

Developing the North and Histories of Indigenous Economic Engagement

Dr Kirstie Close-Barry

Deakin University

The same tensions that existed around development in northern Australia and even, equal economic engagement during the twentieth century have followed us into the twenty-first century. This is evident in the Developing the North white paper, released in June 2015.¹ One of the main ideas floated as a method by which the government will achieve its vision is to make 'it easier to use natural assets, in close consultation with, and the support of, Indigenous communities'.² It goes on shortly after to say that 'Native title should be seen as a source of Indigenous economic opportunity. By requiring the engagement of native title holders, native title rights ensure development occurs in ways that enhance the quality of life for Indigenous Australians.'³ There is an embedded suggestion that native title will be renegotiated so that 'native title land can be an economic asset as well as a cultural and spiritual one.'⁴ The action summary stated that \$10.6 million will be spent to 'support pilot reforms that broaden economic activity on land and demonstrate the benefits of reform to investors, Indigenous Australians and other stakeholders', and creating 'options to use exclusive native title rights for commercial purposes.'⁵ This is amidst other points about improving the native title claim process through developing a faster system, which by and large would or should be a good thing and has been developed in other states like Victoria in recent years due to the excessive lengths of time it has taken to finalise agreements. Yet my alarm was peaked when sitting in a consultative meeting in Darwin earlier this year, when it was made clear that some attendees were in favour of running their cattle over lands that they deemed off-limits through Native Title. This White Paper, as with all policy, is open to

¹ Jeremy Dore, 'Developing Northern Australia: Is Carbon Farming Part of the Dream?', *Aboriginal Carbon Fund*, 2016, retrieved 1 November 2016,

<http://aboriginalcarbonfund.com.au/blog/2016/2/2/developing-northern-australia-is-carbon-farming-part-of-the-dream>

² Office of Northern Australia, *Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia*, Australian Government: Industry, Innovation and Science, June 2015, retrieved 1 November 2016,

<http://www.northernaustralia.gov.au/sites/prod.office-northern-australia.gov.au/files/NAWP-FullReport.pdf>, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

interpretation. As I have argued previously, to fully comprehend this we must look at discourses around both land and labour, and laboring on land.⁶

I'd like to acknowledge a friend who has influenced my thinking around this paper who I spoke to at length about this, and with whom I attended that consultative meeting. This was Dr Eva McRae-Williams, who I worked at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. We have both conducted research on labour policies pertaining to Indigenous Australians, but my work has been historical, while Eva's is anthropological or sociological. Eva has been particularly interested in efforts made to promote remote Indigenous communities' engagement with the workforce, and interrogating the government's perceptions of what that will look like. The frustration felt with the deficit discourse that surrounds discussions about Aboriginal unemployment are traceable through these historical and more contemporary discussions, and are firmly rooted in misconceptions of Indigenous work practices. As Eva has argued, Western and Indigenous conceptualisations of work are different. An important factor to consider too, were the ways in which Indigenous labour was organized between Pacific and Australian sites, colonial administrators dismissed or diminished Indigenous Australian engagement in the labour force. This discourse was so prominent in mainstream media that it has contributed to the continual lack of recognition of Aboriginal work conducted throughout Australia's north. Through discussions with Eva, and through a research project I'm trying desperately to get off the ground, I have been attempting to historicise the discourses around Developing the North project currently being discussed by stakeholders in the Top End. The discourse that presents a need for development simultaneously suggests an absence of economic enterprise in the Northern Territory, amongst Aboriginal people in particular, and that this has been sustained throughout the past 150 years.

