

## “People the North”: Nation-building in 1960s Australia

RUSSELL MCGREGOR

*James Cook University*

The People the North Committee, founded in Townsville in 1962, was true to its name. It wanted to treble the population of northern Australia in a decade. Putting people before profits, the committee insisted that Australians had a moral obligation to prolifically populate their northern lands. Neither the ambition nor the rationale was new. In fact, the People the North Committee was the last gasp of a grand demographic aspiration that went back more than a hundred years. Thereafter, through to the present day, proposals for northern development have prioritised economic over demographic gains: profits before people. This article examines the ambitions and advocacy of the People the North Committee, setting them in the longer historical trajectory of the aspiration to people the north. In doing so, it offers a window onto a neglected facet of the nation-building project in Australia.

The People the North Committee, founded in Townsville in 1962, was true to its name. It wanted to treble the population of northern Australia in a decade, from the existing 350,000 to 1,000,000 by 1973.<sup>1</sup> Peopling the north was not a new ambition. It had been urged by politicians, journalists, lobbyists and scientists since the nineteenth century. Throughout that time, northern Australia was commonly dubbed the “empty north”, dramatising the region’s paucity of people and desperate need for demographic fulfilment. Land lying idle affronted the moral sensibilities of Australians, who prided themselves on their pioneering aptitudes and their readiness to render the earth fruitful. Additionally, it was feared, empty land incited the envy of the less fortunate peoples of the world.

Like its many predecessors, the People the North Committee (hereafter PTNC) put population ahead of any other consideration. In evaluating development projects, PTNC chairman Harry Hopkins declared, the “test must be not exports, not state rights, but people, people in the North”.<sup>2</sup> Population, not profit, was the true criterion of development, the committee told the Queensland Premier, so:

In this development of the North, and indeed in any single development project, there should be only one test; this is not the influence on Australia’s foreign exchange, nor votes in this and bordering areas, or anything else, but whether or not it means settling people in Australia’s North, for this would be the only answer to the Chinese or the Indonesians.<sup>3</sup>

That reason for populating the north had been given for over a hundred years: We — Australians — must people the north, lest others — Asians — do so instead.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Hopes running high north of Capricorn”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August 1963, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> H. Hopkins, “People the North”, Address to the National Council for Balanced Development Conference, 13-16 November 1962, People the North Committee (PTNC) papers, box 5, James Cook University Library Archives (JCULA).

<sup>3</sup> PTNC Deputation to the Premier of Queensland, 1 April 1963, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA.

The notion that title to territory depended on occupation and use was widely accepted in 1960s Australia. In his 1964 best-seller, *The Lucky Country*, Donald Horne noted that “it seems morally wrong to Australians [...] that so few people live in the North and that its resources are largely unused. There is anxiety that Australia will not really have staked its claim to the ‘continent’ until it does something about the North.” Horne depicted the empty north as a nagging sore on the national conscience, but one the public was reluctant to remedy. Overcoming that reluctance was the PTNC’s *raison d’être*. Its members would have applauded Horne’s declaration that “[t]he development of the North’ really amounts to creating the second half of the nation”.<sup>4</sup> For the PTNC, peopling the north was Australia’s most urgent project of nation-building.

Little has previously been published on the PTNC. Lyndon Megarrity includes a short discussion of the committee in his recent book on the politics of northern development, as I did in my 2016 study “empty North” discourses in Australia.<sup>5</sup> Apart from those, the PTNC has scarcely scored a mention in scholarly histories. Yet the PTNC had a high public profile in the early to mid-1960s, not just in the north but throughout Australia. Its media officer, Larry Foley, ensured that the PTNC’s ambitions featured prominently in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television. Other factors impelling the north into prominence included: the Labor Party’s leader-to-be, Gough Whitlam, championing northern development as a national imperative; the increasing contribution of northern mining to the national economy; the escalating controversies over attempts at intensive agriculture on the Ord River in the East Kimberley; and the rising profile of Aboriginal affairs on the national political agenda. It was in this context, in 1965, that the visiting American political scientist, Louise Overacker, described “the question of development of the ‘far north’” as the issue at “the forefront of public discussion” in Australia.<sup>6</sup> Yet this question, once so intensely debated, has since slid from most historians’ gaze.

Insofar as northern Australia gets attention from historians today, it is primarily on the topic of race. Henry Reynolds, Regina Ganter and Julia Martínez, among others, have shown how north Australia’s multi-ethnic makeup engendered a society distinct from that of the south.<sup>7</sup> Warwick Anderson and David Walker have scrutinised the multi-faceted efforts to secure the north for the white race.<sup>8</sup> There are also some excellent histories of particular parts of the north, especially the Northern Territory.<sup>9</sup> But apart from the work of the two historians named in the preceding paragraph, little has been written on the imperative to develop and populate the north. Sarah Irving has published an insightful article on the intellectual traditions that underpinned the

---

<sup>4</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp.137-138.

<sup>5</sup> Lyndon Megarrity, *Northern Dreams: The Politics of Northern Development in Australia* (Melbourne, 2018), pp.95-97; Russell McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North* (New York, 2016), pp.189-192.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Megarrity, *Northern Dreams*, p.114.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia’s North* (Sydney, 2003); Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian-Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (Perth, 2006); Julia Martínez and Adrian Vickers, *The Pearl Frontier: Indonesian Labor and Indigenous Encounters in Australia’s Northern Trading Network* (Honolulu, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne, 2002); David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (Brisbane, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory* (5<sup>th</sup> edn, Darwin, 2009); David Carment, *Territorianism: Politics and Identity in Australia’s Northern Territory, 1978-2001* (Melbourne, 2007).

northern development agenda, and Libby Robin has written on attempts to conscript science to the conquest of the north.<sup>10</sup> However, these studies have little to say about how campaigns to people the north were conducted, or how those campaigns fitted with contemporary controversies and preoccupations. Those issues are canvassed here.

