SELF GOVERNMENT AND THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY’S IDENTITY

Lecture at the Northern Territory Library

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First of all, let me say how pleased I am to be in Darwin again today. It is a city where I spent 25 enjoyable years and had opportunities that were unlikely to have come my way anywhere else. During the Dry Season it is one of the world’s best places to live in and visit. I also thank the Northern Territory Library for inviting me to speak. As I explained when accepting the invitation a few months ago, what I am about to say draws on some of my previous work, especially my short 2007 book *Territorianism*. I will also, however, include new material and ideas in my discussion of the links between the Territory’s history of self-government and its sense of identity.

Not far from here almost 40 years ago self-government in the Northern Territory was officially proclaimed. On 1 July 1978 large crowds attended colourful official ceremonies that included the first
official raising of the new Territory flag. The Territory’s first Chief Minister, Paul Everingham, spoke of ‘cutting the apron springs that have tied us to Canberra’s control for almost 70 years’. ‘Territorians’, he continued, ‘fed up with remote control and its mistakes have been crying out for years for this advance. Now we have come of age’. Later Chief Ministers expressed similar sentiments. For Shane Stone in 2004, the Territory flag was a ‘symbol of our future, our hopes and aspirations’. Like Everingham, he believed that on 1 July 1978 the Territory ‘came of age’.

In their indefatigable attempts to promote a powerful sense of Northern Territory identity, Everingham, and all his successors as Chief Minister from both his own Country Liberal Party and the Labor Party frequently emphasized a particular version of Territory’s past, one that gave prominence to the struggle
to establish a distinct frontier community. That struggle’s outcome was a society characterised by excitement, progress and evolving social harmony.

‘Territorians’, a term widely employed to encompass all those people who made the Territory their home and used with considerable repetition by the Territory’s politicians and media, were and are widely depicted as pioneers and rugged individualists in a particularly special part of the world. Car number plates proclaimed that the Territory was ‘Outback Australia’. Deputy Chief Minister Mike Reed wrote in 1998 that in the past the Territory was regarded ‘by many as Australia’s last frontier. Today, the Territory is still regarded as different from contemporary mainstream Australia, being an exciting and dynamic “frontier” environment’. A related aspect of this environment, the Darwin born and bred anthropologist Tess Lea writes, is
that it is a place ‘where people seeking radical escape from their own psyches seek regeneration in the anarchic, forgiving and forgetful borderlands’. Commonwealth governments were frequently blamed for the Territory’s problems, with politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra criticised as out of touch with the Territory’s aspirations and needs. Considerable importance was given to cultural and economic links between the Territory and nearby areas of East and Southeast Asia. ‘We have’, Chief Minister Marshall Perron claimed, ‘been trading with Asia…since well before Captain Cook ever heard of the great south land…when we talk about building links with Asia, we do it from a position where we are mentally and geographically part of the region’. In announcing the subsequently ill fated proposal for a new Museum of the Northern Territory in April last year Chief Minister Michael Gunner said it would incorporate
the Territory’s continuous and multicultural history from the earliest Aboriginal occupation to the present. According to its vision statement, the museum would ‘embody what it means to be a Territorian’. In February this year the Territory government announced that a creative agency, The Royals, were going to create a ‘masterbrand’ for the Territory. This would, The Royals’ managing partner Andrew Swika commented with extraordinary self confidence, result in ‘every Territorian talking up the Territory the same way’ and being able to articulate ‘what makes the NT fantastic’. Michael Gunner said that the ‘a distinctive and identifiable brand’ would ‘provide the Territory with a unique competitive edge to enable us to better tell the Territory’s story’.

In my lecture today I want to explain how such expressions of identity are key components of the Territory’s evolution as a self-governing entity. I shall do
first by offering some general observations and second through an examination of what many Territory residents have seen as the desirable next stage in the self-government process, the achievement of statehood. I will highlight history’s importance and argue that the development of ideas about Territory identity has often been more complex and problematic than the statements I have just quoted might suggest.

