

Published as Jull P, 2000: 'The Trouble with Northern Territories', *Arena Magazine*, No. 46, April-May 2000, pp 22-23.

Draft for *Arena Magazine*

March 8, 2000

## The Trouble with Northern Territories

by Peter Jull

The trouble with northern territories is that they always want to be something else. A handful of recent settlers or long-time local grandees want to become founding heads of some new order, nation-builders, their homes made heritage sites, and themselves looking destiny in the eye from the pedestal of a statue outside an overpriced and much debated piece of architecture built to house a popular assembly.

Then there are railways. In Canada we've got five railways – yes, five – once running, now rusting, into our far north between the Pacific and Atlantic. The funny thing is that all of them are virtually abandoned – not that loss of traffic, freight, or ore to carry slows down northern or mid-northern town visionaries. No, they then arm-twist electioneering governments to put on a coach or two in summer to bring in tourists and re-invent the hinterland as a theme park. It's okay for German and Iowa adventurers now, or pensioners from Toronto, Vancouver, Melbourne, or Sydney – bears or crocodiles won't get you, but may appear out the window for a snapshot. These ventures rarely last or pay for themselves, either.

But they contain an important truth. If we can't have a real frontier, we can have a Disney dreamytime one. I don't mean the Dreamtime, of course. One of the affecting moments in the world-wide Millennium telecast of December 31-January 1 was when some young Inuit in sealskin parkas on bluffs above Nunavut's new capital, snow and ice all around, switched over to Aborigines performing ancient Northern Territory spirit lore at Uluru. The Aboriginal Dreamtime is real, deep, multi-faceted, amazing. I don't know any visitors from North America or Europe who aren't awed to silence by the rock art and ancient stories of the indigenous people, or serious visitors from New Zealand or Southern Australia, either. They know culture when they see it.

No, I mean the theme park kitsch which seems to inspire hinterland city fathers. For instance, it pained me as one correctly labelled 'child of war dead' in Ottawa files to see the use of brown photos, TV promotions, and virtual 'celebration' of the Japanese bombing of Darwin to promote Northern Territory tourism in 1992. One day I found my downtown Darwin bank sandbagged, with tellers decked out as frontline nurses, accountants with steel helmets and fatigues, and even a machine-gun nest. Painful absurdity, surely.

This compulsion seems in-built. The best account is Daniel Boorstin's *The Americans: the National Experience* where he describes the fierce competition for rail link, hotel, university, whatever, to make some bit of land beyond the Mississippi a great city. Sometimes the would-be dads of new Civilization – that's with a capital C and a 'z' – had to move on and try several times. If you have endured the ceaseless patter of development politics in Darwin, you've heard it all. Governments nearly falling over their hotel ventures, and always the Alice-Darwin railway for distraction at election time. One premier used to argue that other cities in Australia of a million

or more inhabitants had once been the mere size of Darwin. The white man's frontier isn't meant to be logical – it's a gush, a rush.

Not every national resident will be glad to play for an unrepresentative few to play cock of the walk in a large territory which demands or denies the rights of the 50,000-year cultures whose home it is. Northern 'governments', having small tax base, largely share out national fiscal transfers. As a Northwest Territories conflict of interest inquiry recently found, it's amazing what the boys around the cabinet table can get up to with someone else's money, and the habits of entitlement they can begin to feel, the sense of rightful ownership. However, it may be worth it to certain rationalist ideologues to keep the place firmly in the hands of a few small business people. It's not heroic – no Khyber Pass or Khartoum here – but neither is our government in Canberra, and conquest is conquest, under whatever guise.

The Northern Territory is a very postmodern frontier. Whatever innocents in South-East Australia may think about rough diamonds, white Darwin is all leafy suburbs, fine dining, and wide roads ideal for the next post-cyclone or post-bombing evacuation. Alice Springs is a long boulevard of classy motels and a multi-national English dialect spoken by the backpacker young sharing around T-shirts, money-saving hints, sun lotion, and their gene pool. It could be Banff, Killarney, or Amsterdam. Cloncurry, Queensland, on the other hand, seemed to me like Yellowknife – even the same size – before that tough little mining town built on ancient rock, a jump-off spot for every sort of mineral and development fantasy, and supply centre for indigenous locals and white prospectors or trappers, became a high-rise capital with older developers mixing uneasily but profiting from Baby Boom officials and newcomers making the place home and a new non-racist society.

The recent furore over Northern Territory 'justice', political maturity, political rights, and the treatment of Aborigines is impressive. Australians have recognised that it is a national issue and a national problem for national solution. Nor is it novel. As pointed out in 'The Northern Territory Future', *Arena Magazine*, No. 37 (Oct-Nov 1998), debate and workable accommodation on the shape, status, and *reconciliation* of indigenous land and sea use and cultural imperatives in such regions are found in the political practice of Australia's best friends abroad.

There is even a good starting-point in the NT for statesmanship. Neither the white-dominated NT government nor the Aboriginal peoples accept the existing political structure, and many question its legitimacy. There is wide room for negotiation of something new, something appropriate, something in tune with contemporary Australian values. However, the NT governing white élite do not and will not accept the legitimacy of Aboriginal occupation, culture, rights to make decisions or shape the NT future, let alone share power. On the contrary, the Aborigines are seen as a hindrance – except when performing for tourists – and their lands and seas as a source of wealth which should properly belong to the whites. Whites mouth the pieties of majoritarian liberal democracy and what can a weak-kneed prime minister do?

