

RESEARCH REPORT 46: NORTHERN DREAMS, NATIONAL REALITIES: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DR REX PATTERSON

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Northern Australia's strategic and economic potential has captured the imagination of many Australians since Federation. However, Australian public interest in the so-called 'Empty North' reached its highest point in the 1960s.¹ As political scientist Louise Overacker observed in 1968,

In the forefront of public discussion has been the question of development of the 'far north' – the vast area of northern Queensland and Western Australia, and the Northern Territory, where distances are great and population extremely small ... it involves considerations of defence, national prestige, and the welfare of the native Aborigines as well as economics.²

One Australian embodied the sense of national urgency surrounding Northern Australia in the 1960s more than anyone else: Dr Rex Patterson, the Commonwealth's first Minister for Northern Australia. As a public servant and as a politician, Patterson debated, developed and delivered a range of Northern Australia policies designed to increase the well-being of northern residents and enhance the prosperity of Australia as a whole. Despite his political prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, he has largely been relegated to a footnote in Australian political history. This brief essay is an attempt to create a fuller picture of Rex Patterson and his life and times, placing his political career in the context of his role as an important figure within the Australian Labor Party (ALP). It will be shown that Patterson's personal drive helped him make major contributions to northern development, but his more ambitious plans were frustrated by changing priorities and values within and outside the Labor party. The paper is also a celebration and commemoration of a great Voice for the North.

REX PATTERSON: THE EARLY YEARS

Rex Alan Patterson was born on 8 January 1927, the son of Ronald and Margaret (nee Walker) Patterson.³ He spent his childhood and adolescence on a family farm at Gooburrum, near Bundaberg. Better known at Bundaberg State High School for his sporting prowess than his academic ability,⁴ he nonetheless passed the Junior (1941) and Senior public exams (1943) during

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¹ For a discussion of the 'Empty North' attitude towards Northern Australia, see Russell McGregor, *Environment, Race, and Nationhood in Australia: Revisiting the Empty North*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2016.

² Louise Overacker, *Australian Parties in a Changing Society: 1945-67*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1968, p. 9.

³ Basic biographical information in this essay is derived from the following sources: 'CP Now Changes its Poll Tactics', *Canberra Times* (hereafter CT), 22 November 1966, p. 7; 'Vote 1 Patterson for Dawson', *Worker* (Brisbane), 14 February 1966, p. 2; Rex Patterson RAAF Service Records, A9301 2002 453239, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA); *Who's Who in Australia 1996*, Information Australia Group Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 1248-49. Some sources suggest that Patterson grew up on a dairy farm, others say he grew up on a cane farm. I have been unable to verify this detail.

⁴ See the comments of Patterson's schoolmate: Austen Whitaker, 'Looking Back on School in the Good Ol' Days', [Bundaberg] *NewsMail*, 25 January 2014, <http://www.news-mail.com.au/news/days-in-the-old-school-yard/2149836/>.

an era when many Queenslanders left school in the year they turned fourteen. After attending the Queensland Teachers' Training College in Brisbane (1942-43), Patterson began his initial career as a state school teacher, specialising in commercial subjects (book keeping, shorthand, etc.). His first teaching post was the Proserpine Rural School in 1944, and, after serving in the Royal Australian Air Force during the last year of WWII, Patterson began teaching at Mackay State High School.⁵ During his early Mackay years, he achieved local 'star' status by winning the 1946 North Queensland tennis championship, defeating Angus Smith (later a long-serving Townsville Mayor). Patterson's record as a talented young footballer, tennis player, athlete and cricketer in several regional, district and university competitions would later come in handy when, two decades on, Patterson needed to portray himself to voters as a 'man of the people'.⁶

In April 1947, Patterson was sent by the Department of Public Instruction to teach at Ipswich Technical College, but some months later he enrolled as a Bachelor of Commerce student at the University of Queensland.⁷ It is possible that his enrolment was at least partly funded by the Commonwealth, which was then providing financial assistance to ex-servicemen like Patterson to gain further education and training. Patterson never talked much in public about his University of Queensland days, although while he was there he continued to attract attention for his winning way with a tennis racket.⁸

By late 1949, Patterson had relocated to Canberra, taking up a position as a researcher at the Federal Bureau of Agricultural Economics. His research work involved taking field trips to the northern parts of Queensland and Western Australia, along with the Northern Territory. Patterson is likely to have been influenced in his growing interest in northern development through working with senior colleague, John Henry Kelly, whose enthusiasm for Northern Australia and its cattle industry was boundless.⁹

There were two big events in store for Patterson in the 1950s. Firstly, he married Eileen Nelson in 1954, and settled in the Canberra suburb of O'Connor. Their daughter, Jayne, was born in 1957.¹⁰ The second big occasion was when in 1958, Patterson won a Fulbright scholarship to the USA, where he ultimately completed a PhD in Agricultural Economics at the University of Illinois. Patterson's study for his PhD was related to his work at the Bureau of Agricultural Economics; his thesis made the case for constructing beef roads across the north. Patterson was proud of his academic research, which influenced the Commonwealth to finance beef roads in Northern Australia during the 1960s and 1970s, 'opening up the country not only for the cattle industry but also allowing more and more people to go into those areas'.¹¹

On his return to Australia in 1960, Rex became the assistant director of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. He was subsequently appointed the director of the Northern Division of the Department of National Development (1964-65) and continued to make trips to northern districts. He developed a reputation in the north as an engaging speaker on issues such as defence and primary industries.¹²

⁵ 'Holidays are Over: Back to School', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay) (hereafter *DM*), 2 February 1946, p. 2.

