



Governance on Norfolk Island: Economic, Social and Environmental Challenges

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This brief written submission is a follow-up to my meeting with the Joint Standing Committee on 14 May 2003. As noted in the conclusion to my study of the relationship between the Commonwealth of Australia and Norfolk Island (O'Collins 2002:143-152) current debates about the administration and governance of Norfolk Island need to take into account the historical context of this relationship. At the same time, it is also clear that this relationship is not frozen in time and that periodic reviews of economic capacity and administrative responsibilities are necessary. It is also clear that both Australia and Norfolk Island interests need to be considered in any such reviews.

1. Improving financial and administrative capacities

- 1.1 In 1997, the Commonwealth Grants Commission Report on Norfolk Island concluded (1997:218), that the Norfolk Island Government had the financial capacity to meet its obligations, but that revenue raising was often deficient, and that administrative capacity needed improvement. While many on Norfolk Island agreed with these findings, suggestions as to ways to improve financial and administrative capabilities were more problematic. The Island's isolation, small population, and environmental fragility have often increased fears of it being at the mercy of a large distant authority, with little or no understanding of the limited nature of its overall economy. Additional problems arise when claims and counter-claims are fired off at a distance. This makes it even harder to create a positive atmosphere, and maximise opportunities to work through and modify recommendations, so that agreement can be reached on mutually acceptable courses of action.
- 1.2 Any suggestions regarding changes to revenue raising, voting systems and general administrative 'efficiency' need to be made within the context of Norfolk Island's attraction as a tourist destination. There are no magnificent beaches, the coastline is difficult for visiting holiday cruise ships and private yachts, and, while it is also off major airline routes, it cannot really be promoted as a destination for intrepid adventurers. Nonetheless, the earlier history of penal settlements before 1856, the history of the Bounty mutineers and the Pitcairners who finally settled the Island, the whaling industry, shipwrecks and

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other historical events are important attractions and some of its off-shore islands are of great scientific and environmental interest.

- 1.3 Among interesting historical anomalies are the 'Illinois' system of preferential voting and the fact that, although Norfolk Island adopted an American-style Thanksgiving Day, this is celebrated on a Wednesday in November. Somewhat paradoxically, what also attracts many tourists to Norfolk Island is the fact that it has a rather quaint, slow and unpredictable life style and that there are no spectacularly efficient high powered resorts. It is important, therefore, to ensure that economic and administrative reforms do not smooth out these differences as this may well be counter-productive in attracting tourists.

2. Meeting both Australian and Norfolk Island concerns

- 2.1 Australia has particular interests in ensuring that Norfolk Island does not present an undue economic burden or security risk. In addition to financial subsidies, immigration, quarantine, the protection of historical sites with strong Australian connections, and environmental controls related to marine life in the seas around Norfolk Island are all of mutual interest. Problems related to health and education services and employment opportunities are other matters of concern.
- 2.2 It is in Australia's best interests that access by Norfolk Island residents or visitors to mainland Australia is in accordance with Commonwealth requirements. However, concerns has been expressed by islanders that reducing permanent residency requirements on Norfolk Island to those on the mainland will have adverse consequences for the environment and for cultural identity and cohesion. Other environmentally fragile islands (Lord Howe Island is one example) have set optimum levels for accommodating permanent and temporary residents and visitors. These requirements need to take into account the increased environmental, service and administrative pressures which may result from relaxing land use and population limitations.
- 2.3 Although much is sometimes made of the fact that Norfolk Island residents do not pay personal tax, a number of additional indirect taxes and costs also need to be considered. Medicare benefits do not apply, and access to higher education and training involve additional costs, even where some Commonwealth benefits are available. Any move to change the taxation base would also need to take into account the overall cost of providing all the services available to mainland Australians. Other social concerns relate to limited employment choices and opportunities for younger residents which may, at least partially, be related to a reported increase in vandalism and petty crime, even if this is still less than in most areas of mainland Australia.

- 2.4 A major environmental problem is the continuing lack of an efficient and effective waste-disposal system. In late 2001, when visiting Norfolk Island, I observed truck loads of garbage being tipped directly off the cliff face into the ocean. For a number of years, proposals have been made to develop a waste disposal system which will prevent the continuing serious pollution of the ocean and its consequent damage to marine life. Both Australian and Norfolk Island interests would be served if this situation were addressed, both with regard to alternative waste disposal provisions and to environmental regulation and supervision.

3. Final thoughts: Processes and personalities

- 3.1 As noted earlier, in all attempts to review the relationship between Norfolk Island and the Commonwealth, distance and communication problems almost inevitably play a part in creating a confrontational and adversarial atmosphere. Criticisms and rebuttals are often made without looking at the total picture – both in terms of the assistance which Australia provides to Norfolk Island, and the economic developments in the tourist industry which have made self-sufficiency a far more achievable goal.
- 3.2 While there are many areas where further progress is needed, I do find myself in sympathy with those Islanders who feel that their efforts have not been recognised and fear a loss of identity and community integrity. As with all small isolated communities where there is a continuing battle to control scarce resources, internal political rivalries and divisiveness also need to be taken into account. Many Norfolk Islanders have a sincere and deeply felt sense of betrayal. Their belief that Australia's control of their collective destiny is illegitimate, and must be resisted at all costs, may be legally incorrect but needs to be recognised, even if others make use of these sentiments for their own economic advantage.
- 3.3 Finally, a continuing challenge is to devise and maintain open processes of dialogue and consultation between the Joint Parliamentary Committee and the Norfolk Island Legislative Assembly. A sense of shared partnership, in which the efforts of both sides are geared to the achievement of environmentally sound economic and social developments would avoid the stop-start nature of reform-driven reviews and inquiries. Every inquiry seems to create media opportunities for Norfolk Island to be portrayed as the heroic David doing battle with a tyrannical Australian Goliath. Given the obvious and immense differences in power and resources, both Australia's and Norfolk Island's best interests would clearly be served if a positive ongoing process of government to government consultation were instituted and maintained.

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