Separatism, that is the belief that North Queensland should be cut off from the south and allowed to govern itself, was fairly widespread in northern Queensland last century. It was also endemic: between 1866, when the first flare-up occurred, and 1900 there was a series of separation movements seeking the division of the colony. In this lecture these movements will be discussed in some detail. First, however, a few general reasons for the persistent recurrence of separation movements in North Queensland are outlined and then a brief description of the typical characteristics of these movements.

The settlers who came to open up northern Queensland in the 1860s brought the idea of separation with them. Many believed that the separation of Victoria and Queensland from New South Wales as settlement spread indicated the pattern of things to come. It was commonly assumed in official circles, and by the northern settlers in general, that Queensland would sooner or later be subdivided into two or more new colonies. The writings of John Dunmore Lang were particularly influential in creating this outlook. Lang had taken an active part in gaining the separation of Victoria and Queensland from New South Wales and he strongly advocated further separations. Using the small states of the United States of America as his example, Lang wrote of the need for seven colonies along the eastern seaboard of Australia. Therefore the prevailing expectation was that Queensland, with its vast territory and its obviously ill-placed capital city, would inevitably be split up sometime in the future. This idea seems to have taken deep root in the thinking of North Queensland's colonists.

Distance was an important factor in the development of the early separation movements. The capital city was placed in the extreme south-east corner of an enormous territory comprising 670,000 square miles. As the bush ballad from which G.C. Bolton took the title of his
book pointed out, many parts of North Queensland were "a thousand miles away" from the administrative centre in Brisbane. In 1893, a pamphlet entitled Why North Queensland Wants Separation drew attention to the unfortunate geographical position of Brisbane, asking:

When a wheelright makes a wheel, does he put the hub on the rim?....When an engineer erects a stationary engine, does he not erect it as near as possible to the place where its power is to be exerted?...Yet the people of Queensland have placed their administrative engine, the hub of their Government, in the extreme corner of a territory of 670,000 square miles; and expect that the power of the State will be equally exerted at Bowen and at Brisbane, that the benefits of the State will be equally shown at Ipswich, twenty miles away from the capital, and at Croydon, a thousand miles away. Is the expectation reasonable?....What would you think of a man who told you the circulation of the blood would be more perfect if the heart were placed in the big toe?

Distance made the administration of northern areas difficult and inefficient.

Separatism was stimulated when, as in other Australian colonies, the capital city grew and became self-generating - with the result that metropolitan interests began to dominate colonial parliaments. The relatively sparse population on the frontier engaged in pastoralism mining and tropical agriculture felt they were politically under-represented, and that their interests were consequently ignored. Because seats in parliament were allocated on the basis of population, the north could never hope to outvote the south. As Thankful Willmett, the president of the Separation Council, put it in 1886, northerners had:

left to them not the slightest real control over their own political affairs, their public loans, or other public works. They have indeed the privilege of electing eight members to a Legislative Assembly of 55; they have the further privilege of reflecting that, for almost

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all practical purposes, they might as well leave the electoral right unemployed. And, whether they petition or protest, they are met with the reply that Queensland is under responsible Government, against whose dicta, however mischievous, they have no appeal....

In addition, the elongated shape of Queensland's territory, with its long coastline, promoted the development of separate regions; this tendency was especially pronounced in the days of poor communications. Separate regions headed by Bowen, Townsville, Cairns and Mackay as ports of access were established to serve the pastoral, mining and agricultural hinterland. Roads and tracks led from the interior to these individual ports. Likewise the first railways ran from west to east not from north to south, providing communications between the regional capitals and their "back-country". It was not until 1924 that the coastal line linked the north to Brisbane. This communications pattern which developed in the first decades after the creation of Queensland encouraged the growth of regionalism.

