



## AUSTRALASIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP

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### Northern Territory Chapter

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# Listening to the past to build our future

## Northern Territory, 25 years of self government—challenges for the future

Elliot McAdam MLA on behalf of the Hon Clare Martin Chief Minister of the Northern Territory  
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Madam Speaker, ladies and gentlemen.

In thinking about the subject of self government over the last 25 years—and the moves we are taking towards achieving Statehood over the next five years—I have found myself thinking about pasts that are often forgotten.

Beyond the cliches of the noble savage, for many years the Territory's first peoples have been marginalised in the collective imagination of what people believe the Northern Territory is about.

While much is made of the importance of the early days of exploration and the building of the Northern Territory through the pastoral and mining industries; the building of the Overland Telegraph Line; and experiences during World War II, the Aboriginal story has often been side lined.

In saying this, I am not looking towards a bleeding heart version of Territory history, where marginalised groups such as Aboriginal people should be included in the story of the Northern Territory just for symbolic or tokenistic reasons.

I am saying it because any vision of the future for the Northern Territory must be based on a realistic and comprehensive understanding of the past.

It is in this understanding that we have a genuine chance of seeking resolutions to much of the “unfinished business” of our various histories in this part of the nation. It is a way, as well, of tackling some of the myths that surround our comprehension of the Northern Territory—past, present and future.

For example, a part of the mythmaking of the Northern Territory is about the role of the growth of the pastoral industry in “opening up” the Territory, and establishing the basis of its early economy.

Apart from the absurd notion that the pastoralists indeed “opened up” lands that were already owned and fully understood by their traditional owners for many thousands of years, it also obscures the effects that these incursions had on the lives and economies of the traditional owning groups in the first instance. It further hides the changing relationships that developed over a hundred years or so between Aboriginal people and pastoralists.

All the major stock routes that cross the Territory, including those that move north south, and south east from Queensland to the Kimberley in the north west follow major dreaming tracks and permanent water sources.

This is not accidental.

The early cattle drives up to Elsey and Katherine and across through Newcastle Waters to the Victoria and Ord rivers, were only partly based on the work of so-called explorers—and very largely based on the knowledge of Aboriginal people.

Let there be no mistake but there *were* massacres in the Northern Territory—for example this September will see the 75th anniversary of the Coniston Massacre. The conflict over resources engendered by the arrival of the cattle and mining industries in particular was at times brutish.

But after the Killing Times new relationships developed.

The Aboriginal nations of the Northern Territory that established the stock routes now became the backbone of the pastoral industry, supplying the labour that would otherwise made the economies of pastoralism untenable. In large part, this labour was akin to slave labour—until the 1950s cash payments were almost non-existent, with rations, and clothing the only recompense for harsh working conditions.

Indeed without Aboriginal labour, the industry would not have been able to survive.

In some ways, however, the nature of the industry in the Northern Territory, had some advantages for Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal men, in particular, were able to move across their traditional estates and maintain cultural practices. The lay off period over the hotter parts of the year allowed people to move back to country and maintain ceremonial life many decades after this became impossible in the more closely colonised parts of eastern and southern Australia. This has been clearly illustrated in land claims throughout the Northern Territory in the period after 1976.

And again, in all but the very large pastoral leases such as the Vestey-owned Wave Hill, there was a certain equality of hardship between the small holding white families and the Aboriginal people in the camps. Until the 1960s it could be said that both groups did it tough.

However, changing technologies and the introduction of the beef roads changed all this: the demand for labour on Territory pastoral properties was in decline well before the advent of equal wages in the late 1960s, but it accelerated sharply after this time.

These factors combined to radically change the relationship between the pastoralists and Aboriginal people. There were forced removals from properties across many areas in the Territory, and an accelerated drift into fringe camps along the Track.

An alien industry, brought in to the Territory as part of colonisation, and to which thousands of Aboriginal people had adapted and contributed, now rejected them.

This short account illustrates just one element of our history in the Northern Territory that is largely ignored in the history books. It often only survives in the oral histories of the Aboriginal families who have participated in a century of developments that have irrevocably changed the face of the Northern Territory.

The point of all this is that these years of hardship and injustice have been largely forgotten over the past 30 years. They have been glossed over and ignored.

But without a knowledge of histories such as this it will be difficult—if not impossible—to understand how we might move forward.

This is because it was through the Aboriginal labour strikes at places such as Newcastle Waters—and more famously at Wave Hill in 1967—that changed the face of Territory politics, and continue to reverberate today.