⁶ 'CP Now Changes its Poll Tactics', *CT*, 22 November 1966, p. 7;

⁷ 'Personal', *DM*, 12 April 1947, p. 2; *DM*, 11 September 1947, p. 3. I have been unable to trace the date of UQ enrolment. As Patterson was playing tennis for Brisbane in a Brisbane-Ipswich tournament by September 1947 (*Queensland Times*, 11 September 1947, p. 3), a 1947 enrolment date seems likely.

⁸ *Truth* (Brisbane), 18 April 1948, p. 12.

⁹ G.P. Walsh, 'Kelly, John Henry (1895-1983)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kelly-john-henry-12721/text22939>, published first in hardcopy 2007, accessed online 25 April 2016.

¹⁰ *CT*, 4 April 1957, p. 13; *Who's Who in Australia 1996*, p. 1248.

¹¹ Rex Patterson, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter *CPD*), 13 November 1973, p. 3236.

¹² Bruce Juddery, 'Farewell to Vision of Northern Region', *CT*, 18 February 1976, p. 15; Patrick T. White, *Townsville and Lavarack Barracks: The Early Years*, Bachelor of Social Science Honours thesis, James Cook University, 2007, p. 27.

So committed was Rex to Northern Australia in the 1960s that he rejected two lucrative job offers from the World Bank so that he could continue his northern mission.¹³ However, as Northern Division director, Patterson had limited powers. His Division collected information on northern resources and provided policy advice, but ultimately, the Coalition had limited interest in spending money in the north.¹⁴ A fervent believer in water conservation to combat drought and harness rainfall for agricultural purposes, Patterson was particularly disappointed that the Menzies Government seemed reluctant to financially support an expansion of the Ord River irrigation scheme in Western Australia's north.¹⁵ As a consequence, Patterson believed that he might be able to make more difference to the north in politics than in the public service. With this in mind, Patterson made contact with the ALP's Deputy Leader Gough Whitlam (Northern Territory MHR Jock Nelson acted as a go-between).¹⁶

PATTERSON'S DRAMATIC ENTRY ONTO THE POLITICAL STAGE

Patterson would have been attracted to the Labor Party, because under Arthur Calwell's leadership (1960-67), the development of the 'Empty North' was viewed by the ALP as a necessity for Australia's defence at a time of military and Cold War tensions with newly independent Asian nations, notably Indonesia. Labor aligned itself with the popular theory that building up the north's population would deter external invasion and provide additional economic opportunities for Australia. Furthermore, Whitlam had campaigned heavily in Queensland during the 1961 and 1963 federal elections, focussing on the Commonwealth's alleged neglect of northern towns such as Townsville.¹⁷

Whitlam was happy to encourage Patterson's political ambitions. By the mid 1960s, Patterson was well known in Canberra as a public servant and expert on sugar; thus his approach to the federal ALP would have been taken seriously. Gough Whitlam was keen to see tertiary educated men become more prominent in the ALP, and it is not surprising that he saw Patterson's potential. Labor speechwriter Graham Freudenberg recalled the party mood of the times:

The Labor Party could hardly believe its luck when the great local boy from Mackay expressed his willingness to run for Dawson but nobody except Whitlam believed him when he said he could win it.¹⁸

In August 1965, Patterson publicly signalled his intention to resign before the next federal election to become the ALP candidate for the seat of Dawson. As he later explained, 'My reason for standing for Parliament is that I firmly believe the north will never be developed for the benefit of Australians and their children unless more voices which genuinely support the north are heard in the National Parliament'.¹⁹ When the Menzies Government learned of Patterson's intention to stand as an ALP candidate, it swiftly transferred him to a specially created position within the Department of National Development and prevented him from obtaining further access to cabinet

¹³ *CT*, 30 September 1965, p. 3.

¹⁴ See Colin A. Hughes, 'The Dawson By-Election, 1966', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1966, pp. 12-16. I have drawn upon this article for my discussion of the Dawson by-election.

¹⁵ Rex Patterson, *CPD*, 15 March 1966, p. 250; Jonathan Gaul, 'Job Switch for Dr Patterson', *CT*, 23 September 1965, p. 1.

¹⁶ 'The Lone Ranger', *Nation*, 29 May 1971, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷ See Lyndon Megarrity, 'Northern Visions: The Commonwealth and the North since 1945', *Northern Territory Historical Studies*, No. 27, 2016, pp. 26-36.

¹⁸ Graham Freudenberg to Lyndon Megarrity, Letter dated 21 April 2011, letter in possession of author. Accessing expertise and information from people like Patterson was also valued by Whitlam in his drive to create better ALP policies in the 1960s. See Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2008, chapter 11.

¹⁹ Rex Patterson, Australian Labor Party: Dawson by-election – campaign opening address, Theatre Royal, Mackay, 7 February 1966, copy held at the National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA).

papers and policy documents. 'Give [Patterson] a room and give him some books to read', Menzies ordered. The Prime Minister later gave Patterson free publicity by attacking him in parliament for appealing against the transfer.²⁰

Patterson's political career began more swiftly than anticipated because of the sudden death of the incumbent Country Party MHR for Dawson, George Shaw, on 9 January 1966. Consequently, a by-election for the seat was to be held on 26 February. The main population centre of Dawson was the northern sugar town of Mackay but the seat encompassed several hundred kilometres of rural and semi-rural land, as well as several other townships such as Proserpine and Sarina. As such it was considered a natural Country Party electorate, but Patterson had some advantages. He had an understanding of life on the land, having been brought up on a farm near Bundaberg; he had taught as a school teacher in Mackay and Proserpine; and as a young man he had been an accomplished cricketer and tennis player.

