

What if the Burdekin was Never Bridged?

By Patrick White

In 1957 European settlers overcame one of Queensland's great natural borders. Celebrating the feat, the North Queensland Register declared an end to the "annual disease" known locally as "Burdekinitis."¹ The malady had been cured by a newly constructed bridge, similar in size and engineering marvel to the one that spanned Sydney Harbour. Connecting the banks of the Burdekin River diminished the effects of isolation—for many months during the annual wet season the people of northeast Queensland were cut off by a torrent of fresh water flowing down the ordinarily traversable river.² Road and rail links were swamped and often destroyed, and trade was restricted to what could be received or sent by sea. While parts of the economy north of the river lay in temporary ruin, the effects of isolation rallied the residents and councils dotted along the tropical coast. For decades they lobbied the colonial and then state and Commonwealth governments to end the distress. Finally, in the shadow of the Second World War, the Queensland state government committed to the construction of a modern steel bridge across the river. Recognised as one of the nation's engineering marvels, the opening of the "flood



proof' bridge in 1957 was a major milestone in the development of northern Australia. It transformed the connection between northeast Queensland and the rest of the Australian nation south of the river and strengthened the grip of the state's southeast on distant regions to the north.

Bridging the river was no easy task. The

¹ Editorial, "Burdekin High Level Bridge Milestone of the Northland," *North Queensland Register*, 15 June 1957, 2.

² John Kerr, *Black snow and liquid gold: a history of the Burdekin Shire* (Ayr: Burdekin Shire Council, 1994).

Burdekin is the second largest river catchment in Queensland. The headwaters begin in Gugu Badhun country near the Valley of Lagoons and about 120 kilometres west-south-west of Ingham.³ When heavy rains filled the Burdekin catchment during the north's tropical wet season, huge quantities of fresh water would flow into the river and surge southwards, before making a sharp turn to the northeast and emptying into the ocean. The river's crocodilian gape had spewed ancient sediment from the dormant volcanic tablelands into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon for thousands of years. Then in the 1860s, by chance, a handful of white men representing the interests of a controversial Sydney-based merchant established a port and settlement about 100 kilometres to the north of the Burdekin's mouth. The white men called it Townsville, in honour of the Sydney merchant, and the place quickly grew into Australia's largest tropical settlement. The Burdekin River's presence helped to spur the development of Townsville ahead of alternative coastal settlements at Bowen and Cardwell, but the mighty river also isolated the city's rich

hinterland when in flood, cutting the region off from colonial settlements further south. Settlers from Townsville, Cairns, and beyond were relieved when funds for a high-level bridge were secured in the mid-1940s, but extensive construction delays tarnished this victory and tested the patience of the 100,000 people living north of the Burdekin. Finally, following a difficult ten-year construction project in which engineers travelled to India for solutions, the high-level steel Burdekin Bridge was opened. Northeast Queensland's economy and society became fully integrated into mainstream Australia, just in time to embrace the age of the modern motor car.

But what if local lobbying had failed to convince southern governments of the need for a bridge? Or what if the river's deep sandy bottom proved too difficult to build upon and the project was abandoned? The following counterfactual history explores one possible consequence, which has implications for the entire Australian nation.

A Bridge to the Pacific

Basically, northern Australia is thinly peopled because it is—physically—a problem area, bedevilled by heat and drought.

R.H. Greenwood, Professor of Geography, 1963

On 16 October 2024, beside the shimmering surface of the Endeavour River, the premier climbed the timber steps to a temporary stage beneath the Grassy Hill. Amid the cracking and

³ "Wetland Info, Lower Burdekin Catchment Story," Queensland Government, Department of Environment and Science, accessed 12 February 2020. <https://wetlandinfo.des.qld.gov.au/wetlands/ecology/processes-systems/water/catchment-stories/transcript-lower-burdekin.html>.

popping of beer cans and champagne bottles, and the murmur of invited guests, Premier Elisabeth Loyola prepared to take command of this doubly-auspicious occasion. The fiftieth anniversary of the state had conveniently coincided with the final weeks of her second election campaign as premier. Loyola would take the opportunity to launch her government's post-pandemic reconstruction agenda and announce an historic policy that would complement the reopening of Australia's international borders. That explained the presence of the Prime Minister, who had just delivered a speech and now stood back, clearing the premier's passage to the lectern. Once in position, Loyola adjusted her mask, careful not to touch her nose or dislodge the string tucked behind her ears. It would be difficult to convey her usual rhetorical gifts while wearing the covering, but she had—like many public officials since the start of the pandemic—become accustomed to the restrictions of personal protective equipment.