The study of history quite frequently deals with the significance of identity and many historians have discussed ways in which the memory of a society or a state is created, disseminated, institutionalised and understood. It is not chronological or factual history that is crucial here but as the American historian Walker Connor states, ‘sentient or felt history an intuitive conviction of the group’s separate origin or evolution’. Some Australian national histories very usefully analyse
how individuals and communities think about the past and their ideas here are reflected politically. James Curran, for instance, in his book *The Power of Speech*, points to national leaders since the Second World War grappling with ideas of Australia’s identity and struggling to relate them to the nation’s changing place in the world. These leaders’ frequent evocation of history in political debate, he maintains, ‘has been no idle glance backwards; it has affected the way they have performed as leaders and given substance to how they have conceived Australia’. Judith Brett’s book *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class* argues that political conflict is often over how ‘particular events, situations, and institutions are represented and the larger frameworks of meaning in which these are located’. The most effective analysis of such conflict involves the
exploration of connections between historical memory, notions of identity and political processes.

Here in the Territory, as part of what the historian Ann McGrath describes as a ‘history awareness campaign…strategically pitched at promoting a sense of belonging’, Paul Everingham created the Northern Territory History Awards to provide funding for historical research. He also supported government history and heritage units as well as the establishment of what are now the Northern Territory Archives and Library. The History Awards, which still exist, funded much valuable work on the Territory’s past. This included Alan Powell’s book *Far Country*, which remains the best general history of the Territory. At its own expense the Northern Territory Government sent complimentary copies of *Far Country* to all members of the Commonwealth parliament. Clare Martin’s
government established the Northern Territory Chief Minister’s History Book Award. Recipients have covered a wide range of topics. The two most recent awards went to books on Indonesian-Indigenous contacts in the Territory and the story of Alice Springs.

However, alternative histories were sometimes in the Territory, as elsewhere, actively discouraged. After Everingham left Territory politics, there were occasions when Ministers overruled the expert History Awards Committee’s recommendations on the grounds that what they saw as inappropriate research was being promoted. In one instance, this involved the rejection of a recommendation that a major project documenting the history of Darwin’s Bagot Aboriginal reserve receive a substantial grant. Until the beginning of this century the Territory’s official history as reflected in government funded exhibitions and heritage programs frequently
focussed on frontier life styles and industries, colourful and prominent individuals and ultimately successful battles to overcome hardship and adversity. Topics such the widespread inter-racial tensions that existed in the Territory received much less attention.

The situation so far described is very much a part of what the historian Eric Hobsbawm presents as the ‘invention of tradition’. Hobsbawm argues that “"Invented tradition” is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past’. Inventing traditions, he continues, ‘is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition’. Of particular significance is his
claim that invented traditions are highly relevant to the idea of the ‘nation’ and its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols and national histories. They are often just as relevant to regions within nations.

Nationalism in the form of the development of images and traditions has for over a century been an essential element of Australian life. It is expressed in sport, business, literature, music, politics and a variety of other spheres. As the historian Maurice French also observes, the ‘general homogeneity of Australia’s geography and peoples, and the low impact of sectionalism, and the metropolitanisation of the nation-continent have all tended to blur regional differentiation’. This is true but, as so many Australian regional histories illustrate, enough differences exist between areas such as North Queensland, the Riverina and the Darling Downs
to provide a focus for research that frequently reveals quite powerful notions of regional separateness.

Like Americans, Australians often tend to see the frontier as a significant element in national development, frequently using names such as ‘bush’, ‘outback’ or ‘never-never’ to describe it. The historian Graeme Davison suggests that the Australian frontier has always been both an idea and a place, signifying ‘a line on the map and a geographically indeterminate boundary between the known and the unknown, the civilised and the rude, the safe and the dangerous, the ordered and the anarchic’. In large parts of remote Australia today there remain more Indigenous than non-Indigenous inhabitants. The country’s biggest cities are mainly in the southern half of the continent and usually on or very near the coast. The principal industries outside the closely settled areas are pastoralism, mining and tourism. What Davison
describes as the ‘idea of the frontier’ is well established in Australia.

