

The Future of Tropical Australia

being the Sir Earle Page Memorial Lecture, given by Professor Geoffrey Blainey in Sydney, on 8 September 1999.

I pay tribute to Sir Earle Page and to Lady Page who is with us this evening. For forty-one years, Sir Earle was one of the dominant and creative figures in Australian politics. He was prime minister in his own right for nineteen days in 1939; and he was deputy or acting prime minister in various earlier years. He had long terms as federal treasurer, minister for commerce and minister for health - few members in the history of the federal parliament have held major ministries for such a total length of years. There have been only two governments in federal history which were generally known by the names of two leaders rather than one; the best known was the Bruce-Page government which ran from 1923 to 1929. Sir Earle was also the Australian representative in the British War cabinet presided over by Sir Winston Churchill in 1941-42, during the dark days of the war.

No politician contributed more to the early success of the National Party, then known as the Country Party, of which he was for long the federal leader. Few federal politicians were more interested in tropical and outback Australia - the theme I have chosen for tonight's lecture.

In the last quarter century the division between the big city and the declining country side has become a rift; and the rift is now discussed widely. There is also a deepening gap between the north and south of Australia; but it is discussed less often.

There are several definitions of tropical or northern Australia; and tonight I will treat both tropical and northern as similar. One definition of tropical Australia refers to that 38 per cent of the nation's area which lies north of the Tropic of Capricorn. The present governmental definition, however, assigns to northern or tropical Australia 46 per cent of the area. That huge area holds only about 5 per cent of Australia's population.

Here is one of the most sparsely peopled regions in the world. If northern Australia was a separate nation it probably would be second to Greenland as the most sparsely peopled nation on the globe. Incidentally in Aboriginal times, in the centuries before 1788, this tropical area almost certainly held a much higher proportion of Australia's population.

Amongst Australians there used to be a widespread belief that northern or tropical Australia should be developed, and that it was in the nation's long-term interest to populate it. "Develop the North" was once a slogan for the Labor and Liberal and National parties. It sat easily alongside such slogans as "Populate or Perish", which was almost a national slogan in the 1950s.

At various times the hopes pinned on northern Australia were rosy. Just over one century ago many promoters believed that the grasslands and river valleys at the top end of the Northern Territory might produce another Java, if only

population could be enticed there. In every stock exchange were promoters who swore that new Ballarats and Bendigos would someday arise north of the Tropic of Capricorn. They did arise; Charters Towers, built on gold, was once the biggest town in north Queensland, and Cooktown was for a time the biggest port, for it had the rich Palmer goldfields at its back.

In the 1920s came another burst of optimism, and the building of the South Australian railway to Alice Springs was seen as the first stage of a line that would soon cross the continent, at last make Darwin part of Australia, and open up the resources of the Northern Territory. The railway is still unfinished though it might well be built in the next few years.

On the eve of the Second World War, North East Queensland, alone of the various regions of tropical Australia, was the success story. Its success lay mainly in the sugar cane growing along a narrow strip of the Pacific coast. Even sugar would have faltered there but for the high protective tariff imposed on imported sugar by the federal parliament. One reason for the sugar tariff was that a populated coastline would benefit the nation's defences.

The Second World War, and especially the Japanese bombing of Darwin and Broome, confirmed what most well-informed Australians had long feared: that the nation's north was highly vulnerable and yet very difficult to defend. It is now almost forgotten by the general public that Australia's post-war immigration policy was initially inspired by fears of Australia's defencelessness. Politicians of all the parties hoped that some of the waste spaces in the north and south, as well as the new city factories, would absorb the immigrants. But few of the new European migrants went the north. The jobs were not there. Moreover the climate did not appeal to most Europeans.

By the 1960s the Ord River irrigation scheme and the mining boom began to resurrect the old hopes that had once centred on tropical Australia. This region proved to be one of the great mineral belts in the world but, except at Mt Isa, no large mining town has arisen in the entire 20th century. Many of the new mines were huge but were worked efficiently by a small work force. Population on tropical mining fields, whether Weipa or Rum Jungle or the Pilbara, increased very slowly.

