

Arcadian Populism: the Country Liberal Party and self government in the Northern Territory 1978–2005

by Robyn Smith. E-book, Darwin 2013, xi + 318 pp

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It is a growing problem in the academic world that many worthwhile theses are unknown and unread. University presses, who formerly saw it as part of their role to publish theses, have either become completely commercial or defunct. Departmental thesis libraries are difficult to access, often uncatalogued and in some cases have regrettably been disbanded altogether. Robyn Smith has met this challenge by self-publishing her 2012 PhD thesis as an e-book. It is an example that others could usefully follow. University departments, in particular, could use new technology to make the results of their students' work more widely available. Smith says that her thesis has been lightly edited for publication. More editing could, however, have been done to prune the scholarly apparatus that inevitably accompanies a thesis and make the book more accessible.

The Executive Officer to the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly in Darwin, Smith has analysed the record of the Country Liberal Party in the Northern Territory since self government in 1978. A very experienced examiner of PhD theses once observed that most consist of a theoretical introduction and conclusion with a useful case study in between. Smith's is no exception. She uses 'the theory of Arcadianism' and 'the practice of populism' to explore the CLP's record. An invented myth of 'the Territorian' and race as a political weapon explain the CLP's continuation in office from 1978 to 2001.

Early chapters give useful background on constitutional development, the formation of the major parties and the unique nature of politics in the Territory. A detailed chronicle of elections is provided with comprehensive statistics on candidates and results. Other chapters cover: economic management, racism, the legal system and heritage. Smith's conclusions are caustic:

The CLP called election campaigns over Aboriginal land issues and used race as an electoral tool in successive general elections ... In other policy areas, the CLP either targeted Aboriginal people or ignored them ... [I]ts economic credentials can be described as cavalier ... The party and its leaders appeared to think the law applied to everyone but themselves.

It is to be hoped that Smith's electronically published book is broadly accessed. Dean Jaensch comments in his introduction:

Robyn Smith has produced a thought-provoking analysis of a key period in the history of the Northern Territory. It deserves to be widely read, and it has some specific messages for those with an interest in the past, the present and the future of the Territory.