Several difficult years had passed since the global pandemic had first shattered normality and brought Australian society, and the erstwhile stable national economy, to the brink of collapse. Yet on tonight's occasion it would be different. Her state had largely withstood the devastating effects of the virus. Loyola and the State

Government of Carpentaria had worked tirelessly to ensure the celebration would go ahead without restriction. A measure of the jubilant mood could be found on the sea to the east of the state capital of Cooktown, which was crammed with military ships, yachts, and motorboats, and three medium-sized ocean liners—filled with animated tourists from southern states—carefully anchored amid the tangle of reefs and sandbars.⁴ Once again Cooktown was a thriving city, bustling with tourists on the edge of adventure and entrepreneurs hunting opportunities in the Silicon Valley of the southern hemisphere. The importance of the occasion could not be overstated—the prime minister had come to acknowledge the anniversary and declare an opening of Australia's northern border.

To mark the significance of the decision, businesspeople and public servants from Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, and numerous Pacific Island states had been invited to enjoy the celebrations. They hobnobbed with local Gugu Yimithirr and Kuku Yalandji officials. Indigenous nations featured prominently in the state's governing structure—a First Nations Assembly Voice to Parliament had been embedded in the Carpentaria State Constitution. The representatives from Carpentaria's First Nations Assembly had been the architects and brokers of

⁴Tom Aikens, the first premier of the newly founded state of Carpentaria, had elegantly side-stepped the divisive issue of whether Cairns or Townsville would become the capital. While Charters Towers was chosen as the site of a temporary parliament, the state's second premier and Gugu Yimithirr man, Eric Deeral, chose Cooktown as the permanent capital of Carpentaria in 1979. Construction of the houses of parliament began on 17 June 1980—210 years after James Cook's crew began repairing HMS *Endeavour* on the banks of the local river—and was completed in 1988—at the same time as new Parliament House in Canberra.

many of the business partnerships, which had sealed the economic and social success of the region. The international guests would later travel to other Indigenous nations across the state to reignite trade and cultural ties which had prospered before the pandemic. Both tonight's event and the ventures it unleashed affirmed the fact that the virus was finally contained—the vaccines delivered in the wake of the tumultuous 2020 US election had failed to bring about an immediate global reprieve. A second generation of treatments, some developed in Australia, were now proving far more effective—the mask worn by the premier was nothing more than a prop—and confidence was returning. Loyola's speech writer and public relations manager had proposed the idea that she should tear it off seconds before shouting, "Carpentaria is back open for business!" It was a tacky political gesture, but it would play well to the boisterous crowd. As a hush descended upon the gathering, Loyola touched the microphone, bit her lip, and reflected on the incredible origins of Australia's youngest state.

Loyola was Carpentaria's sixth premier and a third generation Basque-Australian. Her grandparents had migrated to the state during the Spanish Civil War—when it was still part of Queensland. Her father—like thousands of other migrant workers employed in the coastal sugar and inland mining industries—had joined the

resurgent Separation movement in the 1940s. The Second World War breathed new life into feelings of isolation at the same time that the "neglected north" theory was stimulating frequent proposals for the separation of north Queensland from the rest of the state.⁵ Yet Separation movements struggled to gain sufficient support to maintain momentum. The idea of a new northern state was often written off by detractors as mere parochialism, or a divisive distraction. Like many others, Loyola's father had drifted from the movement, but hardliners continued to promote Separation at conferences and in publications such as the *Kingsland Chronicle*.