Moreover, the northern portion of Queensland is in the tropics; hence there was a tendency for northern industry to develop along lines quite different to those of the temperate southern portion of the colony. This was especially notable in the case of the sugar industry. At times serious conflicts of interest arose between the producers of North and South Queensland: for instance, northern sugar producers were keen to negotiate reciprocity agreements with Victoria and South Australia to allow duty-free entry of North Queensland sugar, but were thwarted by the overwhelming political influence of the protectionist agricultural producers of southern Queensland. The idea that tropical climates generated a social milieu at odds with the conditions of Western "temperate" civilization was one of the prevailing assumptions of the Victorian era. A.G. Stephens, the pamphleteer of the Townsville Separation League, emphasized the significance of the Tropic of Capricorn in the case for northern separation:
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South Queensland lies almost wholly within the temperate zone; North Queensland lies wholly within the Tropics. To those who will think what this fact implies, there must come conviction that the system of government which is suitable for the one can never be good for the other. The natural opposition is too great. Radical differences of soil, of vegetation, of climate, of rainfall, of physical contour, of natural resources, of artificial products, must cause corresponding differences in the character of pursuits of the inhabitants of the two territories, and in the laws and customs by which they should be governed. 6

The northern separationists maintained that climatic differences led to a diversity of interests which made North and South Queensland incompatible.

These then were some of the underlying factors predisposing North Queensland to separation movements: a belief, held even from the time of the first settlement of the north, that separation was inevitable; the factor of distance; differences in climate, industry and population density between north and south; the development of regional communications systems; and the growth of a metropolitan monopoly in Brisbane.

Two currents of development turned this predisposition into concerted, organized separation movements determined to divide north from south. Firstly, there was a growing sense of grievance against the south due to its alleged inability to deal fairly with all areas of the colony. This aspect of the question was well-presented in R.G. Neale's article in Historical Studies in 1951. Neale stressed economic self-interest in his interpretation of the movement. A second current was the growth and development of North Queensland itself, so that its people came to believe that they were ready to govern themselves in an independent colony. This went back to the assumption that sooner or later separation must come; separationists, especially in the 1880s and 1890s, were convinced that the time was right. They compared North
Queensland to other colonies using various indices of growth such as population, revenue, exports and imports. Finding that North Queensland compared favourably with many colonies that had enjoyed self-government for years, they felt that they too were now entitled to rule themselves.

The separation movements of last century shared several common features. They were organized and directed by separation leagues and committees. These were usually appointed at public meetings and almost invariably included the civic leaders of the northern towns. Local shopkeepers and small businessmen were the core of the leagues. Each local league corresponded with kindred organizations in other towns. The desire for separation was spread mainly by means of public meetings, and it was at public meetings also that important decisions were made about how the movement was to be conducted. One of the main responsibilities of the leagues was the canvassing of signatures for separation petitions addressed to the Queen. The league also maintained a close working relationship with the parliamentary representatives of the northern electorates, who advocated the separation case in parliament.

Despite their surface similarities, however, each of the northern separation movements differed considerably. This was partly because they occurred at different stages in the development of North Queensland. On each occasion the cases presented by the separationists were quite different.

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The first separation movement in north Queensland appeared in 1866. At this time north Queensland was still very much in its infancy. Its first township, Bowen, had been founded only in 1861; in 1865 the population of North Queensland numbered a mere 1086. Because of this
northerners believed, probably quite correctly, that their chances of gaining self-government from the British authorities were very slim. Therefore - a little reluctantly, for rivalry was already intense - north Queensland joined hands with Rockhampton and the districts of central Queensland in demanding separation. The boundary of the new northern colony was to be at the line of Dawes Range to the south of Gladstone. The Northern Separation League had its centre in Rockhampton with affiliated leagues in Bowen and Mackay. But internecine squabbling - between Rockhampton and Gladstone, and between Rockhampton and its pastoral hinterland, as much as between central Queensland and north Queensland - destroyed the movement. By mid-1867 it had burned itself out.

