

An aerial photograph of a large dam and reservoir in Australia. The water is a murky, brownish-grey color, contrasting with the clear blue sky. In the foreground, there are green trees and a portion of a building with a tiled roof. The dam structure is visible on the left side of the image, with some small structures and a road leading to it. The background shows a hilly landscape with sparse vegetation.

# NORTHERN DREAMS

The Politics of Northern Development in Australia

LYNDON MEGARRITY

## ***Praise for Northern Dreams***

'Dr Megarrity uses Northern Australia as a vantage point from which to examine national public policy since 1901. He offers a refreshing view from, rather than of, the region. Drawing on meticulous research, his book places the North in an historical context, providing new insights into electoral politics as well as public policy generation, implementation and outcomes. It highlights the costly metropolitan bias of many politicians, bureaucrats and commentators, as well as the emergence of Indigenous Australians as influential players in the policy process. Its case studies demonstrate that while Northern Australia periodically captures the attention of federal politicians, it is an unstable policy platform, with a propensity to dissolve when confronted with the rigid cartography of States and Territories. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in tropical Australia.'

– Dr Rodney Sullivan, Honorary Research Associate Professor,  
School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry,  
The University of Queensland

'Anyone interested in properly understanding North Australia's intriguing past should read Lyndon Megarrity's important new book. It is particularly well written, based on wide-ranging research and filled with perceptive observations and conclusions.'

– David Carment, Emeritus Professor of History,  
Charles Darwin University

'This is essential reading for anyone interested in Australia's tropical lands. Lyndon Megarrity explains why an urge to develop the north has flitted in and out of popularity for over a hundred years. It seems set to continue to do so.'

– Russell McGregor, Adjunct Professor of History,  
James Cook University



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LYNDON MEGARRITY

AUSTRALIAN SCHOLARLY

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JAMES COOK  
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*To my mother, my father and my brother David.*



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# Foreword

The tropics, in the western imagination, have long been a place of fantasy. And in Australian history, the tropical North has all too frequently been the object of political fantasy, especially among southerners who have viewed it as a place of danger as well as promise.

National visions nurtured in southern Australia found a place for the North, but often as a marginal and troubling presence that reminded Australians of their proximity to a menacing Asian world. Australian nationalism depended on the maps in people's heads. Northern Queensland pointed like a giant untidy arrow towards New Guinea, that seemingly indispensable barrier dividing 'white' Australia from a frightening 'coloured' world beyond it. The Northern Territory, meanwhile, appeared like a welcome-mat, inviting outsiders in. But for some, especially in recent decades, the North has been an entry to Asia, the gateway to its material and cultural riches.

Sustained and clear-sighted engagement with the problems of the North, as Dr Lyndon Megarrity shows in this fine study, is harder to find than periodic bursts of enthusiasm among the southerners who have dominated the terms of political debate in this country. The North has been discovered, neglected and rediscovered, usually for reasons that had precious little to do with the needs of the people – both Indigenous and Settler – who made lives there.

The North has been at once a place, an idea and a problem. It has stimulated the scientists and the theorists – in medicine, defence, agriculture, hydrology and economics – worried the racial ideologues, and planted hope in the breasts of boosters, adventurers and dreamers. But political interest from the south has too often been little more than a projection of the hopes and fears of people living thousands of miles away. The North's advocates

have found their work a thankless and, at times, an ultimately sour task.

Dr Megarrity is himself from the North and he brings to his task an intimate knowledge of its past and a conviction that Australian history must be more than the tale of a few southern cities and their hinterlands. This is the fascinating and important story of one of the most enduring questions in Australian politics: the future of the tropical north in the life of a nation dominated by its temperate south. And good northerner and historian that he is, Dr Megarrity does not neglect the continuing efforts of his fellow-northerners to shape their own destiny.

