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Lamb Island's flirtation with micronationality and the related consideration of a local representative body for the Southern Moreton Bay Islands

PHILIP HAYWARD

Southern Cross University <phayward2010@gmail.com>

Abstract

This research note profiles the background to the short-lived secessionist impulse on Lamb Island in Southern Moreton Bay, Queensland (Australia) in 2013, the role that the media played in disseminating news about the initiative, the manner in which it was represented and its local significance. Further to this, the note outlines the manner in which discussions concerning the viability of an independent council for the four inhabited Southern Moreton Bay Islands (Lamb, Karragarra, Macleay and Russell) relate to the impetus for Lamb Island's flirtation with micronationality.

Key Words

Lamb Island, micronation, South Moreton Bay, Southern Moreton Bay Islands (SMBI), Queensland

Introduction

In fact, there's an attitude that inevitably takes over Lamb Islanders, one that you'll hear expressed time and time again as locals get off the waterbus after a trip to what they refer to as 'Australia' – and it usually goes something like: "Thank goodness we're home again. How can mainland people live like that?" Once you live here, you'll wonder too.
(lambisland.com, nd: online)

Lamb, a low-lying island, measuring 2km by 1km, located at the southern end of Moreton Bay, adjacent to the southern part of North Stradbroke Island, is administered as part of Redlands City Council. At time of European colonial expansion into south east Queensland in the mid-1800s, Southern Moreton Bay was home to indigenous Quandamooka clans who moved through the region in seasonal patterns linked to the availability of various types of sustenance. Their name for Lamb island has been recorded as Nguduroo¹ (after the indigenous name of the paperbark tree [*Melaleuca quinquenervia*] that grows in the region). Initial colonial engagement with Lamb island consisted of visits to its shores to fish, gather oysters and obtain timber. In the 1880s the island began to be formally subdivided, with a number of farmers attempting to cultivate crops such as pineapples and other fruit to supply the needs of the rapidly

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increasing population of the nearby city of Brisbane. Following a marked decline in agricultural usage, the island was subdivided into residential plots and opened for development in the 1970s, before Redlands City Council's acquisition of the Southern Moreton Bay Islands (SMBIs²) from the state government, initiating a settlement pattern that has continued to the present, with Lamb now housing around 430 permanent residents.