Traces of support were occasionally documented at local council meetings and business conferences, but northerners generally relegated Separation to the periphery. Many activists clung to hopes of a national awakening, the kind that would turn Australia on its head, and lead to a renaissance in northern development. These hopes received a boost in 1946 when in the shadow of the War, the Queensland government committed finance to the construction of the Burdekin River high level bridge. It promised to be a victory for settler colonialism.

The massive steel structure would eliminate one of the final environmental barriers to modern development and permanently connect the northeast frontier to the southern centres of the

⁵ "North Wants to Be New State," *Sunday Mail*, 27 May 1945, 6; "Separation for North," *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 26 June 1945, 4.

nation. Just as the Harbour Bridge had unleashed development across Sydney's north shore, the Burdekin Bridge would unveil virgin northern landscapes to powerful southern capitalists. No longer would they be deterred by an impetuous river and the risk of isolated investments. Sydney's bridge had taken eight years to construct

from 1925, but when work began with modern machinery on the Burdekin in 1947, completion was expected much sooner. When news of major complications in the bridge construction spread across northern districts, collective regional anticipation soon gave way to anxiety.

Carpentaria Rising

The path to Carpentaria's statehood began with the collapse of the Burdekin Bridge project in 1956. Construction had languished for years from delays and government neglect. Rage over the Queensland government's inability to solve the issues recharged the Separation movement. Secessionists argued the bridge fiasco embodied the fate of north Queensland if the region remained at the mercy of a government located more than a thousand miles away near the border of New South Wales. Increasing numbers of north Queenslanders believed that the failed bridge project was evidence of a conspiracy of neglect, reaching all the way to the Australian capital. Looking back on that history, many Carpentarians still saw politicians from both Canberra and Brisbane as complicit in a deplorable act of desertion—they had run from the challenges of the north and left its occupants to fend for themselves.

The bridge was abandoned after the Queensland state government was unable to solve the considerable engineering challenges,

which had plagued the project since the 1940s. Construction work was reduced to an expensive and repetitive cycle—during three consecutive dry seasons, enormous holes were dug into the river's bed and filled with mountains of concrete. When floodwaters arrived in the summer, the foundations were obliterated. The cycle of destruction had blown out the project's budget, and by 1950 the Queensland government had called upon the Commonwealth to provide money, engineers, and equipment.

Under the formidable leadership of Menzies, the federal coalition had adopted a cautious approach to funding infrastructure in Australia's north. The federal minister for National Development challenged the Queensland Labor government to take responsibility for completing the bridge. In reply, the Queensland Premier, Vince Gair, accused the Commonwealth of northern neglect and the dialogue between the levels of government deteriorated. By 1953, the Burdekin Bridge project had become a mere prop in a larger pantomime of blame between two

governments on opposing sides of the political spectrum, with each deferring responsibility for northern projects to the other. Meanwhile, the Burdekin River's flooding continued the cycle of seasonal isolation for north Queensland.⁶

In 1954, one of the region's mayors pronounced that "while the people in the south grow fat from leisure and pleasure in cities constructed from the profits of northern lands, we here in the north are in the backblocks . . . still in the packhorse days." Occasionally, the state government despatched an engineer from Brisbane to examine the river for another crossing. The suggestion of sending a team of engineers to India to explore similar projects there was roundly rejected, but alternative solutions were never found. The north's antipathy toward southern Queensland, and the rest of the nation at large, continued to smoulder beneath the surface. The national government was oblivious—the post-war migration boom filled southern cities, the economy hummed, and the tropical north fell even further behind the temperate south. Northern residents were only thrown crumbs from the table and their mutual rage stoked support for the Separation movement. When bridge construction was officially abandoned in 1956, calls for Separation

engulfed Queensland's north.

Unlike the proposed bridge, Separation's appeal spread across the Burdekin River where it reached Charters Towers, an historic gold-mining town which had once rivalled Brisbane for size and glamour. A three-day convention in Charters Towers attracted several thousand participants in 1958.⁷ Interlocutors rounded on the south's disregard for northern residents. Animated campaigners riled up audiences at town-hall style meetings, with onlookers offering unscripted testimony about the devastating effects of isolation and the dim prospects of a future tethered to the whims of southern Queensland. The bright future posed by Separation was illuminated by optimists who imagined a new and prosperous state—one which looked northward to the opportunities presented by the populous Asia-Pacific.