Early Visions of Darwin's Development

⁶ Kirstie Close, 'Invisible Labourers: Cape Bedford (Hopevale) Mission and the "Paradox" of Aboriginal Labour in the Second World War', MA, University of Melbourne, 2009; Kirstie Close-Barry, 'Land, Labour and Ambivalence: Lutheran missionaries managing land disputes at Cape Bedford Mission', *The Journal of Religious History*, 2016, DOI 10.1111/1467-9809.1240, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9809.12401/full>

We can go back to the papers from George Goyder's expedition to Darwin in 1869, and see the way that he described the landscape at what is now Darwin's main port. He noted the quality of the soils, potential pastures, the locality of the harbor with the 'estuaries radiating towards the interior.' Furthermore, the water courses or water tables were, he deduced 'most suited for the purpose of commerce, and likely to lead to the satisfactory settlement of the country.'⁷ His first impulse then was not to comment on what economies were already in place, but to consider the potential for cotton, sugar, rice and pastoralism, with thoughts of trade with India.⁸ These processes of inclusion and exclusion, of selective or blinkered visions, have persisted and contributed to the shape of policy pertaining to Indigenous peoples and their involvement in industry (or perceived lack thereof) ever since.

The Envisaged Role of Aboriginal people in Development (or not)

Peter Yu pointed to the absence of government interest in areas that Aboriginal workers were leading – 'land management, carbon sequestration, conservation and eco-tourism.'⁹ As Yu pointed out, '...it's predictable from an Aboriginal perspective and what it really represents is a kind of 19th century think-tank.'¹⁰ Yu is not far off the mark here, in fact he's pretty much spot on, except that these ideas translated and were transformed and maintained during the 20th century too. J W Bleakley, in an interview reported in the *Northern Territory Times* in 1929, stated that the pastoral industry in the north is dependent on Aboriginal labour, and in fact that Aboriginal women were some of 'the greatest pioneers of the Territories,' – but this was not necessarily an acknowledgement of workforce participation: 'without her it would have been impossible for the white man to have carried on, especially where conditions were practically impossible for the white woman.'¹¹ There was an insinuation that Aboriginal women were supporting white men as their sexual and social partners rather than operating firmly within the colonial economy. As Robert Gosford has pointed out, and he was drawing on Jon Altman's

⁷ 'Mr Goyder's Report', *The South Australian Advertiser*, 21 June 1869, p. 4.

⁸ 'Mr Goyder's Report', *The South Australian Advertiser*, 21 June 1869, p. 4.

⁹ Matt Brann, 'Plans to develop northern Australia not embracing Indigenous population, says Peter Yu', *ABC Rural*, 21 June 2016, <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-21/developing-northern-australia-plans-ignore-indigenous-owners/7528516?pfmredir=sm>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ 'Developing the North: Natives indispensable', *Northern Territory Times*, 26 July 1929, p. 3.

research, large parts of the NT are held by Aboriginal communities, and 'most outback townships are increasingly dependent on the Aboriginal dollar.'¹²

While Cecil Cook, then the Chief Protector, envisaged a dual economy, in which Aboriginal men would be employed in service roles so as not to compete with white men,¹³ Fijian missionaries worked at Methodist missions, including the stations at Millingimbi and Yirrkala. They worked alongside Torres Strait Islanders too, recruited from the Papuan Industries labour force. There was, from the outset of the mission's work, an effort to encourage certain types of manual labour. By 1934, at Millingimbi for example, sweet potatoes, tapioca, melons, tomatoes and yams were grown, and families were encouraged to live in cottages with adjacent garden plots 'within the area of our mission farm.'¹⁴ Aboriginal people were working alongside Europeans, Torres Strait Islanders and Pacific Islanders to produce crops in order to in turn run a self-sustaining community. This was subsidized by government and mission funds because there was an intense interest in moving people away from what were defined as 'primitive' lifestyles.