Russel Ward, one of Australia’s most significant historians, contended in 1958 that the archetypal Australian was a bushman in the Outback. The prominent author Thomas Keneally wrote in 1984 that ‘the region which in the imaginations of most Australians is outback par excellence is the Northern Territory’. Mickey Dewar in her book *In Search of the ‘Never-Never’* concludes that the Territory ‘represents a frontier to Australians, a place where the behaviour of Territorians is in some way quintessential to the national experience’. The focus of many writers on the Territory, she observes, ‘was an attempt to locate and define the non-Aboriginal occupation of Australia from all aspects’ that sought to ‘legitimise European settlement’. Alan Powell, the Territory’s most eminent historian, goes even
further. Non-Indigenous Northern Territory residents, he writes in his monograph *In Search of a True Territorian*, see themselves as distinct in the Australian context because they still believe that they live on a frontier: they ‘rather like the image’, not just for the sake of tourist dollars, but because it causes them to stand out from the general mass of Australians. The sociologist Jon Stratton agrees. For him the Territory is the ‘other’, part of a discourse by which the rest of Australia defines itself as ‘real’.

After 1978, Northern Territory governments enthusiastically created and encouraged notions of identity for the purpose of establishing bonds of loyalty to the Territory among its diverse population. This was particularly so with its non-Indigenous residents, many of whom came from others parts of Australia and the world and only lived in the Territory for short periods.
Governments championed what the political scientist Alistair Heatley describes as ‘Territorianism’, an aggressively presented sense of identity that encompassed an aspiration for full statehood and rapid economic development. A significant element for many years was strong opposition to Aboriginal land rights. The Darwin political historian Robyn Smith argues that what she calls the ‘Arcadian Populism’ that guided Country Liberal Party governments until 2001 resulted in the ‘marginalisation and exclusion of the Aboriginal community from the rest of the Northern Territory population’. ‘Territorianism’, Heatley maintains, emerged most clearly in the Territory government’s dealings with the Commonwealth. Criticism of Canberra was, he writes, ‘traditional for Territory politicians’ who ‘made frequent, forceful (and, one suspects, telling) use of it in the new constitutional and political context’.
Chief Minister Ian Tuxworth vividly illustrated this approach when he announced in September 1985 that his government would boycott the ceremony to be held at Uluru at which the Governor General handed over title documents to traditional Aboriginal owners. ‘The handover’, he complained, ‘is symbolic of what is wrong about the relationship between the Territory and the Commonwealth’. Clare Martin, the Territory’s first Labor Chief Minister, in 2005 attacked the Commonwealth’s plan to establish a nuclear waste facility in the Territory using similar language. It was, she declared, ‘the worst-ever federal attack on Territory rights’ and was only possible because the Territory was not a state.

The challenge facing Territory governments was how to establish and then maintain the Northern Territory’s legitimacy as a separate cultural, economic
and political entity. Territory governments were initially unable to make much use of already existing bonds of political obedience and loyalty. They aimed to strengthen a sense of Territory ‘communion’ and the effective articulation of those elements that to them held the Territory together. Many observers commented on the phenomenon. Historians Bob Reece and Lenore Coltheart claimed in 1981 that the Territory’s government depicted itself as custodian of ‘a long-awaited and hard-won legislative and administrative autonomy, whose course must be to fulfil the obligations their moment in history entailed. These obligations centred on the development of land resources now that distant government was discarded’. Political scientist Peter Loveday in 1991 pointed to the ‘chauvinism’ which was so evident in the Territory, ‘directed against Canberra and other metropolitan centres, especially at
election time’ and asked whether the ‘myth of the frontier’ sustained it. Everingham’s biographer, Frances Chan, explains how the first Chief Minister immediately after self-government in 1978 led the way here through an astute public relations campaign involving giveaways such as flags, flag pins, coat of arms pins, emblems, ties, scarves and brochures. Visitors to and newly arrived residents in the Territory during the early years of self-government could not help noticing the fervour with which its political leaders promoted local identity. ‘Not even in Texas’, Thomas Keneally observed in 1984, ‘do you see a regional flag flown so fervently’. When I first met Everingham not long after I came to live in Darwin during late 1981, he gave me a black, white and ochre Territory tie and cufflinks bearing the Territory coat of arms from boxes of these in his office. Numerous other
recent arrivals who met him in that office received the same gifts.