The Brisbane *Worker* used such examples of Patterson's 'down-to-earth' experiences to quash any anti-intellectual doubts among its working-class readers about the candidate's academic and public service background:

Patterson ... is as familiar with the business end of a cane knife as he is with the principles of agricultural economics ... Dr Patterson is just not another 'backroom boffin', with a text book in one hand, and a slide rule in the other.²¹

Concentrating on the issue of northern development, Patterson, with Whitlam's support, won a previously impenetrable Country Party seat with a swing of 12 per cent. It also brought renewed media attention to Gough Whitlam because he had skilfully used the Dawson campaign and the popular Northern Australia theme to highlight his leadership qualities to the general community. As journalist Jack Lunn pointed out, 'Mr. Whitlam's [northern development] plan becomes of great importance to Australia as present political developments could shortly make him Labor parliamentary leader.'²²

Further, Patterson's victory was instrumental in gaining crucial support from the Queensland branch of the ALP for Whitlam's internal struggles against the Labor hierarchy and then ALP leader Arthur Calwell. Because the Queensland delegates on Labor's federal executive switched their votes, Whitlam narrowly escaped expulsion from the Labor party on 3 March 1966 for 'gross disloyalty'. Several members of the federal executive wanted to expel Whitlam because he publicly criticised their decision to bind ALP parliamentarians to opposing state aid to non-government schools. Patterson played a small but key role in preventing Whitlam's political oblivion. On a visit to Allan Fraser (MHR Eden Monaro), Patterson became alarmed when Fraser received a phone call from an exultant Calwell crowing that the federal executive had the 'numbers to expel the big bastard'. Having been made aware of Calwell's comments, Patterson informed Queensland State Secretary Tom Burns that Whitlam was in political danger. Burns phoned the Queensland delegates and convinced them to change their votes and prevent Whitlam's expulsion.²³

YEARS IN OPPOSITION 1966-1972

²⁰ Sir David Fairbairn, interviewed 24 March 1976 by Mel Pratt, ORAL TRC 121/74, NLA; 'Sir Robert Defends Patterson Transfer', *CT*, 24 September 1965, p. 3.

²¹ Editorial, *Worker*, 14 February 1966, p. 2.

²² Jack Lunn, 'Growth in North ... the Whitlam Way', *Courier-Mail* (hereafter *CM*), 15 February 1966, p. 8. See also See Lyndon Megarrity, "'Necessary and Urgent'?", *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 97, Part 2, 2011, p. 148.

²³ Burns' method of persuasion was to appeal to their self-interest. If they voted for the expulsion, they would be 'removed from the Executive'. Brian Costar, 'Political Leadership and Queensland Nationalism', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2006, p. 71.

Soon after his election as Member for Dawson in 1966, Patterson left his home in Canberra to take up residence in Mackay, the chief city in his electorate:

Patterson's Mackay office is plastered with panoramic pictures of northern development – the brigalow scheme, the Ord project, northern mining enterprises.²⁴

By all accounts, Rex enjoyed being a local MP and developing favourable links with all sectors of his large constituency. According to one writer in 1971, if you had been in the Dawson electorate for 'thirty days, Rex Patterson will have called on you.'²⁵ Patterson's personal and family links with the Dawson area ran deep, with some of his ancestors having settled in the area during the nineteenth century. He commanded local attention because of his 'political legend' status following the Dawson by-election of 1966, as well as the pleasant irony of his being the nephew of Country Party Primary Industry Minister Charles Adermann. Patterson also knew the value of a good political stunt: he once spent 24 hours up a pole in 'the middle of Mackay, to raise money for homes and a hospital for the aged.'²⁶ Intentionally or otherwise, Patterson created an image of himself as a relatively uncomplicated, straightforward 'knockabout bloke' from the bush.²⁷ This can be seen in the story of Whitlam and Patterson's campaign encounter with a retired Childers canecutter. The blue-singleted retiree invited the pair for a yarn and a Bundaberg rum with milk:

'A little early for me,' said Whitlam. It was nine o'clock [AM]. Patterson handed Whitlam his glass, raised his own and downed it, saying to Whitlam, who had no option but to follow: 'When in Rome [do as the Romans do]'.²⁸

Such colourful stories notwithstanding, Patterson was more than just a 'knockabout bloke': he was a deeply ambitious ALP politician. When Gough Whitlam became leader of the federal Labor party in February 1967, Patterson stood unsuccessfully for the deputy leadership. He was nevertheless elected as a member of the ALP Federal Executive (1967-1972) after less than a year in parliament, a reflection of his links to Whitlam and his dramatic victory in Dawson.²⁹ Patterson also became prominent as the ALP opposition's chief spokesman on rural affairs and Northern Australia.

