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Many Voices, One Ambition: Local Government, Post-War Reconstruction and Northern Development in Australia

Established in 1944, the North Queensland Local Government Association made an impact on post-war reconstruction and northern development in Australia. The association modernised infrastructure and improved social conditions in Queensland's north, as well as launching an influential publicity campaign to promote a massive northern development scheme. In an era when federal proposals for developing Australia's northern regions often struggled to make a convincing case for Commonwealth investment, these were significant contributions to nation building. Putting substance before parochialism, the association fostered cooperation among municipal authorities and patiently lobbied the Queensland Government. But some members complained that their region was part of a "neglected north" and called for a more assertive campaign. By the late 1950s, having developed regional infrastructure, grown in confidence, and looking for new challenges, the association shifted its lobbying to target the Commonwealth Government. The change led to the "People the North" publicity campaign, which influenced federal northern development policy. This article analyses the campaigns led by the North Queensland Local Government Association in the twenty years after 1944. It illuminates a neglected part of Australia's political history: the contribution of regional political voices from Australia's north to nation-building projects such as post-war reconstruction and northern development.

The Second World War stimulated an era of purposeful nation building in Australia, not all of it led by central governments. Histories of post-war reconstruction have tended to focus on the role of the Commonwealth Government in transforming the nation.¹ Contributions from Australia's sparsely populated continental north are neglected. Yet municipal governments in Queensland's north mobilised their collective resources and transformed their region. These endeavours modernised north Queensland and influenced the politics of northern development.

In some respects, the politics of northern development in Australia partially resembles histories from the American frontier west or the north of Canada, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Like Australia, some of these countries have grappled with sparsely populated northern frontiers.² Occupied by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years, these frontiers are abundant in natural resources and similar for their challenging environments. In each case

¹ For example: Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015); Kate Darian-Smith, "World War 2 and Post-War Reconstruction, 1939-49," in *The Cambridge History of Australia: The Commonwealth of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 88-111.

² Canadian political scientist Peter Jull has compared the conceptualization of Australia's north with Canadian political themes: Peter Jull, *The Politics of Northern Frontiers* (Darwin: Australian National University, North Australia Research Unit, 1991).

“the north” exists at the periphery of the modern mainstream nation. The destiny of northern frontiers has often been determined by the waxing and waning interest of distant national governments and the predominantly southern-based populations who hire and fire them. This article illuminates a northern frontier voice. It demonstrates that local and regional initiatives originating in Australia’s north have made an impact on national politics.

Like national post-war reconstruction in Australia, northern reconstruction began during the Second World War. In contrast to the centralised federal post-war planning typified by the Curtin-Chifley Government, reconstruction in north Queensland was led by local politicians. Isolated from the bulk of nation’s people and governments in the south, north Queensland’s civilian community had endured significant disruption during the war. The influx of tens of thousands of allied defence personnel put pressure on critical resources and strained local infrastructure. Believing they had a clear responsibility to fill a void created by the preoccupied state and federal authorities, local governments took on a bigger role to minimise these effects and protect civilian interests. Responding to the exigencies of the war, northern reconstruction embraced the concepts behind the Commonwealth Government’s national reconstruction agenda.

Local governments interpreted the Commonwealth’s agenda in a regional context. They rallied local agencies to create a louder political voice and direct northern reconstruction. In 1944, eleven municipalities located along the coastal strip between Townsville and Cooktown formed the North Queensland Local Government Association (NQLGA).³ The objective was to improve cooperation between local governments and coordinate regional development.⁴ In the adjustment to peace, the association was mandated to represent the vast array of political

³ When established in 1944, the NQLGA began life as the North Queensland Local Authorities Association. The word ‘Government’ began to replace ‘Authorities’ during the 1950s and was an official replacement from the 1960s. For simplicity, this article uses only the NQLGA acronym.

⁴ Politicians representing local authorities from Cairns, Townsville, Atherton, Cardwell, Douglas, Eacham, Herberton, Hinchinbrook, Johnston, and Mulgrave formed the association at a meeting in Innisfail on 8 April 1944. The president of the Malanda Chamber of Commerce was also present: "Local Authorities Form Northern Body," *TDB*, 12 April 1944, 2; At the time, the ten local government authorities occupied lands traditionally owned by First Nations Peoples - Yirrganydji, Djabugandji, Yidinjdji, Bindal, Wulgurukaba, Kuku-Yalanji, Djirbalngan, Mbabaram, Girramay, Gulnay, Djiru, Warrgamay, Nyawaygi, Djirbalngan, Ngadjonji, Mamu, Warungnu, Gugu-Badhun, Ewamian, Gugu-Yimidhirr, Kokowarra, Kokomini, Mutumui, and Lama Lama: Australian Government, National Native Title Tribunal, “National Native Title Register”, <http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleRegisters/Pages/Search-National-Native-Title-Register.asp>; Australian Government, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, “Map of Indigenous Australia”, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>.

interests across the north to the state and federal authorities (and private industry) in the south. It was an organisation dominated by men of European origin—the voices of women of European origin and Indigenous Australians were generally ignored or unheard in the NQLGA during the period examined by this paper. Yet the creation of the NQLGA was a critical initiative in the political history of regional Australia.

By creating the machinery for regional cooperation, local governments recognised the growing importance of their region and seized responsibility for post-war development in north Queensland. Stuart Macintyre's *Australia's Boldest Experiment* explores the Commonwealth Government's post-war reconstruction agenda, but is relatively silent on the northern experience.⁵ Macintyre argues that the Commonwealth's agenda transformed the nation's economy, society and politics and helped to concentrate power at the centre of the federation. The mobilisation of local governments in north Queensland shows that the Second World War inspired change on the federation's northern frontier. While the Commonwealth attempted to make a special case for northern Australia in the reconstruction agenda, it made few tangible impacts. Russell McGregor demonstrates that during the 1940s the Commonwealth's North Australia Development Committee struggled to determine a clear rationale for investment in northern regions.⁶ Northern development faded as a national priority in the 1950s.⁷ This paper argues that post-war reconstruction and northern development were not the exclusive preserve of state and federal governments. Through the compact of a regional association, local governments drove the reconstruction of north Queensland. They persisted despite the nation's declining interest in northern development.

The NQLGA's contribution to northern development laid the foundations for a national publicity campaign called "People the North", which repositioned the north as a national priority. Launched as a sub-committee of the NQLGA in 1962, the campaign had a high public profile throughout Australia.⁸ The People the North campaign promoted population

⁵ Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*; Geoffrey Bolton, *The Oxford History of Australia, Volume 5: 1942-1988, The Middle Way* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996); Jenny Hocking, "Post-War Reconstruction and the New World Order: The Origins of Gough Whitlam's Democratic Citizen," *Australian Journal of Politics & History (hereafter AJPH)* 53, no. 2 (2007). 223-235.

⁶ Russell McGregor, "Developing the North, Defending the Nation? The Northern Australia Development Committee, 1945-1949," *AJPH* 59, no. 1 (2013). 33-46.

⁷ Lyndon Megarity, "Necessary and Urgent?": The Politics of Northern Australia 1945-75," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* 97, no. 2 (2011). 136-160.