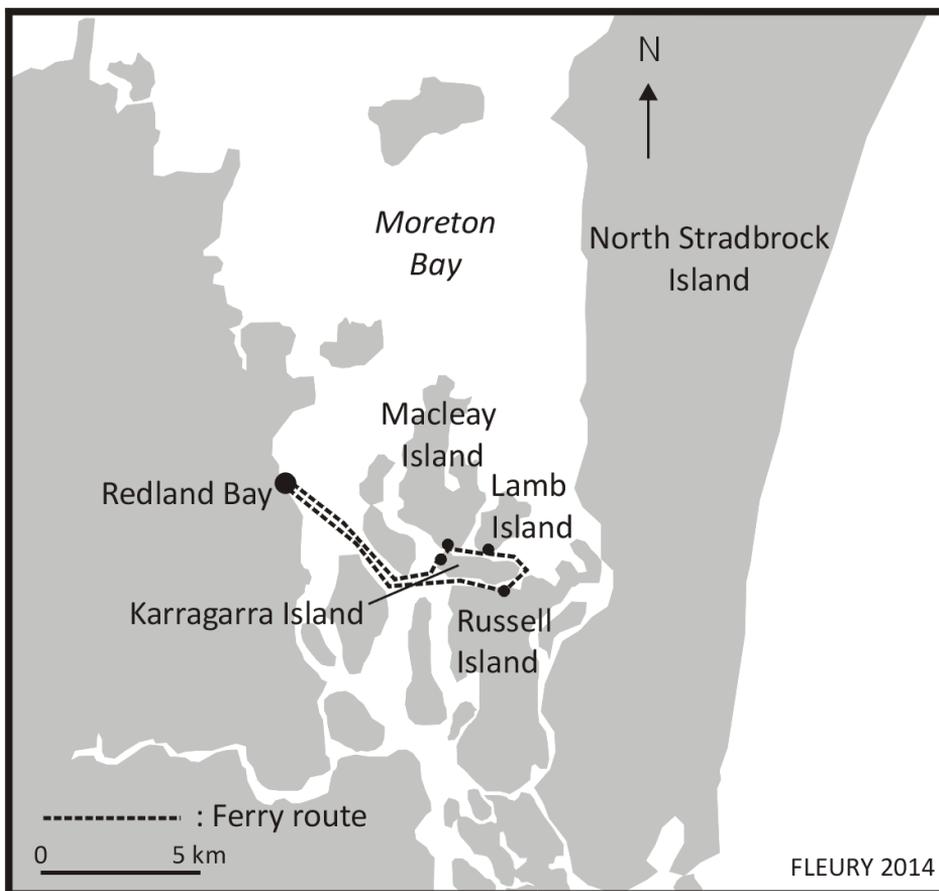


Figure 1 – Location of South Moreton Bay Islands in relation to Redland, ferry routes and North Stradbroke Island (map by Christian Fleury)

I. South East Queensland Politics

Politics in the Australian state of Queensland is nothing if not colourful. Scandals and controversies have afflicted the state for many years, reaching their peak in the 1970s and early 1980s during Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Country/National party regime (1968-87). The early 2010s have seen something of a return to polarisation and controversy in the state following the return of a Liberal National state government in 2012 and the election of maverick millionaire Clive Palmer³ to the federal Queensland seat of

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Capricornia. The south east Queensland coastal constituency of Redlands, located to the south east of Brisbane and to the north of the Gold Coast, on the southern shores of Moreton Bay (usually a low-profile presence in Queensland's political scene and a somewhat forgotten corner of the 'Sunshine State'), has recently had its moments in the media spotlight as a result of two very different stories. The first concerned the constituency's member of state Parliament, Peter Dowling, and his relationship with his mistress. The latter's most notorious aspect was his sending of explicit photos as phone text message attachments, including a shot of his penis inserted into a glass of red wine (apparently taken in his parliamentary office). Somewhat unfortunately dubbed 'Plonker' (a double-entendre term referring to 'plonk', the Australian slang term for wine, and the verb 'plonk', the act of setting something down noisily); Dowling's behaviour was deemed inappropriate by the media and members of the public (and also ran contrary to Queensland Parliamentary ICT usage policies). Considerable negative publicity also arose over allegations that had he misused his parliamentary travel allowance to take his mistress on travel to Western Australia. Media coverage of these issues, particularly in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* newspaper, contributed to a strong sense of dissatisfaction amongst his constituency members that resulted in a campaign by a local group calling themselves 'Redlands Residents NO Plonker' targeted at either getting Dowling stood down as MP prior to the next state election or else de-selected as an official Liberal National candidate for that election.

Allegations of misuse of tax-payer money and a general perception of lack of interest in grass roots constituency issues, for a MP who should have been aware of the latter (due to his previous service as Redland City Council member for Victoria Point and Coochiemudlo Island) was particularly galling for Redlands' constituents who reside on islands whose communities (with an aggregate population of just over 6000) have long complained about inadequate services and support. Coochiemudlo Island, along with North Stradbroke Island and the populated islands of Southern Moreton Bay (Karragarra, Lamb, Macleay and Russell) – henceforth referred to as the SMBI - have the highest socio-economic disadvantage ratings of any area within Redland City area⁴ and have struggled with the familiar list of issues affecting small, offshore island annexes to coastal towns (transport issues, concentration of infra-structural services on the mainland, high cost of imported materials and low availability of local employment). In these contexts, Dowling's antics were something of a red rag to a bull and contributed to a general sense of marginalisation that resulted in one area, Lamb Island, generating its own media focus in late 2013 by considering secession from Australia and constitution as a new micronation.