Frank Bongiorno FRHistS FASSA  
Professor of History  
The Australian National University  
April 2018

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Some of the chapters in this book were based partly on work which appeared originally as online publications and journal articles, although the chapters as they appear in this current publication may differ in tone and emphasis:

Lyndon Megarrity, *Research Report 46: Northern Dreams, National Realities: The Life and Times of Dr Rex Patterson*, T.J. Ryan Foundation, Brisbane, May 2016, online publication on T.J. Ryan Foundation website: <http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/cms/page.asp?ID=1991>

Lyndon Megarrity, 'Northern Visions: The Commonwealth and the North since 1945', *Northern Territory Historical Studies*, No. 27, 2016, 26–36.

Lyndon Megarrity, "'Necessary and Urgent'? The Politics of Northern Australia, 1945–75', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 97, Pt 2, 2011, 136–60.

Lyndon Megarrity, 'The Queensland Legend', *Journal of Australian Colonial History* (special issue on the work of historian Russel Ward), Vol. 10, No. 2, 2008, 123–38.

Lyndon Megarrity, "'White Queensland': The Queensland Government's Ideological Position on the Use of Pacific Island Labourers in the Sugar Sector 1880–1901", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2006, 1–12.

I thank the editors of the above publications for their permission to use this material.

I am indebted to numerous organisations and cultural institutions. The James Cook University Library, the State Library of Queensland, the Fryer Library, the National Archives of Australia, the National Library of Australia and the Northern Territory Library are all blessed with useful resources and fine staff. I also thank the Australian Labor Party National Secretariat for giving me permission to view records of the Australian Labor Party Federal Secretariat held at the National Library of Australia relating to northern development policy (file 74, Box 127, MS 4985).

This research was supported by the Australian Government under an Australian Prime Ministers Centre Fellowship, an initiative of the Museum of Australian Democracy. I place this acknowledgement here because I have drawn on some of the research I conducted during my Australian Prime Ministers Centre Fellowship (2010–11) in the writing of this book. Finally, I would like to thank the College of Arts, Society and Education (CASE) at James Cook University: between 2014 and 2018, I have been an adjunct lecturer at CASE, and have been provided with office space and ready access to James Cook University's library services.

# Abbreviations

<i>AJPH</i>	<i>Australian Journal of Politics and History</i>
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ANU	Australian National University
A&U	Allen & Unwin
CLP	Country Liberal Party (Northern Territory)
<i>CM</i>	<i>Courier-Mail</i>
<i>CPD</i>	<i>Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates</i>
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
<i>CT</i>	<i>Canberra Times</i>
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DRC	Darwin Reconstruction Commission
FIFO	Fly-in-fly-out
JCU SC	James Cook University Library Special Collections
MHR	Member of the House of Representatives (Commonwealth)
MUP	Melbourne University Press
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NADC	Northern Australia Development Committee
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NLA	National Library of Australia
NQLGA	North Queensland Local Government Association
<i>NTN</i>	<i>Northern Territory News</i>
PTNC	People the North Committee
QPD	Queensland Parliamentary Debates
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
<i>SMH</i>	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
UAP	United Australia Party
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UQP	University of Queensland Press
UWA	University of Western Australia
UWS	University of Western Sydney

The map illustrates the geographical layout of Australia, including its states and territories. Key features include:

- States and Territories:** Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland, and Papua New Guinea.
- Major Cities and Towns:** Perth, Fremantle, Mandurah, Inland, Broome, Darwin, Alice Springs, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville, and others.
- Geographical Features:** Coral Sea, Gulf of Carpentaria, Torres Strait, Timor Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Tropic of Capricorn.
- Islands and Peninsulas:** Cobourg Peninsula, Arnhem Land, Gove Peninsula, and various islands in the Torres Strait.

# Introduction

If Australia is to be held – it will be held in the North ... It can only be made impregnable by settling the empty, inviting, healthy – but now neglected – North, with men who will make it their home, their holiest of holies, their own. Empty North Australia menaces all Australia.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote journalist John Sleeman in 1920. From the late nineteenth century to the early 1970s, commentators preached doom for Australia if the northern half of Australia remained underpopulated by Europeans and undeveloped by their civilisation. Sleeman and his peers assumed that advancing Asian nations would seek to invade and settle the north's so-called empty spaces and crush the ideal of a racially pure White Australia forever.