⁸ Russell McGregor, "'People the North': Nation-building in 1960s Australia," *AJPH* 65, no. 2 (2019). 215-229.

growth in northern Australia and argued for the creation of a national authority to manage northern development. The campaign unified numerous political and commercial interests and attracted support from high profile Australians such as Sir William Walkley and Sir Douglas Copland. Lobbying by the PTNC stimulated cooperation on northern policy between the state governments of Western Australia and Queensland and influenced the Commonwealth to restructure its Department of National Development.

By 1964, north Queensland's local governments had refocused federal political attention on northern Australia. But the substance behind the PTNC campaign was not new. McGregor describes the campaign as "the last gasp of a grand demographic aspiration that had prevailed for a hundred years".⁹ His argument situates People the North at the end of a long held national aspiration to populate Australia's northern frontier. McGregor does not analyse the campaign's local roots or its key sponsor: the NQLGA.

McGregor and Lyndon Megarrity analyse key political themes of northern development. Their work has explored emptiness rhetoric and the influence of national security and decentralisation on federal northern development policy.¹⁰ In his 2016 book, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North*, McGregor illuminates the many voices in debates about the north between federation and the 1970s. McGregor demonstrates how the continental north is often positioned within Australia's developing national identity: most frequently as an outlying problem in need of remedial action.¹¹ Other historians have also studied the notion of the north at the margins, which was the lived experience of communities there between the 1940s and 1960s.¹² Northern isolation was examined in Alan Powell's *Far Country*, which studies the ways in which policy efforts to incorporate the Northern Territory into mainstream Australia.¹³ Similarly, Megarrity's *Northern Dreams* argues national policy has tended to overlook the local challenges faced by

⁹ McGregor, "People the North". 229.

¹⁰ Russell McGregor "A Dog in the Manger: White Australia and Its Vast Empty Spaces," *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012). 157-173.; Megarrity, "Necessary and Urgent". 136-160.

¹¹ Russell McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). 45-56, 66-71.

¹² Regina Ganter, "The View from the North," in *Australia's History: Themes & Debates*, eds Martyn Lyons and Penny Russell (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2005); Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia's North* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003). 145-157.; Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History*, vol. 3 (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2014). 166-198.

¹³ Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Third ed. (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1996). 122-188.

most northern residents in favour of grandiose northern development schemes designed to deliver benefit to southern audiences.¹⁴ Collectively, these histories broadly explicate how the discourse and policy agenda for northern development is set by southern-based governments for southern-based audiences. So far, northern development as expressed in Australian historiography is a story of the nation's struggle to merge a distant frontier into a single Australia. The effort of political voices located on the northern frontier is not sufficiently explored.

Even histories of local government in Queensland offer no analysis of the NQLGA's impact on northern development. Reflecting upon the era of post-war reconstruction in *Local Government and Regionalism in Queensland 1859-1977*, Charles Harris focused on the Commonwealth's attempts to establish Regional Development Committees.¹⁵ Similarly, Frank Hornby's *Australian Local Government* assesses the achievements of local governments across Australia and in Queensland, but overlooks regional bodies like the NQLGA.¹⁶ Despite Hornby's neglect, it is likely that no other association of local governments has produced a national publicity campaign quite like People the North.

This article adds fresh perspective to existing histories of post-war reconstruction, northern development and local government in Australia. It argues that the NQLGA's emphasis on region building in the 1940s and 1950s contributed to purposeful nation building in northern Australia, something that had generally eluded national governments since federation. Success led some in the association to believe they could reposition the north as a national priority. Innovative in its use of modern public relations, the People the North campaign argued that it was in the nation's interest to quickly develop the north. It is worth remembering the NQLGA story because it made a formidable contribution to Australian politics in an era when national priorities often eclipsed regional concerns.

Wartime Origins

¹⁴ Lyndon Megarrity, *Northern Dreams: The Politics of Northern Development in Australia* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018).

¹⁵ C.P. Harris, *Local Government and Regionalism in Queensland 1859 to 1977* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1978) 174-182.

¹⁶ Frank Hornby, *Australian Local Government and Community Development - from Colonial Times to the 21st Century* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012).

The Second World War's impact on local and regional politics in north Queensland cannot be overstated. Wartime administration had enhanced the sense of 'north Queensland' as a natural region, despite its lack of recognition by governments. The north endured major wartime food shortages and social conflict, consequences of war which were intensified by the region's distance from state and federal governments. In response, eleven local authorities established the North Queensland Local Government Association. Historically, smaller councils had led the push for official cooperation between local governments within Queensland's north. As late as 1940 large authorities like Cairns and Townsville were unsupportive of a northern-based local government association.¹⁷

By 1943, the strategic importance of Northern Australia was much clearer than it had been in 1940.¹⁸ The consequences of war had struck Queensland's north and local governments, including those representing Cairns and Townsville, saw the advantages of formal cooperation. Queensland Premier Frank Cooper wrote in 1943 that "North Australia has assumed tremendous importance since December 1941...before the war this area of Australia was terra incognita to the majority of Australians. The war has changed all that".¹⁹ The bombing of Darwin, Broome and other tropical locations had fixed the north in the nation's gaze. Tens of thousands of allied defence personnel were based and trained in locations such as the Atherton Tablelands and Townsville, straining local infrastructure and increasing competition for resources.²⁰ These conditions disrupted civilian life, which encouraged cooperation between local authorities which often felt abandoned by the rest of the nation. "During the war North Queensland people were hampered and suffered considerably while those in the South hardly knew there was a war on", reflected Townsville's veteran Mayor John Stewart Gill in 1947.²¹ Gill's exaggeration reflected the strong sense of isolation felt in

¹⁷ Eacham Shire, a small municipality located on the tablelands south-west of Cairns, proposed formation of a northern authority in 1912 and the concept was revisited by others in the 1930s and early 1940s: "Telegrams. A Growing Movement," *Cairns Post (hereafter CP)*, 15 January 1913, 4.; "City Council," *Northern Miner (hereafter NM)*, 10 June 1938, 3.; "Cairns City Council," *CP*, 20 November 1940, 4.; "City Council," *Townsville Daily Bulletin (hereafter TDB)*, 22 November 1940, 10.

¹⁸ Albert Palazzo, "Projecting Power: The Development of Queensland as a Base for War," *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 19, no. 6 (2006). 878-891.

¹⁹ "Decentralisation - Development of the North - State Premier's Comments," *Warwick Daily News*, 20 September 1943, 4.; "'We Must Develop the North' - Perils in Just Drifting Along - Aggressive Policy Is Needed," *Daily Mercury*, 15 September 1943, 5.

²⁰ Darryl McIntyre, *Townsville at War, 1942: Life in a Garrison City* (Townsville: Townsville City Council, 1992). 80.; Ross Fitzgerald, Lyndon Thomas Megarity, and David Symons, *Made in Queensland: A New History* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2009). 110-118.

²¹ "Back Bid For Deal to North," *CM*, 23 August 1947, 3.

northern Australia during the 1940s. The rapid militarisation of north Queensland during the Second World War exacerbated some of the effects of isolation.