EWP Chinnery was significant in trying to develop and apply the New Deal policy in the Northern Territory, which John McEwan had announced in February 1939 and under which he hoped that Aboriginal people would be brought more firmly into the capitalist economy – he was calling for social and economic assimilation.¹⁵ Cecil Cook, whose position Chinnery effectively filled as Director of Native Affairs, spoke of the role of missionaries, and suggested that missions 'develops in the native economic and cultural wants which it makes no provision to satisfy. The subsequent gratification of these wants by the aboriginal entails emigration from the reserve, concentration in the neighbourhood of white settlement or Japanese pearling camps, prostitution and worse.'¹⁶ He noted the idealism missionaries possessed but suggested that missionaries tended to be of 'low intelligence and poor capacity', who were 'exploited by their vanity

¹² Robert Gosford, 'Abbott's White Paper for the Black Tropics: Boon or Boondoggle?', *Crikey*, 19 June 2015, <https://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2015/06/19/abbotts-white-paper-for-the-black-tropics-boon-or-boondoggle/>

¹³ Barry Leithhead, 'Cecil Cook and the Remote Aborigines', *Quadrant*, vol. 57, issue 7 / 8, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁴ T T Webb, 'Missions to the Aborigines', *Australian Christian Commonwealth*, 4 May 1934, p. 5.

¹⁵ Geoff Grey, 'Mr Chinnery should be given the recognition he deserves': E W P Chinnery in the Northern Territory', *Journal of Northern Territory History*, issue 15, 2004, pp. 21-33, p. 22.

¹⁶ Cecil Cook, 'Subsidies of missions', *Mission Australia, Policy and Programs for halfcaste population*, Croke Island, North Australia, 1939-1949, SLNSW, p. 10.

to establish them as autocrats whose administration, inspired by personal advantage, marred by indolence, and unguided by intelligence has a disastrous effect upon the welfare and morale of native peoples.¹⁷ Missionaries were sometimes more immediately pressed to negotiate the multiple economic systems in operation while trying to promote change. What I have thought about with regards to Chinnery and other policy makers who moved between Australia and the Pacific and back again is that they were moving in the same circles as missionaries, who were equally influenced by anthropology, and all were constantly comparing with the lifestyles of Pacific islanders (in Chinnery's case New Guineans) and Aboriginal peoples. These comparisons fostered notions of racial hierarchies, were usually assumed on reflection of community land use systems. They were not necessarily considering the distinctions between the varied modes of colonialism in each context.

Historical Scholarship around Aboriginal Land and Development

Discussion around the White Paper has progressed since I left the NT in July. In August, the NT's Northern and Central Land Councils resolved that they were disappointed in the White Paper on Developing Northern Australia for its 'lack of support for the planning and implementation of Indigenous-led developments'.¹⁸ Jon Altman had noted well before that, that Native Title rights 'do not provide a basis for active participation in the economy.'¹⁹ There remains a dissonance in recognizing existing, ancient modes of labour and land management within the capitalist economy. Jon Altman has referred to this as the 'customary economy' and has also noted the lack of attention given to this by researchers. This includes, he notes, 'hunting, gathering and fishing... land and habitat management, species management and maintenance of biodiversity'. It is not monetized. What this means effectively is that systems of inclusion and exclusion persist in ideas of what constitutes development of the north, and who participates in it, and in what way.

There is considerable scope for historians to speak directly to this debate and shape or at the very least, inform policy initiatives. Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe have led the way

¹⁷ Cook, part 2, p. 1-2.

¹⁸ Central Land Council, 'NT Land Council Calls for Indigenous Led Northern Development', 24 August 2016, retrieved 1 November 2016, <http://www.clc.org.au/media-releases/article/nt-land-councils-call-for-indigenous-led-northern-development>