Despite his debt to Whitlam, Patterson was prepared to be the ALP leader's 'candid friend', chiding Whitlam for not consulting more widely within the party regarding his attempts to reform the administrative processes of the Labor Party.³⁰ If Whitlam was unhappy with Patterson over this criticism, it does not seem to have created lasting tensions. Indeed, Patterson's years in Opposition saw him collaborate effectively with Whitlam over Northern Australia policy.

²⁴ Peter Bowers, 'Patterson is King', *Sydney Morning Herald* (hereafter *SMH*), 23 November 1966, p. 8.

²⁵ 'The Lone Ranger', p. 13.

²⁶ He arranged to have a telephone installed to keep in touch with the media and the ALP. 'Labor Man up a Pole', *CT*, 19 June 1971, p. 3; Clem Lloyd Interviewed [1975-1976] by Mel Pratt for the Mel Pratt Collection, ORAL TRC 121/64 (transcript), NLA. For Patterson and the electorate, see also *CT*, 30 September 1965, p. 3; 'CP Now Changes its Poll Tactics', *CT*, 22 November 1966. p. 7.

²⁷ Tim Mulherin, former Labor MP for Mackay, described Patterson as a 'knockabout bloke'. He told the story of Patterson picking up a well-dressed Paul Keating from the Mackay airport in his Ford utility vehicle, throwing Keating's luggage in the back of the ute where one of Patterson's dogs was in residence. Loris Wall, 'A Lasting Impression', *DM*, 24 April 2016, <http://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/a-lasting-impression/3005690/>, viewed online 30 April 2016.

²⁸ John Stubbs, *Hayden*, William Heinemann Australia, Port Melbourne, 1989, p. 62

²⁹ Jonathan Gaul, 'Anatomy of the Labor Power Struggle', *CT*, 14 February 1967, p. 2; 'A.L.P. Executive Seat for Patterson', *SMH*, 9 February 1967, p. 8.

³⁰ Jonathan Gaul, 'Patterson Criticises Whitlam on Tactics', *CT*, 16 May 1968, p. 1. Patterson's comments were made in the context of Whitlam's April 1968 resignation and re-election by the caucus to the ALP leadership. The resignation was a calculated gamble, partly designed to consolidate his authority within the party and the federal executive after a series of internal obstructions. See Graham Freudenberg, *A Certain Grandeur: Gough Whitlam's Life in Politics* (1977), Viking, Camberwell, 2009 (revised), chapter 8.

Patterson and Whitlam's northern development policies were generally based on ideas and proposals that had long been debated by a variety of groups and individuals, including Whitlam himself, Patterson, local government councillors, journalists, academics, and even the Snowy Mountains Authority Commissioner Sir William Hudson:

[Hudson] has hinted that Snowy experts should be used in large water resources projects in North Queensland and other parts of North Australia ... He also says that large irrigation schemes appear feasible in the Herbert, the Burdekin, and Fitzroy basins of northern Queensland.³¹

Patterson and Whitlam's northern development policies were united under three themes. First, they argued that Northern Australia's minerals, beef production and other primary commodities held the key to Australia's future economic prosperity and destiny:

The increased export earnings which the north can provide are necessary to raise the productive capacity of the South ... what happens in the Fitzroy Basin in Central Queensland or on the Fitzroy in the Southern Kimberleys is important to the people who live in Fitzroy, Melbourne.³²

This sense of Northern Australia as an integral part of the national interest justified federal investment in ambitious schemes like the ALP's proposed retention of the Snowy Mountains Authority to develop northern water resources. Patterson was especially keen on this idea. The Coalition government had decided to dismantle the Snowy Mountains Authority once its major task, the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme (southern NSW/northern Victoria), was completed. Why not use the engineering skills and talents developed at the Snowy for water projects in Northern Australia?³³

The second major northern theme explored by Whitlam and Patterson was the notion that the Commonwealth had a key role to play in a bold national infrastructure program of dam-building, road construction and power generation. Influenced by Patterson, Whitlam pledged in 1969 that he would create a Department of Northern Development, which would not only deal with economic development but would also be responsible for nature conservation in the region, including areas like the Great Barrier Reef.³⁴

The third northern political theme fleshed out by Patterson and Whitlam was the argument that since Labor lost power in 1949, the Liberal-Country Party Coalition Government in Canberra had neglected the north in essential areas such as transport. Whitlam asserted that only the ALP had the will and the desire to rectify the situation. Patterson, Whitlam, and deputy opposition leader Lance Barnard went on a tour of North Queensland towns such as Mt Isa, Weipa and Karumba in April 1967 where this message of northern neglect was rammed home:

Southerners might grumble about telephone services, but when Gough Whitlam's staff tried to contact him at Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria during his current northern tour they were told the telephone line had been out for three months.³⁵

As the 1969 election approached, Patterson was at the peak of his popularity with his Labor colleagues, and Whitlam publicly declared that in a future ALP government, Patterson would be 'a senior member of the Labor Cabinet':

³¹ 'North Queensland Could be a New "Snowy"', *CM*, 4 January 1966, p. 3.

³² E.G. Whitlam, *Opening Address: 1967 Senate Election* [speech at Blacktown Civic Centre, 13 November 1967], copy held at Mitchell Library.

³³ See Patterson's comments in 'Patterson Victory Personal Triumph', *CT*, 28 February 1966, p. 1; Rex Patterson, *CPD*, 15 March 1966, p. 250.

³⁴ Gough Whitlam, Australian Labor Party Policy Speech, Sydney Town Hall, 1 October 1969 (transcript at Mitchell Library).