With the arrival of thousands of troops increasing pressure on finite resources, some local politicians took radical action to protect civilian interests.²² Food and housing shortages were common and clashes between civilians and military personnel were politicised by aldermen such as Townsville's Tom Aikens, who criticised distant governments and authority. Aikens had been expelled from the Australian Labor Party's Hermit Park (Townsville) branch in 1940 because his brand of socialism was opposed by the Queensland party's dominant Australian Workers' Union faction.²³ The entire Hermit Park branch was expelled two years later because of its connection to a local "aid to Russia" committee and Aikens joined the exiled branch and formed a new party: the "Hermit Park ALP".²⁴ In 1943, the new party won 70% of Townsville's council positions and formed a loose coalition with the Communist Party of Australia, which had influenced north Queensland politics since at least the 1920s.²⁵ Along with the Communist Party alderman Fred Paterson (who represented the seat of Bowen in the Queensland Parliament between 1944 and 1949), Aikens argued that north Queenslanders had to bear an unfair burden during the war because of the high number of military personnel based in Townsville and its hinterland.²⁶ As a response to war-time constraints, the Townsville City Council socialised critical services such as child care and the sale of groceries, ice and appliances.²⁷ In this sense, the Townsville City Council found purpose by filling a void vacated by distant state and federal governments. Regardless of the ideologies behind the policies, it was an example of what might be achieved on a larger scale across the region.

²² Ian Moles, "'The Fiery Cross Will Go Forth': Working-Class Radicalism and Municipal Socialism in Townsville During the 1930s and 1940s," in *Lectures on North Queensland History* (Townsville: James Cook University History Department, 1979). 101-130.

²³ D. W. Hunt, 'Aikens, Thomas (Tom) (1900–1985)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/aikens-thomas-tom-12124/text21719>, published first in hardcopy 2007, accessed online 8 May 2018.

²⁴ "A.L.P. Drops 6 Men at Townsville", *Courier Mail* (hereafter *CM*), 27 January 1942, 3.

²⁵ Dianne Menghetti, *The Red North: The Popular Front in North Queensland* (Studies in North Queensland History Townsville, no.3: James Cook University History Department, 1981). 14-28.

²⁶ Ian Moles, *A Majority of One: Tom Aikens and Independent Politics in Townsville* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1979). 65-71.

²⁷ "Municipal Fruit Shops in North," *CM*, 3 February 1944, 3; "North to Receive More Food," *CM*, 23 December 1943, 4.

Hinchinbrook Shire Chairman James Kelly sensed the need to prepare for the war's end.²⁸ Kelly believed local governments across the region should mobilise to consolidate the war's positive effects such as improved infrastructure, and tackle negative effects such as civil and economic disruption. Militarisation had led to the construction of some new roads and airports, but the war had exacerbated housing shortages, disrupted markets for northern produce and delayed civilian development initiatives.²⁹ Kelly believed in a bigger role for local government and promoted a regional alliance.³⁰ In February 1943, Kelly told five of the region's local governments at a conference in Ingham that:

Councils need to be given a greater share in the responsibility of good government of the people in their areas. The tendency [in Australia] is to govern from capital cities, and no matter how sympathetic the Governments maybe it often results in control by persons not fully acquainted with local conditions and needs.³¹

Kelly claimed that southern governments did not understand local needs and he proposed regional cooperation on big developments such as roads and bridges better suited to north Queensland's tropical wet season. Often cut off for months during the wet season, the region's widely dispersed populations were disadvantaged by antiquated infrastructure.³² In the 1940s most of north Queensland's roads were dirt tracks prone to severe damage from general traffic and complete destruction from flooding.³³ Kelly was not alone in his views. In 1944, Frank Vicary of Croydon Shire similarly pronounced, "we are in the backblocks and still in the packhorse days".³⁴ A shared sense of neglect drew local authorities together to plan for a more prosperous future.³⁵

²⁸ "Post-War Planning - Innisfail Activity," *CP*, 21 April 1943, 4.

²⁹ Fitzgerald, Megarrity, and Symons, *Made in Queensland*. 111-118.; "Northern Local Authorities and Post War Problems," *Evening Advocate (hereafter EA)*, 26 June 1944, 4.

³⁰ In 1943 Hinchinbrook Shire requested that other councils support a northern local authorities association to facilitate post-war planning: "Local Authorities - Northern Association," *CP*, 26 April 1943 1943, 1.

³¹ "Northern Local Authorities Confer at Ingham," *EA*, 18 February 1943, 3.

³² "Flood Waters - Extensive Railway Damage," *NM*, 10 April 1940, 3.; "Heavy Rain in North - Flooding at Innisfail - Ingham Dislocation," *CM*, 26 March 1940, 3.

³³ Early NQLGA meeting agendas often focused on infrastructure: "NQLGA meeting 3 December 1948: Agenda" in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the Charters Towers Regional Council (hereafter CTRC). The possession of these archives follows the rotating secretarial duties attached to the NQLGA's modern successor, the *Northern Alliance of Councils* (est. 2017).

³⁴ "Shire Owes Govt. Nothing, but left in Packhorse Era," *Telegraph*, 25 September 1944, 6.

³⁵ "Post-War Planning - Innisfail Activity," *CP*, 21 April 1943, 4.; "Development of Far North," *CP*, 06 October 1944, 4.

Local governments lead Northern Reconstruction

Local politicians were influenced by the growing momentum of post-war reconstruction in the national political agenda, momentum that had been building since 1940. Northern newspapers often reported federal debates about post-war planning, which culminated in 1943, when the Curtin Government formed the Department of Post-War Reconstruction.³⁶ The department was established to liaise between state and federal governments and formulate policy recommendations.³⁷ At the time of its formation, the Department's Director General, HC Coombs, considered that the war had provided the nation with an "opportunity to move consciously and intelligently towards a new economic and social system".³⁸ Coombs later described some of the ministry's key concerns as being "the reestablishment in civil life of those who had been involved in the war" and "the improvement of the physical and social environment".³⁹ Local governments in north Queensland recognised similar opportunities.

Local governments embraced post-war reconstruction because of its potential to bring about much needed social and economic change in north Queensland. Atherton Shire's William Whiting, the inaugural vice president of the NQLGA, was well aware that the federal Labor government was trying to consolidate advances made in the economy during the war. In 1944, Whiting appealed to fellow NQLGA delegates to do something similar for their region:

we must make preparations [for the end of the war, because] ... there is the housing problem, and a market for the crops we grow... [and] embark upon [developing] secondary industries [and] the only way to do that is to get more population here... I think the idea of founding the Northern Local Authorities Association was to get on with the question of how we are going to populate the North.⁴⁰

³⁶ "Post-War Planning," *TDB*, 05 August 1942, 2.; "Post-War Planning," *CP*, 05 August 1942, 4.; "Post War Planning," *TDB*, 09 October 1942, 2.; "Post-War Planning: Dr. Evatt's Urge," *TDB*, 16 November 1942, 1.

³⁷ Paul Sir Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-1941* (Australian War Memorial, 1952). 267-89; Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015). 43-44, 65-121, 142; "Gazettal of New Post-War Planning Dept," *Northern Star*, 25 December 1942, 1.

³⁸ H.C. Coombs, 'The Economic Aftermath of the War', in DAS Campbell (ed.), *Post-war Reconstruction in Australia* (Sydney: Australasia Publishing Company, 1944) 98.

³⁹ H. C. Coombs, *Trial Balance* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981). 27.

⁴⁰ "Northern Local Authorities and Post War Problems," *EA*, 26 June 1944, 4.