This article examines the ambitions and advocacy of the PTNC, setting them in the longer historical trajectory of the aspiration to people the north. In doing so, it offers a window onto a neglected facet of the nation-building project in Australia. The PTNC did more than merely lobby for demographic growth in remote parts of Australia. It advanced particular conceptions of the nation and international affairs, of the proper relationship between people and resources, and of moral conduct in a world facing a crisis of over-population. Like previous generations of Australian population boosters, the PTNC tried to negotiate the dilemma that while Australia's supposed population problem was deficiency, the world's problem was ever-burgeoning excess. Its proposed resolutions illuminate some important aspects of Australia on the cusp of the crucial changes of the 1960s.

### Unbalanced Nation

The PTNC was set up as a committee of the North Queensland Local Government Association by the president of that association, Townsville alderman Harry Hopkins. Its members were aldermen from councils around north-east Queensland, but its ambitions were not confined to that small patch of the north. The PTNC embraced the entirety of northern Australia, from Cape York to the Pilbara. Most members were businessmen or primary producers, whose natural political sympathies would have lain with the Liberal-Country Party coalition then in government under Prime Minister Robert Menzies. But Menzies had dragged his feet on developing the north, allowing the Labor opposition to seize the initiative. Labor's rising star of the 1960s, Gough Whitlam, made the most of the opportunity, successfully projecting himself as the north's staunchest advocate.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of the political allegiances of its members, the PTNC accorded with Labor on questions of northern development. Rejecting the Liberal mantra that economic development should be left, as much as possible, to the private sector, the PTNC insisted that massive government funding and meticulous government planning were needed if the north were to be properly peopled. To this end, it advocated the immediate creation of a Northern Development Commission, which, having "laid the foundations for the orderly development of the north", would be transformed into a permanent Northern Development Authority.<sup>12</sup> Strongly supporting government intervention in the economy, the PTNC argued that the north would not grow of its own accord since both capital and people would follow the well-worn path into the south-east corner "unless a deliberate and sustained effort is made to divert part of the flow into hitherto-neglected areas". Existing trends were leading to a grossly imbalanced population distribution which could be countered only by federal funding and federal planning.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Irving, "Governing Nature: The problem of northern Australia", *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol.45, 3 (2014), pp.388-406; Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney, 2007), ch.6.

<sup>11</sup> Megarity, *Northern Dreams*, ch.4.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Hopkins, "Planning Northern Development", in *North Australia Development: Proceedings of the Symposium held at the University of New South Wales, 14-15 February 1966* (Sydney, 1966), pp.75-79.

<sup>13</sup> *People the North! An urgent message*, PTNC pamphlet, ca.1963, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA. See also *A Plan for the North*, PTNC pamphlet, ca.1966, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA; H. Hopkins, "The Problems of Maintaining Growth in the Northern Areas", address to the Council for Balanced Development Conference, Armidale, 1964, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

Following long established precedent among northern population boosters, the PTNC maintained that it was inherently wrong for people to concentrate in particular parts of the continent. The committee insisted that “if Australia is to have any moral right to hold on to this [northern] part of the country the ludicrous imbalance of population must be redressed rapidly”.<sup>14</sup> *Operation Elbow Room*, a propaganda booklet by PTNC media officer Larry Foley, warned of the dangers facing a nation that was “growing lopsided”. Foley expressed strong misgivings about the Australian people’s hold over the continent, and equal unease over other nations’ perceptions of Australia’s poor performance in filling its empty lands. “Occupation of a country is like justice”, he declared, “which must not only be done, but must be seen to be done”. His booklet brims with moral and political injunctions that echo back to the early years of the twentieth century, asserting, for example, that unless the north were prolifically peopled, an international statesman might “point an accusing finger at Australia and denounce her as a dog in the manger”.<sup>15</sup> It exactly replicated the rhetoric of the interwar years.<sup>16</sup>

There had always been commentators who argued the opposing line: that an uneven population distribution was a normal and natural consequence of the uneven distribution of resources. Exponents of this view contended that the population of the north would remain sparse since most of the region was poorly endowed with amenities such as water and arable land. The geographer, Thomas Griffith Taylor, was the most famous — and most pugnacious — purveyor of this view in the interwar period, but there were numerous others who, like him, insisted that Australians had to accept the demographic limits of the northern portion of the continent.<sup>17</sup> The argument was still bubbling along decades later. In 1962, the year of the PTNC’s creation, W.D. Borrie, Professor of Demography at the Australian National University, argued that Australia’s existing demographic pattern would persist into the foreseeable future and most of the north was unlikely to experience major population growth. Australians should accept the clustering of people in the southern cities as a demographic fact, he stated, rather than fighting against it as if there were something unnatural about population concentrations in particular areas.<sup>18</sup>

Some experts argued to the contrary. The eminent economist, Sir Douglas Copland, chaired a body called the National Council for Balanced Development, whose name accurately stated its objectives. While the council’s concerns were broadly economic rather than narrowly demographic, it had close connections and overlapping interests with the PTNC. Like the latter body, Copland argued that in view of the burgeoning populations in neighbouring Asian countries, we must “promote settlement on a vigorous plan [in] Northern Australia”.<sup>19</sup> Like the PTNC too, Copland explained that northern development was necessitated not by profit-seeking but by political and moral obligations: “It is not merely a matter of developing effectively the resources of the

---

<sup>14</sup> “Hopes running high north of Capricorn”.

