

SUBMISSION BY BRENDAN DORAN

to

Australian Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia

Inquiry into the Development of Northern Australia

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I write from the perspective of a long term interest in northern Australia's development and interaction with the Indo-Pacific region - through past professional activity as an Australian and Northern Territory public servant and ongoing activity within the academic community.

The Realities of northern Australia

Analysis and planning on the future of northern Australia should be informed by reality, history and the national interest. The north has been a policy preoccupation since European settlement and what we have today is the result of government policies and community energies over time and within the context of the geographical, environmental, social and economic realities and limitations. The north is very different to southern Australia. It is not some continent-wide plain of fertile, watered and readily inhabitable agricultural land waiting to feed the world and house millions of people. There are significant additional environmental, social and accessibility constraints on many forms of economic activity. The nature of the landscape, the climate, conservation and environmental values, the rights and expectations of its indigenous peoples and the learnings of history and past policy and economic failures cannot be wished away.

Further enquiries and papers by political parties and governments provide no guarantee of any additional resourcing or investment in the north in the future other than the flows that exist now and what might be allocated through the normal processes of government, community and business decision-making. Broader domestic and international preoccupations constitute a base-level determinant of any significant action. While there is great hope of some positive universally-accepted outcomes from this latest focus on northern Australia, it is important that expectations are not raised then dashed as has happened before.

Brain-storming and wish-listing will be part of the inquiry process but it will be disappointing if the end product is simply another un-original litany of "thought bubbles" without serious cost-benefit analysis with credible social, scientific, environmental and economic research underpinnings or without indications of resourcing and implementation likelihood.

It will also have been a distraction for those dealing on a daily basis with issues and challenges in northern Australia and a waste of scarce human and financial resources. It will have confused Australia's Asian and other international partners and stakeholders. It may damage "brand Australia" if it descends into partisan political and jurisdictional bickering or community division. Too often domestic considerations can blind politicians to the international impact of the adversarial way our local discourse is conducted. Consequentially, careful consideration needs to be given to "messaging" during inquiries and in reports, green and white papers and government decisions arising.

National Interest the touchstone

Policy settings for northern Australia should be based on the national interest, in short what is best for Australia, its values and current and future generations of Australians. Foreign relations, investment and trade are important but not the core consideration. Appropriate foreign investment is normal and welcome but it is not a panacea to the problems of the north. Also, the special social, environmental and conservation and defence and security (including biosecurity) values of the north, together with mainstream Australian values should never be traded off to non-Australians for short-term individual, corporate and fiscal benefit. There is no place for foreign enclaves or special economic zones where Australians are not prioritized for work opportunities and employment, work practices, wages and conditions are not in accord with Australian values.

The national interest is certainly not served by raising expectations that cannot be met or misrepresenting opportunities to foreign investors and partners which cause them to lose face, time and money and raise sovereign risk.

Consultation and Consensus required

A great disappointment today is the political partisanship and lack of consensus on important national interest issues, particularly those with an international dimension. The Australian community and our Asian neighbours are left only with disillusion and uncertainty over the implementation of the White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century after being actively solicited for contributions. There was also significant resourcing and whole of government/nation effort attached to the exercise. Why cannot an incoming government build on, rather than seemingly abandon, a major piece of policy work, and in this case one that has direct and indirect linkages with options and planning for the future of northern Australia?

Another example is the way the incoming CLP government in the Northern Territory abandoned the Territory 2030 Plan developed under its ALP predecessor after extensive community consultation at considerable public cost and which had an established implementation framework. Such a document would seem highly relevant to discussion of the future of both the Territory and northern Australia.

Equally puzzling and damaging to brands Territory and Australia were the arbitrary CLP decisions not to implement its own specific 2012 election campaign commitments to strengthen links with Indonesia (including to hold an annual high level forum in conjunction with Charles Darwin University); not to follow through on educational exchange commitments made by ALP Chief Minister Henderson to President Yudhoyono; and to abandon, without replacement, the Territory's 2009-13 Trade Strategy and the longstanding CLP-initiated Arafura Sporting Games which were a unique contribution by the Territory to Australia's overall relations with the Indo-Pacific region.