The NQLGA's expansive definition of "the north" matched the ambition of its members. Defined as 'commencing on the coast at the Southern Boundary of the City of Mackay thence due West to the Western boundary of the State of Queensland', the NQLGA's 'north' was an early clue that it would one day promote development and population growth in areas far beyond the jurisdiction of its members.⁴¹ Regional development schemes dominated the early agenda. These included hydro-electric power generation, modern road and railway networks, the inclusion of northern towns on flight paths, public service decentralisation to northern areas, and the opening of new lands for settlement to accommodate population growth.⁴² The NQLGA knew it needed state and federal government support. It discouraged parochialism and advanced a unified and coherent vision of northern development. As Atherton's Ernest Pawsey said: if the region's local authorities "were going to get anything done for North Queensland they must speak with one voice".⁴³

North Queensland's local governments even expressed an embracing view of the natural environment. They discussed Australia's "dead heart" and debated whether northern rivers could defend north Queensland against encroaching deserts. The discovery of animal fossils in central Australia had contributed to the belief that the vast Australian inland, now "dead", had once been well-watered. "The dust bowl is growing every year" and threatens our good coastal lands claimed the Douglas Shire's James Reynolds.⁴⁴ John Bradfield's irrigation concept from the late 1930s inspired Reynolds and others to argue that diverting "surplus waters" from the Daintree, Mossman, Baron, Johnstone, Tully and Herbert rivers to inland Australia could defend against drought.⁴⁵ Spirited debate followed and some NQLGA delegates cautioned that diversion could deprive north Queensland of a precious resource and obstruct their efforts to develop hydro-electric power. None of the delegates recognised that the biggest threat to good agricultural lands along Queensland's north-eastern coastal strip, would eventually come from the inevitable urbanisation, which occurred as the region's cities expanded into a mass of sprawling suburbs.

⁴¹ "NQLGA Constitution - 1946" in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the CTRC.

⁴² For example: "NQLGA meeting 20 December 1946: Minutes" in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the CTRC.; "Conference Desires Electrical Expansion," *EA*, 26 September 1944, 3.; "Northern Delegation to Press for New Bridge across Burdekin," *EA*, 9 April 1945, 3.; "Hydro Scheme for N.Q.," *TDB*, 15 December 1944, 3.

⁴³ "Northern Local Authorities and Post War Problems," 4.

⁴⁴ "'Dead Heart' of Australia Encroaches on Fertile Land," *EA*, 02 July 1945, 4.

⁴⁵ "North's Surplus Water," *CP*, 07 July 1945, 7.

The NQLGA's discussion of river diversion was extensive and involved representations to the federal government. The focus was on water and an internal compromise worked on the basis that other rivers, such as those emptying into the Gulf of Carpentaria, could be diverted instead for national benefit. We 'respectfully submit that as this question is of such great national importance' wrote the NQLGA to Prime Minister Frank Forde in 1945, "that your Government should immediately and conclusively determine the practicality of the schemes or otherwise".⁴⁶ The Commonwealth "regretted" that it was "impossible to undertake the wide investigation which would be necessary" and deflected the NQLGA's interest in water resources to the Queensland state government.⁴⁷ Local government was and remains a state government responsibility under the Australian Federation. But the deflection symbolised the loose connections between local governments and the Commonwealth in the 1940s, which potentially weakened the federal government's post-war plans for northern Australia.

"Getting precisely nowhere": federal northern development planning in the 1940s

The NQLGA had limited engagement with the federal government's North Australia Development Committee (NADC), which had been formed as part of the Chifley Labor government's post-war reconstruction agenda. The NADC did not seek links with northern political organisations, which could have provided much needed pragmatic direction to national planning. It was defunct by 1949 and unlike the NQLGA, the NADC made few tangible impacts on northern development beyond increasing official knowledge of the north through maps, reconnaissance and reports. The NADC nonetheless left an imprint upon national visions of northern Australia and its legacy informed memory of northern development well into the 1960s.⁴⁸ The NADC's perceived lack of success, for example, stayed in the memory of the Queensland Premier Frank Nicklin, who in 1961 when addressing the concept of creating a federal authority to develop the north, wrote:

The formation of an Authority, called by whatever name, would not be sufficient to secure the necessary funds and consequentially it would be restricted to furnishing reports, giving opinions etc... Indeed this is what happened under the old North Australia Development Committee. That

⁴⁶ NQLGA to Frank Forde, 6 July 1945, A9816, 1943/664 Part 1, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA).

⁴⁷ Prime Minister's Department to NQLGA, undated, A9816, 1943/664 Part 1, NAA.

⁴⁸ Megarrity, "Necessary and Urgent". 137-147.

Committee did a lot of hard work and made a sound report and recommendations but got precisely nowhere.⁴⁹

“Getting nowhere” was a partial consequence of the federal government’s inability to determine the rationale behind northern development. As Coombs wrote to Chifley in 1947: “we would request direction on whether the development of the north should still be regarded as an object of policy on defence and international relations, or whether should it be approached purely from an economic point of view”.⁵⁰

The NQLGA did not suffer a similar lack of focus. Its priorities for development were generally pragmatic responses to the realities of life in north Queensland. Whether it was infrastructure or building supplies, material for local libraries or the management of rivers, the NQLGA pursued practical developments aimed at improving the quality of life in the north. In contrast, the NADC failed to find a consensus on why the nation should even develop the north and contests over conceptions of national security between the defence and external affairs departments contributed to a lack of clear policy.⁵¹ The NADC even struggled to determine where northern Australia was: Chifley himself led a push to cut north-east Queensland from the NADC’s area of concern, which caused arguments between the prime minister and the Queensland premier Ned Hanlon.⁵² As the federal government debated the whereabouts and relevance of northern Australia, the NQLGA pushed ahead with northern development and managing its own political challenges.⁵³

As the binding experiences of the Second World War slipped further into the past, stable leadership and a clear focus helped the NQLGA to remain relevant. The evidence is found in meeting and communication archives and reinforced by newspaper reporting in the major northern periodicals of the era such as the *Townsville Daily Bulletin*. These primary sources reveal a methodical organisation, which carefully developed consensus among a politically diverse membership. North Queensland was a vast geographical area and triannual meetings

⁴⁹ Frank Nicklin to C. Rains [Secretary, Federated Chambers of Commerce of North Queensland], 10 September 1962, in Item ID540578, Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA).

⁵⁰ HC Coombs to Ben Chifley, 7 November 1947, A663 O66/1/709 Part 1, NAA.

⁵¹ McGregor, "Developing the North, Defending the Nation?" 39, 44, 46.; Coombs, *Trial Balance*. 70-72.

⁵² Extract from the transcript of the August 1947 Premier’s Conference, A9816 1946/302 Part 3, NAA.

⁵³ Proposals for the Separation of north Queensland from Queensland were frequent in the mid-late 1940s. The NQLGA mostly avoided the divisive issue because it threatened its emergence as a stable, unified and influential northern political voice. Separation was a dead-end and the NQLGA were quick to realise it.

were held across the region to enhance participation. Rotating the events between locations enabled delegates to familiarise themselves with the infrastructure and landscapes of the entire region. It was clear that the NQLGA's actions were informed by the realities of life in north Queensland, as opposed to the ideological generalisations or broad assumptions about northern potential so often portrayed by other initiatives focused on Australia's north.