³⁵ 'Where Time Stands Still', *Sun-Herald*, 30 April 1967, clipping in M156 35, NAA.

Such is Dr. Patterson's talent and dedication, and such is my reliance on him, that he will virtually name his own position in any Cabinet I lead.³⁶

Unfortunately for Patterson, Whitlam did not become Prime Minister in 1969. While he continued to play a public role as the federal ALP's rural spokesman, Patterson in the early 1970s found that his rural and northern policy ideas were coming under challenge from within the party. Urban MPs attacked Patterson's emphasis on subsidies and protectionism for primary industries, and recommended caution and 'cost/benefit' analysis before ploughing ahead with irrigation schemes. Future Whitlam Minister Bill Hayden was an especially vociferous critic of Patterson's rural worldview, which was not, in essence, all that different to that of the Country Party.³⁷

Given the fact that the federal ALP was now dominated by MPs from urban areas with little knowledge and less interest in agriculture, it is not surprising that Patterson hit a roadblock in his political ambitions. Furthermore, having been fast-tracked into the seat of Dawson without a history of Labor activism, and favoured chiefly by Whitlam, Patterson lacked the wider support base he needed within the Labor caucus to further advance his personal goals.³⁸

REX AND CHINA

Ironically, Rex Patterson's membership of Labor's 1971 delegation to China might have turned his political fortunes around – had Patterson been the leader of the China delegation, as originally planned. During 1970 and 1971, the Coalition Government's economic and political relationship with the Chinese mainland came under fire from the Labor party, and Patterson as rural spokesman led the attack. After a decade of lucrative wheat sales to China, the Australian Wheat Board found it could not renew its contracts. Ostensibly to find out why, but mainly to embarrass the Australian Government, the ALP Federal Executive agreed in April 1971 to seek 'an invitation' from the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, 'for an ALP delegation to visit China.'³⁹ The proposed delegation was to be led by Rex Patterson, and the press coverage shows him in 'Whitlamesque' mode, leading the Government from the Opposition:

Dr Rex Patterson said in Brisbane tonight that his direct aim was not to sell wheat to China. He merely hoped his coming trip might make it easier for Australia to sell China her wheat ... He hoped to discuss Australian steel ... coarse grains and livestock products, while in China. "In the next decade China and Japan could become our two most important customers in the world", he said.⁴⁰

When, after several weeks, the Chinese Premier agreed to issue the invitation, Whitlam decided that he would lead the delegation. He may have always intended this, as the sudden suspension of wheat sales was partly due to Australia's refusal to formally recognise Communist China: the Labor leader's belief in meaningful engagement with Asia would probably have made leading the delegation difficult to resist. Whitlam's China visit paved the way for the Whitlam Government's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1972.⁴¹ While given a place in the resulting six-man delegation, Patterson was understandably disappointed. His frustration was expressed by attacking the inclusion within the delegation of Labor figures from outside federal parliament, whom he labelled as 'machine men'.⁴²

³⁶ Statement by E.G. Whitlam, Canberra A.C.T., 28 September 1969, in Grassby and Patterson 28.9.69, M170 2001 69/1983, NAA.

³⁷ 'ALP Building a House on Rock', *CT*, 29 June 1971, p. 2; 'Criticism of ALP Rural Policy Answered', *CT*, 24 June 1971, p. 8; Stubbs, *Hayden*, p. 100.

³⁸ K.H. Kennedy, *Mackay Revisited*, Mackay City Council, Mackay, 2002, pp. 364-65

³⁹ Stephen FitzGerald, *The Coup that Laid the Fear of China: Gough Whitlam in Beijing, 1971*, Whitlam Institute, Sydney, 2012, p. 6.

⁴⁰ 'Patterson: Aim not to Sell', *CT*, 16 April 1971, p. 8.

⁴¹ See Billy Griffiths, *The China Breakthrough: Whitlam in the Middle Kingdom, 1971*, Monash University Publishing, Clayton, 2012.

⁴² FitzGerald, *The Coup*, p. 7.

However, ruffled feathers aside, Rex Patterson was able to play a constructive role in the delegation of July 1971. He initiated talks in China that, in 1973, ultimately resulted in the Chinese Government agreeing to purchase around 300,000 tons of sugar per annum for 3-5 years.⁴³ On his return to Australia, Patterson praised Whitlam's statesmanship and eloquently made the economic case for recognition of China:

Because of the Australian Government's open hostility to China the Australian people and the Australian economy have suffered ... The wheat farmers and wool growers of this nation do not owe this [the Coalition] Government any thanks for its ostrich-like approach to the realities of China. When it comes to the next election this Government will see very quickly what the wheat farmers and wool growers think of its foreign policy on China.⁴⁴

THE WHITLAM YEARS 1972-1975

Had Patterson gone to China as the leader of the 1971 delegation, his status within and outside the ALP would probably have been lifted to a high level. A future Whitlam Government would probably have felt obliged to give Rex the portfolio of Primary Industry: this position would have enabled him to pursue his northern dreams with some degree of authority. However, when Whitlam came into office, he chose to give Primary Industry to Ken Wriedt, who had limited knowledge of rural matters and 'could not tell the difference between a Corriedale and a Merino'.⁴⁵ Wriedt became a respected Minister, but it must have been a difficult moment for Patterson, identified as Labor's rural spokesman for some five years. Judging from Whitlam's later actions on farming issues, Whitlam probably felt that Patterson's traditional rural mindset no longer fitted with Labor's political direction.