While the goal of a White Australia has now been discredited, Sleeman's claim that the 'Empty North Australia menaces all Australia' still has resonance today. The notion that vast areas of the north are untouched by economic development and therefore 'Empty' periodically concerns Australia's political and business elites, who are mainly based in the south-east of the country. Significantly, economic anxiety about 'unused land' has often combined with fear of political damage to be incurred through neglect of the northern electorate. For despite the fact that Commonwealth, state and local governments over several generations have expended large sums in providing the north's rural and urban residents with infrastructure and amenities, northern politicians continue to push the notion of an uncaring south obstructing the future greatness of the north through neglect. Government funding, especially Commonwealth funding, has been a traditional remedy



to secure infrastructure that would demonstrate the national significance of Northern Australia as well as provide security and well-being to northern residents.

The persistence and passion of advocates for Northern Australia go beyond economics. The frequent insistence that Northern Australia deserves attention because of its presumed national significance taps into a sense that Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory are the centre of media and political attention: areas in the remote north often feel left out of the conversation. This feeling is not unjustified. As historian Regina Ganter wrote in 2005,

The geopolitical imagination of Australian history has relegated the north to the margins ... In Australia, the focus of national cultural and intellectual life is on the Sydney/Canberra/Melbourne axis.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of northern neglect is a close cousin of a traditional national ideal described by the political scientist Judith Brett:

Built into the notion of what it was to be an Australian was an idea of shared access to basic services, a shared minimum standard of living, no matter where you lived.<sup>3</sup>

However, the notion of an under-developed north needing to be righted by a benevolent Commonwealth has not always attracted much enthusiasm from the southern part of the continent, which, after all, has its own regions hungering for support for long overdue infrastructure.

When the north does command national attention, it tends to fall victim to a marginalising exoticism and otherness. The media in the south prefer to build stories around an imagined rural world of farmers battling the environment, colourful but simple politicians, eccentric outsiders turned 'troppo' and miners digging up the land. This is the experience of some, but certainly not the majority, of people in the north. Even before 1901,

people in Northern Australia have generally pursued a suburban lifestyle in places such as Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton, Cairns, Mt Isa, Darwin and Broome. Such an existence is quite removed from the rural landscape. With an imagined rural north obstructing the vision of both southern and northern champions of Northern Australia, a study that sheds light on both the urban and rural nature of the political north is well overdue.

## ***Focus and Definitions***

The politics of northern development is a crucial theme in the Australian national story. In this book, I emphasise the importance of national identity and imagination as the main drivers behind the push for northern development since the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. Visions of northern development have been inextricably linked with the expression of Australian identity through a number of shifting national priorities and ideals: the collective push for a White Australia; Australia's evolving relations with Asia; support for regional Australia; and the perceived need, for moral and social purposes, to 'tame the wilderness' represented by the northern frontier.

The first chapter of this book briefly traces the history of Northern Australia and its emerging political situation up to the Federation of Australia in 1901. The remaining chapters are focused chiefly on the Commonwealth Government and its interactions with the north. Northern Australia for Commonwealth politicians can be a potent symbol of national values, but the actual development of the north has been more incremental than promised in the grand visions of Australian political leaders. Because the northern frontier and its people were often abstract notions in the minds of urban-based federal politicians, the issue of northern development has generally faded from the national political agenda after its periodical revivals.

The less than impressive record of Commonwealth governments on northern development should not blind historians to the rhetorical centrality of the north in the Australian political imagination at times when citizens sought certainty and confidence in the national direction. The national cry

of 'Develop the North!' has cropped up when invasion fears were at their height, especially during the early Federation years and during the 1940s. Most significantly, Commonwealth leaders such as Arthur Calwell, Gough Whitlam and Tony Abbott used northern development as a key electoral issue when they sought to position themselves as visionary alternative Prime Ministers during their years in opposition. Being a champion of northern development provides an outlet for leaders wishing to feed the Australian yearning for ambitious national projects that would demonstrate Australian character, ingenuity and economic vision.