National debates about northern Australia in the 1950s continued to draw upon anxieties about emptiness and unexploited land. These ideas affected northern-based development initiatives and they appeared to influence the federal government, which under Menzies, generally took an economically cautious approach to northern development.⁵⁴ In 1951 the Coalition's then Minister for National Development, Richard Casey, wrote that there were "a lot of physical difficulties" in developing the north: a nod toward the complex entanglement of environmental challenges and policy abstractions which seemed to discourage the government from a decisive commitment.⁵⁵ The NQLGA worked hard to convince southern doubters of compelling reasons to develop the north. Like many northern political voices, it subsequently tried to persuade the Commonwealth to link northern development with national security.⁵⁶

National security and northern development

Fresh memories of the Second World War caused many north Queenslanders, like other Australians, to peer anxiously at empty spaces. "The people in the south would only snap their fingers at the needs of the north [if] there was a danger of an enemy landing on Australia through North Queensland" exclaimed one NQLGA delegate in 1949.⁵⁷ The common sentiment inspired protests "against [government] neglect of north Queensland", which included public rallies and correspondence among Queensland's business community representatives.⁵⁸ Frustrations with 'the south' were behind the formation of a short-lived

⁵⁴ Megarrity, "Necessary and Urgent?", 142-145.

⁵⁵ RG Casey to WM Simmonds [Queensland Liberal-Country Party senator], 18 January 1951, A987 E15, NAA.

⁵⁶ For examples see: Simmonds to Casey, 30 December 1950, A987 E15, NAA.; Editorial, "Priority Scheme the North's Main Hope for Development," *The TDB*, 27 July 1949, 2.

⁵⁷ V.A. Toms [Wangaratta Shire's representative to the NQLGA]: "Would It Be Unfair?," *TDB*, 27 January 1949, 7.

⁵⁸ L. Lawrence [President, Federation of Chambers of Commerce of North Queensland] to M. Wainwright [President, Brisbane Chamber of Commerce], 17 May 1949, Item ID540576/558, QSA.

North Queensland Development League in 1949, which demanded that the Commonwealth declare north Queensland a 'strategic area [for defence purposes] giving it no.1 priority on supplies of cement, steel, and essential materials, amenities and preferential taxation'.⁵⁹ The NQLGA declined to participate in that movement.⁶⁰

Despite sometimes resorting to anti-southerner rhetoric, the NQLGA was dominated by conservative operators like Dr Peter Delamothe from Bowen Shire, who was president of the organisation for most of the 1950s. Delamothe was a medical doctor who had served with the Royal Australian Air Force during the Second World War. He later became a minister in state governments led by Frank Nicklin and Joh Bjelke-Petersen.⁶¹ Delamothe was committed to northern development. He had worked closely on policy with former NQLGA presidents like the Cairns alderman Thomas Crowley, who represented Cairns for the Australian Labor Party in the Queensland parliament between 1947 and 1956. Delamothe preferred an agenda of specific projects and rejected the parochialism of southern-government-bashing espoused by the North Queensland Development League, which had not proved effective.⁶² The idea of strengthening defence through northern development transcended party allegiances.

The Queensland parliament linked national security and northern development in 1950. It passed a resolution stating "that all projects relating to the development and settlement of tropical Australia [should] be regarded by the Commonwealth as defence measures".⁶³

Queensland's Government was attempting to divert the frustration of its northern constituents away from Brisbane toward Canberra. It had some degree of success. The NQLGA conferred with the Commonwealth about northern defences, but the defence minister Philip McBride told the local association that it was not practical to locate permanent defence forces in "sparsely populated areas such as North Queensland".⁶⁴ The Commonwealth believed that Australian defence forces were mobile and thus deployable at a moment's notice. Defence

⁵⁹ "North Queensland Development," *CP*, 03 June 1949, 5.; W. Appleton [Secretary, North Queensland Development League] to WJF Riordan [federal ALP member for Kennedy], 27 July 1949, A663 O66/1/794, NAA.; Extract from letter received by Treasurer from Cairns Chamber of Commerce, A663 O66/1/794, NAA.

⁶⁰ "NQLGA meeting 1 June 1950: Minutes" in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the CTCRC.

⁶¹ Lady Joan Delamothe and Brian Stevenson, *The Delamothe Story* (Brisbane: Boolarong, 1989). 25-27, 40-46, 89-104.

⁶² "N.Q. Development League - Poor Attendance at Annual Conference," *TDB*, 18 April 1950, 2.

⁶³ JH Mann [Speaker of Queensland Parliament] to RG Menzies, 17 October 1950, A663 O66/1/794, NAA.

⁶⁴ PA McBride [Minister for Defence, succeeded Harrison in late 1950] to Stephenson, 17 July 1951, A663 O66/1/794, NAA.

chiefs maintained their view from the 1940s that developing the north was “primarily an economic and social problem”.⁶⁵

Arguments to link civilian development with national security were generally dismissed by the Commonwealth until the mid-1960s. In late 1963, federal cabinet ministers overruled the advice of defence chiefs and ordered that the new Third Regular Army Battle Group be based in Townsville instead of Victoria.⁶⁶ The federal government’s sudden decision to establish Lavarack Barracks in Townsville in 1964, which is now the largest army base in Australia, can be considered as a major success for the NQLGA. Decades of campaigning by the local association had raised the profile of the north and sharpened the awareness of both major parties of the potential to extract political capital from northern development.

The secret to unlocking north Queensland and telling its story

The north’s larger national profile in the early 1960s partially stemmed from NQLGA campaigns in the 1950s. North Queensland was presented as a place of national significance for reasons beyond economics or defence. Population growth and urban development meant that the region was becoming less like the rest of northern Australia and more like the urban south. By 1951, the City of Townsville had over 36,000 residents and the City of Cairns had grown by 54% between 1933 and 1951.⁶⁷ These cities represented the urban frontier in northern Australia and the region acquired two new federal divisions – Dawson and Leichhardt – in 1949. North Queensland’s significance to national politics was growing and senior leadership within the NQLGA recognised these trends.

The NQLGA derived much of its strength from self-assured and educated leadership, a trend exemplified by Dr Peter Delamothe.⁶⁸ Under Delamothe’s leadership, the NQLGA grew in confidence and continued the focus on diminishing isolation. As Delamothe argued in 1954, “whether it is stock routes or tourists, main roads or passenger ships, the Burdekin Bridge or

⁶⁵ AW Fadden to Cairns Chamber of Commerce, 20 April 1950, A987 E15, NAA; Department of Defence Minute Paper, 2 February 1951, A663 O66/1/794, NAA.

⁶⁶ Patrick White, "A Chain of Fortuitous Circumstances: The Sudden Rise of a Military Base in Townsville," *History in the Making* 4, no. 1 (2015). 76.

⁶⁷ "City of Cairns Population Has Best Pro Rata Increase," *TDB*, 19 March 1952, 5.

⁶⁸ "Northlanders - Peter Delamothe Again North Queenslander No. 1," *NQR*, 6 June 1953, 5.; "Hopkins Equalled Delamothe Record," *NQR*, 4 June 1960, 5.

quicker freight trains, it is clear all northern local authorities are at grips with the secret that will really unlock North Queensland – ease of communications”.⁶⁹

One way was to tell the north’s story. A local initiative led to the publication of the region’s history by Geoffrey Bolton. In 1956, the NQLGA commissioned *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920* and made their historical records available to the ANU researcher.⁷⁰ Commissioning a history of this kind was a bold step. This was not a crude marketing exercise, nor was it expected to lead to glossy local council tourist brochures. It was a genuine contribution to the region’s social and cultural development, themes almost never mentioned in national northern development discourse.