<sup>15</sup> Larry Foley, *Operation Elbow Room*, PTNC booklet, 1964, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA.

<sup>16</sup> Russell McGregor, “A Dog in the Manger: White Australia and its vast empty spaces”, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol.43, 2 (2012), pp.157-173.

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, *Griffith Taylor: Visionary, Environmentalist, Explorer* (Canberra, 2008); McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood*.

<sup>18</sup> Borrie, quoted in Gavin Souter, “Two-sided problem of balanced development”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November 1962, PTNC papers, box 4.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Copland, “Need for a National Policy”, paper presented to the Conference on Balanced Development, Wagga Wagga, 13-16 November 1962, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

Northern area of the continent, but of demonstrating to the world, and particularly to our populous neighbours to the North, that Australia is fully aware of its obligation to develop the North, and is determined to utilise all the resources at its disposal for this purpose".<sup>20</sup>

Among the speakers at the 1962 Conference on Balanced Development at Wagga Wagga was the leader of the federal parliamentary Labor Party and populariser of the slogan "populate or perish", Arthur Calwell. He stated that half of Edmund Barton's ambition of 1901 had been achieved, since "in the political sense we have a nation for the continent":

But we have not yet won the continent for the nation. By no means can it be said that we truly inhabit this continent, when well over a third of our people live in two southern cities, when two-thirds of our people live in six capital cities, and when forty per cent of the continent is 'occupied' by four per cent of our people; it is barely peopled at all [...].

We cannot be truly self-reliant as long as we have the bulk of our population, as it were, clinging to the cliff face of small sections of our eastern and southern coastlines. We cannot be said to be self-reliant when two-fifths of our territory, some of it the richest we possess, and among the richest possessed by any nation, lies virtually empty.<sup>21</sup>

It was a nice statement of the nationalist abhorrence of demographic disparities within the national territory.

Labor had no monopoly on devotees to the balanced development doctrine. "Balanced development is an article of faith in Western Australia", that state's Liberal Minister for Industrial Development and later Premier, Charles Court, proclaimed. He added: "I emphasise the word 'faith' because our justifications for it are as much a matter of deep intuition as of logic".<sup>22</sup> Only by filling the empty spaces could Australians "justify our possession of this rich continent" and at the same time "assuage the desires of other peoples by helping to fill their basic needs". Court maintained that balanced development and peopling the north were essential not only for economic and political reasons but also to fortify our sense of belonging to Australia, "our homeland". While lauding the mining ventures recently opened in the Pilbara, he wanted to see more emphasis on closer settlement and family farms, for which he invested high hopes in the agricultural enterprises then being launched in the Ord and Fitzroy valleys in the Kimberleys. In Court's summation: "Balanced development is necessary for defence [...] it is necessary for economic strength [...] it is necessary for personal satisfaction".<sup>23</sup>

At its most extreme, the balanced development dogma called for an even spread of people and enterprises across the entire continent. In the 1920s and 1930s, some enthusiasts had demanded as much, but by the 1960s ambitions had moderated to some extent, in recognition of environmental, economic and societal constraints. Compared with the interwar boosters, the PTNC's demographic projections were restrained. Larry Foley explained that

---

<sup>20</sup> D. Copland to H. Hopkins, 23 May 1963, PTNC papers, box 2, JCULA.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Calwell, "The Need for a National Policy so that Australia will be fully occupied by Australians", paper presented to the Conference on Balanced Development, Wagga Wagga, 13-16 November 1962, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

<sup>22</sup> Court, quoted in Souter, "Two-sided problem of balanced development".

<sup>23</sup> C.W.M. Court, "Balanced Development is a National Priority", paper delivered to either the 1962 or 1964 conference of the National Council for Balanced Development, PTNC papers, box 5 [ellipses in original], JCULA.

the Committee is not saying the North should be *filled*, immediately, with people. What it maintains is that one million would be enough to furnish living proof of possession, and show that this is our land, from east to west, top to bottom, and that we have faith in its future.<sup>24</sup>

What the PTNC imagined as a desirable ultimate population in the north is unclear, although it seems to have accepted that attaining demographic parity with the south was a goal for the distant future.

Nonetheless, some members proposed prodigious population increases. W.G. Walkley, chairman of the Sydney branch of the PTNC and former managing director of Ampol Petroleum Ltd, approved the projection of Sir William Hudson (another interstate ally of the PTNC and Commissioner of the Snowy Mountains Authority) for a northern population of three million.<sup>25</sup> However, Walkley seems to have considered this just a beginning, since he proposed an Australia-wide population of 150 million, a figure obtained by extrapolating the population density of the United Kingdom onto the land area of Australia, then halving it so as not to appear too sanguine. Perhaps Walkley was idiosyncratic in being more firmly in the interwar booster tradition than other members of the PTNC. Talking up the agricultural potential of Mary Kathleen, he stated: "If ever there was a Garden of Eden, Mary Kathleen is one".<sup>26</sup> Mary Kathleen is the site of an abandoned uranium mine in the arid lands between Mt Isa and Cloncurry.