II. Lamb Island Considers Secession and the Media Comment

In mid-October 2013 the Australian media fell with relish upon the news that Lamb Island intended to vote on secession. Reporters simultaneously reported on and satirised the event. The Australian edition of *The Guardian*, for instance, combined interview material with secession leader and island store manager Tony Gilson with speculation that the island might adopt 'Klingon' – the language spoken by the eponymous alien species featured in the TV (and more recently film) series *Star Trek* - as its official language (accompanying its story with an image of a surly Klingon space commander) (Farrell, 2013: online). As the report summarised, the secession plan was arrived at in a less than thoroughly-researched and programmatic manner. As Gilson was quoted as recalling, "It started out as a sitting on a deck with a friend of mine and

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just having a general gripe about lack of provision of services and then I thought, ‘why don't we secede?’” (ibid). Amongst various aspects considered for the micronation, Gilson proposed two of the island’s longest inhabitants, octogenarians Barton and Margaret Bulwinkel, as constitutional monarchs (ibid) and – somewhat contradictorily – proposed ‘The Republic of Ngudurooistan’ (a title derived from the Aboriginal name for the island) as the new nation’s name (Silva, 2013: online).

A vote on the proposal followed that supported secession but since less than 25% of the population participated, the outcome was not given any particular credence on the island or in Redland in general. As a local posting on *The Guardian Australia’s* website (responding to Farrell, op cit) under the moniker ‘Figmince’ commented:

Here's the reality: Yesterday (Saturday) the vote was held on whether Lamb Island should secede or not. Between drinks at the adjacent club, 49 people voted 'Yes' for secession (around 12% of the island's adult population); 34 people (8.5%) actually bothered to vote 'No'; and the rest of the island, 317 people (79.5%) who've got a life, ignored it all. Unlike the media, desperate for anything rather than having to cover trivial stuff like Egypt, Syria, etc.⁵

Local, state and national governments conspicuously failed to react to the island’s announcement of secession intentions and to the secession vote itself, conforming to a pattern that has seen other Australian micronations, such as Bumbunga,⁶ Rainbow Creek⁷ and, most famously, the Principality of Hutt River,⁸ regarded with disdain and disinterest by state and national governments. Indeed, almost the only national government statements about the existence of these entities has concerned Hutt River’s attempt to issue passports and to set up an office in Dubai in 2007 to issue these and to promote Middle Eastern interest in investing in the microstate. Even in this case, the response was not overly dramatic.⁹



Figure 2 – Aerial shot of Lamb Island (centre of image, with the Queensland coast in background) (reproduced from <http://www.lambisland.com/>)

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One of the most significant insights into the nature of the Lamb island autonomist movement was provided in a short report on page 29 (of the 48 page) *Redland City News* magazine (the item's page positioning suggesting the lack of priority accorded to the issue locally). Carly Ogbourne's report on the movement focused on the manner in which a small group interaction 'went viral':

We've all had those nights; the nights where a few drinks lead to heated conversation and grandiose schemes. But for most of us, our schemes don't often survive past the next morning. When Lamb Island convenience store owner Tony Gilson had a few beers with some mates earlier this month, the conversation turned to every happy person's favourite pastime – complaining about the government. As the night wore on, plans about seceding from Australian and turning Lamb Island into an independent micronation were tossed around. It could have been one of those things that was forgotten by the morning, until Tony did something that turned the idea from a passing thought into a viral news story – he Tweeted his idea. One of his followers, 'someone I banter with about football', turned out to be a reporter with the ABC. And the rest may become history. "That was on Monday," Tony said, almost in disbelief, when I spoke to him the following Thursday. In the three days since the ABC piece went live, the story had made national news and sent social media platforms a-twitter. (Ogbourne, 2013: 29)

As Ogbourne went on to report, Gilson seized on the momentum of the news story and improvised a number of strategies and proposals that attracted further attention to the island and its issues. These in turn served to stimulate local debate about infrastructure and community identity that he hoped could serve as a focus for local activism (ibid). The proposals also caused considerable concern amongst a sector of the Lamb Island community that had vested interests in remaining within the Commonwealth of Australia, namely the substantial proportion of residents receiving retirement, disability and unemployment pensions. Redland City Councillor Mark Edwards (representative of Council Division 5 - comprising SMI and Redland Bay) has attested to this, reporting to the author that he received a stream of anxious communications from elderly residents for several weeks after the media story broke (personal communication, February 2014).