This mixture of commercialism and national sentiment is very old. An early exponent was Federation-era poet Mabel Forrest, whose ideas, if not their expression, are still echoed today in the politics of northern development:

*Arm the empty North that drowns by its tide-washed sandy slopes;  
There is iron in the ranges, there is silver in the stopes,  
There is wealth undreamed – your birthright – in the country's  
scattered parts,  
There is grit and honest courage in your people's loyal hearts.<sup>4</sup>*

The political history of northern development can be defined as 'White Fella Dreaming'. The most prominent version of Northern Australia politics has revolved around issues such as assisting primary industries, building dams, defence and funding regional infrastructure in northern towns. The politics of Aboriginal land rights, identity and advancement have been particularly strong in Northern Australia since the 1960s, but Australia's politicians have tended to treat Indigenous issues separately from those generally regarded as regional 'Northern Australia' issues, which are (westernised) rural and urban ideals of land development. While in recent decades there has been more acknowledgement of Indigenous citizenship and land rights within Northern Australia policy frameworks, the fact remains that northern developers are focused primarily on developing land for economic and political gain. Other alternative uses for northern lands are tolerated and at times accommodated, but the northern boosters of past and present are locked into narrow European ideas of 'pioneering' and 'taming the wilderness'.

Where exactly is Northern Australia? Where does it start and finish? Northern Australia will be defined here as those parts of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia (WA) which are located north of the Tropic of Capricorn. Northern Australia is not, however, an officially defined geographical location, and so it should be noted that politicians have sometimes stretched the concept of 'Northern Australia' to include the whole of the Northern Territory and large areas of Queensland and WA below the tropic as well.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the Tropic of Capricorn is a useful lower boundary for this historical study of Northern Australia because political discussion of northern matters was concentrated on the relative isolation and conditions of the tropics.

For the most part, this narrative concentrates exclusively on the development of towns and districts above the Tropic of Capricorn. In the case of the Northern Territory, however, my rule has been to incorporate the relatively small area below the Capricorn into individual chapters when it is relevant to the politics of Northern Australia as a whole.

Because of its prominence in political discussion of northern development Queensland will frequently be the major focus of attention. For the sake of convenience, the term 'Northern Queensland' is sometimes used to describe the entire area of Queensland above the Tropic of Capricorn. At other times, the term 'North Queensland' is used specifically to describe the area between Mackay/Sarina and the Torres Strait Islands, and 'Central Queensland' is defined as the area south of Mackay and north of Bundaberg. Central Queensland traditionally incorporated territory above and below the Tropic of Capricorn. The use of the terms and definitions of 'North Queensland' and 'Central Queensland' is sometimes necessary because that is how they were often understood by many historical players in this story during the twentieth century.

## ***Northern Australia: Historical Interpretations***

Numerous books and articles have been written about Northern Australia, exploring themes such as geography, local government, Aboriginal affairs, mining, agriculture, the environment and links with Asia. Geographer

P.P. Courtenay, former public servant J.H. Kelly and, more recently, James Cook University academic Allan Dale are among those who have pondered on the past, present and future of Australia's tropics.<sup>6</sup> The focus of such commentators has been largely on contemporary issues, with historical themes acknowledged but generally under-explored.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the history of the north was a thriving field of scholarship among historians in the north itself, facilitated by the growth of regional universities there.<sup>7</sup> With the decline in funding for universities in the latter half of the 1990s, less 'commercial' disciplines such as history suffered massive cuts at the tertiary level which are still felt today. Nevertheless, regional historians, often at postgraduate level, continue to produce work that adds to the body of our knowledge of the tropics, its industries and its people, although generally in studies whose parameters are defined as well as confined by state and territory borders.

In the recent past, historians have been seemingly reluctant to pursue a combined 'Queensland-Western Australia-Northern Territory' study of the expanse of Northern Australia. In part this is due to historical fashions. The concept of a vast super-region of Northern Australia was often underplayed or forgotten in Australian public life between 1975 and 2010, whereas local or regional studies of specific areas of the north seemed more relevant and urgent to northern historians on the ground.