The final day of the convention brought one of the most decisive calls to action. A fastidious woman pushed her way to the podium and proclaimed: "We are closer to the rest of the world than Sydney or Melbourne and one day it will be our state in the continental north of Australia that the world sees when it looks to this great southern land. We will show the world that peace and security among all people is not only

⁶ People in north Queensland often had to learn to live with the extremes of flooding and drought, see: Rohan Lloyd, Patrick White, & Claire Brennan. (2020). "Escaping Water: Living Against Floods in Townsville, North Queensland, from Settlement to 2019." In *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand* (pp. 99–117). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4382-1_6; Patrick White. "The Competing Influences of Deluge and Drought in Queensland's Dry Tropics." *Environment & Society Portal, Arvadia* (Spring 2020), no. 5. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9003.

⁷ Staff Correspondent, "New States Movement Gains Momentum Again," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 October 1958, 2.

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possible, but exists here in the lands of Carpentaria.” A cheer rose from the gathered mass of people, with chants of “Car-pen-tar-i-a, Car-pen-tar-i-a” and uproarious renditions of patriotic songs that continued well into the night. The woman leading the chant was Erika Loyola, the daughter of a Kurtjar woman and an Irishman from Cork who had met on a cattle station near the headwaters of the Gilbert River. She became an overnight heroine. Her words ignited the Separation movement, but she could not have imagined that her little Lizzie would one day be premier of Australia’s seventh state. Unlike previous iterations of the movement, the energy was maintained and spread further west across the Great Dividing Range into Gulf country. Questions about the economic viability of a new northern state were answered when huge deposits of minerals were discovered in Cape York and near Mount Isa.

Estimates of the significance of both discoveries often appeared in major newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney. One *Sydney Morning Herald* report predicted that the anticipated

mining growth would drive a new era of northern development.⁸ The tone had shifted and the nation was suddenly interested in the bounty of northern land. Melbourne’s *Age* implored the Australian government to exploit the wealth for the benefit of the nation. It argued it was “now a matter of urgency” to meet the challenge of northern development and “to make full use of the [nation’s] natural resources.”⁹ Prime Minister Robert Menzies took note, claiming that “Australia’s whole character over the next 50 years would depend on northern development.”¹⁰ But in the lands of Carpentaria, the nation’s interest came too late. People no longer held high a program of northern development pushed by southern governments and entrepreneurs, which reduced the north to an abstract national resource. Northern inhabitants saw their region as more than a national quarry or a food bowl for Asia, and their enthusiasm flowed for Separation and regional control of the gifts of geography.

A huge Separation rally at Innisfail in 1961 produced a petition which called for a referendum on the partition of Queensland. It

⁸ Special Reporter, “Boom! Vast El Dorado of Future,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1957, 5.

⁹ Editorial, “Incentives for Our Empty North,” *Age*, 20 May 1958, 2.

¹⁰ Editorial, “Menzies Should Implement His Views on Developing the North,” *North Queensland Register*, 24 May 1958, 3.

attracted 93,000 signatures and was delivered to the Queensland Premier, Frank Nicklin, who was forced to allow the referendum, or risk defeat at the next election. The referendum was carried by a majority of 73%, with northern regions from just south of Mackay and west to the Northern Territory border voting heavily in favour. Many districts in southern Queensland were happy to sever ties with a portion of the state which had increasingly attacked them and their way of life for several years. Yet statehood did not come quickly or easily.

Legal challenges and further political wrangling heralded desperate efforts to keep the original Queensland together. The notorious Country Party Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, dragged the issue into the 1970s, hoping to hold onto north Queensland's mineral wealth and the supposed oil beneath the Great Barrier Reef. Scandalised by the prospect of drilling on the Reef, all of Australia suddenly seemed to support the partition of Queensland. The fledgling environmental and Indigenous rights movements across Australia saw common cause with Carpentaria. Union black bans began to disrupt Queensland shipping and rail freight and international human rights groups circled the carriages. The Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, called upon Queensland to honour the referendum. Protest action spread across Queensland and rallies were held at university campuses across Australia. Bjelke-Petersen lamented the "intervention of the communists,

blacks, gays, students, and dirt lovers." Ironically, his government tried to cultivate a brand of populism by whipping up fear of the "South, Canberra, international reds, and the unholy world government." Then, finally, one of the battles between the Queensland and Commonwealth governments benefitted the north.