Puffery like Walkley's aside, the PTNC inevitably claimed the north as a resource-rich land. It had to be, to sustain a prolific population. "Contrary to the belief of many", Harry Hopkins told an Apex Club convention, "tropical Australia is not a poor country; indeed it is exceedingly rich." The problem was that its riches were not recognised.<sup>27</sup> Larry Foley told the same Apex audience that the north was exceptionally well endowed with Australia's "rarest and most precious commodity", water, but the north's plenty was merely "running to waste in the sea". "By ignoring the North, by refusing to try to save this water, our life's blood, we are inviting national stagnation."<sup>28</sup> This image of life-giving water running to waste in the sea was a common trope of northern development advocates. PTNC allies Sir William Hudson and C.H. Munro, Professor of Civil Engineering at the University of New South Wales, harnessed that imagery in their advocacy of massive engineering projects to conserve the wet-season run-off of the north.<sup>29</sup> As their example illustrates, the PTNC extolled not only the natural attributes of the north but also the capacity of modern technology to transform the environment according to human desires.

### **Dangerously Rich and Dangerously Empty**

In April 1963 a delegation of the People the North Committee impressed upon the Queensland Premier the urgency of their objectives. Since the Second World War, they explained, three crucial changes had occurred: "fabulous mineral discoveries" had been

---

<sup>24</sup> Foley, *Operation Elbow Room*.

<sup>25</sup> W.G. Walkley, chairman's comments, *North Australia Development*, p.205.

<sup>26</sup> W.G. Walkley, "Northern Development", Address to the Australian Institute of Management, 18 October 1965, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

<sup>27</sup> H. Hopkins, "The Need to Develop the North", Address to the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Association of Apex Clubs, Easter, 1964, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

<sup>28</sup> Larry Foley, Address to the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Association of Apex Clubs, Canberra, 27 March 1964, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

<sup>29</sup> See for example W. Hudson, Luncheon Address to National Council for Balanced Development, 15 July 1965, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

made in the north; the political and military supremacy of the West had diminished; and Southeast Asian countries had become independent and often aggressive. "All this means", the PTNC delegation declared, "that Northern Australia is dangerously rich and dangerously empty."<sup>30</sup> Those words — "dangerously rich and dangerously empty" — became a favourite phrase among members of the PTNC, as well as sympathetic outsiders such as Charles Court.<sup>31</sup> And there was never any doubt about where the danger lay.

The threat of Asia had always held many dimensions — military, moral, political, economic, demographic — and the stress laid on each shifted over time. In the 1960s, the perceived military threat was receding, while moral and political misgivings loomed larger than ever. Especially toward the end of the decade, Australia was pushed into an intensifying engagement — or "enmeshment" in the terminology of the day — with Asia, and increasing emphasis was placed on the opportunities thereby offered.<sup>32</sup> Those shifts were hesitant, often faltering, and as the career of the PTNC attests, a perception of Asia as threat persisted even as the nature of the threat was transformed.

After separately interviewing Harry Hopkins, journalists Margaret Jones and Ward McNally both reported that the PTNC chairman was "obsessed with the threat of Asian countries to the north of Australia, swollen and over-ripe with population". Both recorded him saying: "If we don't people the North, someone else is going to do the job for us". However, they noted that Hopkins did not see the threat of Asia as primarily military. According to Jones, he explicitly stated that "you don't have to have shooting wars any more to take possession of a country". Hopkins envisaged a scenario whereby an Asian country became strong enough to impress its wishes on world opinion. "Along comes the United Nations and says Australia's empty spaces are morally indefensible, and constitute a danger to world peace. We should admit Asians, or else, they will tell us."<sup>33</sup> A United Nations' abrogation of Australia's sovereignty sounds highly implausible, but Hopkins was not the only peddler of this prospect at the time. Moreover, it recapitulated interwar fears of the League of Nations forcing Australia's hand if it continued to leave its north empty while barring Asian immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

As Hopkins' words indicate, he and his committee were devotees of the White Australia policy. Excluding Asians and filling the north with white people were to them alternate sides of the same coin. "We have the chance to build a white, Western civilisation right from the ground up", Hopkins enthused, but the opportunity would be forfeited unless the north were fortified with white people.<sup>35</sup> Members of the PTNC seem to have accepted the premises of a white Australia as a matter of common sense. They seldom explicitly discussed the policy, but their advocacy was steeped in its assumptions. "The northern third of Australia [...] will one day hold millions of

---

<sup>30</sup> Deputation to the Premier of Queensland, 1 April 1963.

<sup>31</sup> "Dangerously Rich, Empty", *Courier Mail*, 8 July 1963, PTNC papers, box 4.

<sup>32</sup> David Goldsworthy, David Dutton, Peter Gifford and Roderick Pitty, "Reorientation", in *Facing North: A Century of Australian Engagement with Asia*, Vol.1 (Melbourne, 2001), pp.310-371; McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood*, ch.11; David Walker, "Australia's Asian Futures", in Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell, eds, *Australia's History: Themes and disputes* (Sydney, 2005), pp.63-80.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Jones, "Vision of Empire in Capricornia", *Sun-Herald*, 25 November 1962, PTNC, box 4; Ward McNally, *Australia: The Challenging Land* (London, 1965), pp.76-77.

<sup>34</sup> McGregor, "Dog in the Manger".

<sup>35</sup> Jones, "Vision of Empire".

people”, a PTNC pamphlet prophesied. “*But will those people be Australians?*”<sup>36</sup> Logically, if they lived in Australia, of course they would be “Australians”. But the PTNC construed that word much more narrowly.