If it is to be a serious and reliable player with a chance of leading or shaping outcomes, the Northern Territory needs to give urgent consideration to processes which can restore a greater degree of unity and continuity across the political and community spectrum on the bigger policy issues and Territory links with Australia's Asian neighbours.

There also seems to be squabbling over which State or Territory is best placed to "lead" the consultations on the future of northern Australia, or which city should be regarded as "the capital" of the north, or which place or places should be the location of any secretariat to support various enquiries or implementation activity. These distractions need to be quickly sidelined in favour of concentration on substantive issues.

The not-insignificant-task of examining the future of northern Australia will require extensive and comprehensive consultation. The elements of any nation-building/ reaffirming implementation plan and associated resource allocation prioritisation will require significant consensus across stakeholders and interested parties, with appropriate weighting to the views of those with long-standing ties to the north. This may require considerable time, but it is better to take the time to ensure positive outcomes. If the best achievable early outcome is the fast-tracking of improvements in social and economic disadvantage of the anchor (indigenous) population of large parts of the north, this would provide a good base to take other matters forward. It will also be important to take a broad approach in interpreting Terms of Reference and words such as "development" and "growth" to ensure that all values and interests are considered.

Also, priority should be given to evidence-based inputs and sources. A considerable body of quality research already exists on the north by highly reputable Australian academics and thinkers and research institutions and networks, many located in northern Australia. Maximum use should be made of this resource and consideration given to ways and means to further build the corpus of “northern knowledge” as an input to genuinely evidence-based policy development.

Suggested early priority to views of northern communities

One approach might be for the Joint Select Committee to give early priority to the views of individuals, communities, governments, business, non-government organisations and research institutions located/headquartered in the north. Their commitment in one form or another, permanent or temporary, is already established and they ‘live’ the challenges.

While the inquiry is about the north, many of the issues and challenges are those faced by remote and regional Australia generally. Situations vary considerably but a common challenge is how to sustain functional, healthy and economically diverse communities, settlements, villages, towns, cities and regions. This could also be a particular prism through which the Committee could approach its work, with the emphasis clearly on policies for sustaining and enhancing existing entities as bases for widening rings of appropriate economic activity, land management and environmental protection.

‘Healthy societies’ are a core element and objective. This may require policies that significantly decentralize government personnel and services and encourage investors and new migrants to remote areas. A high priority must be to support Indigenous communities, towns and business and make a qualitative leap forward from the Commonwealth, State, Territory and local government failures of the past.

Innovative thinking and action is required. Some lessons from the overseas development assistance context may be useful including ways of providing best-practice governance, management and expert support (including investment attraction) to municipal and community organisations.

Counterpart and mentoring advisory services to local leaders and employees would seem preferable to actual service provision, although the reality is that some small communities require the latter. There may be scope for an official Remote and Regional Corps of specially trained public servants and skilled volunteers under Commonwealth auspices. Control would, however, generally need to remain local.

Consideration could be given by entities in the north to fostering relationships with communities and organisations elsewhere in Australia through friendship groups, school twinings, sister entity and remote town adoption arrangements and special interest projects by corporate and research bodies.

Investigation could also be made of greater use of cooperative models of economic interaction and self-sufficiency, and of prospects for prioritization of communities for full/hybrid electrification by renewables such as solar, for broad-band connectivity and for provision of land care, ranger and coast watch services.

An approach by the Committee that does not first go to promotion of big population, mining and agriculture and big-ticket project infrastructure such as dams, ports, transport and pipeline networks, but rather to recognition of existing societies and economies together with their contexts, needs and reasonable aspirations is preferable. The emergence of common ground between stakeholders on many common challenges may result. This approach should help set the tone to keep expectations within appropriate bounds.

Australian intergovernmental cooperation

Queensland, WA and the NT and local government and regional representative bodies are competitive in respect of investment attraction, job creation, trade and tourism. This will be an issue in prioritising any new infrastructure funding designed to boost the development of northern Australia.