In 1973, Whitlam—motivated by his bitter rivalry with Bjelke-Petersen—helped to carve up Queensland. While less enthusiastic about state governments than most prime ministers, Whitlam believed he could reform the federation by strengthening the direct relationship between regions and the Commonwealth. Privately, Whitlam hoped to reduce the relevance of state governments and drive the creation of regional authorities that would do the business of the Commonwealth at a local level. In northern Separation, Whitlam saw three clear opportunities; weaken the recalcitrant Queensland led by Bjelke-Petersen, establish a new state in which the Commonwealth might carry significant influence (and later transition into a regional authority when states were abolished), and use the new jurisdiction to help reorientate Australian foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific. Whitlam did not last long enough in office to see out these goals, but Carpentaria acquired statehood in 1974.

Despite a late movement to include the Barkly Tableland and north-east Arnhem regions in the new the state—thus giving it control of the Gulf of Carpentaria—its borders did not spread into

the former Northern Territory.¹¹ Instead, Carpentaria extended from the Torres Strait to the Burdekin River and westwards to Kalkadoon and Yallarnga country. Its southern border was contentious, determined by an unfortunate compromise. Queensland had lobbied hard to keep control of the central Queensland coal fields and saw Mackay and its hinterland as part of the deal. Yet Mackay, the Whitsundays, Bowen, and Home Hill had strengthened their links to north Queensland in the decades after the Second World War—residents of these districts identified with Carpentaria.¹² Home Hill lay on the southern bank of the Burdekin and the land surrounding it was conceptualised as the river’s left lung. Many hoped it could one day be reunified with the right lung on the north bank. For now, only a barge linked the two banks—Queensland in the south and Carpentaria in the north.

The cable-barge criss-crossed between the banks next to the abandoned Burdekin Bridge.

Tourists from the southern states paid a small fortune to have their vehicle ferried across the river during the peak leisure seasons. In recent years, there had been a growing chorus of calls led by tourists and residents of Queensland to build a bridge. One Carpentarian MP from the seat of Deeral chided his southern neighbours: “Oh how the shoe has changed feet!” Now, however, there was not even a barge—the site was ravaged by a catastrophic fire in 2019—and to get around the mighty Burdekin, road traffic was forced to take the much-longer inland route through Bellyando Crossing near Charters Towers, and northwards to a diversion across Hervey Range for Townsville, or even further to the Lynd Junction and beyond for the far north. Many tourists had passed through the Lynd on their way to Carpentaria’s capital, Cooktown, for the current anniversary celebrations, where the prime minister and Premier Loyola were about to reopen the fifty-year-old state, and the rest of nation below it, to the world.

Post-statehood

Loyola was well aware that the opening of borders would provide a massive boost to

national morale. Since Carpentaria had acquired statehood, the development of trade and eco-

¹¹ Carpentaria’s path to statehood helped spur the evolution of the former Northern Territory. It gained self-government from the Commonwealth in 1975 and eventually became the state of Lingiari-Arnhem in 1995.

¹² Editorial, “Mackay Alignment with the Northland Issue Calling for Immediate Decision,” *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 31 October 1960, 2.; “Mackay Line-up with North Q’land Urged,” *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 29 October 1960, 1; Patrick White & Claire Brennan. (2020). *Lessons from history point to local councils’ role in Australia’s recovery*. The Conversation, 4 June 2020: <https://theconversation.com/lessons-from-history-point-to-local-councils-role-in-australias-recovery-138547>.