The late Geoffrey Bolton (1931–2015) was one historian who saw potential for a large-scale study of tropical Australia. In 1995 he wrote:

It is my plan for retirement to attempt a magnum opus on the whole of northern Australia incorporating North Queensland, the Top of the N.T. and the Kimberleys. But there are a number of other items which must be shifted out of the intray first.<sup>8</sup>

Bolton's scholarly intray was never sufficiently clear for him to begin such a book. Yet he had already made a strong contribution to the field with his postgraduate work on the Kimberley pastoral industry and explorer-politician Alexander Forrest, along with the first and to date only general

history of North Queensland, *A Thousand Miles Away* (1963).<sup>9</sup> During this early research, he sensed the existence of a tangible northern identity that transcended government boundaries:

So many of the stock routes, lines of communication (both Aboriginal and settler) and shared environmental problems were common to all regions. In the 1950s the *North Queensland Register* was still read on some Kimberley Stations.<sup>10</sup>

An idea of what Bolton's monograph on the north might have looked like can be found in his chapter on the subject in a collection of papers called *Contemporary Australia* (1969) published by Duke University Press. In Bolton's narrative, isolation and poor infrastructure resulted in mass economic disappointment by the 1920s: outside coastal areas, 'most of Australia's North was little more than a vast ranch for sparse herds of beef Shorthorns battling for a living on unfenced and underimproved properties with dismaying overdrafts.'<sup>11</sup> These hard times were followed, however, by federal, state and private investment following World War Two that helped alleviate isolation, facilitated transport and communication, and improved amenities for northern residents. Bolton's essay was published at the tail-end of enormous public and political pressure to accelerate development in Northern Australia where the motivation seemed more patriotic than firmly grounded in cost-benefit analysis. In the space of an essay, he could only speculate as to why this was so:

Urban Australian politicians and their voters like to feel that they have not lost the capacity to pioneer new frontiers ... one suspects that the defence argument [for northern development] to some extent masks a pricking of conscience felt by many urban Australians toward the people of northern Australia because they have assumed a pioneer role which other Australians are taught to admire but do not wish to imitate.<sup>12</sup>

Russell McGregor's 2016 monograph, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North*,<sup>13</sup> investigates the question of national identity and the pursuit of northern development for which Bolton expressed an early fascination. McGregor traces the contest of ideas about how best to develop the north within Australian political, cultural and commercial life from 1901 to the early 1970s. In those years, the perception that the north of the continent was under-developed led to somewhat overblown anxieties about Asian designs on the 'empty north'. There was also a belief that Australia as a European-dominated nation was duty-bound to fill those empty spaces with economic development: otherwise, it did not deserve stewardship of the whole continent. The alternative view, that economic considerations must trump emotional appeals to 'do something about the north', was also highly vocal but its advocates remained in the minority. McGregor argues convincingly that while the Empty North myth and its racist connotations no longer have currency, the persistence with which developers and politicians refer to Northern Australia as a 'frontier' demonstrates that the knee-jerk developmentalism that marked cries to develop the north remains a part of the national landscape:

Both terms [Empty North and 'frontier'] denote a place at an early stage of progress toward future fulfilment, and both signify a present sorely in need of the transformative hand of enterprise and initiative ... Emptiness still echoes through today's declarations on the north.<sup>14</sup>

McGregor's work is focused on the history of ideas related to the north's place in the national imagination, including the various contested debates on Northern Australia conducted by prominent public figures, including politicians, geographers, anthropologists, public servants, economists and medical scientists. While this study also necessarily explores ideas such as the empty north, my work is more sharply concentrated on the Commonwealth's political engagement with the north, emphasising the party-political context surrounding the politics of northern development. It is, in essence, a political

narrative of the Commonwealth's political and policy involvement with the people and resources of Northern Australia since 1901.