At time of writing (March 2014), the secessionist impulse appears to have petered out, in symmetry with the subsidence of its viral dissemination. This withering is perhaps fortuitous in that the choice of an Aboriginal name for an island that was part of an indigenous area cleared by European settlers and now claimed as autonomous by a group of (mostly) European-Australians jars with the recent history of Aboriginal land claims in the region; a point not lost on 'Danijo', one of the contributors to *The Guardian's* online web forum on Lamb Island, who wrote:

Maybe these non-indigenous Australians need to take in to account that this Island and the rest of Australia was originally inhabited for the last 60,000 years by indigenous Australians. I am sure if they were asked, they would say the original European settlers should go back to where they came from if they aren't happy in my country! Fair dinkum.¹⁰

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III. Realities

Interviewed in October, on the eve of the secession vote, local community member Mark Williams (proposed as social justice and equity minister in the intended Lamb Island government) identified state MP Dowling's lack of pursuit of local issues as a particular cause of dissatisfaction (Silva, 2013: online).¹¹ But understandable as this may have been, given Dowling's aforementioned antics, the concerns facing the Lamb Island community are essentially a local instance of global issues concerning island communities' desires for modern infra-structural servicing in locations expensive to deliver such services to. While aspirations to micronationality may be comprehensible as a reaction to perceptions of inequity; threats of secession are clearly gestural rather than practical in a location that has no obvious resource(s) to sustain a micro-economy nor any likely recognition of a secession claim that could lead to an advantageous external status that could facilitate such potentially lucrative activities as tax sheltering, casino operation etc.



Figure 3 – Lamb Island jetty and island arrival facilities (photograph – Philip Hayward February 2014)

The roots of the island population's dissatisfactions with levels of infrastructural support date back to the era of Queensland politics discussed in the Introduction. The island was subdivided into residential plots and opened for development in the 1970s without the necessary infrastructure to support such subdivisions. As a result, the plots and subsequent homes constructed on them (many of which were, initially at least, fairly basic and low-cost) were available for sale at prices substantially lower than similar plots on the mainland coast. Low costs and the relative obscurity of the island (and surrounding islands) attracted individuals and families wishing for a reclusive existence, for various reasons;¹² and the lack of police presence on the island on anything but an intermittent basis also appealed to individuals whose personal lifestyles and proclivities were somewhat at odds with state and national laws. In this sense, the autonomist impulse behind the recent micronational initiative is both consistent with and comprehensible with regard to the initial phase of its post-World War Two settlement. However it also indicates another issue for secessionists – the high proportion of the island's inhabitants that receive unemployment, disability and/or

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retirement pensions would provide an immediate strain on the economy of any micronation that might emerge. But whatever the inadequacies of Lamb Island's micronational initiative, local reflection on such issues brought media attention to them and paralleled the development of a more modest initiative.

Prior to the Lamb Island secessionists' brief moment in the media spotlight, Redland City Division 5 Councillor Mark Edwards obtained unanimous support from the Council in July 2013 to explore the viability of SMBI splitting from Redland and becoming an autonomous council. Edwards subsequently wrote to Queensland Local Government minister David Crisafuli to request consideration of the viability of the proposal; a request that the state government declined. Edwards further proposed that a referendum be held if the proposal looked viable. An item on the issue published in the *Redland Times Bayside Bulletin* on November 26th (Kerr, 2013) prompted a series of responses by locals both opposed to and in favour of the plan. The former either concentrated on the doubtful financial viability of a shire with a population of around 5500 (and of the implications of withdrawing from Redland Council in terms of securing subsidised parking places at mainland ferry points for islanders); or else were concerned about the impacts on the local environment. Supporters tended to be pro-development. The following responses summarise key issues around autonomy and development:

The islands don't need their own council, they need RCC and State to 'man-up' and invest the funds to get the island's infrastructure to the level of mainland divisions. RCC needs to allow SMBI ratepayers a vote in local government elections, whether they are resident or not - no taxation without representation. One island, and Russell is the obvious choice, should be developed as the commercial, residential and business hub, whilst the three other islands retain their 'special character'. All it takes is vision, commitment, money and not listening to the extreme greens, who would prefer the islands as a mangrove and mosquito sanctuary! (Brian H.C)

And, by contrast:

And how please will the process work to establish a council not populated with exactly those undesirables we want off the islands, big and small? Just like that recently sprouted rubbish idea about an independent Lamb Island the biggest challenge will be to keep these ones outside. Our own council, why not, but most likely and for sure it'll be the greedy real estate agents and alike who will be lifting their hands for council so the decisions to develop faster will be so much easier. And just like the Gold Coast the very essence why we live here, birds, nature and bit more quiet, will be destroyed in no time... (For Fairness)

Various aspects of these views were vigorously debated at a community debate on the viability of local autonomy held as part of the 1st South East Queensland Island Forum (SEQIF 1)¹³ on Macleay Island in February 2014. Following a presentation on the economies of scale of Australian councils provided by Southern Cross University academic Michael Kortt (2014), discussion focused on the manner in which administrative and infra-structural support could be enhanced in SMBI. Given that perceptions of the desirability of a separate council were balanced by those concerning

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the likely financial fragility of any such entity; proposals such as that for the micronational autonomy of Lamb Island were afforded little credence by those attending. Indeed, perhaps the most creative solution to addressing the economies of scale and the fragmentation of community resources in the inhabited SMBI was offered in the suggestion of constructing bridge links between Karragarra, Lamb, Macleay and Russell islands so as to allow for shared community resources (one medical centre, a central business precinct etc.) and the development of an integrated SMBI community identity. But given the lack of any obvious agency to fund a feasibility study for such a development, let alone its construction (should the SMBI community support it); it is unlikely that this suggestion will be investigated or realised in the immediate future.

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As the above discussion has identified, while Lamb Island's flirtation with micronational status may have received a substantial amount of media attention, this was principally on account of its ability to be easily satirised within an established tradition of finding the humour in micronational initiatives (see Grydehøj, 2014). In terms of local impact, opinion amongst SMBI residents expressed to the author of this paper was that the Lamb Island proposal was a humorous expression of a set of more deep-seated and inter-island issues that merited more serious attention. While seems unlikely that the brief assertion of Lamb Island micronationality will be remembered as anything other than a colourful moment in local social history that was fanned by expression within the 'Twitterverse'¹⁴, the issues it raises are enduring ones that concern the essence of island existence, and particularly inequalities of infrastructural facilitation between isolated offshore communities and larger mainland ones.

End Notes

¹ Also spelled 'Nguderoo'.

² Pronounced 'Sim-bees'.

³ Leader (and defining personality) of the Palmer United Party.

⁴ See Redlands City SEIFA disadvantage table, archived online at: profile.id.com.au/redland/seifa-disadvantage?es=2&WebID=140 - accessed November 2013.

⁵ www.google.com.au/search?q=mobicker&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&gfe_rd=cr&ei=ELORUqnEMMfC8geM14CoBw#q=monicker&rls=org.mozilla:en-US%3Aofficial - accessed November 2013

⁶ Located north east of Adelaide and notionally operational in the mid 1970s to 1980s.

⁷ Located in rural Victoria, which notionally operated in 1979.

⁸ One of the more famous micronations internationally, the Principality of Hutt River, located north of Perth, in Western Australia, declared independence in 1970 and has

been active in promoting itself. See its official website: www.hutt-river-province.com/ - and the number of documents archived online there.

⁹ See the Australian Embassy in the United Arab Emirate's October 2007 statement on the matter archived online at: www.uae.embassy.gov.au/abud/huttriver.html - accessed November 2013

¹⁰ www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/18/lamb-island-nationhood-secession - accessed February 2014 (NB the Australian term 'fair dinkum', is used - in this context - to emphasise the truth of the statement.)

¹¹ Contrasting Dowling's inadequacies with the successful 'can-do' attitude and financial clout of (previously discussed) maverick Queensland MP, Clive Palmer, another disgruntled local, real estate agent Trevor Ehrlich, speculated that Palmer might like to buy the whole island (ibid).

¹² Tim Marshall's short fiction film *Lamb Island* (2013), for instance, represents this aspect of island seclusion (available online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=drbBTJRezQg - accessed March 2014)

¹³ Which the author co-organised with Frank Pearce from Redland City Council.

¹⁴ The extended media space generated by Twitter postings and their reposting and related discussion and dissemination in related media and oral cultural contexts.

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