Instead of Primary Industry, Rex Patterson was appointed Minister for Northern Development (which included responsibility for sugar). Subsequently, in October 1973, Patterson was given the Northern Territory portfolio as well. As Minister for the Northern Territory, Patterson notably assisted with the Commonwealth's emergency response to Cyclone Tracy and the reconstruction of Darwin which followed. In June 1975, Patterson's two portfolios were amalgamated to form the Department of Northern Australia: very shortly before the Labor Government was dismissed from office, Whitlam transferred Patterson to Agriculture and put a young Paul Keating in his place.⁴⁶

Patterson found his time as Minister for Northern Development to be a frustrating experience. One of his key problems was that there was a sense of uncertainty about the Department of Northern Development's role and jurisdiction. At the time of its establishment, the party leaders declared that Patterson's Department was 'responsible for all matters concerned with the specialised development and utilisation of the natural resources of land, water and minerals' north of 26° latitude.⁴⁷ As Northern Development Minister, Patterson therefore expected to be given substantial Government authority for development in northern areas. He was especially eager to gain primary responsibility for northern minerals, as 'There can be no doubt that the main determinant of growth in northern Australia will be investment in mining for export.' Patterson was nevertheless prepared

⁴³ 'Prime Minister's Press Conference, Peking, China, 4 December 1973', held at the Whitlam Institute (University of Western Sydney) (hereafter WI).

⁴⁴ Rex Patterson, *CPD*, 19 August 1971, p. 327.

⁴⁵ Freudenberg, *A Certain Grandeur*, p. 260. Freudenberg states (p. 260) that in ruling out Patterson for the position, it was because Whitlam believed that 'a Minister in the House of Representatives representing a marginal seat would be too vulnerable to industry lobbying and parochial pressures.'

⁴⁶ Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972-1975*, Viking, Ringwood, 1985, p. 752. A full discussion of Patterson's role as Northern Territory Minister is not attempted here. Describing Patterson's specific contribution to the Commonwealth's NT policies and administration (as opposed to the collective contribution by the Whitlam Government) cannot be achieved without large-scale archival research. See Alistair Heatley, *Almost Australians: The Politics of Northern Territory Self-Government*, Australian National University, Darwin, 1990, chapter 2.

⁴⁷ Rex Patterson, 'The Role of the Department of Northern Development', 22 February 1973, Cabinet Submission No. 151 (Withdrawn), A5915 151, NAA.

to give responsibility for Northern Australia's uranium, natural gas and petroleum to Minerals and Energy Minister, Rex Connor, possibly in deference to the latter's personal interests.⁴⁸ However, by the time Patterson had made an abortive cabinet submission in early 1973 on the roles and functions of the Department of Northern Development, it was becoming clear that Patterson's power to influence the direction of Government policy on northern matters would be inhibited by the formidable Connor.

On 31 January 1973, Connor announced that the Cabinet had decided to impose price controls on Australian mineral exports. As the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* explained, 'The Federal Government in effect will set a minimum price and the maximum tonnage for minerals to be exported.'⁴⁹ Connor was partially motivated to introduce export controls by his conviction that Queensland's cheaper coal prices gave it an unfair advantage over New South Wales coal. Patterson went public with his dissent:

The facts are that if northern coal producers had demanded the relatively high U.S. coal prices, or the average world price ... it is likely that the central and north Queensland coalfields would not have been developed at all.⁵⁰

The Prime Minister and many members of the Cabinet were in no mood to tolerate Patterson's public criticisms of an announced Government decision. Whitlam successfully moved a motion at the ALP's federal executive meeting (5 February) congratulating 'Federal cabinet on the ... steps it has taken to carry out the party's programme with respect to ownership, control and development of Australia's natural resources.'⁵¹ This motion received unanimous support, and appears to have been a deliberate attempt to demonstrate that the Northern Development Minister did not have strong internal support for his views. Several 'off the record' comments by anonymous Labor figures criticising Patterson's 'breach of Cabinet solidarity' were reported in the press.⁵² This also served to underline the limited political authority of the Northern Development Minister compared to the popular Minister for Minerals and Energy.

Patterson's powers as a Minister for Northern Development were limited, as other Ministers with national responsibilities such as transport, mines and primary industry were not prepared to relinquish any of their power to a regionally-focussed Minister. The only major sector over which Patterson had clear jurisdiction was sugar. Patterson subsequently became something of a rural 'outsider' within the Whitlam Government. The Prime Minister now paid more attention to the ideas of Rex Connor, who was fixated with securing greater Australian ownership of mining projects. Connor's attempts to 'buy back the farm' ultimately led to a scandal over a grandiose but unsuccessful attempt at loan-raising on a massive scale, which would eventually help destroy the government.⁵³

Whitlam's decision not to appoint Patterson as his Minister for Primary Industry (later retitled Agriculture) until October 1975 must also account for Patterson's inability to shape rural policy in favour of his northern objectives. He reacted strongly against the Prime Minister's lack of political understanding of rural matters, shown in Whitlam's drastic decisions to cut special assistance schemes which had long been taken for granted in the bush. These budget savings, including petrol subsidies to country areas and the superphosphate bounty, helped contribute to a disastrous

⁴⁸ Patterson, 'Role of the Department of Northern Development'.