¹⁹ Jon Altman, 'The "Right to Development" on Indigenous Lands', *New Matilda*, 9 August 2015, <https://newmatilda.com/2015/08/09/right-development-indigenous-lands/>

with innovative and vigorous historical scholarship on Aboriginal modes of land management in recent times. This I link to growing understandings of histories of Aboriginal economies. They have drawn from historical texts, some generated by colonists, to extend knowledge about the land and how it has been managed. There is a need to extend this, and other labour history methodologies in place-based studies that focus on the Top End. Robert Gosford has described the North was a 'political terra nullius' – 'Bugger-all people live up here and that means bugger-all votes.'²⁰ This idea of a land devoid of people, of capital, or of voters needs to shift: it has longevity beyond what is deserved. I'd like the debate about economy and development not to be void of historical consciousness. At the very the Northern Territory budget should acknowledge the diversity of economies in operation. In 2015-2016 budget said: 'Relative to other jurisdictions, the Territory economy is at an earlier stage of development, with less depth and diversity than other jurisdictions.'²¹ This just simply is not the case.

Reading List

Altman, J, 'The "Right to Development" on Indigenous Lands', *New Matilda*, 9 August 2015, <https://newmatilda.com/2015/08/09/right-development-indigenous-lands/>

Brann, M, 'Plans to develop northern Australia not embracing Indigenous population, says Peter Yu', *ABC Rural*, 21 June 2016, <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-21/developing-northern-australia-plans-ignore-indigenous-owners/7528516?pfmredir=sm>

Central Land Council, 'NT Land Councils Call for Indigenous Led Northern Development', 24 August 2016, retrieved 1 November 2016, <http://www.clc.org.au/media-releases/article/nt-land-councils-call-for-indigenous-led-northern-development>

Cecil Cook, 'Subsidies of missions', *Mission Australia, Policy and Programs for halfcaste population*, Croke Island, North Australia, 1939-1949, SLNSW, p. 10.

Close, K, 'Invisible Labourers: Cape Bedford (Hopevale) Mission and the "Paradox" of Aboriginal Labour in the Second World War', MA, University of Melbourne, 2009; Kirstie Close-Barry, 'Land, Labour and Ambivalence: Lutheran missionaries managing land disputes at Cape Bedford Mission', *The Journal of Religious History*, 2016, DOI 10.1111/1467-9809.1240, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9809.12401/full>

'Developing the North: Natives indispensable', *Northern Territory Times*, 26 July 1929, p. 3.

²⁰ Robert Gosford, 'Abbott's White Paper for the Black Tropics: Boon or Boondoggle?', *Crikey*, 19 June 2015, <https://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2015/06/19/abbotts-white-paper-for-the-black-tropics-boon-or-boondoggle/>

²¹ NT Budget 2015-16.

Dore, J, 'Developing Northern Australia: Is Carbon Farming Part of the Dream?', *Aboriginal Carbon Fund*, 2016, retrieved 1 November 2016, <http://aboriginalcarbonfund.com.au/blog/2016/2/2/developing-northern-australia-is-carbon-farming-part-of-the-dream>

Gosford, R, 'Abbott's White Paper for the Black Tropics: Boon or Boondoggle?', *Crikey*, 19 June 2015, <https://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2015/06/19/abbotts-white-paper-for-the-black-tropics-boon-or-boondoggle/>

Grey, G, "Mr Chinnery should be given the recognition he deserves": E W P Chinnery in the Northern Territory', *Journal of Northern Territory History*, issue 15, 2004, pp. 21-33, p. 22.

Leithhead, B, 'Cecil Cook and the Remote Aborigines', *Quadrant*, vol. 57, issue 7 / 8, 2013, p. 2.

McRae-Williams, E & Gerritsen, R, 'Mutual incomprehension: The cross-cultural domain of work in a remote Australian Aboriginal community', *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2010.

'Mr Goyder's Report', *The South Australian Advertiser*, 21 June 1869, p. 4.

Webb, TT, 'Missions to the Aborigines', *Australian Christian Commonwealth*, 4 May 1934, p. 5.

Office of Northern Australia, Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia, Australian Government: Industry, Innovation and Science, June 2015, retrieved 1 November 2016, <http://www.northernaustralia.gov.au/sites/prod.office-northern-australia.gov.au/files/NAWP-FullReport.pdf>