Some marked changes occurred in the Northern Territory after the election of its first Labor government in 2001. Yet in terms the issues I discuss here, there are more similarities between the County Liberal and Labor parties than either party probably cares to admit. Labor Chief Ministers Clare Martin, Paul Henderson and Michael Gunner, and their colleagues all remained strongly committed to the promotion of rapid economic growth and supported, although in varying degrees, the achievement of statehood. Both Martin and Gunner were able History students at Northern Territory University who shared Paul Everingham’s enthusiasm for history and his recognition of its place in identity building. A well-qualified and highly regarded historian of the Territory, Mickey Dewar, was one of Martin’s senior
advisors. In October 2003 Martin described how local history and heritage were ‘very dear’ to her heart and highlighted themes such as the struggle to overcome isolation, the push for economic development, the important role of the Chinese and improvements in transport. In June 2003 she launched an events grants scheme, a Territory Service Medal and a commemorative vehicle number plate to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Territory self-government. Although the Country Liberal Party was in power for most of those 25 years, Territory residents were asked to ‘celebrate’ the past and special community grants were provided to enable them to do so. Michael Gunner last year pointed to the Territory’s history being ‘built on our large families of Aboriginal, Chinese, Greek and many others ancestries’. The forthcoming government sponsored celebrations of self-government’s 40th anniversary will,
to quote from the Territory Day website, encourage ‘everyone to get involved’ and celebrate ‘everything we love about living in the Territory – the people, the landscape, the culture and our diverse communities’.

The extent to which successive Territory governments have been successful in making people want to celebrate 40 years of self-government is still unclear. While many will undoubtedly do so, there remain sections of the population that are unlikely to enthusiastically participate. Michael Kilgariff, a well known member of a pioneering Territory family, commented in July 2005 that, ‘The degree to which people even want the Territory to be that different from the rest of Australia is changing…In 2001 nearly 25 per cent of Territorians did not even live in the NT only five years earlier…The old mantra of “this is the Territory and we do things differently up here”…is viewed as
parochial, slightly humorous and maybe even quaint’.

The high population turnover to which Kilgariff referred has continued although since 2010 there has been significant net interstate migration loss, that is departures outnumbering arrivals. Among the many thousands of the Territory’s former residents now living elsewhere are its first four Chief Ministers. Before the 1960s non-European residents were frequently not regarded as Territorians, a word that was originally used to describe the Territory’s white settlers. The politician Malarndirri McCarthy noted in 2006 that there were still thousands of her people in the Territory ‘who know what it’s like not be a citizen of their own country’. The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress argued later in the same year that ‘Territorian’ was still ‘an expression…often used in pursuit of non-Aboriginal interests or agendas’.

Strong public opposition to the proposed Museum of the
Northern Territory indicated that many Territory residents did not believe its goal of encouraging Territory identity was worth the money the museum was likely to cost.

Rolf Gerritsen, a Professorial Fellow in Charles Darwin University’s Northern Institute, points to another difficulty, the existence of regional tensions. The divide between Central Australia and the Top End, he maintains, should lead to a radical rethink of how the Northern Territory operates. ‘We should’, he says, ‘have a separate territory for Darwin that would be self-governing and much more fiscally abstemious than it is.’ The rest of the Territory ought to be another jurisdiction. Alan Powell in his just published book on Central Australia’s history concludes that ‘Central Australia has no solid links to the Top End’ and except for the Aboriginal questions the links between the two are ‘mainly artificial’.
Some of the issues so far discussed can be further illuminated when considering aspects of the Territory’s statehood aspirations since the early twenty first century.

