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Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia

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I propose the following concepts for accelerating development of Northern Australia:

1. **Free land clusters:** Despite being so vast and so empty, it is not possible to enjoy our great expanses of Australia by simply owning a piece. By being able to settle through private ownership, the spread of new people, new spirits of enterprise, and new ideas can be allowed to take root. Small areas of land need to be released across the isolated and remote areas of the North, and along transport routes. Allow people to buy smaller lots for a peppercorn, the land has low value anyway. If they can't make a go of building there or getting themselves enough infrastructure to survive, the worst is the areas will go unoccupied or just be occupied seasonally say during the wet, or they will sell it on. People should be allowed to own and enjoy the expanses without having to buy thousands of hectares at a time. From this primary freedom, occupation, belonging, and inspiration will be engendered. This proposal offers a 'soft' form of colonization of remote areas and is a vital step in allowing for enterprise to be seeded rather than somehow constructed. Lowering the barrier in being in the North will allow enterprising individuals from all levels of the economic scale to initiate participation with the important step of being there and so learning the land and its opportunities.

2. **Small ports:** Australia has 35,877 km of mainland coastline much of it in Northern Australia. Our nearest neighbour Indonesia has 54,716 km with both countries sitting in the top six of longest coastlines among nations. Indonesia enjoys great access to its 'blue highway' by virtue of it being made mostly of islands and most land areas being close to coastal shipping of some scale. Small and low cost ports costing as little as \$200k give Indonesia's remote areas rapid access to outside markets. Australia needs to do the same in Northern Australia to create more symmetry with the Indonesian situation. An example is the Bing Bong loading facility on the Gulf coast of the NT. Originally built to export concentrates from the Macarthur River zinc-lead mine, it is finding a new life through iron exports of Western Desert Resources <http://www.westerndesertresources.com.au> which are trucked 165km to the port, and may also service energy exports if the success of Armour Energy <http://www.armourenergy.com.au> grows. Small ports could take cattle to small ports across Indonesia, and similarly mineral processing opportunities such as we see with nickel in Yabulu, Townsville

might open up. Lets get more small ports with fewer restrictions – vessels are engineered in many new ways these days and demand less of the port's infrastructure. Creating smaller and freer ports may well also entail Industrial Relations reform and the proponent governments may have to tackle the union constraint of coastal shipping head on to achieve this.

3. **International ideas:** It is possible, and even probable, that Australia does not have a monopoly on the imagination and creativity required to fully explore the full range of what is possible with its own North. To build a new building in Circular Quay Sydney, developers are required to run an international contest among architects, such is the modern awareness of the value of international input today. So where to source fresh and alternative ideas from to accelerate the development of the North, could be a vital question. A strong element of innovation could be introduced by harvesting from a wider human experience. We need to ask questions that we do not know the answer to. So why not go out to groups of planning and development innovators from say 10 different countries where conditions similar to those in our North prevail? Mongolians, Chilenos, some jungle terrain specialists, Africans, China Mongolians, Russians, Nevadans and others. The aim would be to learn cultural approaches and insights rather than academic approaches with emphasis on experience-driven teams delivering alternative recommendations. Not necessarily a large or expensive program required but has the potential to shake us free of the idea that we have the knowledge and experience in Australia to explore the potential of the North without help and inspiration from outside.
4. **Council free zones:** Throughout Australia Councils operate as a powerful force in defeating new ideas. Architects must fight to get the most basic innovations through, and more frequently don't. Because they are locally elected, and staffed by often unskilled local candidates, Councils inevitably tend to defeat creative thinking and the making of new communities by reflecting the selfish and unprogressive attitudes of locals best. Lowest common denominator principles tend to rule and hamper progress generally. Designated development areas should be cut free of any Council ownership for the purpose of piloting the development of new experimental districts where planning laws are totally open and experimental developers can do what they want (after passing some basic common sense tests). These would be SEZs where the economics would follow on the trail of pioneers seeking to exploit the greatest Australian asset – Freedom. And they could do it as a model and inspiration to others who could then drop needless restrictions, regulations and laws that choke imagination and defeat the very thing they say they are there to create through 'order'.