For national leadership to be provided and new policy developed and implemented on the north, the cooperation of the three levels of government will be required. The question arises as to whether any new research, consultative, secretariat, coordination, decision-making, funds-channeling and implementation arrangements are needed besides those existing, including COAG processes and local government interaction mechanisms. Unproductive bureaucracy and window-dressing is not needed. The respective capacities of the various levels of government to deliver on what might be allocated to them as part of any agreed implementation strategy could also be an issue.

Within jurisdictions, political parties also need to look at maximizing bi-partisanship to get the best outcome for each jurisdiction and the north as a whole. This is particularly so in the case of the Northern Territory which is struggling in respect of policy, budget and operations in the face of some of the bigger challenges of the north. Its economic history is that of a boom-bust cycle and high vulnerability to shocks. It also has the least influence in Canberra and the greatest dependency on the rest of the Federation for funding.

Preparedness for government is a problem for Territory political parties as is policy prioritisation, development and consistency on the basics between administrations. There is a strong case for the Territory establishing a government of national unity around an agreed program and drawing on the best experience available in the Territory Parliament. Other options could be the negotiated return of some powers, functions and responsibilities to the Commonwealth or the delivery of some services cross-border by neighbouring States where it is more efficient to do so.

Developing the north – international dimension

Reference has already been made to the need to carefully calibrate the messages to the international community about its role in the development of northern Australia, in order to keep domestic and international expectations realistic. The Australian national interest remains paramount but there is a place for international best practice and expertise, investment and labor.

Australian government policy, law and regulation provide the context within which the other levels of government, business and the community operate. Commonwealth agencies, particularly DFAT and Austrade, actively market Australia and promote trade and investment. The other levels of government market themselves but cooperate together and with the Commonwealth where it is mutually beneficial. Much of this cooperation is negotiated informally. Commonwealth-initiated formal mechanisms to coordinate better have a chequered history but some survive through the COAG and the Treaties Council/ Standing Committee arrangements. Consideration could be given to ways to better harmonise interests, promotions and activities, including in respect of northern Australia's social and economic potential and international links.

A shared list of specific investment-ready exploratory opportunities or project ideas in the north that have been pre-cleared at all levels for social, environmental and regulatory approval would be a useful.

There would seem to be scope for closer and more formal consultation between the Commonwealth, perhaps through DFAT, on matters such as special regional treatment in Free Trade Agreements; encouraging greater foreign consular representation in northern Australia and regular visits by the southern-based diplomatic and consular corps; and coordination on State and Territory overseas representative offices, delegation travel and the negotiation of contracts, memoranda-of-understanding and sister province/city arrangements in order to improve synergies.

The role of migration policy and temporary foreign labor in northern development needs particular scrutiny given national interest considerations and the paradox of labor shortages and high unemployment, particularly amongst indigenous people, in a number of places. The matter is complex. One aspect that the Committee may wish to examine is the success or otherwise of seasonal labor schemes with Timor-Leste and Pacific Islands countries initiated in recent years and whether they might be widened beyond horticulture and limited tourism fields and the numbers taken and periods of stay increased for northern Australia. Beyond the training and employment priority that must be given to our own citizens, there would be merit in giving more opportunities to citizens of northern neighbours in the Pacific (including PNG), Timor-Leste and Indonesia.

An issue that the Committee may wish to address is the proposal for some form of special economic cooperation between northern Australia, Eastern Indonesia and Timor-Leste, with a lead role for the Northern Territory. The economic rationale and the descriptive language around the concept is imprecise and there seems to be no financial or other commitment by any government to date beyond travel and exploratory meetings. Variations on this idea have arisen many times in the past but have been predicated on unrealistic expectations of additional Australian foreign investment and aid flows and have never prospered and at times led to acrimony. There are existing business and people links between the three individual northern jurisdictions of Australia and Indonesia and Timor-Leste but the scope to take this to another level of trilateral economic cooperation or integration would seem very limited and premature. Questions arise as to what cost-benefit analysis of the proposal has been done; whether the Commonwealth is encouraging idea including the involvement of the States and Territories; whether the Northern Territory, a jurisdiction that is struggling to administer itself, should be leading such an initiative; and what priority it should have for the attention of Australian governments and public funding.

I wish the Committee well in its deliberations on this important matter.

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