In 1869 the separation movement was revived. By this time north Queensland had progressed considerably and the discovery of gold at Cape River and Ravenswood made its economic future look promising. But still separationists were not hopeful of northern autonomy and they were wary of association with Rockhampton as a result of their previous experience. Reasoning that their small population would deter the British government from granting them fully-fledged responsible government they adopted the aim of separation as a Crown Colony. In a Crown Colony, the Queen, through her appointed officials would control legislation and all public officers; it was argued that north Queensland needed a period of tutelage under the British Colonial Office before it would be ready for the onerous responsibilities of self-government.

This movement of 1869 to 1872 was the first move for the separation of north Queensland proper, as distinct from central Queensland. This time the boundary of the new colony was to be at the line of Cape Palmerston south of Mackay, excluding Rockhampton and the central districts. In 1871 a petition was sent to England asking for separation; it was refused by the Secretary of State for the Colonies.
in 1872 on the ground that the complex question of separation had not been adequately discussed in the Queensland parliament. The British Government was reluctant to interfere in the internal affairs of self-governing colonies like Queensland. This negative reply effectively put a halt to the northern movement.

But other, internal, factors also contributed to the failure and collapse of the separation movements of the 1860s and very early 1870s; local loyalties undermined the unity of these movements. Bowen vied with Rockhampton to be the capital of the planned new colony. Other towns such as Townsville and Mackay were unwilling to assist either Rockhampton or Bowen in the bid for supremacy. Co-operation was also lacking between the northern pastoralists and the people of the towns. There was considerable ill-feeling between town and country in this period; in central Queensland a number of the outback squatters even organized an anti-separation petition.

During the remainder of the 1870s there was no active separation campaign, though in 1876 Bowen and Townsville vainly attempted to initiate a movement. During this decade northern complaints about financial discrimination became increasingly strident. Northerners believed that the centralization of legislative and administrative powers in the south allowed the south to use the finances of the colony for its own benefit, to the neglect of essential public works in the north. Public loans were raised on the security of the whole colony but, according to many North Queenslanders, the money was applied mainly to southern development. Still the north had to pay its share of the interest, though it received no direct benefit from developmental projects in southern Queensland. Administration was increasingly inefficient with greater distances from the capital. Furthermore, North Queensland, lacked influence in parliament to remedy these injustices because seats were allocated on a population basis.
Under pressure from North Queensland representatives parliament, in the 1870s considered a number of legislative remedies for these ills. The idea was to divide Queensland into three or four provinces for financial purposes. Separate accounts of revenue and expenditure would be kept, and the parliamentary representatives of each of the provinces would form committees empowered to advise parliament on the financial administration of their province. Southerners tended to find these so-called "Financial Separation" bills too drastic, while northerners felt that they did not go far enough in redressing their grievances. Pleasing no one, they were easily postponed or shelved. In 1877 a Royal Commission was appointed in an attempt to allay discontent in the distant parts of the colony. As a result of its deliberations, another Financial Separation bill was drawn up: "to provide for the division of the colony into districts for financial purposes, and to adjust the general and local receipts and expenditure of the colony." But this, like the earlier bills, failed to pass parliament.

The 1880s saw the most serious, concerted and well-organized attempt to achieve separation. This time the movement aimed for separation with representative institutions and responsible government, with the border once again at the line of Cape Palmerston. From the early 1880s to about 1894 separation became a great issue in North Queensland. The movement affected the entire north but reactions to it varied widely. Thus G.C. Bolton has designated the issue of separation as "North Queensland's first great controversy."