Admittedly the biggest ports in Australia are now in this region. Mining ports, mainly specialising in coal and iron ore, they are far bigger than Melbourne and Sydney in the tonnage handled. But except for Port Hedland - and it is a 19th century port revitalised - the new minerals ports hold relatively few people. Today most of the new mines in the region do not even support a mining town. Since the early 1980s the fly-in & fly-out system has been the vogue. In any case the huge mines are so mechanised that 200 people can do the work which 5000 miners and millmen would have struggled to do in the pick-and shovel days.

In the next ten years the uncertainty about the operating of the Native Title laws will reduce mineral exploration across tropical Australia. No less important, Australian mining companies are increasingly attracted to overseas

lands. But the changes in the mining industry itself, especially in the last half century, really prevent it from greatly boosting the population living in tropical Australia.

Mining, a highly efficient industry, employs few people but creates great wealth. Most of the wealth does not stay in the mining region itself. Instead it goes in payment to other regions or other nations in payment for machines and electricity and oil, it goes to shareholders in dividends and to governments in royalties, and even the employees' wages are mostly spent in non-tropical Australia. This is the big difference between say Ballarat goldfields a century ago and say the new Century zinc mine in north west Queensland today. Nearly all the money earned in Ballarat gold mining in the 1890s was spent in Ballarat or Victoria. Even the fuel used by the Ballarat mines was local - it was firewood. The very opposite is true in the new mining regions of tropical Australia and will probably remain so.

The hopes that rural industries and mining would be the real springboard for northern development and attract a large population have almost gone. On present indications, tropical Australia will mainly attract new people to work in the service industries. Such population growth as occurs will be in Cairns, Townsville, Alice Springs and Darwin, or smaller towns where tourism or the bureaucracy thrives: The local Aboriginal populations will also grow - at present they have high birth rates. But in most parts of tropical Australia the prospects for increased population are poor.

A significant change is the altered attitudes felt towards the north by the city people who usually dominate the nation. While people who live in the northern part of Australia remain intensely interested in its future, the nation's south today is less interested in the north than were previous generations of southerners. It is one of the surprises of our time - the declining discussion of what should or could happen in that tropical zone which embraces four-tenths of Australia'.

Earlier generations of Australians knew how vulnerable was the coastline extending from Port Hedland to Darwin and the Great Barrier Reef. In their eyes it was Australia's front line, and not easily defended. The events of 1942 made that clear. At the time of the bombing of Darwin, there was no railway and no bitumen road linking the far south or the east coast with Darwin. Even ships could not reach Darwin harbour in safety because the sealanes were endangered by Japanese aircraft. Public interest in defence has declined, and the public interest in the northern coastline has declined too. I wrote that last sentence before last week's events in East Timor which dramatically quickened interest in defence.

The arrival on northern shores of numerous boats filled with illegal immigrants, each involving a risk of plant and animal diseases, slightly quickened national interest in the vulnerability of the northern coastline. But not until some of the boats reached the coast of NSW this year was strong interest aroused in NSW and Victoria.

A generation ago most Australian politicians believed that the nation somehow must develop the north or risk losing it. That argument is rarely heard today, partly because it was realised, after a long experience of painful failures, that the financial cost of developing the north was often high. Moreover the old moral argument has also been superseded by the new argument that the nation has a moral duty to confer huge areas of the north on Aborigines, even if that means retarding economic development in the region. That new moral argument was vindicated by the High Court in the early 1990s. Also visible in recent years is an increasing moral and aesthetic duty felt towards nature, a duty that has led to the preserving of Kakadu, Daintree, Jardine River and other tropical areas as national parks.

So a long buffer zone of nature reserves and Aboriginal lands extends across much of northern Australia.