I will only make very brief observations here regarding the tortuous campaign for Territory statehood until 2003 that is well documented elsewhere, especially in Ted Dunstan’s comprehensive doctoral thesis. While the Territory developed into a ‘quasi-state’ after 1978, the Commonwealth of Australia retained control of Aboriginal land, the ownership of the two most significant national parks and the ownership of uranium resources. With only two Senators, the Territory did not have the same parliamentary representation in the federal upper house as the states. As already mentioned, all Territory governments strongly emphasized a view of the Territory’s past that highlighted a struggle to establish a distinct frontier community and blamed the
Commonwealth for many of the problems that occurred. Finally, and of crucial importance, the Territory provided Aboriginal people, who comprised about 30 per cent of the population, and their organisations with greater political influence than in the states. Alistair Heatley’s thorough analysis of the 1998 statehood referendum argues that Aboriginal opposition to the statehood proposal was the main factor in its narrow defeat.

On 21 May 2003 Clare Martin announced a new, community based, campaign for the Territory to become a state in the Australian federation. The unsuccessful referendum showed that statehood needed very delicate handling, Alistair Heatley writing that due to the involvement of ‘partisan and other political factors’ with the task of constitution-making, any second referendum was likely to face considerable obstacles to success. The Chief Minister indicated that consensus on the matter –
within the Northern Territory government, between the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments, between the major political parties and, as far as possible, in the wider Territory community – was essential. She spoke of statehood being part of ‘a maturing, the development of a more inclusive Territory, the sense of taking the political tension that was here out of the place’. In order for that to occur agreement was needed on matters such as the ownership of parks, uranium mining and, in particular, Indigenous affairs that had previously aroused considerable antagonisms.

Two months later, Elliot McAdam, the Aboriginal chair of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly’s Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, on the Chief Minister’s behalf addressed the Australasian Study of Parliament’s Group’s annual conference in Darwin on history’s role in the revived statehood
movement. He contended that ‘any vision of the future for the Northern Territory must be based on a realistic and comprehensive understanding of the past’. In doing so, he saw the renewed move towards statehood as a means of ‘tackling some of the myths that surround our comprehension of the Northern Territory’, pointing to the need to give much greater recognition of Aborigines’ role in the development of the pastoral industry and their struggle for social justice and land rights.

In spite of the Territory government’s determination to approach statehood on a new basis, one that McAdam described as listening to the past, the historical tension to which Martin referred did not subsequently abate. Although the government established an energetic Northern Territory Statehood Steering Committee, by the middle of 2007 statehood was, as the Northern Territory News put it, ‘as far away as ever’. While the arguments
supporting statehood made frequent references to history, they did not prove productive in the manner that Martin and McAdam anticipated. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs in its report *The Long Road to Statehood* in May 2007 argued that the Territory government still needed to find a consensus on statehood. The committee believed that statehood ought to be something that united Territory residents but there was strong evidence that they held a variety of views on it. Subsequent efforts to resolve the differences were sporadic and, according to some observers, half hearted. On Territory Day in 2009 Paul Everingham, in stark contrast to his earlier views as Chief Minister, asserted that the Territory’s statehood push was a waste of time and all Australia’s state and territory governments ought to be abolished. While members of the Council of Australian Governments
unanimously agreed in July 2015 with Chief Minister Adam Giles that the territory ought to become a state by 1 July this year, little if anything was done to achieve that ambitious target. There are two closely related factors that indicate statehood remains a distant prospect.

First, it is a false assumption to conclude, as many statehood proponents have, that an apparent acceptance of self-government and feelings of belonging were sufficiently strong forces to ensure that most Territory residents viewed statehood as the logical next step. Deputy Chief Minister Syd Stirling in November 2006 repeated the claim that statehood was ‘an important issue in terms of fundamental democratic rights’ but the only evidence he offered to support this was that twice since 1978 the Commonwealth had overturned Territory legislation and that the Territory vote in federal referenda was not ‘the same as a Queensland or NSW vote’. The
two Territory Acts to which he referred, one allowing voluntary euthanasia in certain circumstances and the other preventing a nuclear waste facility in the Territory, were strongly opposed by large sections of the Territory population even if, in at least the case of euthanasia, these did not represent a majority. In particular, prominent Aboriginal leaders were unhappy with the Acts. There is a good deal of anecdotal evidence that fear of the euthanasia legislation being reintroduced was a matter of concern for numerous Aboriginal voters in the 1998 referendum. Few Territory residents appeared at all worried about their voting status in federal referenda.

