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The Northern Territory Future

by Peter Jull

On August 11 the Prime Minister announced that Northern Territory (NT) statehood would commence on January 1, 2001, to celebrate the centenary of Federation. For good measure he said this move 'will be applauded by all but the mean in spirit and narrow of vision'.

Because most of the key issues of NT statehood remain to be negotiated or revealed, however, we should keep our mean spirits and narrow vision at the ready. The press, too, were sceptical, e.g., *The Australian* of August 12, and immediately struck by all the unanswered questions.

The future of the NT is an important issue for Australians. Section 121 of the Constitution says as much with its requirement that national Parliament set terms and conditions for the constitution of any new state. That is the clause under which the Prime Minister will grant statehood.

The NT situation now unfolding has been anticipated for some years. See 'O brave new world!', *Arena Magazine* No. 29, June-July 1997. Australia has the opportunity to avoid mistakes made by other 'first world' countries in similar circumstances, but as yet has not seemed ready to do so.

In Scandinavia, post-war governments committed to socio-economic well-being even in the remote reindeer plains and mountainous coasts of the north expected to finesse the problem. They ensured excellent living conditions, facilities, services, and opportunities to all northerners, Sami (the 'Lapps') included.

Anyone familiar with hinterlands of Australia or North America comes away shamed from Sapmi ('Lapland'). Nonetheless, encroachments of many forms of development are crowding out traditional Sami possibilities, most notably reindeer-herding, but also fishing, hunting, etc. Sami have been taking cases to the United Nations while official elected national Sami Parliaments in Norway, Sweden, and Finland are seeking political and legal recognition of their territorial rights and greater control of services affecting them.

Greenland is the best example of enlightened national policy. After the war Denmark, rebuilding itself from Occupation and sabotage, poured benefits into that rugged Arctic island, mostly covered by ice up to 4 km thick. Trying to make the Inuit Arctic like Continental Europe had a high social cost, and soon young educated Greenlanders were demanding self-government and an end to Danish paternalism. The Danes then saw their error and nobly pushed forward with 'home rule', achieved in 1979.

All cabinets have been made up entirely of Inuit Greenlanders, the founding premier now returned again – a Lutheran pastor, seal hunter, and charismatic leader.

Everything from church to town planning, the fish economy and computer technology are in Greenlander hands. Greenland and Denmark share a veto on resources policy and projects, so nothing goes ahead without agreement. Danish and European claims on fish and other resources, including uranium and oil, have provided the hottest political flashpoints. The ultra-modern European style and yet traditional Inuit character of the country captivates any visitor.

Alaska, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon all provide recent case studies directly relevant to Australia. When Canada used its Constitutional centenary of 1967 to create a full-fledged provincial-like Government of the Northwest Territories, those of us involved thought it a great step. Quickly, however, it proved a failure for indigenous peoples. Many and expensive programs and structures were set up to encourage indigenous communities to grab hold of the white man's local government tradition. Inuit, Dene, and Métis were less interested in street lighting in the hitherto unlit and unstreeted Arctic than in basics: management of land and sea food species, cultural and linguistic survival, public services relevant to their social customs, and equal pay, housing, and benefits with the high-living white men sent in, usually for brief spells, to rule them.

Government wanted the races to live in harmony, and decreed people equal when the evidence of everyone's eye was that the white minority had the houses and jobs while 'natives' had shacks, grudging welfare payments, and disdained 'backward' traditions, cultures, and languages. The head of government shouted 'We're all northerners!' but this became a term of derision among politically aware indigenous youth – an ironic rallying cry.

The upshot was the indigenous rights movement whose agenda was not only land, freshwater, and marine territories protected from the white man's industrial follies, but northern local and regional or territorial governments in the style and idiom of northern indigenous residents.

The Inuit used their numbers in the NWT legislature and their people's passion for their own territory, Nunavut, to settle claims and establish a new government which takes office on April 1, 1999 in a land area larger than Queensland. Much Inuit interest is on the sea, however, and Inuit rights of marine protection and management, revenues, etc. are being implemented (and watched by coastal indigenous peoples around the world).

As in Australia, Northern Canada has federal territories treating indigenous inhabitants better than do adjacent states/provinces. The worst social ills in Canada are found in this provincial north stretching across seven of the ten provinces – conveniently far from TV and press reporters so their horrors only episodically upset Canadians. Special pain comes when bad images or tales reach Europe and Canada is bombarded with questions and censure.

In 1979 a new Canadian federal conservative government tried to rush through Yukon constitutional change to please white supporters there. By unbalancing the Yukon indigenous claims negotiations underway, and diminishing the likely role of Yukon Indians in public institutions, furore resulted across Canada over the government's

indigenous intentions. It had to hold urgent meetings with the Indians, re-balance policies, and be humiliated when Yukoners then rejected provincehood.

