

Submission to the Senate Committee on the effectiveness of the Australian Government's Northern Australia agenda regarding Northern Australia

by David Kault

The Senate Committee is required to inquire into and report on the effectiveness of the objectives, design, implementation and evaluation of the Australian Government's Northern Australia agenda, with particular reference to:

- a. facilitation of public and private investment in infrastructure and economic development;
- b. economic and social benefit arising from that investment for Northern Australians, in particular First Nations people;
- c. funding models and policy measures that capture the full value of existing and emerging industries;
- d. measures taken to develop an appropriately skilled workforce;
- e. emerging national and international trends and their impact on the Northern Australia agenda; and
- f. any related matters.

My Response comes under a number of headings:-

General Problems with Development

The objectives are fundamentally flawed. Public and private investment in infrastructure and economic development has proceeded in Southern Australia for 230 years. The result has been massive loss of species and biodiversity, topsoil, forest cover, profound degradation of our largest river system and in some areas rising salt and salinisation of previously useful lands. The cities of Southern Australia that have been built upon this destructive and unsustainable development are now becoming increasingly crowded, with housing standards for most people declining substantially and homeless people and beggars appearing on the streets in increasing numbers. There is widespread recognition that the economic development of Southern Australia has meant the extraction of wealth from the natural capital of the land at an ever increasing rate. This is not sustainable. In the long term, development in the style which has given Australia our bread basket of the Murray Darling basin, is clearly leading to catastrophe particularly of the Murray Darling Basin itself.

Northern Australia is one of the last parts of the world still relatively new to intensive development. However, it too has already suffered major damage from an adverse development mindset. Some of the catastrophes that are emerging in Northern Australia are rooted in an adverse global development mindset, not just an adverse Australian Government mindset. I refer to the threat to the Great Barrier Reef with about half of its coral destroyed by recent acceleration in coral bleaching events. I also refer to phenomena such as the hundreds of thousands of acres of rainforest around the tourist town of Eungela, destroyed by a recent fire of the sort that hadn't occurred in the

previous million years. This destruction of reef and rainforest is recognised as being due to global climate change – and is ultimately due to an adverse development mindset of Governments not only in Australia, but globally. However, there components of the destruction of Northern Australia that Australian Governments must take primary responsibility for. As in Southern Australia, these include woodland destruction (euphemistically known as land clearing) with the accompanying loss of biodiversity and topsoil and the creation of carbon pollution, dust storms and silted rivers. However, because Northern Australia is relatively new to intensive exploitation there is much here yet to be destroyed.

Why Northern Australia is less developed than the South

There is good reason why Northern Australia is relatively new to intensive exploitation. It is simply a more hostile environment in which to live. Floods and high temperatures close to the limit of human survivability are more common in the North and cyclones, which can destroy low lying cities, simply don't occur down South. Added to this litany is the biting insects, disease vectors and agricultural pests which simply can do better in a warmer climate than they do down South. This writer has had the dubious pleasure of killing 38 mosquitoes with a single clap of hands. As well as mosquito borne disease such as Dengue fever and Ross River fever, there are other more serious diseases which either don't occur down South or are a lot less common. Such diseases include leptospirosis, melioidosis and Q fever. The prevalence of such diseases, regardless of other factors, adds perhaps a few percent to the cost of providing adequate medical care in Northern Australia. All these natural hazards, diseases and pest related problems are likely to worsen as climate change progresses.