Apart from McGregor's recent account, there has been some historical work which looks at the issue of Northern Australia from a multicultural perspective. Scholars such as Henry Reynolds and Tim Rowse have suggested that, at least in historical terms, there were and perhaps still are, two Australias: North and South. As Tim Rowse argues,

When Australia federated in 1901, there were two Australias: North and South. One of the questions for federal public policy since 1901 has been how to bring these two regions together within a single governmental paradigm ... The North ... was different [to the South]: in its more demanding geographies, in its more limited opportunities for private and public investment, in its sparser population and in the ethnic composition of that population.<sup>15</sup>

While seeing some merit in this argument, I believe that it obscures the big picture: there was an early acceptance among European settlers in the north that they belonged to a continental nation state and shared its mainstream values. For instance, although Henry Reynolds is correct in highlighting the economic, political and social significance of racial minorities that were largely absent 'down south' in the late nineteenth century, European northerners were as convinced as any by 1901 as to the merits of white dominance across the continent. The only difference between a minority of political players in the north and mainstream Australian opinion was the extent to which the multicultural elements of the northern economy should be allowed to remain in place.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, while much historical attention has been given to popular and medical fears that Europeans could not live and work effectively in the tropics, this theme can be overplayed.<sup>17</sup> Concerns about tropical health were shared by many northerners, but barriers between 1880 and 1940 to northern migration on a permanent basis were much more complex than a simple fear

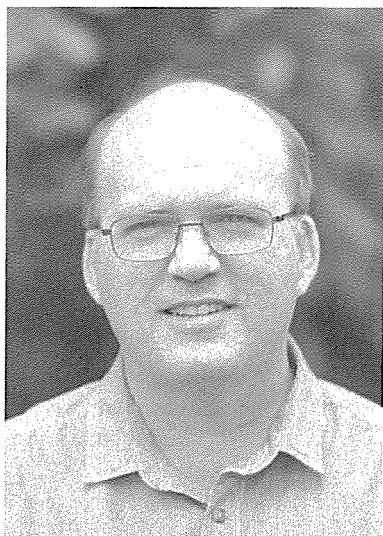


of tropical decline: the emotional pull of family and friends in established southern towns and cities, dislike of hot conditions, concern at a perceived lack of urban amenities and a sense of isolation must also be considered. The 'uncertain future' of the white race in the tropics was certainly not strong enough to prevent adequate migration up north when working conditions and wages were attractive, and boosters of northern schemes tended to pay only lip service to fears of living in the tropics.

My own interest in the politics of Northern Australia was sparked when I began a project in 2010 on the regional policies of Ben Chifley and Gough Whitlam. As I worked my way through documents at the National Archives of Australia, I was surprised at how frequently Northern Australia featured in government files as a Commonwealth issue since 1901. I was also struck by how little attention historians had paid to the national significance of the north in Australia's political history. With a strong focus on archival sources, I published a series of in-depth articles on the politics of northern development between 1945 and the present, with a strong emphasis on the policies of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). I took special interest in uncovering the story of Dr Rex Patterson, the career public servant and rural expert who subsequently became Australia's first Minister for Northern Development.<sup>18</sup>

*Northern Dreams* builds on my earlier work, but the larger format of a monograph gives me an opportunity to explore the politics of Northern Australia in greater detail. While this study looks at the north from a political perspective, I choose this path not because I have a fascination for political *processes* or *institutions* as such, but because I am interested in *people*. For me the study of politics and public policy is a window onto the values and lives of people, and what they cherish most at particular times in history. It is this belief in the power of political debate to flesh out the human drama at the heart of the national story of northern development which guides my narrative.

# About the Author



Lyndon Megarrity has published widely on many historical topics, including Queensland political history, race relations, local government and Northern Australia. Megarrity was also co-author and researcher for a Queensland government-supported history of Queensland: *Made in Queensland: A New History* (UQP, 2009). He completed his PhD in history at the University of New England (awarded in 2002) and has since

been employed as an historical researcher and tertiary teacher. He is currently an adjunct lecturer at James Cook University in Townsville.