Is it in Australia's interests that this buffer zone occupies much of the vast tropical region? Possibly - but far from certainly - it is in the national interest. In any case much of this arid land has little chance of supporting economic activity, not even tourism. In addition European opinion - but not Asian opinion - will probably endorse the permanent setting aside of increasing areas of Australia for Aboriginal land trusts and national parks, and be critical of any Asian nation which someday might fix its eyes on part of this land. In essence, the new buffer zone might well assist Australia to retain sovereignty over land which, in the opinion of many, it has failed to utilise adequately during its long custodianship.

South East Asian opinion might well take a different view. It might not, in the next 100 years, approve of the northern half of the continent, with its huge Aboriginal and nature reserves, remaining sparsely populated.

Australia's own north, in human terms, is one of the last of the world's empty zones. Much of it is arid and infertile but parts are deluged with rain. In a typical year more freshwater runs out to sea in the northern half of Australia than in the southern half. It would be easy to provide the water needed by a city of 2 million people on several parts of the coastline of northern Australia. I am no saying that such a city will be built. I am simply saying we tend to exaggerate the water scarcity.

In the long run the governments and opinion-leaders of south-east Asia might not always sanction a rich nation occupying such a huge area, on the doorstep of Asia, and refusing to allow the normal processes of human settlement inside it. Australia's recent habit of placing obstacles in the way of northern development rather contradicts the widely-voiced argument that Australia is part of Asia.

If Australia is part of Asia, why is there no Australian capital city in the northern half the continent? And if Australia is part of Asia, why does this strong buffer zone separate the Australian capital cities from the nearer parts of Asia?

The Aborigines living there will have a far stronger say than in the past, though not the sole say about its future. In 1994, Aboriginal leaders put their distinctive case to the federal committee chaired by Barry Jones on the question of what is Australia's potential population: "high population growth will not be good for Aborigines to the extent that they then have a smaller voice in a larger population and may lose land, regarded as spiritually or culturally significant, to development". They would probably oppose any official attempt to increase population rapidly in tropical Australia.

Likewise the more ardent section of the green movement sees tropical Australia, much of which is now fenced off from economic development, as their special triumph. They will not favour increased growth of population there. And yet is it in their long term interest that Australia continues to control this territory. Effective control probably depends on creating more coastal towns - even if only to aid surveillance of a coastline difficult to survey.

The long-term question of what will happen to tropical Australia is one of the most important facing the nation. In Melbourne and Sydney, the topic is probably less debated now than at any other time in the past 75 years. In Adelaide it is a more relevant topic because that city hopes to be the terminus of the new north-south railway.

For the northern half of Australia there is no simple formula. A sharply-increased immigration program to Australia as a whole will do nothing for this region. Most new immigrants have no interest in the wide open spaces. They prefer the crowded suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. The only way a higher proportion of Australians will be persuaded to live in the northern half is by providing them with job opportunities and a few sizable coastal cities in which to live.

The biggest single way to encourage the north is to set up several states which can pursue their own economic and political interests rather than merely accept those policies which the southern half of the continent, through Canberra, imposes on them. The Northern Territory in a few years will be a fully-fledged state, and will prosper when it finally achieves independence. During the first two decades of independence its population will probably grow much faster than that of any existing state, but it will grow from a humble base. This growth will occur even if the Alice Springs-Darwin railway is not accomplished. Sometime in the coming century the NT will probably pass Tasmania in population.

Another northern state, in addition to the Northern Territory, is essential. But you can bet your last dollar that WA and Queensland will, understandably, do everything to prevent a new state being carved from their territory. One of the grave weaknesses of the present Commonwealth constitution is that it allows existing states to block the creation of new states within their territory. In contrast the NT can become a state because it can take advantage of this technicality: that it was virtually abandoned by its owner, South Australia, and was taken up as an orphan in 1911 by the Commonwealth. If the NT

instead had been taken up by Queensland in 1911 it would still probably be far away from statehood.

Meanwhile Australia has not seen a new state since 1859 when Queensland was created. That is an incredibly long gap. In the same period the USA, with a similar area and a similar diversity of regions and a similar federal system, has created, by my reckoning, at least sixteen new states. The USA has gained through that policy of creating new states which serve the needs and interests of each distinctive region. Australians should think about that lesson.

Geoffrey Blainey