The term “population explosion” dates from the 1950s, although the idea can be traced back to Thomas Malthus’s writings in the eighteenth century. By the 1960s, the “population explosion” had spawned an array of forecasts of demographically-induced disaster, summed up in Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*. Many responded through movements such as Zero Population Growth. But not the PTNC. Its propaganda frequently referred to the “population explosion”, but as a warning of the threat to Australia’s empty northern lands and the consequent need to people them. According to Larry Foley, the “population explosion” was widely misunderstood, partly because the term was somewhat misleading:

It is not an explosion so much as a tide that is simply going to rise, and rise, apparently without ever turning. Because it is a barely perceptible process, and something new, nobody is making adequate preparations for it. Few are raising the alarm. But as in all floods, soon there will be a panic struggle for the high, dry grounds. Like Australia. When the new millions face starvation, why should they not ask whether our great empty spaces could support them?<sup>37</sup>

While the PTNC freely used the new term “population explosion”, its extrapolations from it were the hackneyed political and moral injunctions against land lying idle:

in the light of the population explosion and the resultant pressure on the world’s capacity to feed the hungry, Australia is under a moral obligation to make full use of her land.

What answer will Australia give if one day a demand is made through the United Nations that unused but potentially productive areas be turned over, in the name of humanity, to larger powers – under United Nations auspices – which *will* use them?

What if Australia is told: ‘Your continent is obviously too big for you to develop alone?’

Would we have the right to deny its use to others in need?

The question of taking our lands by force need never arise.

The real threat to Australia’s future may prove to be not a nuclear bomb in a dictator’s hands but a hungry baby in an Asian mother’s arms.<sup>38</sup>

Alert to its emotional impact, the PTNC recycled the hungry baby image many times over.

Occasionally, the PTNC raised the spectre of military invasion, but its usual scare scenario was Australia being forced by the international community to either cede territory or admit Asian immigrants en masse. These were common projections among northern development advocates at the time. Yet some still proffered an apocalyptic vision of military invasion. In 1967 the Country Party member for the north Queensland seat of Kennedy, Bob Katter senior, warned that the Chinese looked on our “great empty north” with envy, and on the Australian people with “vicious, animal hatred”. Inevitably, when the Chinese population exploded, “[w]e who live in the northern part of Australia would suffer the initial onslaught of an invasion that would be like Armageddon”.<sup>39</sup> Though not averse to scare-mongering, the PTNC avoided such over-dramatisations. They would have detracted from its campaign to attract people to the north.

<sup>36</sup> *People the North! An urgent message.*

<sup>37</sup> Foley, “Address to the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of Apex Clubs”.

<sup>38</sup> *People the North! An Urgent Message.*

<sup>39</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, House, 23 August 1967, p.353.



### Normalising the North

The PTNC did not support development at any cost. It wanted the north to be a home where people could build happy lives, not a mere quarry open for exploitation. "For too long", Larry Foley lamented, "the North has been looked on as a place to plunder, not to populate", a place to which people came "to make money, but not a home; to dig something up, push or pull something down, catch something, kill something. Then back they go to where they came from, leaving behind gaps and scars in the landscape, holes in the ground and a depleted fauna."<sup>40</sup> That attitude and those actions, the PTNC insisted, had to stop.

Consequently, while members of the PTNC welcomed the north's mining boom, they had grave misgivings about how the mining industry carried out its business. The prevailing practice of trucking minerals to the nearest port and sending them south for processing was squandering opportunities to build industries and cities in the north. The PTNC wanted the minerals to be processed on site, to form centres of industry and thereby nuclei for population growth. As Harry Hopkins explained in 1962, the PTNC aimed to ensure "that where there are lodes in the North, there must be steel cities, aluminium cities, and so forth, not just loading ramps, gantreys and a few bulldozer drivers".<sup>41</sup> In the PTNC's view, Australians were too ready to enjoy the wealth generated by the north's minerals, and too reluctant to ensure that the associated industries contributed to a more even population distribution.<sup>42</sup>

The PTNC's espousal of urbanisation and industrialisation was at odds with mainstream populate-the-north advocacy before the Second World War. Then, the emphasis had been squarely on agriculture, and the ideal northern settler had been conceived in the yeoman farmer mould.<sup>43</sup> Harry Hopkins rejected what he called a "nineteenth century" model of agrarian settlement and gave farming no priority over other economic enterprises.<sup>44</sup> The PTNC vision was of a north studded with cities, the land transformed by science and engineering, the economy driven by factories, mines and machines.

In line with its advocacy of urbanisation and technology, the PTNC was among the keenest promoters of a new tropical university. The University of Queensland had founded a college in Townsville in 1961, and when a major expansion got underway three years later, Larry Foley waxed lyrical about the prospects for "Australia's first tropical university". He and fellow northern enthusiasts were sure the college would soon become an autonomous university: "a meeting place of pioneering minds devoted to the world's tropical belt, where East meets West, where formidable problems of over-population, of alternate floods and droughts, of famine and plague, demand solutions". Increasingly by the 1960s, white Australia supporters were recognising that Australia had to reach out to its region through aid and exchange programs. As Foley explained: "Many newly independent nations in Africa and Asia face developmental problems similar to those posed by Australia's empty North, which Townsville as an Australian tropical centre of learning will help solve". He specified, too, that while the new

---

<sup>40</sup> Foley, *Operation Elbow Room*.

<sup>41</sup> Hopkins, "People the North". See also L Foley, "PTN – the story so far", 25 January 1965, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA.

