. He played that role because he was a man of exceptional capacity and tenacity, and also because he was part of the minority of Indigenous Australians whose original home was in the islands of the Torres Strait.

The Torres Strait and the adjacent lands of Australia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, and the people who live there, share many things, including except

anything like its present form, and long before nation states constrained the movement of people across the lands and seas. The more rapid, anthropogenic climate change that is

constitution to the parliament in preparation for independence, and then the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade who negotiated the maritime boundaries in Torres Strait. The eminent early leader of Papua New Guinea died earlier this year in the undersupplied hospital of Daru, just across the water from the tip of Cape York.

Over time, the international boundaries became important. The new laws agreed between independent Papua New Guinea and Australia respected the old movements from village to village across the waters, but the location of one's main roots mattered more and more. The coming of social security to Indigenous Australians introduced a difference in incomes. That, in turn, led to new sources of employment in services for poor cousins from the north. Naturally, the better medical and other services to the south were a magnet for people who had some choice of declared home. And the right to move further south provided a security for Australians that was not available to people whose homes were north of the border.

In the old times, the people of the lowlands across the waters in New Guinea and the surrounding islands including the Torres Strait were fractured more than any on earth by geographic barriers, which became barriers of other kinds. They developed hundreds of distinct languages and patterns of life. But they kept some cultural traits in common, including strong attachment to the land on which they grew their food and lived their lives.

Amongst these peoples, the young were educated in the importance of owning land inherited from ancestors and passed on to their descendants. This was the practice discovered as law by the Australian High Court in 1992. This discovery enhanced concern to correct perceived wrongs between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians extending far beyond Mabo's lessons on land. As Paul Kelly said in his recent book, this triggered a revolution in Australian governance. For the first time, an Australian Prime Minister made Indigenous justice his main priority in time and politics. The resulting catharsis changed

occasional freakishly high tides.

will make a big difference to the damage that it does to human settlement and society. That time will be shorter the warmer the temperatures. And when the ice from Greenland is gone, it will have added about seven metres to what would otherwise be the levels of the

would go well beyond the economic losses that I tried to measure in intricate detail in the Garnaut Climate Change Review. These are the immeasurable type 4 losses to which I referred in Chapter One of the Review—the loss of natural and human heritage--that we must try to bring to account outside the economic models.

Humanity is now in the process of a collective decision on whether to take great risks for the economy and the natural and human heritage of the future by failing to break the link that has been present since the industrial revolution between economic activity and greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change mitigation is a conservative issue. The central policy issue is whether and how much we are prepared to pay to conserve established patterns of human