

Submission to Northern Australia Taskforce on Green Paper on Developing Northern Australia

Preamble:

This submission is from a former resident of Northern Australia. I lived and worked in Mackay, North Queensland and its surrounding 200 km from January 1965 to December 1969, and again from December 1976 to August 1980. From January 1970 to April 1972, I lived in Geraldton, Western Australia and as a Main Roads Department engineer, my work area extended from there north to Newman and east to Wiluna and Sandstone. Between April 1972 and February 1974 I was based in East Kimberley living with my young family in Kununurra. From March 1974 to December 1976, and from August 1980 until January 1986, I lived in and worked from Townsville covering areas from Cooktown to the north, to Mt Isa in the west and to south of Mackay, including short deployments in Darwin in 1977 and 1985. In all, I was living and/or working in Northern Australia for 21 years. I was transferred to Brisbane by the Queensland owned company in 1986. I attended a North Australia Development Association conference in Cairns in 1980.

SECTION A: PROFILE

1. I believe the area being considered as Northern Australia should be all that north of the 26th parallel of latitude, also being the boundary between South Australia and Northern Territory, and also a line of significance in Western Australia. This line extended in Queensland could also define the boundary between north and south as far as the Great Divide, from where it could follow the local authority boundaries of the Wide Bay - Burnett region to south and Fitzroy region to north.
2. The predominant characteristic of this whole area, whose climate and terrain varies from wet tropical mountains and coastal plains to generally flat savannah and desert with undulations, is the distinct wet and dry seasons. In particular is the considerable variability in rainfall not only within the whole area but also from year to year, with several successive years of drought with little or no river runoff, and times of high rainfalls resulting in widespread flooding, occasionally two or three times in a single season.
3. The most important features for current growth and future development are undoubtedly water both above ground (in large dams) and the Artesian Basins below ground, and the extensive mineral deposits including natural gas.
4. Opportunities must be taken to continue expanding population of the current population centres, especially Townsville, Darwin, and Karratha as major centres, and Rockhampton, Mackay, Cairns, Mt Isa, Alice Springs and Broome as significant centres, and which also support smaller "in between" towns.
5. The biggest risk is to lose the momentum built over the past 30 years in the expansion that has occurred, and while private investment is essential, governments need to focus on its encouragement as much as possible, especially in regard to facilitation of essential services – water, transport infrastructure, energy, education and communications.

There is a need to focus on water management such as “drought proofing” water supply, utilising effects of major flooding and linking energy sources. The prospects for renewable energy – solar, wind and tidal must be extensive.

SECTION B: OPPORTUNITIES

1. Yes, these are the major global and domestic trends that can create further opportunities for development together with utilising the desire for migration from troubled and over-populated climatically similar regions of the world.
2. Increased tourism from Asia is one opportunity, and establishing more education and associated research in tropical agriculture for global benefit as well as in managing tropical diseases.
3. Resource exploration using developed new techniques would allow further mineral extraction.
4. Darwin is strategically located to become a significant transit station between Asia and southern Australia through more utilisation of the rail links from Darwin to Adelaide, Perth, Melbourne and even Sydney being less than the longer route by sea. Extensive use of the ports on the west coast of North America is made as transit for goods between Asia and the eastern areas utilising four rail links.
5. Asian oriented research and associated tertiary/trade training especially for the tropical environments could relieve the demand on southern based facilities.
6. Expansion of hospitality services for the tourist industries both in the north and in Asia could include more indigenous Australians. In North America indigenous people are seen extensively in such services especially where there are cultural performances.
7. Traditional indigenous food sources could be developed commercially for local and tourism consumption, as something unique.
8. Natural assets of Northern Australia are by far underutilised as demand has been small, but with ordered development they can be in greater demand, especially use of solar and wind energy. More mineral processing could be undertaken instead of just exporting the ore.

SECTION C: BARRIERS

1. Yes, there are barriers and their impacts are more pronounced in the north but that does not mean they cannot be largely overcome by appropriate action and government, community, and industry all working together.
2. While living, working, climate and amenities are different to those in the south providing better equivalence will result in less disincentive to population expansion associated with corresponding employment opportunities and living conditions.
3. Infrastructure provision or facilitated by government is distinctly lacking because of greater demand in the more populated areas, but there are no limitations that cannot

be overcome. North America is an example of what can be done. Upgraded road and rail links east-west joining ports in Western Australia and joining to Tennant Creek, Mt Isa and Bowen would be a start. Newman connected to Geraldton and thus Perth is another possibility. New servicing centres would arise creating further development.

4. Potential use of land needs to be determined and mapped to identify optimum usage, which may be prioritised in conjunction with infrastructure and industry expansion.
5. The Ord and Burdekin River dams provide a lot of water storage and there are other river systems which could be similarly utilised to enhance economic development and industry growth while not causing undue environmental distress.
6. By comparison, living and working conditions are too good in the south, and it may be necessary to provide more incentives for potential workers. Perhaps working for the dole may require deployment to the north especially in provision of infrastructure. Flexibility in working/school hours might be an option with concentration in early start in the cooler morning and siesta from 11am to say 4pm. Six 6 hour days for workers (could be in shifts) and possibly five 5 hour days for schools, primary in morning (6am to 11am) and secondary in evening (4pm to 9pm) would also reduce the amount of building and play areas needed. Some experimentation should be trialled.
7. Each state needs a separate Ministry for the North to work with the Northern Territory government so systems used for government and laws are more uniform for the whole region. The balance between state/territory control and local authority control will probably be different to other states, and would be tailored to the realities of the area.

SECTION D: POLICY DIRECTIONS

1. All types of industry and consequent community growth have to be supported with financial and regulatory incentives to become established and initially maintained. Tertiary industries especially research and development associated with branch campuses of the major southern universities could become significant. They could concentrate on enhancing food management for growing Asian markets. Secondary industry processing mineral ores could also arise complementing the current exporting of the raw materials.
2. Simplification of government control would help.
3. Administering and coordinating the north Australia development could be through a Council of 9 elected government members consisting of 3 from Commonwealth, Prime Minister (or his deputy), Minister for the North, and Minister for Defence; and 2 each from the 2 states and the Northern Territory, being the Chief Minister and Premiers (or deputies) and their Treasurers. This Council could be supported by an executive advisory body of 24 consisting of 8 elected representatives and 8 senior public servants from the three levels of government, and 8 from private industry groups active in the north who could serve terms of 2 or 3 years.

Submitted by Michael Sharwood, [REDACTED] 4020, on 05/08/14.