<sup>42</sup> PTNC, "Submission made to the joint government mining and national development committees at Townsville, 27 July 1968", PTNC papers, box 3, JCULA.

<sup>43</sup> McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood*.

<sup>44</sup> Hopkins, "Planning Northern Development", pp.81-82.

university should offer the usual complement of subjects taught at Australian universities, it “should differ markedly in its specialities related to the East”.<sup>45</sup>

The PTNC did not regard the university as either an ivory tower or a mere technical adjunct to development. It saw a northern university as a manifestation of the cultural maturity of the north. A press release by Larry Foley, on the occasion of the turning of the first sod at a new campus in Townsville on 7 November 1964, devoted as much space to the aesthetics and architecture of the university-to-be as to its academic credentials. Foley lovingly described how the campus would be fashioned as a “great park”, aligned to take advantage of vistas of the major natural landforms of Townsville, Castle Hill and Mount Stuart, while its buildings would incorporate local stone and copper to “blend beautifully with the natural background and vegetation”. The new university would “form a harmonious whole throughout all stages of its growth over the coming centuries. Yes, centuries”, he enthused, adding an endorsement of the university planners’ comparison of their institution’s projected growth with that of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Yale.<sup>46</sup> The PTNC wanted an educated and urbane north.

Whereas its pre-war precursors had deplored the devitalising impact of urbanisation, the PTNC lauded the comforts of the city and enthusiastically embraced suburbia. Denying that the north was “a land of extremes and hardships”, it tried to convince the “townie or city-dweller, who has a steady, routine nine-to-five job, a house in the suburbs, cuts the grass in front of his house and cleans his car on Sunday” that his comfortable lifestyle could be replicated in the north. Developing the north was “not a question of calling for pioneers”, the PTNC declared; “Australians will not pioneer today as their forefathers did; they do not have to [...]. They are born, live and die in an affluent society.” Consequently, what the north needed were the facilities that would enable families to enjoy a suburban lifestyle. That lifestyle in the north would be better than in the south, the PTNC averred, with more space, fresher air, less bustle and fewer juvenile delinquents.<sup>47</sup> This may have been a manifestation of the triumph of suburbia in 1960s Australian popular culture, but it dovetailed with the PTNC’s campaign to normalise the north.

It was a sign of changing priorities, too, that the PTNC adopted a conservationist stance, albeit a moderate one. Among the biggest environmental campaigns in Australia in the 1960s was saving the Great Barrier Reef from mining and drilling for natural gas.<sup>48</sup> The PTNC recommended against mining, at least until comprehensive scientific studies had been undertaken. It was “Australia’s duty to ensure that the Great Barrier Reef is preserved for posterity and not allowed to be endangered by short term and immediate monetary gain”, the committee advised, adding that it was probable that the reef’s “immense value as a tourist attraction will far outweigh in monetary gain the once only harvest from mineral extraction”.<sup>49</sup> This combination of conservationist

---

<sup>45</sup> L. Foley, “Australia’s first tropical university”, 7 November 1964, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA.

<sup>46</sup> Foley, “Australia’s first tropical university”.

<sup>47</sup> Foley, *Operation Elbow Room*.

<sup>48</sup> Rohan Lloyd, Maxine Newlands and Theresa Petray, “Coral Battleground: Re-examining the ‘Save the Reef’ campaign in 1960s Australia”, *Environmental Sociology*, Vol.3, 1 (2017), pp.54-63; Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement* (Cambridge, 1999), pp.99-106.

<sup>49</sup> PTNC “Submission made to the Senate Select Committee on Off-shore Petroleum Resources, on 14 February, 1969”, PTNC papers, box 4. See also PTNC “Submission made to the joint government mining and national development committees 1968”, JCULA.

idealism and economic pragmatism was commonplace in contemporary appeals to save the reef.

At times, the PTNC asserted a stronger conservationist line. It quoted with approval ecologist Len Webb's statement regarding the north Queensland rainforests, that the "aesthetic and spiritual reasons for conservation are self-evident". It quoted with even greater approval a declaration by the prominent conservationist and co-founder of the Save the Reef campaign, John Busst:

Hell, chum, we're not standing in the way of progress. Far from it. We all want the North developed.  
 But let's do it without trampling the whole bloody paradise underfoot!  
 Let's tread carefully. Bulldozers don't!<sup>50</sup>

It bears noting that insofar as the PTNC advanced a conservationist line, it was for the two iconic environments of north Queensland: reef and rainforest. In any event, its moderate conservationism and development-within-limits ethos were consistent with the PTNC's desire to make the north a home for Australian families, not just a patch of dirt from which to scratch a profit.

Despite its emphasis on population, and the fact that the 1960s was a time of massive immigrant flows into Australia, the PTNC had no particular interest in channelling immigrants northwards. On the relatively few occasions it raised the issue of overseas immigration, the PTNC was careful to specify that while it welcomed immigrants, it did "not advocate a special immigration policy to attract people to northern Australia".<sup>51</sup> "I am not an advocate of special immigration for the development of the North", Harry Hopkins declared, though he added that governments could make a better effort "to publicise North Australia overseas."<sup>52</sup> The PTNC seems to have envisaged the north being populated primarily by people from southern Australia moving northward to enjoy the benefits on offer, with overseas immigrants only minor contributors to the process.

