

## **Indigenous Law Speaker Series 2014**

### **The political ecology and political economy of the Indigenous land titling 'revolution' in Australia**

**Jon Altman, the Australian National University**

13 February 2014 – 12.30 – 1.30 p.m.  
Faculty of Law, Victoria University of Wellington

In the past 40 years there has been a land rights revolution in Australia. After two centuries of strident colonial state assertion that Indigenous peoples did not own the continent in any proprietary sense, the *Mabo* High Court judgment in 1992 revolutionised Australia's land tenure. A combination of native title and earlier statutory land rights regimes have seen a rapidly growing proportion of the continent re-vested in Indigenous land owners. Most of this estate is in remote and very remote Australia and it has two critical features, high conservation value because of remoteness; and high mineral prospectivity.

In this paper, the extent of Indigenous land holdings and their natural and mineral values are documented using GIS information and maps (in close collaboration with colleague Francis Markham), something that is rarely done in Australia for many complex reasons. I then deploy the theoretical frames of political ecology and political economy as two competing perspectives, the former favouring conservation, the latter mineral exploitation, to consider how the land might be most effectively used for Indigenous benefit. The articulation between the two frames can be encapsulated by the workings of power and the role that property rights play in exercising this power. Property rights in turn are being constantly reshaped by recourse to domestic legal challenges and to international indigenous rights instruments. I look to capture both the progress made in the last 40 years as well as the severe limitations of what has been achieved. I end by looking to explore possibilities and discuss similarities and differences in post-colonial Australia and New Zealand.

#### **Professor Jon Altman**

Jon Altman is a research professor in anthropology at the Australian National University in Canberra; from 1990-2010 he was the foundation director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research there. He has undertaken research in remote Australia since the late 1970s and in 2012 was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand.

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