⁴⁹ 'QLD May Put Coal Law to High Court: Exports Control', *CM*, 1 February 1973, p. 1.

⁵⁰ 'Patterson Stands by Sales of Cheap Coal', *Australian*, 3 February 1973, p. 1.

⁵¹ 'Labor Closes Ranks Over Mineral Policy', *Australian*, 6 February 1973, p. 1.

⁵² 'Labor Closes Ranks', p. 1. See also Chris Anderson, 'Fed Ministers Snub Colleague', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 4 February 1973, p. 25; Brian Johns, 'Cabinet Endorses Patterson Censure', *SMH*, 7 February 1973, p. 3; 'Whitlam May Axe Patterson', *Melbourne Observer*, 4 February 1973, p. 3.

⁵³ 'Minerals Gag on Patterson', *CM*, 7 February 1973, p. 10; Max Griffiths, *Of Mines & Men: Australia's 20th Century Mining Miracle 1945-1985*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 1998, pp. 104-08.

result for Labor in the 1974 Queensland state election.⁵⁴ The decision to abolish the subsidy on superphosphate fertilizer did not sit well with Patterson's ideas on developing Northern Australia's pastoral industry:

Improved pastures such as Townsville Stylo have got to have phosphate ... It [the Northern Territory] is a development area and it does still need financial incentives.⁵⁵

With some justification, Patterson felt that Whitlam had lost touch with Queensland and the north, which had played such a part in the formation of Whitlam's public profile. Whitlam by the end of 1974 was better known in Queensland for his personal slanging match with Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen than for his northern policies. Much to Whitlam's vocal annoyance, the Queensland Premier proved unwilling to co-operate with Federal Labor's centralist reform program.⁵⁶ Strongly anti-Labor and focussed on state rights, Bjelke-Petersen refused to countenance Whitlam's proposal to make Townsville a regional growth centre, with its implication of Commonwealth involvement in planning and developing new residential estates.⁵⁷ The Queensland Government also successfully encouraged the perception of a neglectful Canberra during the Whitlam era.

Patterson himself was a 'true believer' in much of the Whitlam 'quality of life' social reform agenda, but by 1974 he was concerned that Whitlam was no longer listening to the concerns of Northern Australia and its primary industries:

Mr. Whitlam is the best national leader in Australia, and I have the highest respect for his ability, capacity and dedication for hard work. But his message ... is not getting to the people now ... The great benefits of the Federal Labor Government's achievements in education, health and social services have been completely lost because of the large number of pin-pricking policies which have been resented by Queensland and the north in general ... Queensland is fiercely parochial – a feeling which intensifies the further north one goes. Melbourne is closer to Brisbane than Cairns to [Brisbane] ... The pouring of millions of dollars into heavily-subsidised Sydney and Melbourne ... make[s] no impression in the north ... such actions only intensify the feeling of neglect when they are skilfully handled by anti-Labor forces.⁵⁸

Ironically, by December 1975, Patterson and Whitlam could look back on a number of achievements in northern development. Patterson secured bilateral agreements with countries such as Japan, China and Singapore to purchase Australian sugar, benefiting North Queensland farmers. The Whitlam Government also provided several millions of dollars in grants and loans to facilitate the building of Queensland water projects, including the Kinchant Dam at Mirani, near Mackay; Ross River Dam, catering for the water needs of Townsville residents; and Julius Dam, assisting with the water supply of Mount Isa. Further, the Whitlam Government continued the former Coalition Government's financial support for beef roads in Queensland and Western Australia.⁵⁹

However, the northern outcomes were modest in comparison to the ALP's oft-repeated vision of a vast new Snowy Mountains scheme to develop the north. The relatively low-scale achievements also did not match the sense of urgency and commitment engendered in Whitlam's 1972 policy speech:

⁵⁴ Ross McMullin, *The Light on the Hill: The Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991, p. 350.

⁵⁵ Errol Simper, 'New Minister Pleases Northern Territorians', *CT*, 24 April 1974, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Peter Coaldrake, *Working the System: Government in Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989, pp. 91-92.

⁵⁷ Growth Centres in Queensland: statement by Prime Minister, Townsville, 5 April 1975, held at WI.

⁵⁸ 'Minister says P.M. Out of Touch', *CM*, 10 December 1974, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Whitlam, *Whitlam Government*, pp. 235-37; Speech by the Hon. E.G. Whitlam ... to the Labor-in-Politics Convention, Brisbane, 19 January 1977, held at WI; Denise Conroy, 'Federal-State Relations', in Allan Patience (ed.), *The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership 1968-1983: Issues in Public Policy*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1985, p. 255.

It is in the North that the great sugar and cattle industries have been established and it is in the North that Australians face the greatest challenge to retain the ownership of the nation's resources.⁶⁰

'Northern Development', the *Courier-Mail* cynically claimed, 'was a useful campaign issue for Labor in 1972, but it counted for little once Labor was in power.'⁶¹ Indeed, the low public profile of the Northern Development portfolio compared to Immigration, Education and many others left the door open for northern Opposition members such as Duke Bonnett (MHR Herbert) and Robert Katter senior (MHR Kennedy) to turn the tables on the ALP's earlier criticisms of the former Liberal-Country Party Government, using much the same theme of northern neglect:

I do not think the Prime Minister can deny that this Government is southern oriented and that it will not spend money in the north when it can be used to greater political advantage in the south.⁶²