While immigrants were marginal to the PTNC's concerns, Aboriginal people were virtually absent. This may seem unsurprising to readers today, but in fact Aborigines had been an enduring presence in writings about northern Australia, and by the 1960s some exponents of northern development were including Indigenous interests in their advocacy. J.H. Kelly, a former member of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, even titled one of his booklets *Human Rights for Aborigines: Pre-requisite for Northern Development*.<sup>53</sup> Yet in the prolific propaganda of the PTNC, the only mention of Aboriginal people I have found is in *Operation Elbow Room*, where Larry Foley instanced them as one of many peoples who have forfeited their lands, thereby exemplifying the fate modern Australians must resolutely avoid.<sup>54</sup> Using the story of Aboriginal dispossession in this way — as a reminder of what would befall those who failed to properly people their country — had been a stock-in-trade of population boosters for more than a century.

<sup>50</sup> "Hope for Mankind in North's Rain Forests", PTNC press release, 14 November 1965, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA.

<sup>51</sup> Hopkins, "Planning Northern Development", p.80.

<sup>52</sup> Hopkins, "Problems of Maintaining Growth in the Northern Areas".

<sup>53</sup> J.H. Kelly, *Human Rights for Aborigines: Pre-requisite for Northern Development* (Sydney, 1966-67). See also R.C. Ward, "The Constructive Contribution of Northern Development to our External Relations", ca.1964, PTNC papers, box 5, JCULA.

<sup>54</sup> Foley, *Operation Elbow Room*.

## People or Profits?

The drive to people the north had never been primarily about making money. Capitalist though Australia was, some things transcended the profit motive. Nation-building was one of them. The PTNC was firmly within this tradition, insisting that peopling the north was a national priority to which all other developmental objectives, including economic gain, must be subservient. Many other northern development advocates agreed. Speaking at a PTNC conference in 1964, Rex Patterson, Director of the Northern Division of the Department of National Development, affirmed that development should aim at establishing “a permanent and growing population”. Rejecting the idea that projects should be evaluated “in terms of strict economics”, he wanted funds to be invested in “that type of development, such as intensive agriculture or processing, which will not only constitute a stable nucleus, but will result also in a rapid growth of population to service the continuing and self-generating demand which is created”. The primary objective of northern development, he insisted, was not to generate profits, but to put people permanently in the north.<sup>55</sup>

But by the 1960s some advocates of northern development — even some allies of the PTNC — were playing down the population objective. R.H. Greenwood, Professor of Geography at the University of Queensland, had participated in the 1962 meeting at which the PTNC was conceived, but he rejected the ambition that gave the committee its name. While he strongly urged the economic development of the north, and recognised that this would attract people to the region, Greenwood disavowed population growth as a deliberate objective of policy. Rather, the north should be developed to diversify the national economy.<sup>56</sup> Fellow geographer J. MacDonald Holmes, Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney, similarly demoted the objective of population growth:

Great empty spaces are not a handicap, but a challenge to producers of large-scale commercial enterprises on the land, whereby men and machines and modern technology will maintain the empty space, empty of people but full of production so that it discounts the world over-population bomb which bids fair, should it burst, to have even more disastrous consequences to the world than the much publicized atom or hydrogen bomb.<sup>57</sup>

Holmes was an advocate of northern development, but he had abandoned the equation of development with demographic intensification. His views were on the ascendant in the 1960s.

Some experts not only discounted the demand to populate but also assailed the whole drive to develop the north. Half-way through the PTNC’s short career, agricultural economist Bruce Davidson published a withering blast against what he called “the northern myth”. There had always been critics of grand schemes for northern development. In the past, most had based their critiques on environmental grounds, particularly the north’s shortages of accessible water and arable land. Davidson took a different tack. He acknowledged the environmental impediments to northern development — his book essentially took them for granted — but he

---

<sup>55</sup> R. Patterson, “Establishing a Permanent Population in Northern Australia”, paper presented to the Conference of People the North Committee, Townsville, 18 October 1964, National Archives of Australia, Darwin, NTAC 1980/26 1973/931.

<sup>56</sup> R.H. Greenwood, “The Strategy for Northern Development” in *North Australia Development*, pp.116-117; R.H. Greenwood to H.H. Hopkins, 24 May 1963, PTNC papers, box 4, JCULA.

<sup>57</sup> J. MacDonald Holmes, *Australia’s Open North: A study of Northern Australia bearing on the urgency of the times* (Sydney, 1963), p.450.

formulated his arguments along rigorously economic lines. On the premise that "development is an economic process", he insisted that assessments for developmental purposes must adhere to a systematic set of questions concerning products, yields, costs, prices and competition, and should never become entangled in social, political or moral questions.

Although Davidson's book was primarily a quantitative study of the economics of northern development, he devoted one chapter to critiquing its "non-economic" motivations. The first of these was the notion that unless the north were occupied by Australians, it would be occupied by someone else; the second was the need for military defence. According to Davidson, these were founded on misunderstandings of international affairs, and, like all "non-economic" motives for northern development, should be summarily dismissed.<sup>58</sup> His rebuttals of these motives were in no way original; all had been proffered by numerous critics on numerous occasions over the preceding six decades. Where Davidson was original was in the rigour with which he built up an economic case against the investment of money and resources in special projects to develop the north.