tourism, and cultural exchange throughout the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York had boomed. The state looked north (and not south) for the energy and relationships that drove the economy and defined its society. Just as it had been before colonial settlement, Carpentaria returned to the role of Australia's gateway to the South Pacific. Its political culture had been redefined by statehood, no longer having to rage against a distant authority in Brisbane or Canberra—the politics of parochialism and rural populism were replaced by optimism, acknowledgement of the past, and vigorous co-operation. The north's attractive natural environment and clever tax incentives helped to drive migration to the state, which further enlivened the growth of a sanguine political culture. The university established in Townsville focused on research and innovation and developed a world class reputation for humanities, marine and social sciences, and tropical health. Margaret Reynolds had migrated to Townsville with her husband, Henry, when he took up work within the history department at the university in the 1960s. Margaret Reynolds entered political life in Townsville and went on to become state premier of Carpentaria for nearly two decades from the 1980s. Her benevolent leadership and progressive policies were backed up by cabinet members such as Joan Innes-Reid and Noel Pearson. The period between the 1980s and the 2000s saw incredible growth. Defence industries followed the establishment of new bases and an ambitious northern state helped the

region to redefine Australia's relationships with neighbouring countries to the north. In turn, since gaining independence from Australia in 1975, Papua New Guinea had prospered.

PNG had grown alongside Carpentaria and the fledgling jurisdictions, connected by a busy and prosperous Torres Strait, gained mutual benefits from greater cooperation. They no longer relied upon the bureaucratic mood of distant cities in Australia's temperate zone. Carpentaria's Supreme Court had also overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius* in 1986, which inspired similar cases in other states and the implementation of the Commonwealth *Native Title Act* in 1993. Carpentaria initiated ambitious native title schemes which returned large tracts of land to traditional owners. This in turn led to a wider variety of industrial and commercial innovation, spanning the digital, tourism, and commercial-scale Indigenous agricultural initiatives.

The creation of Carpentaria—followed by Lingjari-Arnhem, the new state which replaced the former Northern Territory—revitalised the settler nation. From the 1970s, the political, social, and cultural development of northern Australia helped to forge a stronger connection to the Asia-Pacific. The Australian tropics were no longer dismissed as the “empty north.” The northern third was no longer condemned to play the role of a sparsely populated protective buffer between Asia and a paranoid European nation huddled in the southeast of the Australian

continent. Owing to its larger population and more established economy (in comparison to Lingiari-Arnhem), Carpentaria led the way in helping the nation to reorientate vital cultural and economic ties from the northern to southern hemispheres.

Australia grew out of being a mere obedient cousin of older northern hemisphere nations. By the twenty-first century, Australia had found a strong independent voice and confidence in its place on the edge of Asia. Carpentaria had helped the nation to mature, but the state's success had been disrupted when the global pandemic began in 2020. Now that was over and Premier Elizabeth Loyola was about to seize the initiative with a massive post-pandemic reconstruction agenda. It would begin with the state's largest infrastructure project since the 1980s, when Carpentaria's parliament was constructed in

Cooktown.

Loyola told the nation that she would “reunite the Burdekin’s left lung with Carpentaria” by building the world’s most modern bridge over the river between Yuru and Bindal lands. It was a direct challenge to the Queensland Government to cede the area between Mackay and Home Hill, on the southern bank of the Burdekin, to Carpentaria. Such a move would provide a pathway to the Yuwi, Giya, Biri, and Yangga First Nations to join Carpentaria. Decades ago the Burdekin Bridge had first been proposed as a project that would permanently tie north Queensland to the settler nation developing below it. Now the bridge was transformed into the symbol of a more inclusive future, and a community who understood and acknowledged its past.

Coda

So, what is fiction and where are the facts? The creation of a new northern state, Carpentaria, was, of course, a counterfactual scenario, but a concept with roots in the nineteenth century. Settlers in northern districts genuinely lobbied Queensland officials and the British parliament to grant them a separate northern colony.