In commissioning a history, the NQLGA looked past locally popular northern writers such as Glenville Pike. On Sir Keith Hancock’s advice, the organisation instead chose an ANU research fellow to write an objective history of north Queensland.⁷¹ Bolton’s book was another demonstration of the NQLGA’s sophistication: the association resisted imposing a parochial political agenda on the work, insisting only that the geographic focus of the book reflect the municipalities that funded the project. The association encouraged its members to provide the historian with unobstructed access to their archives, which enabled Bolton to develop his own view of the region’s past.

In the 1990s, a James Cook University oral history project interviewed former NQLGA president Harry Hopkins, who fondly remembered Bolton’s book. Hopkins succeeded Delamothe as president of the NQLGA in 1957 and was still the president in 1963 when Bolton published his work. Hopkins reflected that “the NQLGA had discovered in the late fifties that they could get together [and] produce some things for the north... they got all the councils involved to contribute to a book that was published and it was a great success”.⁷²

⁶⁹ “NQLGA meeting 4 June 1954: President’s Annual Report” in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the CTCRC; “Communications Problems in North,” *NQR*, 5 June 1954, 5.

⁷⁰ “New Book Bridges Gap in Northern History,” *NQR*, 5 October 1963, 16.

⁷¹ Lyndon Megarrity, “Geoffrey Bolton’s ‘a Thousand Miles Away’: Origins, Influences, Impact,” *History Australia* 12, no. 3 (2015). 13.

⁷² Harry Hopkins, interview with Barbara Erskine dated 29 October 1992, James Cook University oral collection, held at James Cook University Special Collections.

As president during the late 1950s, Hopkins encouraged the NQLGA to think about new challenges. The organisation had successfully modernised parts of the region's infrastructure. Persistent lobbying had contributed to projects such as the Tully Falls hydroelectricity scheme, the Tinaroo Dam, cement, copper and steel works, better ports, roads and aerodromes and the Burdekin Bridge, which massively reduced the isolation of northern communities during the wet season. After the steady and capable leadership of Peter Delamothe, the association had the footing to take on new challenges. Its achievements gave it confidence, and in 1959 Delamothe's ambitious successor, Harry Hopkins, sensed the beginning of a new era:

There was once a time when local government in North Queensland had to talk about the "neglected north", however, the fabulous mineral discoveries – uranium at Mary Kathleen, bauxite at Weipa and copper at Mt Isa – changed all that and advertised North Queensland and its potentialities to the world in a spectacular manner. In fact the north had become... one of the glamour development areas of the Commonwealth.⁷³

This was an audacious claim by Hopkins, especially because local authorities in north-west Queensland had not traditionally been part of the NQLGA, which usually operated east of the Great Dividing Range. Hopkins was from Townsville, however, and his city stood to benefit as enhanced railway links to western Queensland brought minerals to his city's shipping terminal for export.⁷⁴ More broadly, Hopkins recognised the potential of tying the NQLGA to a larger definition of the north, which included Queensland's west and maybe more. Northern mineral deposits could attract large foreign companies and international capital. If national political interest in northern Australia could be revitalised, the possibilities for a new era in northern development were extensive.

"The chance to build a new civilisation"

Stoking these national policy possibilities was a key objective of the NQLGA under Hopkins' leadership. Hopkins built relations with prominent business personalities and supporters of northern development. In addition to being a Townsville alderman since 1949, he was the foundation chairman of the Townsville branch of the Australian Institute of Management

⁷³ "Says N.Q. Glamour Development Area," *NQR*, 6 June 1959, 1.

⁷⁴ Megarrity, *Northern Dreams*. 86-89.

(AIM), a “society of managers” with members across Australia. AIM had begun its life as the Institute of Industrial Management in Melbourne in 1941 before becoming the Australian Institute of Management in 1949. Many of nation’s top professionals became members.⁷⁵ In 1961, Townsville hosted an AIM conference focused on boosting development in northern Australia. The conference was so popular that many applicants were turned away.⁷⁶

Hopkins met nationally recognised business personalities at the Townsville conference including the chairman of the Commonwealth Banking Corporation, Warren McDonald, and William Walkley, the managing director of Ampol Petroleum. Both men publicly supported northern development and the encounter transformed the NQLGA’s approach to lobbying and public relations.⁷⁷ Speakers argued that people in northern Australia needed to better promote the region’s potential to capital and governments. Professional lobbying and public relations techniques had gained prominence in the post-war period as corporations like Ampol sought to influence government policy.⁷⁸ Walkley appreciated journalists and the art of good publicity, having endowed the Walkley Awards for journalism in the 1950s. After the conference in Townsville, his company established a relationship with the NQLGA, providing advice on the mechanics of a publicity campaign.⁷⁹

By February 1962, the NQLGA had created its own public relations lobbying group: the People the North Committee (PTNC).⁸⁰ To make an impact the People the North Committee created public interest stories about northern potential, which included appearances on television shows such as *Four Corners*.⁸¹ At the heart of the new campaign was the claim

⁷⁵ Denis Nettle, "Issues of Management Identity: Attitudes to Management within the Australian Institute of Management, 1940-73," *Business history* 56, no. 2 (2014). 290-291.

⁷⁶ "Management Conference "Booked Out"," *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 11 May 1961, 3.

⁷⁷ See: "Banker's Call to Develop North Welcomed," *The Age*, 14 March 1961, 10; "W.G. Walkley: If I Ran This Country... Australia Would Double Its Population by 1980," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 April 1961, 2.

⁷⁸ Thomas C. Buchanan and Thomas Ashley Mackay, "The Return of the Steel Octopus: Free Enterprise and Australian Culture During B.H.P.'S Cold War," *History Australia* 15, no. 1 (2018). 66-67.; Colin Simpson, *Show Me a Mountain: The Rise of an Australian Company, Ampol* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1961). 101-116. 155-157. 185-190.

⁷⁹ "News and Information Bureau Proposed – Plan for the Development of North Queensland – Local Government Association Conference Decision," *CP*, 7 October, 1961. 1.

⁸⁰ "PTNC meeting 1 February 1962: Minutes" in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the CTRC.

⁸¹ For example: "£100m. Scheme for North – 10-Year Aim," *SMH*, 15 April 1962, 39.; "Aust. Could Have 6 More Isas in North Qld.," *CM*, 1 April 1963, 7.; Editorial, "Developing the North," *SMH*, 18 January 1964, 2.; "How to Salvage the North," *The Australian*, 11 August 1964, 4.; "T.V. Finds 'Paradise' without Takers," *The Age (hereafter TA)*, 13 August 1965, 3.; Frank Bennett, "People the North," in *Four Corners* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1964).

that the nation needed to triple the population in northern Australia within ten years to unlock its potential.⁸² The PTNC argued that Australia risked foreign intervention if it did not act urgently. In a dramatic appraisal of the situation in 1962, Hopkins declared to a Sydney journalist that “our biggest danger comes not from nuclear bombs, but from an Asian mother with a starving baby in her arms”.⁸³ To avoid potential invasion of northern borders, the PTNC argued that a national authority should be created to manage northern development and deliver what was a deliriously ambitious population target. The goal relied entirely upon internal migration and ignored several challenges such as current population trends.⁸⁴ The new approach abandoned the NQLGA’s steady and effective campaigns of the 1950s, but it acknowledged key changes in Australian politics.

