



DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER
MINISTER FOR NORTHERN AUSTRALIA AND TRADE

Parliament House
State Square
Darwin NT 0800

GPO Box 3146
Darwin NT 0801

Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Email: FADT.SEN@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Kitching

Thank you for your letter of 5 March 2021, to the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory advising that the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade references Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the funding for public research into foreign policy issues.

The Northern Territory Government welcomes publications by think tanks on multifarious topics impacting the Northern Territory and Australia, especially on advancing Northern Australian development. The Northern Territory Government accepts that the majority of think tank contributions are written in good faith with an aim of providing evidence based assessments of opportunities to strengthen policies in line with Australia's national interest. The Northern Territory Government actively considers the views of think tanks, and applies rigorous testing of think tanks' research and policy recommendations which are directed to advancing the Northern Territory development agenda.

At their finest, think tanks can improve the quality of governments by providing ideas, intellectual resources for debate. Think tanks can provide a bridge between the world of policy and other voices and help anchor debate in research-based evidence, applying long-term thinking.

Current funding by Australian Government departments and agencies in this area

There is a risk that think tanks receiving government funding can be perceived to be promoting that government's agenda. Maintaining editorial independence from government is crucial to the credibility of any research output.

The Northern Territory Government recommends stricter statutory obligations be applied to think tanks, including clearer reporting on funding to demonstrate financial transparency of commissioned research pieces. All records of government payments to Australian think tanks should via a statutory obligation reporting mechanism be reported on.

This could be done by requiring think tanks to simply identify government funding or payments separately under a category of 'government payments' in their annual reports.

Strategies the Australian Government should adopt to build the knowledge needed to support more effective future foreign policy

To increase Australia's global engagement we need to build a greater understanding of our regional neighbours in the Asia Pacific as foreign policy partners and strategic actors. This can be achieved by improving our collective understanding of these nations' structures, foreign policy positions, leaders and defence capability, and through a healthy public discourse between strategists, linguists, economists, historians and political scientists.

The Northern Territory Government recommends Australia increases our global engagement through growing our academic and research collaboration sectors. Additional investment in positions, scholarships and tied research programs to support and incentivise a new generation of Indo-Pacific and Pacific Island scholars is required to position Australia to take advantage of the Asian century.

The Northern Territory Government recommends that resourcing in this area be spread across universities and think tanks, to avoid over-dependence on any one institution and to allow for regional think tanks and universities to contribute.

Grow Australia's diplomatic corps presence internationally and in Northern Australia

Developing diplomatic relationships with important partners and neighbours around the world is critical to Australia's international success. Australia remains a disproportionately small diplomatic power for a country with our comparative economic weight and wealth. We have one of the smallest diplomatic networks in the developed world, ranking behind Belgium, Hungary, Portugal, Chile and Greece, all far smaller nations with economies and populations considerably smaller than Australia's.

The Northern Territory Government advocates for increased diplomatic staff posting in regional and Northern Australia jurisdictions. The Northern Territory is a natural hub for Australia's defence, emergency response, aid, capacity building and humanitarian initiatives into the region, and we welcome the Australian Government leveraging our advantages in these sectors. In addition the resources already long identified in the Northern Territory are well known such as minerals, agribusiness, energy and tourism.

As such, with ongoing mutually beneficial assistance from Australian Trade and Investment Commission and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and with coordinated national and Northern Territory policies in place, the Northern Territory economy, exports and inward investment can grow and expand and be a key contributor to Australia's future prosperity.

The Role of Non-government Institutions in the Development of Australian International Policy

Think tanks are increasingly supporting diplomatic functions that were traditionally the sole preserve of state officials. Australian based think tanks conduct and or support diplomatic activities through: negotiation, communication with foreign publics, information-gathering and promoting either friendly or unfriendly relations.

In instances of diplomatic freezes between Australia and other nations, think tanks have been able to keep communication channels open. Think tank dialogues, often provide senior officials an invaluable way to maintain communication and allow Australian officials to understand what issues are most important from an international partner.

When things are difficult at a political level, maintaining connections such as think tanks is vital, and Australia benefits best when multiple players across society engage internationally, which also ensures essential balance is maintained during a period of possible strained official relationships.

Ways of enhancing greater public understanding of foreign policy issues

The Northern Territory Government recommends the Australian Government provide more regular updates to the public at large regarding Australia's Foreign Policy initiatives. These briefings and or publications should explain the rationale for why Australian Government is working to establish new active partnerships, exploring new ways of managing a divided world and reforming the institutions to which we belong.

The Northern Territory supports the Australian Government's Team Australia approach. Acknowledging the value of constructivist collective action, the power of institutions to drive change has enabled Australia to develop long lasting regional frameworks where respect for alternate views are recognised and Australia can discuss our differences in perspective and opinion. As a prosperous middle power nation, Australia has become good at building foreign policy frameworks, and we have a proud tradition of elevating and empowering multilateral institutions.

As the world economies continue to become increasingly interconnected, diplomatic relations are been played out by more than nation-state players. As such, having more publications and briefings on Australia's foreign policy positions, can provide an opportunity for Australia's position to be promoted by a larger cohort of Australian players engaging internationally.

Yours sincerely

NICOLE MANISON

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