This whole mess made the government look incompetent. It was one of several such issues which led to its early demise weeks later and the return of the Liberals in new elections. Trudeau moved quickly in April 1980, agreeing to indigenous self-government as a national issue for face-to-face constitutional negotiations between himself and premiers meeting with indigenous leaders.

Alaska statehood was achieved in the late 1950s. Alaska and Hawaii became the 49th and 50th States of the USA. This 'success' merely opened a new phase, however, because it left aside indigenous rights. Alaska Natives, as they often call themselves, mobilised. When the US was eager for Arctic Ocean oil to be drilled and shipped across the state to Valdez (of *Exxon Valdez* fame) the heat was on. Inuit, Dene, Haida, Tlinkit, and Aleut leaders worked out a package deal with the US Congress, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971. It set aside lands, provided an immediate \$1 billion in cash to fund regional bodies, and was paralleled by a further Act for 'national interest' lands (i.e., parks and key environments), all of which would secure indigenous lifeways.

Alaskan politics are truly rambunctious, but unlike Australia's NT, it is not a one-party state. Politicians and parties come and go so that Alaskan Natives can work with the mainstream political system to get results. Nonetheless, indigenous peoples keep fighting to maintain and strengthen indigenous self-management and self-government forms, and their rights to harvest resources of land and sea as they have always done. A major court decision in recent weeks is seen as bringing closer the day when the federal government must resume full power for indigenous resource use in order to ensure that white bloody-mindedness doesn't make Natives beggars at their own feast.

The tragedy in Alaska, as in the NT, Northern Canada, Scandinavia, and Northern Russia is that southern whites move there for its unique character and then begin to assert cultural and political hegemony according to the very models they have left behind. In all such regions, except Australia to date, national governments play an active role assisting race relations, social peace, and political accommodation between white and indigenous. They do this to maintain order and respect for government, avoid further social costs of failure, and to prevent bloodshed.

In Canada's Western NWT, the region supposedly all fixed up in 1967 at the Centenary of Confederation and rump now left by Nunavut, things are more innovative. As we speak there are federally-appointed eminent persons acceptable to indigenous peoples working in the several ethno-regions, i.e., of Dene peoples and the Inuvialuit Inuit, to design regional government structures based on indigenous traditions and wants. The regions will then form a 'federal' territory government. The Western NWT has had several truly inspirational sets of proposals and studies over the years, but not the inter-racial or inter-regional consensus to achieve outcomes. Ottawa has had to become active to obtain a result.

Russian indigenous people, academics, and officials have been paying attention to Northern Europe and North America, working with indigenous peoples in Canada and

elsewhere to develop options for their northern indigenous crisis. (For background see *Anxious North*, ed. A Pika, J Dahl & I Larsen, IWGIA, Copenhagen, 1996.) One promising idea is a nation-wide framework law with principles under which indigenous peoples and regions can negotiate 'regional agreements' for self-governing territories. Relations between president and parliament have prevented this from becoming law.

The constitutional and political reforms described above were not devised by wild-eyed radicals. They came from Republican and Democrat, Liberal and Conservative, Labor and Social Democratic governments, sometimes involving *very* conservative governments at sub-national or regional level. They grew naturally from the insufficiency of social betterment programs as remedies, i.e., from the very approach deemed 'new' in Australia today.

Northern territories overseas have had many problems, all of which stemmed from the dynamics of two opposites: national neglect of northern social and political equality, and episodic imposition of inappropriate southern-style solutions. In recent decades these hinterlands have attracted much serious policy consideration, and some inspiring approaches. For instance, the new Arctic Council brings together the USA, Russia, Canada, and Nordic five (Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland) together with their northern indigenous peoples in a permanent problem-solving and project-undertaking forum. It is likely that in coming years that part of that world will come up with many important further innovations in indigenous-government and northern territory development.

North Australia has seemed to a foreign observer more of a policy-free zone. While it may make some sense to Canberra to hand over the economic potential and race relations of the north to white small business interests in Darwin, such sense may belong more to 19th century habits than late 20th or early 21st century imperatives. Nor will it ensure Canberra the quiet life it apparently craves from such a transfer.

National governments are held to account by the international community, a fact responsible for their less offensive rhetoric on race than comes from territory or state capitals under populist rule. To see the white government of a continent already notorious in world race relations history handing over non-white peoples and their lands, against their will, to a government which abuses or uses them to win racially tainted elections will draw foreign attention.

There are many options available for NT peoples and regions already tried abroad. There are many more which NT people may devise. At the very least the Australian Parliament should ensure that NT indigenous representatives are able to maintain their vital interests and design their future in a part of Australia where they are and will remain the permanent residents, in country truly theirs.

It is interesting to note that in the overseas cases there have always been false starts and derailed processes before a final outcome is reached. Best for the NT would be to go back to the drawing board and have real studies of possible options and real negotiations. One hopes that the Prime Minister's generally measured and restrained announcement of steps leaves such an option open.

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