The organization of this movement was more complex than before. It comprised 20 local leagues which sent representatives to a central co-ordinating body, the Separation Council, based in Townsville. In June 1886 the Separation Council sent a 26-foot long petition containing just over 10,000 signatures to England. Debates on separation took place in the Legislative Assembly and delegations were sent to London to lobby on behalf of the separation cause.
Strong leagues were formed in Townsville, Mackay and Hughenden; there were also branches at Cairns, Charters Towers, Cooktown, Bowen, and many other smaller centres. However, in many places there were also sizeable anti-separation groups. A poll in Charters Towers in 1890, for instance, showed that the anti-separationists outnumbered the separationists by 1220 to 984.14

Much of the opposition to the movement within the north was due to the belief that it was basically a move by the northern sugar planters to protect their supplies of coloured labour for sugar cultivation. In 1883 Sir Samuel Griffith had achieved an overwhelming electoral victory on a platform of curtailing the entry of alien labour into Queensland. Griffith alleged that the planters, fearing the impending restrictions, had taken up the cause of separation with the aim of establishing a "black state" in the north, a planters' aristocracy based upon imported coloured labour.15 Separationists vehemently denied the Premier's accusations, but he had successfully managed to tar "the whole movement with the 'black labour' brush".16 The coloured labour issue aroused the suspicions of British officials, who associated the movement with all the evils of "blackbirding", so recently forced upon public attention by the "Hopeful" scandal.17 It also tended to alienate from the movement the working class, and particularly the northern miners, who fiercely opposed the use of imported "coolie" labour. The coloured labour issue inevitably had a detrimental, divisive effect on the northern separation movement.

Moreover, as in the 1860s, there was bitter rivalry between the northern towns for selection as the new capital. Virtually every town in the north was convinced that it had the best claim to the honour. In an attempt to obviate destructive bickering, the Mackay league and John Macrossan suggested an entirely new capital, perhaps at the Valley of Lagoons inland from Cardwell. But this idea was never taken up. Again, localism and urban rivalry were powerful divisive forces undermining the separation movement.
The northern separationists encountered many setbacks in London. In 1887 the Secretary of State for the Colonies refused to give an affirmative answer to the separation petition. He argued that the British government had only a "latent power" in deciding the question. Because Queensland was a self-governing colony, he said, he was unwilling to interfere in its internal administration unless the Queensland parliament specifically requested him to do so. This meant that a resolution in favour of separation would have to be passed by the Queensland Legislative Assembly. As the northern separationists well knew, this was an impossibility. Southern members outnumbered northerners in parliament and they consistently voted in a bloc against separation.

Following this negative answer from the Secretary of State the separation movement plunged into a period of despair and disillusionment. But by 1890 the agitation had revived and once again memorials and letters were sent to London. The persistence of the separationists seemed to be having effect. Rumours spread that the Secretary of State was becoming more favourably inclined towards the movement. But once again Samuel Griffith showed his political astuteness. He devised an elaborate scheme for a provincial federation within Queensland. The three provinces of north, central and south Queensland were each to have their own legislature; in addition, a federal legislature, including representatives from all three provinces, was to meet in Brisbane.

So long as it seemed that northern grievances could be met by means short of separation, the Secretary of State was pleased to delay making a decision. He therefore told a separation delegation in London to wait until Griffith's scheme had been thoroughly thrashed out in the Queensland Legislative Council, separationists thought their day had finally come. But now, owing to a change of government in Britain, Sir Henry Holland who as Secretary of State was by this time fairly well-
informed on the separation question and whose attitude seemed to be softening, was replaced. Lord Ripon, the new Secretary of State, was reluctant to make a decision and eagerly seized upon the financial crisis in Queensland in 1893 as an excuse to postpone his decision indefinitely.\(^{20}\)