A develop at all cost mentality has had free reign throughout Northern Australia for over a century and a half. Over this time there have been dams built and irrigated agricultural schemes set up wherever people have seen a short and medium term profit in doing so (and generally have disregarded long term sustainability issues). However, few irrigation schemes have emerged in Northern Australia. Of the few big schemes that have emerged, Humpty Doo near Darwin almost totally collapsed and the Ord River scheme is proving very marginal indeed. Few other schemes have emerged because cold analysis has shown that they would not be profitable even if long term sustainability is disregarded. There are clear geographical reasons. Australia is an old, largely flat continent. This means that the topography is mostly unsuited to dams and the age and lack of topography also leads to poor fertility soils. The lack of topography also results in very low average annual rainfalls throughout the inland. In Northern Australia this is compounded by a particularly erratic climate. As a resident just South of Townsville, this writer experienced 2 metres of rain in one week this year. On the other hand I had the experience of bringing up my son from babyhood to the age of 5 without him ever experiencing rainfall beyond a few showers. Poor soils, lack of topography suitable for dam sites and huge annual variation in rainfall mean that almost all of Northern Australia is entirely unsuitable for intensive agriculture – even if long term sustainability issues are ignored.

Case Study: the proposed Hells Gate Dam complex

The Hells Gate dam now proposed on the Burdekin river to the west of Townsville is a good case study. The area is currently managed for cattle grazing in a way which can be sustainable and it supports a stable, but not large, population. The proposed dam is a large, shallow dam which would irrigate soils of marginal fertility. The authors admit that the irrigated land would be more expensive than land in other irrigation schemes. They argue that to compensate for the more expensive land, the scheme could be made profitable if it were to be used for 30,000 hectares of

expensive tree crops. However, they then admit that the water would be adequate only 7 years in 10 (“70% of the time”). This might not matter so much for annual crops where land can be left fallow in drought years, but failure of irrigation would be disastrous for irrigated tree cropping. They give Durians as an example of the sort of high value tree crop that might be grown. This writer is attempting to grow Durians on a hobby farm close to the coast - it is common knowledge that this is an equatorial high rainfall tree, and it is an expression of hope to plant a couple of these trees on a totally frost free block with relatively higher rainfall, close to the coast, but absolutely ludicrous to think that they could grow inland in almost semi-desert country at an altitude of 1000 foot where occasional winter frosts are all but inevitable. There are other examples in the Hells Gate proposal which seem fanciful to the point of being deliberately misleading. In particular they mention toe of dam large scale hydro electricity production at Hells Gate. This writer has no special knowledge of hydro electricity, however a similar hydro electricity facility at the main Burdekin dam has been promoted by development enthusiasts for 40 years and it is still not considered worthwhile, despite the main Burdekin dam having a spillway 50% higher than the proposed Hells Gate dam (37m vs 24m) and a lot more water flow.

The Hells Gate dam proponents suggest that the scheme could eventually be expanded to 130,000 hectares. The Burdekin could almost certainly supply water to irrigate this much land in a good year. In a bad year it is Townsville's emergency water supply and no emergency urban water would be available if the water had been committed to crops covering even a small fraction of this area. Near the Hells Gate dam site there are Burdekin tributaries which flow off mountainous areas and as part of the full Hells Gate scheme, there are proposals to dam these tributaries. They would be then flooding the most spectacular canyon country in north-east Australia and would be ruining what could have been a prime tourist destination.

My impression is that the proponents of projects like the Hells Gate dam are people who want to make a profit out of major development. They are not interested in the huge amount of environmental destruction, death of millions of native animals etc, which goes with “clearing” 130,000 hectares of Australian bush and the degradation of the rivers and canyons in the area and they are not interested in the sustainability of the scheme or in Townsville's emergency urban water supply. The 130,000 hectares to be “cleared” is equivalent to adding more than 25% to Australia's already shameful annual rate of woodland destruction and adding more than 3% to our annual carbon emissions. It is as if the proponents want destruction of natural assets for the slightest chance that a profit can be made out of the proposal, at least if the profit can be made for the proponents. It seems that the attitude must be that if, as seems most likely, a profit cannot be made, then the proponents will be satisfied by a sense of spite – that land that others see beauty in and that supports lower key economic activity, will have been destroyed because it could not make money for the proponents. The Hells Gate proposal would clearly come at the expense of those working in the grazing industry in the first instance and in the longer term will be at the expense of those working irrigated farms which are unlikely to be viable and also at the expense of the people of urban Townsville who want secure water supplies. The proponents to my mind will be those with a “get rich quick and get out” mentality who have no interest in the welfare of either the people or environment of Northern Australia.