The second, and crucially significant, factor remains, as Alistair Heatley argues in explaining the 1998 referendum’s defeat, that most Aboriginal people in the Territory have feared ‘that any form of statehood will serve to undermine their objectives of self-government
and self-determination…it is unlikely that their now firmly entrenched resistance to statehood will dissipate’.

*The Long Road to Statehood* noted that the Territory’s Aboriginal land councils held ‘greater trust in the constitutionally guaranteed accountability mechanisms of the Commonwealth Parliament, regardless of which party was in power, rather than the accountability mechanisms of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory’. Central Australian Aboriginal Congress director Stephanie Bell further observed in November 2006 that her organisation wanted to know how statehood would improve Aboriginal lives. Martin Mowbray, a Congress policy officer, contended at much the same time that the current statehood process ignored the question of how statehood and any associated governmental reforms might address the serious historical inequalities between Aboriginal and other
people in the Northern Territory. Even a former Country Liberal Party Chief Minister, Steve Hatton, has conceded that the Territory’s Aboriginal people were ‘left out of the benefits of self-government’. Frequent Territory government utterances over a long period about the ‘great Territory lifestyle’ often appear oblivious to such concerns. For people like me it usually is great but for many Indigenous Territory residents it has not been. Recent accusations that successive Territory governments have redirected more than $2 million in Goods and Services Tax revenue intended to address remote and Indigenous disadvantage and calls for urgent reform following reports that nearly two thirds of the Territory’s Aboriginal children have been subject to neglect, emotional harm or sexual exploitation are likely to heighten Indigenous concerns.
The Long Road to Statehood, correctly in my view, suggested that it was an anomaly that the Territory did not have statehood. ‘There is’, it argued, ‘no question about the significance of the Northern Territory in the story of Australia’, pointing to the Territory’s prominence as the Australian front line during the Second World War, its role in the national land rights movement, its home to key mineral resources, its proximity to Asia, its world heritage environment and its growing and diverse population. The Territory is also a region where important elements of Aboriginal culture survived European colonisation and Aborigines own many of their traditional lands. The issues examined here reveal the considerable difficulties of rectifying the anomaly to which The Long Road to Statehood referred, especially when the ideas, institutions and values of the Aboriginal inhabitants and those of the non-Aboriginal
colonisers all need accommodation. Clare Martin’s worthy hope in 2003 that statehood could alleviate the Territory’s long-term tension and Elliot McAdam’s equally commendable belief that an understanding of the past would provide a foundation for statehood were far too optimistic.

A striking feature of Territory identity, however, has been the extent to which, in spite of all the serious obstacles and complex problems discussed here and numerous others that I have not mentioned today, many of the Territory’s leaders, opinion makers and residents continue to so frequently express a strong, sometimes defiant, spirit of optimism. On election night in August 2016 a jubilant Michael Gunner declared that the ‘Territory remains a land of opportunity and I am proof of that. A boy born in Alice Springs, who grew up in public housing in Tennant Creek and now stands here as
a Chief Minister of the NT’. Although the Territory is currently experiencing serious demographic, economic and social challenges, anyone familiar with its past knows that these are not new. A considerable number of people who live here will almost certainly on 1 July this year commemorate what they see as the Territory’s unique spirit and express confidence about its prospects. Alan Powell in defining a ‘True Territorian’ argues that, ‘It is your belief in the place that matters, your hope for its future and your future in it’. I do not know how much longer this optimism can continue but as a former long term Territory resident who remains very attached to the place I hope that it does so for many years into the future. Thank you for listening to me.