A number of general reasons have been advanced for the hesitancy of the British government on the question of North Queensland separation. Firstly, the British government was anxious to protect the interests of people in Britain who had bought Queensland bonds. It was feared that the division of Queensland would reduce the security on which the bonds had originally been issued and increase the risks of failure to redeem or pay interest on the borrowed money. By 1890 Queensland government borrowing amounted to about 28 million pounds, so the British bondholders had a considerable interest in the continued prosperity of the colony. Secondly, the British government were apprehensive that a new colony might not be economically viable, and hence become an added expense. They therefore preferred to maintain the status quo. Thirdly, granting separation to North Queensland may have caused embarrassment to the British government in view of its unionist policy on Ireland. The separation issue could have been taken up and exploited by the Irish members of the House of Commons, asking "if North Queensland was entitled to self-government, why not Ireland also?" And finally, a genuine reluctance to interfere with the workings of self-governing colonies influenced the attitude of the British colonial minister. This meant that the British would rather consider any solution other than separation. The growth of the nationalist feeling throughout the Australian colonies was already making itself felt in resentment at political interference by the British authorities.

In North Queensland itself, the separation movement had by 1894 declined into insignificance. Repeated rebuffs in London had produced a sense of despondency, a feeling that further attempts were
useless. The financial depression, heralded by the bank closures of 1893, absorbed the attention of many separationists. Furthermore, the advent of the Labour party on the political scene caused many formerly ardent separationists to think twice. In the general election of 1893, seven Labour men were elected in North Queensland out of a total of seventeen northern members. In 1894 this victory was consolidated by the success of a Labour candidate in a Townsville by-election. From then on the possibility that the government of the new colony in the north might be Labour-dominated had to be considered. Naturally enough this new outlook tended to make Labour supporters more keen on separation, but the more conservative groups, which had previously been the backbone of the movement, became increasingly alienated from it. All these factors contributed to the decline of the movement. By 1894 the north's most significant, serious separation movement had virtually petered out. British resistance, southern opposition, and northern disunity had combined to defeat it.

Since then there have been only sporadic attempts to revive the separation issue. But the effects of separatism have been more wide-ranging. For instance, separatist feeling seems to have been one factor in North Queensland's overwhelmingly affirmative vote for federation in the 1899 referendum. In fact, the votes of North Queenslanders were decisive in bringing Queensland into the Australian Commonwealth. While South Queenslanders feared being overwhelmed by the numbers and trading strength of the southern colonies, northerners saw little difference in being governed from Melbourne, Sydney, or Brisbane. Some highly optimistic separationists even argued that the removal of inter-colonial trade barriers would reduce the incentive of the South to retain its hold over northern trade, hence bringing separation nearer.

In the event, however, federation drastically altered the situation for die-hard separationists. Clauses 123 and 124 of the new
Australian constitution made the approval of the state government and the Commonwealth government preconditions for the division of any state:

123. The Parliament of the Commonwealth may, with the consent of the Parliament of a State, and the approval of the majority of the electors of the State voting upon the question, increase, diminish, or otherwise alter the limits of the State, and may with the like consent, make provision respecting the effect and operation of any increase or diminution or alteration of territory in relation to any State affected.

124. A new State may be formed by separation of territory from a State, but only with the consent of the Parliament thereof, and a new State may be formed by the union of two or more States or parts of States but only with the consent of the Parliaments of the States affected.

State governments, of course, have vested interests in the matter and no state government has yet given its support to a separatist movement within its borders. Moreover, through federation the separationists lost the British government as a final court of appeal.

At the same time economic factors were working towards the gradual assimilation of all districts of Australia within a national economy. Improved transport and communications undermined much of the old sense of regional identity. Nevertheless, northern separatism has still enjoyed its revivals. Between 1910 and 1914 the issue was raised once again in the Queensland parliament by T.J. Ryan and John Adamson. Petitions were sent to the Federal government, which, however, declined to accept responsibility for making a decision on the question. In 1910 a motion favouring the division of Queensland into three separate states was actually passed in the Legislative Assembly, but no further action was taken on the matter. In the 1920s and more especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s active movements tried to obtain government backing for a referendum on separation. Even today the idea of a new state in the north is far from dead, though popular
support can in no way be compared to what it was at its height in the 1880s. A feeling of regional loyalty still exists in North Queensland; this may be recognized, in part at least, as a significant long-term effect of the separation movements of the past.

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