The ALP's rhetoric of urgency and national destiny in regard to northern development became a distant memory in office. One reason for this was that circumstances had changed. The political momentum for creating an authority to oversee large-scale water resources projects in the north began to decline when the Holt Government made the decision to dismantle the Snowy Mountains Authority upon completion of the scheme. As the Authority was being phased out, the Coalition established the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation, a much smaller organisation which did consulting work in both Australia and overseas.⁶³

Even if Labor had wanted to pursue a spectacular, Snowy Mountains-type scheme in Northern Australia, there were a number of giant hurdles in the way. For example, strong doubts were emerging about the north's capacity to become a paradise for irrigators. Passionately supported by Patterson, the Ord River scheme in the north-west Australia was less than successful. Completed in 1972 with the federal support of the Liberal-Country Party Government, the Ord River scheme proved to be relatively unprofitable: Ord River farmers experimented with a variety of crops, including cotton and sorghum, but the crops were frequently decimated by natural pests.⁶⁴

Further, it was difficult to maintain the sense of urgency to develop Northern Australia as economic and diplomatic relations between Australia and Asian countries became closer under Whitlam. The gradual dismantling of the White Australia policy in the 1960s and early 1970s meant that fear of northern invasion was no longer acceptable as a means of drawing attention to the north, but nothing as powerful took its place as the *raison d'être* of northern development. The national media, so fascinated by Patterson and Northern Australia in 1966, had relegated northern development to a second order issue by the time that Whitlam had come to power.

REX AFTER POLITICS

Patterson was defeated in the Dawson electorate in December 1975. Encouraged by Whitlam, Patterson considered running again as a Labor candidate in 1977, but on medical advice decided against it.⁶⁵ Based in his adopted home of Mackay, he subsequently settled into a new career as a financial and economic consultant, advising several international corporations on agricultural matters between 1976 and 2008. Patterson developed personal interests in the sugar and cattle

⁶⁰ Whitlam, Australian Labor Party Policy Speech 1972, p. 21, held at WI.

⁶¹ Editorial, 'The North', *CM*, 20 December 1975, p. 1.

⁶² Robert 'Duke' Bonnett, *CPD*, 29 October 1974, p. 2973. See also Robert Katter sr, *CPD*, 11 May 1975, p. 1783.

⁶³ Bob Brown, *Governing Australia: A Century of Politics, Policies and People Volume 2 1950-1975*, R.J. Brown, Nelson Bay, 2007, p. 242; Fairbairn, interviewed by Mel Pratt, NLA.

⁶⁴ G.C. Bolton, *Land of Vision and Mirage*, UWA Press, Perth, 2008, p. 160.

⁶⁵ 'Not to Stand', *CT*, 2 November 1977, p. 8. See Whitlam's comments: 'Rex Patterson, *who will return to Canberra next elections as the member for Dawson*, made long-term agreements for Queensland sugar' [author's italics]. Speech by the Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Q.C., M.P., Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party to the Labor-in-Politics Convention, Brisbane, 19 January 1977, held at WI.

industries, and largely avoided the limelight. A patron of the Mackay Rugby League club for many years, Patterson was also passionately involved with a number of local causes including animal welfare.⁶⁶ He remained somewhat ambivalent about his time in Labor politics:

Gough was the best Opposition Leader in Australian history. He was in touch with all areas of the nation. When he became PM he didn't keep in touch. The priority given to the cities was like a red rag to a bull in the bush.⁶⁷

However, he was nostalgic enough for the Whitlam days to attend a Sydney reunion of Whitlam's second ministry in 1992.⁶⁸ Dr Rex Patterson died on 6 April 2016, survived by his daughter Jayne.⁶⁹

REFLECTIONS

Dr Rex Patterson contributed to the north both materially and non-materially. Among other things, he successfully negotiated sugar deals to benefit North Queensland canefarmers, assisted the cattle industry with beef roads and helped to rebuild Darwin after Cyclone Tracy. He was, however, unable to accelerate the development of Northern Australia as much as he hoped. His ambitions were stifled partly because his status and authority declined within the ALP: he lacked sufficient allies within the party, Whitlam's attentions moved away from northern development, and Patterson's rural and mining ideas received a cold reception from his mostly urban Labor colleagues. Yet Patterson stands out in the Whitlam period as an outspoken champion for the rural north, measured but firm in his views. Australian and state parliaments continue to need people like Dr Rex Patterson, who will fight for regional concerns to be heard and acted upon by the city-based MPs that dominate Australian political culture.⁷⁰

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⁶⁶ Loris Wall, 'Obituary: Changing Political Landscape', *DM*, 23 April 2016, <http://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/changing-political-landscape/3005691/>, viewed online 29 April 2016. See also Tony Stephens, 'Years On, Gough's Men Look Back on their Summer Storm', *SMH*, 19 December 1987, p. 1; *Who's Who in Australia 2011*, Crown Content, North Melbourne, 2011, pp. 1679-80.

⁶⁷ Stephens, 'Years On', p. 1.

⁶⁸ Errol Simper, 'The Ambiguity of Whitlam', *Australian*, 27 October 2014, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/opinion/errol-simper/the-ambiguity-of-whitlam/news-story/d8a5f8b7a6f46916b1740331449018fd>, viewed online 29 April 2016.

⁶⁹ Death Notice, 'Patterson: Rex', *DM*, 13 April 2016, p. 35. His wife Eileen had passed on some years previously.

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