For the asperity of his economic analyses, plus the stridency of his attacks on northern development projects, Davidson earned both acclamation and condemnation. *The Northern Myth* was among the most vigorously debated books of the mid-1960s, with argument, pro and con, appearing in a wide array of newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs. It gave the north a lot of publicity, though not necessarily of the kind the PTNC wanted. Among the committee's many rejoinders to Davidson was a lampoon by Larry Foley, featuring a book titled "The Southern Myth" being debated by a northern Cabinet located in an imaginary Australia whose colonisation had begun, sensibly, in the tropics.<sup>59</sup> Like most of the PTNC's ripostes, it failed to confront the hard-headed analyses of *The Northern Myth*. Despite its opposition to Davidson's stance, however, when the PTNC hosted a major symposium in Sydney on 14-15 February 1966, it invited Davidson to participate as a speaker. Perhaps the PTNC was committed to fairness and balance. Or perhaps its members were over-confident of the cogency of their own arguments.

In fact, the tide of opinion was turning Davidson's way. In an appreciative review of *The Northern Myth*, economist Alan Lloyd stated:

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Davidson's book and the interest it has aroused symbolize a new era. The transition has been gradual, but it is clear. Until recent decades decisions on government-financed development schemes, such as irrigation projects and the opening up of new areas, were made largely on the basis of technical factors, flavoured by amateur economics (as propounded by engineers, accountants, and agricultural scientists) and a leavening of parish pump politics (many a dam is a memorial to a swinging seat of the past). Nowadays, properly calculated benefit-cost ratios and returns on invested capital are at least considered and are sometimes decisive.

Lloyd discerned a hardening division of commentators "into two permanent camps — pro and anti northern development", with economic criteria increasingly at the centre of contention.<sup>60</sup> In this context, with economics gaining ascendancy, the PTNC's conventional focus on demographics was being pushed to the margins.

---

<sup>58</sup> Bruce Davidson, *The Northern Myth: A Study of the Physical and Economic Limits to Agricultural and Pastoral Development in Tropical Australia* (Melbourne, 1965), ch.1.

<sup>59</sup> L. Foley, "Is the South Worth Developing?" in PTNC, *What the Press is Saying*, Series II, [1965], National Library of Australia, Npf 338.1894 D252.

<sup>60</sup> A.G. Lloyd, "The Controversy on Northern Development", *Review of Marketing and Agricultural Economics*, Vol.33, 3 (1965), p.124.

Other social and cultural shifts pushed in the same direction, so that by the latter part of the 1960s the PTNC's aspirations and arguments no longer gripped the national imagination. After Prime Minister Harold Holt's reforms of 1966, the long, slow demise of the White Australia policy picked up pace.<sup>61</sup> While perceptions of Asia as a threat persisted, emphasis shifted toward the opportunities Asia offered. A nascent environmental movement was changing attitudes toward land and resources, undercutting older ideas of a moral imperative to put resources to use. Recognition of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal interests were on the rise too, and with these the notion that the north was in some sense "empty" was losing credibility.<sup>62</sup> There was no sudden change of heart among the Australian people, but the ambition to people the north was steadily deflating.

After a change of chairman in mid-1967, the PTNC decided to change its horizons as well. Abandoning the broad sweep of northern Australia, henceforward it would lobby exclusively for the area covered by the North Queensland Local Government Association, that is, north-east Queensland. New chairman Mick Borzi justified the narrowing of vision by claiming that "the Committee's vigorous campaign had been successful in arousing interest throughout Australia of the imperative need for development of the North".<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this was not entirely delusional. Through its media campaigns, the committee had stimulated public interest in the northern cause. However, the grand ambitions proclaimed by the PTNC on its inauguration five years earlier had certainly not been met. They had scarcely advanced a step.

By slicing off the greater part of its initial area of concern, the PTNC did more than merely change focus. The contraction of interest to north-east Queensland meant that a body set up to promote population growth in the north would now limit itself to the one place in the north that already had a substantial and rapidly-growing population. The ineptness of this was not pointed out at the time, but the PTNC had clearly lost its compass. After stumbling along ineffectually for almost two years, the committee quietly expired in May 1969. No one mourned its passing and no comparable lobby group was set up in its place.

## Conclusion

The PTNC was a very Townsville-centric body. Most of the active membership lived in that city, and those who did not still lived on the east coastal strip of north Queensland. They tended to see the potential of the north in the familiar terms of their own region. Indeed, it would be only a slight exaggeration to say that they sought to remake the entirety of northern Australia in the image of north-coastal Queensland. That part of the north already had a primarily urban populace and well-established secondary industries. Those elements of the PTNC agenda which were relatively novel among promoters of northern development — the encouragement of urbanisation and industrialisation — were rooted in local realities. The PTNC wanted to create an urbane society in the north, and this, more than any other factor, distinguishes it from earlier lobbyists for a populous north.

Apart from urbanisation and industrialisation, the other components of the PTNC's agenda, its rationales and rationalisations, were well-established, even clichéd. By the late 1960s, those conventional rationales for filling the empty north — affirming moral

---

<sup>61</sup> Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (Melbourne, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Megarrity, *Northern Dreams*, pp.115-116; McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood*, ch.11.

<sup>63</sup> M. Stitt, "PTN to concentrate on promoting North Queensland", 3 July 1967, PTNC Papers, box 3, JCULA.

title to territory, shoring up defences and preserving white Australia — had waned in public credibility and consequence. When the PTNC fizzled out in 1969, its ambition of boosting the northern population was no longer an issue of urgent public concern. The PTNC was the last gasp of a grand demographic aspiration that had prevailed for a hundred years. It was not that proposals for northern development came to an end. They continued. But by the beginning of the 1970s, boosting the population was no longer front and centre of those proposals. Financial profit eclipsed demographic gain.