Since the Second World War the federal government had steadily gained power at the expense of state governments. Key legislative changes stemming from the Second World War, such as Uniform Taxation, quickened centralisation in Australian federalism and by the 1960s the Commonwealth was an essential source of power and revenue for state governments.⁸⁵ As state governments grew more reliant upon the Commonwealth developing northern Australia through a single, unified policy effort depended upon federal support. To win federal approval, the north needed to be a national priority, and proposals for northern development needed to include a clear benefit to the nation.

Hopkins and the NQLGA sought to gain national attention by engaging with pre-existing narratives regarding the north’s Australia-wide significance. A campaign focused on civic development in north-eastern Queensland would be weaker than one embracing the grand political themes of Australia’s continental north. Believing that its region would benefit from a new era of northern policy, the NQLGA stepped away from an approach which had traditionally focused on specific projects in north Queensland, toward promoting northern development for the sake of the nation.⁸⁶ Hopkins declared that the Commonwealth’s

⁸² “£100m. Scheme for North – 10-Year Aim,” 39.

⁸³ Margaret Jones, “‘The Chance to Build a New Civilisation...’ Vision of Empire in Capricornia,” *SMH*, 25 November 1962, 41.

⁸⁴ “Population Increase Was 2.04 P.C. In 1961,” *TDB*, 21 April, 1.; “Australian Population Now 10.5m,” *NQR*, 4 November 1961, 3; Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Year Book Australia*, 1962.

⁸⁵ Karen Wilcox, “Australian Federalism,” in *Politics in Australia*, eds Rodney Smith and Lex Watson (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989). 144-45, 148-49.

⁸⁶ “PTNC meeting 4 December 1962: Harry Hopkins letter to PTNC” in Box 7, NQLGA archives, held by the Charters Towers Regional Council (hereafter CTRC)

northern development initiatives had failed in the 1940s because “money in sufficient quantity was not voted by the nation and because there was nobody remaining in existence with a continuing responsibility to achieve the development”.⁸⁷ Addressing these issues by securing funds for development and filling the empty spaces was now at the centre of the NQLGA’s agenda.

Despite criticism, including from within the NQLGA, Hopkins and the PTNC accessed an impressive range of Australian politicians between 1962 and 1964.⁸⁸ The PTNC created momentum by revisiting decades-old ideas about northern emptiness, northern potential and looming foreign threats. While the campaign began as a public relations exercise, the committee developed a second strategic front. It lobbied senior state government politicians in Queensland and Western Australia, recognising that support from the states which held jurisdiction over territory in the continent’s north, would increase pressure on the Commonwealth Government.

The PTNC began a dialogue with the Liberal Western Australian (WA) government led by Premier David Brand. When elected in 1959, the Brand government appointed Charles Court to the newly created ministry of Industrial Development, the Railways and the North West.⁸⁹ Court was a strong advocate of northern projects such as the Ord River Irrigation Scheme, and his interest in northern development helped the PTNC to get an audience in WA.⁹⁰ The Queensland government took note.

In 1963 the Queensland Premier Frank Nicklin told his cabinet that “this People the North Committee and the subject generally have attracted quite a deal of publicity at different times and this is an aspect which we... cannot or should not ignore at the present time”.⁹¹ Nicklin cited the PTNC’s cooperation with the Western Australian government who had told business

⁸⁷ H Hopkins, “People the North: Address to the National Council for Balanced Development Conference,” 13-16 November 1962, box 5, PTNC papers.

⁸⁸ Dissent about the PTNC campaign came from Mackay and Cairns based NQLGA delegates and from Queensland legislative assembly members such as Tom Aikens and the ALP’s George Wallace: “People the North Name Not Fancied,” *NQR*, 6 October 1962, 3.; Tom Aikens in Frank Bennett, “People the North,” in *Four Corners* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1964).; George Wallace (MLA Cairns), *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 10 March 1964, 2347-2349.

⁸⁹ Geoffrey Bolton, *Land of Vision and Mirage: Western Australia since 1826* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2008).

⁹⁰ Ronda Jamieson, *Charles Court: I love this place* (Osborne Park, WA: St George’s Books, 2011).

⁹¹ Queensland Government Cabinet submission no. 4487, 8 April 1963, Item ID540578, QSA.

leaders in north Queensland “that the development of the Northern areas [was] beyond the financial capabilities of the State Governments [and that] ...northern development must be treated as a national concern”.⁹² The PTNC developed a detailed plan for a new national authority to manage northern development.⁹³ The concept gained support in WA and Nicklin advised the Queensland cabinet that “we should go along with the idea and support the [PTNC] in its work at this juncture”.⁹⁴ Queensland media reported that Nicklin had agreed to develop a joint approach to northern policy with the WA state government.⁹⁵

The increased publicity around northern development attracted federal political attention. In 1963 the Queensland Division of the Liberal Party complained to the federal Treasurer, Harold Holt, about the “problem of continuous efforts by people to raise this ‘Develop the North’ idea”.⁹⁶ The Queensland Liberals were sensitive because they had lost eight seats to the Australian Labor Party (ALP) at the most recent federal election in 1961. That result was largely attributed to deputy ALP leader Gough Whitlam’s campaigning on the government’s alleged northern neglect.⁹⁷ The letter to Holt referenced the publicity generated by the PTNC. Holt is likely to have alerted the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, who met with Harry Hopkins and Douglas Copland, an economist with a nationally recognised profile, in October 1963.⁹⁸

Copland was president of the National Council for Balanced Development (NCBD), a body focused on increasing development in regional Australia. The PTNC had joined the NCBD in 1962 and persuaded it to promote the north. Copland arranged a delegation to meet Menzies and pitch the case for a national authority to manage northern development. The PTNC were initially concerned the meeting “might cut across the work being done by Queensland and

⁹² Brand to secretary of FCCNQ, 31 October 1962, Item ID540578, QSA.

⁹³ Frank Nicklin, Premier of Queensland, to Charles Court, Western Australian State Government Minister for Industrial Development, Railways and the North West, 19 April 1963, Proposed Northern Development Authority, State Records Office of Western Australia (*hereafter SROWA*), WAS 4514, Cons 1302 1963/065.

⁹⁴ Queensland Government Cabinet submission no. 4487, 8 April 1963, Item ID540578, QSA.

⁹⁵ "Qld. Prepares 3-Way Plan on North," *CM*, 11 April 1963, 2.

⁹⁶ Alan Hulme to Harold Holt, 19 July 1963, A987 E15, NAA.

⁹⁷ "Australian Political Chronicle July-December 1961," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 8, no. 1 (1962).; A. Calwell, *Labor’s Policy: a blueprint for a government*, Melbourne, 1961, in M157 35/17 Part 2, NAA.

⁹⁸ "Case for Growth in North," *SMH*, 8 October 1963, 13.; "Menzies Asked for Help on the North," *SMH*, 9 October 1963, 24.