What started as industrial actions over appalling working conditions rapidly developed into demands for the return of traditional Aboriginal estates to their owners. Hand in hand with the bark petition and the battles of Aboriginal people in centres such as Darwin, the role of the first Territorians could no longer be ignored.

Make no mistake about it.

The struggle for social justice and land rights has been an integral part of our politics here in the Territory for well over 30 years—it is not something that has been imported here by southern stirrers or do gooders, despite ill-informed assertions to the contrary.

This has important implications for the future—especially if we are to progress constitutionally in the Northern Territory. Social justice, and issues such as land rights and cultural protection, must be incorporated into any future constitutional developments in the Northern Territory—including progress towards Statehood.

I will not dwell on the failures of the last campaign for Statehood, suffice to say that what should have been a vote for Motherhood was rejected by many Territorians—and by no means just Aboriginal people. I think it significant, for example, that the rejection came from non-Aboriginal voters in centres such as Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, and was by no means overwhelmingly supported in Katherine.

I believe this was because there was widespread feeling in those areas—which otherwise might have been expected to give solid support the then government’s call for a “yes” vote—that their histories had also become forgotten.

Fairly or unfairly, it was seen as an urban, elitist push by people relatively new to the Territory. Statehood, as it was then constructed, was arguably seen as a southern import—because it ignored our histories.

So it is with our collective histories in mind that I accepted the position of chairing the Northern Territory’s Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which will be taking on Statehood as part of its brief over the next five years.

It is worth quoting the words of our Chief Minister, Clare Martin, when she called for a renewed move towards Statehood in May this year. The Chief Minister was calling for a process far more inclusive of all our histories when she said:

*We will do this with careful community consultation and community involvement from the start.*

*It will not be hijacked by politicians.*

*And so I pledge ... that a majority of delegates to any future Constitutional Convention will be elected by the people, not imposed by political leaders.*

*I further pledge that decision making processes, such as constitutional conventions and a final referendum, shall be independent of the normal electoral cycle.*

*I want to stress that this process will not be driven – as happened last time – by politicians thinking of their places in the history books.*

*And, importantly, we will ensure that the Indigenous communities and their representatives are centrally involved at all stages.*

*While I want to leave maximum flexibility in how we achieve our goal of Statehood, I think it is important to set down a few guidelines to ensure this process is orderly.*

*A possible time frame is that Statehood might coincide with the 30th anniversary of self-government, 1 July 2008.*

*We think by the age of 30 years, democracy in the Territory might truly be seen as coming of age.*

*But if the community wants us to take longer to draft a new constitution that satisfies its many important constitutional, political and social priorities, so be it.*

*If the referendum is successful, the Federal Parliament would be asked to pass a law establishing the Territory's Statehood through a new State Constitution drafted by Territorians.*

*The path towards Statehood will be guided by the following values:*

- *It will be community based, not imposed upon the people*
- *The Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs of the Legislative Assembly will facilitate and provide resources to this community based process.*
- *We will aim for a five-year timetable, including the drafting of a new Constitution, its examination by an elected Constitutional Convention, and an eventual vote by all Territorians. However, this timeline will be designed for maximum flexibility to fit in with community wishes.*

*A central principle will be respect for, and proper recognition of, the Indigenous people of the Territory.*

The key to the Chief Minister's words is in her call for a process that will minimise—perhaps even marginalise—the role of politicians in leading constitutional change.

I have no problems with this, but it will impose interesting and significant challenges for parliament in general and the Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee in particular. Certainly, it will involve the Standing Committee in having to work out ways in which it responds to what must be a citizen-led process.

What might develop, for example, is the possibility of ordinary citizens playing either formal or auxiliary roles in the work of the Standing Committee in ways that are not ordinarily contemplated under conventional parliamentary practice.

This will involve having to look at many technical issues such as that of procedure, of process, of privilege and resourcing.

But it might also involve us re-thinking the way parliament might relate to its constituents, and the kind of parliamentary democracy the Northern Territory might evolve towards. If indeed we can work through a committee system that more fully involves electors and more comprehensively listens to the people it represents, it might also influence broader constitutional arrangements that we develop.

But, in any case, what the Standing Committee must do is listen to the past.

Not just the past work of former members of the Committee, and the extensive consultations it carried out in the 1990s in developing blueprints for Statehood. And not just the work of the Kalkaringi and Batchelor conventions

It must also listen to the forgotten pasts—all of them—if we are to build our future here in the Northern Territory.

Thank you.