

Why the Northern Territory Matters... to All of Us

by PETER JULL

Adjunct Associate Professor,
School of Political Science & International Studies,
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Q. 4072

Chief Minister Clare Martin, the Northern Territory 'premier', seems to have the sort of personality to preside over a serious and coherent (rather than merely eccentric and shrill), and inclusive (rather than divisive or redneck), next phase in northern political and constitutional development. On the subject of moves towards full NT statehood she is quoted as saying that 'There's a need for public education, information-sharing. No other jurisdiction in Australia has faced the task of building governance from the ground up for well over a century... Statehood could be part of a maturing, the development of a more inclusive territory, that sense of taking the political tension that was here out of the place. It can be a growing, learning process. I see it in the next few years as a healing process as well, bringing the community together. Yes, statehood can actually be healing for the territory.' ('We of the Never-Never', N. Rothwell, *The Weekend Australian*, 28-6-2003)

Of course, Ms Martin's Labor party is not so much a broad church as an outdoor rally scattered across the fields, by no means all easily within earshot. Rallying them all for a sausage sizzle – let alone constitutional canapés – will take time and talk. But her interview is the best sign of hope from the organised non-indigenous North in many years that a bloody-minded white 19th Century frontier political arrangement is not good enough for the 21st Century.

The Northern Territory constitutional challenge is breathtakingly simple. The region now defined as the NT contains two societies with values, aspirations, needs, etc. which are almost polar opposites. One is centred on a largely transient Anglophone population who make up the majority at any given census or election day. The other is a permanent scattering of Aboriginal territories, peoples, cultures, and languages, including their recent urban or semi-urbanised diaspora in Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and elsewhere. These two archetypal groupings interpenetrate and modify each other at many points, but their differences are basic.

There may be no more than two broad points of agreement – that they live in and make up a special sort of place, and that their current politico-administrative arrangements are insufficient and/or unsatisfactory. Given the depth of contending social and political cultures, such common ground is by no means trivial. It provides a basis for political reform.

Too often these critical steps are botched. Our jubilation at creation of Canada's Northwest Territories government in 1967 turned to disappointment, leading to indigenous land/sea claims and self-government movements, including creation of the Inuit territory of Nunavut and other regional renewals such as the Deh Cho (see my 'Canada's Nunavut and Nunavut's Canada', <http://eprint.uq.edu.au/archive/00000098/>,

and ‘Deh Cho First Nations Framework’, *Australian Indigenous Law Reporter* 6(3), 2001). Alaska’s 1950s statehood dynamics, all too much like many NT aspirations, have created decades of conflict as indigenous peoples marginalised then have had to recover rights and territory. Greenland and Inuit Arctic Quebec are working through major ‘second generation’ indigenous political reforms to build on early successes and problems. Russia juggles indigenous territorial autonomy here, and proposals for mass depopulation of the Arctic there. Sami in Norway have wondered if they are back to ‘square one’ with uncomprehending governments despite the constitutional amendment and other reforms of the late 1980s.

These and many other cases, not to mention Torres Strait, Cape York Peninsula, the Kimberley, Pitjantjatjara lands, remind us that building new political structures to meet the needs of rapidly changing ‘old but new’ societies is an honourable, widespread, and exciting field of work. Too many white Australians act as if it is dirty and best met with denial.

Framework agreements, political accords, special forums, and a recognition that ‘sparselands’ have their own moral and political imperatives, are all part of the mix. Mere ‘rep by pop’ assemblies are no answer where a minority people is the legitimate first owner and claimant of lands, seas, and resources. (In Northern Canada we mixed Indian, Inuit, Métis, and white leaders from the ‘rep by pop’ legislature with elected Indian, Inuit, Métis, and even white representatives from the native movement to achieve constitutional consensus.)

Ms Martin sees what many others around Australia recognise. The NT is not a remote hinterland but an exciting forerunner; not merely an add-on to a southern industrial society, but a different kind of social, cultural, developmental, and political space, one linked to the biggest challenges – racial harmony, environmental maintenance, sustainable development, Asian relations – of our era. The site preparations never done in the rest of Australia in indigenous relations and environmental management are ‘matter of fact’ here. While Australians loiter on the wrong side of the indigenous policy divide – where it is still thought politically remarkable and speechworthy to have ‘universal’ health, education, and welfare programs include these visible minorities – the other northern territories mentioned above all accept more or less happily cross-cultural realities and equalities in their regions and politics. As Martin says, to do that quietly and intelligently in the next few years in the promising ground of the NT would provide some much needed healing. She tactfully refrains from saying ‘for the whole of Australia’.