Western Australia”.⁹⁹ Court agreed, telling the WA cabinet that the deputation “would not be in the best interests of what we were seeking to achieve”, but Hopkins went along anyway.¹⁰⁰

It turned out to be the first of two strategic errors by the PTNC in late 1963. The meeting gave the prime minister the background and details of the interstate proposal. Menzies was aware that public interest in northern development was growing and he now had the time and critical intelligence to consider a tactical response. Hopkins wrote to Court and revealed that Menzies was uncommitted after expressing concerns about the “budgetary independence of the states” and the lack of a “particular policy” on northern development.¹⁰¹

Shortly after meeting with Hopkins and Copland the prime minister called a general election. When launching the Coalition’s policies on national radio, Menzies declared “the north” to be a major priority and referred to approaches by third parties and asserted that “what these proposals overlook is that all Government development work costs money and that Governments are accountable to the taxpayers for the money they spend”.¹⁰² Most of these taxpayers were located in southern Australia. Those audiences had to be persuaded of the benefits of national investment in northern regions. Whilst this political reality had encouraged the People the North Committee to leverage anxieties about northern emptiness and unexploited natural resources, it had also supported the rise of a “national benefit” measure for northern projects. The accepted logic for northern development was limited to defence or large-scale resource exploitation. Plenty of these proposals were part of the national discussion, but few were designed to specifically benefit northern communities. The Menzies Coalition foreshadowed the creation of a “Northern Division” within the Department of National Development and promised to consider individual northern projects on the basis of their potential to benefit the nation. The Coalition were endorsed and won the election in December 1963 with an increased majority in parliament.

⁹⁹ Cabinet Minute, Northern Development Authority, 1 October 1963, SROWA, WAS 4514, Cons 1302 1963/065.

¹⁰⁰ Cabinet Minute, Northern Development Authority, 1 October 1963, SROWA, WAS 4514, Cons 1302 1963/065.

¹⁰¹ Hopkins to Court, 14 October 1963, Proposed Northern Development Authority; SROWA, WAS 4514, Cons 1302 1963/065.

¹⁰² "Sir Robert Menzies Announces Govt. Policy on National Telecast," *TA*, 13 November 1963, 6.

On the one hand the federal coalition's policy was a set-back for the PTNC. The Menzies government had started its own plans for northern development and ignored the framework developed by the PTNC, which was inspired by the government machinery used to manage the successful Snowy Mountains Hydro Electricity Scheme. On the other hand, it was proof the PTNC campaign had influenced national policy. The nation's mood had shifted in their favour: even Melbourne's *Age* newspaper proclaimed the north's national significance and encouraged the states to hold the Commonwealth to account on northern policy.¹⁰³ But a second strategic error by the PTNC in December 1963 damaged the committee's relations with the state governments.

On 9 December 1963 the PTNC issued a press statement claiming that the Menzies election victory raised the risk of complacency on northern development. It claimed that "Australia's haphazard, piecemeal stop-and-go approach to northern development" must end.¹⁰⁴ It sent telegrams to the state governments demanding they start the new-year by finishing the business of northern development. The PTNC explained its version of the interstate negotiations and revealed its frustration at the results. The committee rammed the message home with "now that the Prime Minister is back, more securely, in the saddle, it is to be hoped that the Queensland and Western Australian leaders have not lost the courage of their convictions of six months ago".¹⁰⁵ Charles Court was unimpressed. He replied immediately with a statement to the press and sent a scathing letter to Hopkins. "I think you will agree that we are entitled to take exception to both your telegram and your press statement." Court felt it was obviously intended as a "rebuke to the Governments of Queensland and Western Australia". He disputed the PTNC's interpretation of events and cautioned against further encroachment into the affairs of state governments. Court told Hopkins that "I think it is unfortunate that your committee has seen fit to strike this jarring note".¹⁰⁶ The relationship never recovered.

Court forwarded copies of the correspondence to the Queensland Premier. Nicklin read it "with interest" and appreciated "the forthright manner in which you so very nicely conveyed

¹⁰³ Editorial, "Northern Development is National Cause", *TA*, 4 February 1964, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Copy of "Complacency risk over the North now", *CM*, 9 December 1963, Item ID2279713, QSA.

¹⁰⁵ Copy of "A reminder from the North on its development", *CM*, 23 December 1963, Item ID2279713, QSA.

¹⁰⁶ Court to Hopkins, 23 December 1963, Proposed Northern Development Authority; SROWA, WAS 4514, Cons 1302 1963/065.

to them [the PTNC] the facts of life”. “It will do them a great deal of good”.¹⁰⁷ The state governments pushed the People the North lobbying group into the background and reasserted control of the policy agenda. The states continued with the proposal for a new federal authority to manage northern development and travelled to Canberra to meet the Prime Minister in May 1964. But Menzies and his cabinet colleagues convinced the states to abandon the national authority idea and support the “Northern Division” within the Commonwealth Department of National Development.¹⁰⁸ This ended the PTNC’s hopes of shaping national policy to suit its agenda.

From 1964 until it was disbanded by the NQLGA in 1969, the PTNC lobbying group had less direct influence over state and federal governments. It continued to attract new supporters from across the nation and established a “Sydney Branch” in 1965. The PTNC organised big events such as the “North Australia Development Symposium”, held at the University of New South Wales in 1966. The symposium attracted prominent speakers such as Bruce Davidson, Gough Whitlam, David Fairbairn and Rex Patterson. Right up until its demise, the PTNC retained a significant presence in Australian media but ultimately, the campaign could not get past the realities of political power on a national and federal level.¹⁰⁹ The NQLGA refocused the agenda back to its regional roots before the 1970s ushered in a new era in the politics of northern development in Australia.

Conclusion

In the course of twenty years the North Queensland Local Government Association transformed from a mere amalgam of local authorities at the fringe of Australian politics, into a sophisticated regional alliance with influence on federal northern development policy. It was a remarkable outcome in an era when national political narratives often eclipsed regional concerns. North Queensland’s local governments rallied their authority to ensure the region was not left behind by national post-war reconstruction. Strengthened regionalism in north Queensland left an indelible mark on Australian political history by fostering the rise of an influential northern polity. By initially focusing on issues *within* north Queensland, the

¹⁰⁷ Nicklin to Court, 7 January 1964, Item ID ID2279713, QSA.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Proposal by WA and Qld for establishing a Northern Australia Development Authority’, Cabinet Decision 195, 5 May 1964, A5827, Volume 5/Agendum 160, NAA.

¹⁰⁹ The NQLGA and the remainder of the PTNC campaign are the subject of further research by the author.

NQLGA generally avoided complex national political debates and made practical and enduring contributions to northern development. A confident organisation at the end of the 1950s was seduced by the potential for bigger achievements and in a bid to influence national policy, the association launched the People the North Committee publicity campaign. It embraced modern communication techniques and while the campaign was successful in raising the profile of northern interests, it failed to develop fresh and compelling principles for northern development. People the North and the NQLGA encountered the limits of settler society's vision of northern Australia, which was dominated by broad economic and security themes and measured northern development proposals on a scale of national benefit. Yet, it is still worth remembering this story because the North Queensland Local Government Association helped to develop northern Australia and secure new policy commitments. The association's slow and steady campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in a modern sales pitch in the early 1960s, are outstanding examples of the local and regional dimensions of post-war reconstruction and northern development in Australia.