On the northern treadmill

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Abstract
Australians seem to be forever rediscovering an urgent need to 'unlock' the vast potential of the north. They've been doing it for over a hundred and fifty years, and throughout that time their efforts have been accompanied by a great deal of hyperbole. It still is. On the other hand, extravagant proposals for northern development have always inspired countervailing arguments, pointing out their economic and environmental impracticality. Yet today's advocacy of massive northern developments takes place in a virtual historical vacuum. This article makes a plea for the vacuum to be filled.

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Australians seem to be forever rediscovering an urgent need to 'unlock' the vast potential of the north. The latest chapter in this national saga is the federal government's *White Paper on Developing Northern Australia* issued in June this year, which followed from a *Green Paper* on the same topic issued in June last year, which in turn followed from the Coalition's *2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia* issued during the 2013 federal election campaign.

Preceding all these recent papers and visions is more than a hundred and fifty years of trying to find the key to unlock the north. Throughout that drawn-out search, hyperbole has been a constant companion. It still is.

'A strong north means a strong nation', the *White Paper* proclaims on page 1, reassuring us that the north contains 'untapped promise, abundant resources and talented people'. With equal ebullience, the *Green Paper* describes the north as 'a diverse and vibrant region rich in opportunities to drive growth', while its proximity to Asia provides 'unparalleled economic opportunity for the nation'. Attaining even greater heights of grandiloquence, the *2030 Vision* statement declares that 'the potential of Northern Australia is almost limitless'.

We've been saying this sort of thing for a very long time. Back in 1839 an entrepreneur named George Windsor Earl, based at Port Essington in what is now the Northern Territory, imagined the region becoming 'an emporium of the Archipelago of the Arafura', maintaining 'a thriving trade with China' and sustaining a lucrative line in tropical agriculture. Through the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, publicists and politicians

from across the ideological spectrum urged the north be remade into a prosperous and populous land, with flourishing farms and a lively international trade. Even as developmental schemes collapsed one after another, devotees of the north continued to insist that it was, in the words of adventurer Michael Terry in the 1920s, 'a land of promise'.

Yet every time there's another flurry of talk about unlocking the north, the long history of trying to find the key gets forgotten. Or it gets pushed so far to the margins as barely to register. The *White Paper* and *Green Paper*, for example, fleetingly mention past efforts to develop the north before proceeding to breathlessly promote their own proposals as if they had no precedent.

This is all the more remarkable for the fact that not only has there been a continual stream of hyperbole on the prodigious potential of the north, there's also been a countervailing stream of argument over the same period, explaining why we should not expect miracles in the north. Among the best-known debunkers are the geographer Griffith Taylor in the 1920s and the agricultural economist Bruce Davidson in the 1960s, but there were numerous others who argued that massive development projects in the north are neither environmentally feasible nor economically sustainable.

We mustn't imagine that the debunkers were ignored by their contemporaries. In fact, their arguments drew fervent support as well as vehement opposition, generating recurring controversies throughout the twentieth century. Sometimes the controversies were rancorous; other times more sedate; but the north has always been a place to argue about.

So it is today, although recent advocacy of northern development is sadly lacking in historical awareness.

Among past debunkers of the northern myth were men as respectable as Chairman of the Queensland Land Administration Board William Payne and pastoralist John Fletcher, who in 1937 conducted an inquiry on behalf of the federal government into the Northern Territory's potential for development. They chided those members of the public who continued 'to hug the delusion that great prospects comparable to those of the populous parts of the continent lie hidden in the Territory'. Payne and Fletcher attributed the delusion to an excess of patriotism, which made many Australians reluctant to acknowledge the deficiencies of their own country, but urged them to 'courageously face the facts' about northern Australia's serious limitations. Their plea is as pertinent now as it was when they wrote it nearly eighty years ago.

Payne and Fletcher did not suggest that the Territory, or the north more generally, held no prospects for economic exploitation. They advocated its development to the extent that the available resources could sustain. But they especially urged an end to the hyperbole that pervaded public statements on northern Australia, pointing out that inflated expectations merely invited crashing disillusionment. Again, their plea is as pertinent now as it was then.

There seems to be something peculiar about the urge to develop northern Australia that prompts public figures to continually return to the topic, recycle the advocacy of earlier enthusiasts and pretend they're advocating something new. Somehow, the topic seems to

invite commentators to not only repeat the glowing commentary of their predecessors but also refuse to recognise that they're on a treadmill of repetition. Perhaps that is merely a consequence of Australians' inattention to history, but I suspect that more is involved.

In my forthcoming book, *Environment, Race and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) I suggest that the recurrent appeal of northern development derives from the continuing currency of a 'frontier' mentality in Australian popular and political culture. Past enthusiasts for northern development explicitly framed their proposals as pioneering enterprises to be undertaken for the sake of national self-respect and security as well as for material gain. The 2014 *Green Paper* continues this tradition, declaring that 'Northern Australia should no longer be seen as the last frontier; it is, in fact, the next frontier'. Although the would-be slogan eludes precise meaning, it evokes a vision of Australians facing a whole series of future frontiers, of which the north is the most immediate and the most pressing. That's how the north has been represented since before federation.

It's not yet clear how enthusiastic the new prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, is about northern development, but since his cabinet reshuffle there is now, for the first time since 1975, a federal minister whose responsibility for northern Australia is specified in the title of his portfolio. Perhaps it's fortunate for the minister, Josh Frydenberg, that he is also responsible for resources and energy, since our first minister for northern development, Rex Patterson, was rendered politically ineffectual by his continual clashes with Minister for Minerals and Energy Rex Connor.

Beyond that squabble within Whitlam's cabinet, the new minister and new government would be wise to pay greater heed to the history of the northern agenda than other recent governments have done. In particular, they might cut back on the hyperbole, cease invoking the rhetoric of unlocking the north's vast potential and acknowledge that the north was unlocked long ago. What is needed is not a more diligent search for a key that will unlock a dragon's hoard of riches in the north, but recognition that Australians have been engaged in that futile quest for a long time. It's time to step off the northern treadmill, and a closer acquaintance with its history might help us do so.

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