Development and Aboriginal Communities

The senate committee asks for comment on the aim of social and economic benefit particularly for First Nations people. There have been quite a number of instances where there has been development in Northern Australia with very direct economic benefit for Aboriginal people in terms of royalties from mining. Having spent a total of about 2 years of my life working in various Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia, I would be interested in objective measures here.

My impression is that such economic development can have strongly counterproductive effects. There is the obvious problem that mining may be destroying land that many in the community may regard as sacred, causing community division. I also note that able bodied people growing up without the expectation of needing to earn their keep and their place in their society, can become dissolute. In the case of Aboriginal culture with a strong commitment to sharing and lack of materialism, it is my impression that this dissolute mindset can emerge as a corrosive alcoholism which, even if it affects only a minority, can destroy an entire community. Traditional economic development may therefore not be positive socially. I would ask the senate committee to research the correlation between receipt of royalties by a community and its level of social progress as judged by indicators such as educational achievement, imprisonment rates etc.. If, as I suspect, there is either no correlation or a negative correlation between royalty receipt and social indicators, traditional economic development cannot be supported as a mechanism to promote a more positive future for First Nation peoples.

Challenging Development as an Aim

At a basic level, I am mystified by the push for development. The people of Northern Australia for the most part have the material basis for a reasonably comfortable life. With that basis, whether our lives give us fulfilment and happiness will be dependent on our culture and other factors and not on whether we are part of a community of a million people in Northern Australia or part of a community of many times that size. Indeed, I think many of us who have been born into or who have chosen Northern Australia as our home would be horrified to see our population swelling at the expense of the open spaces, uncrowded lifestyle and natural assets that we currently possess. Additionally, there seems to be no correlation between growth and the proportion of people without the material means to fully enjoy life. Employment booms create an influx of people and the unemployment rate here is now little different to what it was when I first arrived in Townsville 45 years ago when Townsville was a third of the size it is now. If we do not seek to increase our population we do not need to increase the economic basis that allows our current reasonably comfortable lives. I note that all continual growth is ultimately unsustainable. I note that 3% growth is something that has been “achieved” at times in Townsville and celebrated by some. However, it implies a doubling of quantity every 23 years. Doubling 10 times then gives a thousand fold increase in 230 years. At this rate of 3%, Townsville’s urban and semi-urban area will grow to meet Cairns and almost the entire East coast will be a continuous conurbation in about 60 years. Townsville will have more people than any city that currently exists on earth in just 170 years. Perpetual growth clearly will eventually destroy natural assets that makes the North a positive place for those of us who choose to live here despite the cyclones, floods and wet season biting insects. We do not need to grow in population or economic size until we have destroyed everything that makes our part of the world worthwhile. “Perpetual growth is the ideology of the cancer cell”.

Positive economic developments

There is however some room for certain economic developments. In particular I note that there is a huge amount of degraded denuded land in Northern Australia. There are two obvious usages for such land. Land which is degraded beyond redemption would be an excellent place to locate large solar farms with minimal impact on the environment. Land which is not beyond redemption could be used for large scale reforestation to act as a major carbon sink for the world. Despite the damage already inflicted, Northern Australia is still wealthy in terms of biodiversity. This suggests that economic activity should be put into preserving this biodiversity, not only for its own sake, but also for the potential for bio-prospecting and inspiration for bio-mimicry and as a tourist attraction. This then requires a lot of effort to be put into controlling and eliminating the pest species which

threatens this biodiversity. This effort could take the form of both direct labour to eliminate weeds and pest animals or to fence off areas from pest animals such as cats and cane toads. Effort should also be put into academic labour to find more efficient ways to control such pest species and academic labour should also be put into bio-prospecting.