Plenty, in fact, but Howard is not your man. A wonderful picture of Malcolm Fraser as prime minister looking unconvinced over the head of an eager suppliant NT premier Everingham is the cover of a fine short book on federal-NT relations. Even his worst enemies agreed that Everingham had brains. Another premier, Hatton, had

decency and brains, but like the present man – apparently not personally vicious, either – the party caucus and party formula brought him into line. That line is to use Aborigines and their despair and disadvantage as an electoral asset.

Living in the NT one found a national Liberal leader who was no racist and had moved in urbane academic and international circles come (or sent) north to sit at the feet of NT white notables to ‘learn’ about Aboriginal relations. A Labor premier who had promised indigenous reform and delivered little in his state came, too, and with less shame. Later we read in the press and post-election accounts that the 1996 election saw Howard drawing heavily on NT electoral styles, and now he has made a discredited former NT premier the national Liberal party president.

Coriolis effect? In the northern hemisphere national parties and political leaders make sure that their hinterlands don’t disgrace their cause or their country. Whatever Gro Harlem Brundtland did to the bad old Labor barons of North Norway, it worked for nearly 20 years, and as soon as she was gone they came out from under their rocks and are in full racist rant about Sami rights. She had also shut down the Sami rights debate on the promise of an expert commission to deal fairly. It did, at first, but its charismatic chairman became chief justice and things have fallen apart since. His was the one case which comes to mind where charisma alone worked wonders. Carsten Smith took a fractious large committee of interest group spokespersons, with only two or three Sami, and by sheer patience and goodness brought them to accept a national constitutional amendment recognising Sami rights and a national Sami-elected parliament both to develop and to advise on indigenous policy. These are in place.

The Swedish Sami parliament had an interesting twist. The King came to read his speech at the 1993 opening, the Queen was outfitted in Sami attire, and then a Sami leader read a Statement of Distrust. Distrust of the Sami affairs minister, distrust of the government, etc. Perhaps the Reconciliation council has considered the idea? Or a Statement of Disgust?

Recent Finnish governments and the Swedes have been bemused and baffled by indigenous rights reform and the antics of northern non-Sami, but the issues will not go away and the United Nations has been brought into the debate. [E.g., through ILO 169 interpretations in several Sami land rights cases.] In Greenland the Danish authorities pushed aside divide-and-rule proposals for a fragmented country of municipal barons and opted for a sensible coherent national unity which has worked well since 1979 under successive all-Inuit governments.

In Washington both Congress and the White House have at various times had to clobber or ‘guide’ their more excitable partisans and others in outlying regions, especially Alaska. Alaskan 1950s statehood was all about riches for the white man – cloaked as usual in the alleged God-given right to do what one liked while ignoring or controlling ‘the natives’. Washington has clumsily but firmly made sure that America’s brutal 19<sup>th</sup> century frontier history did not simply repeat itself and legislated indigenous rights.

In Canada, northern provincehood movements were off and running in the two northern territories when Ottawa finally recognised that ‘provincehood’ (like NT ‘statehood’) meant for whites approximately what ‘land rights’ meant for indigenous

peoples. It was a basic concept but at its core was the demand of peoples to exercise and maintain their cultures on lands and coasts with their basic rights secured, including rights to govern themselves and their territory. This has now been negotiated or is nearing completion with somewhat different outcomes in each of the Yukon, Northwest Territories (NWT), and Nunavut. Two territories became three, the 'unity' of the NWT always more a cartographic fiction than a social or political fact until the east became Nunavut. Indeed, Australian and Canadian boundaries in general little reflect indigenous territories and have caused much hardship as a result.

Section 121 of the Australian Constitution requires that federal Parliament create new states on appropriate terms and conditions. The terms appropriate in the year 2000 are very different from the 1890s fashions dressed up for the 1901 Constitution, but the NT government want us all to buy the old model.

The issue of popular vote, whether in mandatory sentencing to lock up blacks or to hand the future of the NT to the white majority present on voting day – a population which flows in and out ceaselessly while a few clever and not-so-clever local whites control the political apparatus for a vast area – is a red herring. We have courts and careful processes rather than lynch mobs. We have leaders – or we did in times past – who interpret, explain, lead debate, and lead by moral example so that the excitable *demos* do not go running off a cliff every time they are exercised about the latest crime or rumour or exposé – or spectacular interpretation of biblical prophecy. Of course, the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw positive and progressive government measures taken enthusiastically in expectation of the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, but contemporary populism, as a reading of Queensland parliamentary debates or countless internet sites reveals, seems more a psychological than political problem.

The Northern Territory is known throughout the world as what it is, an Aboriginal region of peoples and cultures with diverse art forms both modern and ancient. Like all sparsely settled regions there is also another population brought in for service industry, administration, trade, curiosity, escape, and various good works. A little statesmanship could see an admirable political and constitutional outcome. I have known some of the NT indigenous leaders and their back-up people, and I know they have what it takes to achieve political reconciliation – or constitutional reform as it may better be called – in which all Australians can take pride. For 15 years I have scrutinised the words and positions of NT governments and the words of the present Prime Minister on indigenous matters, and I know that they do not and will not.

If ever there was a time for reasonable persons – whether Liberal, National, Labor, Democrat, Green, and even, God help us, Country Liberal Party! – to shape events, it is in the matter of the NT. If Australians do not wish a predictable international race relations disaster they must broker a Northern Territory future in which Aboriginal rights, self-government, and culture are secure – a future for Aborigines no less than theme park politicians who jape, mock, and mow!

\*\*\*

Peter Jull is Adjunct Associate Professor, Dept. of Government, University of Queensland, and a survivor, negotiator, former official, and observer of First World northern territories and their politically legitimate successors.