Secessionists really felt the effects of distance and isolation. After all, the colonial government was located over one thousand miles away in Brisbane.¹³ The nineteenth century campaign for Separation was, however, unsuccessful and overtaken—in part—by the federation movement. After federation of the Australian colonies

¹³ An “old Palmer [River Gold Rush] Diggins song” from the nineteenth century referred to the Queensland colonial capital being over “a thousand miles away”. The expression became the title of a regional history of north Queensland published in 1963, see: “A Thousand Miles Away,” *North Queensland Register*, 5 October 1963, 5; Geoffrey Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920* (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press in association with the Australian National University, 1963).

in 1901, support for Separation ebbed and flowed with the fortunes of north Queensland's economy and society. After the devastating effects of the Depression-era 1930s, north Queensland was severely impacted by the Second World War. Wartime constraints and the sudden presence of over 100,000 allied troops exacerbated competition for limited resources. Many locals felt abandoned by the distant and preoccupied Queensland and Commonwealth Governments. Separation emerged again as a panacea to the northern problems, but federal Labor's national post-war reconstruction agenda restored hopes of a new era in northern development. Yet federal Labor governments and their conservative successors were unable to determine a rationale for developing Australia's northern regions.

Northern development faded as a national priority during the 1950s. While post-war Australian governments struggled to come to grips with the problems and opportunities of northern regions, local authorities stepped into the void. The North Queensland Local Government Association (NQLGA) formed in 1944 and led a regional post-war reconstruction agenda. Generally, the NQLGA was a relatively conservative movement and in the interests of unity, tended to avoid divisive issues such as Separation. But the Association was "a worthy watchdog of the needs of Queensland's north."¹⁴

It had supported the bridging of the Burdekin and made decisive contributions to persuading the Queensland Government to finance the project in the 1940s. When the Burdekin Bridge was finally completed and opened to traffic in 1957, the new infrastructure was considered a rare major milestone of northern development. This counterfactual transitions from fact to fiction with the collapse of the Burdekin Bridge project during the 1950s.

In the real world, the project to construct the bridge was delayed by major engineering challenges. Furthermore, optimism around northern development increased during the late 1950s when large minerals deposits were discovered in north Queensland. The region's local politicians and business community eagerly anticipated a new era of northern development. Yet private investment was slow to respond and a major government program of northern development never eventuated—the Menzies Commonwealth remained cautious about funding expensive infrastructure projects in northern Australia. One of the major responses to the challenge of maintaining interest in northern development came in the form of a new publicity campaign orchestrated by the previously conservative North Queensland Local Government Association.

The NQLGA sponsored a lobbying group called "People the North" which ran a campaign

¹⁴ Editorial, "Mackay District Interest in N.Q.L.A.A. Indicates Solidarity of the North," *North Queensland Register*, 28 May 1960, 3.

designed to generate public interest in northern development and build pressure of federal politicians. The campaign was run by a committee of local government politicians from Cairns, Mackay, Townsville, and other communities in Queensland's north. The People the North Committee hired a journalist and used public relations techniques to spread "good news stories" about northern economic potential and about the lifestyle benefits of living in the Australian tropics. Chief among the campaign's goals was a massive growth in population in tropical Australia and new government machinery to manage northern development. To bring about closer settlement and industrial development, the People the North Committee lobbied the governments of Queensland, Western Australia, and the Commonwealth to support the creation of a statutory authority to administer the north. For several years during the 1960s, the campaign attracted support from high profile Australians and maintained the interest of mainstream media. The campaign's officials met with state premiers and the prime minister and influenced federal policy, but like other initiatives before it, the People the North lobbying group failed to develop new and compelling reasons for

northern development.¹⁵ Much like Australian governments, People the North encountered the limits of settler society's narrow vision of northern Australia, which was dominated by broad economic and security themes and measured northern development proposals on a scale of national benefit. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the push for northern development in Australia reflected an underlying desire to finish the colonial project. The counter-factual above has rendered an alternative vision of northern Australia, which has retained much of the nation's real political architecture. The counter-factual is an intentionally utopian apparition energised by real Queensland optimism and raises the question: "what if?"

Image: "[Inspection of Burdekin Bridge by Division Engineers \(1947\)](#)" (CC PDM 1.0) by [QLD State Archives](#)

¹⁵ Patrick White, "Many Voices, One Ambition: Local Government, Post-War Reconstruction and Northern Development in Australia," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 66, no. 4 (2020). 578-595: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajph.12704>.