

20 October 2013

The Hon Andrew Robb AO MP
Federal Member for Goldstein
368 Centre Road
Bentleigh
Victoria 3204

Dear Mr Robb

Thank you for arranging for me to receive the booklet "Developing Northern Australia" and the paper on Water Management, both of which I have studied with great interest.

While the booklet sets out quite comprehensively a range of potential opportunities to develop Northern Australia it seems to me to be almost totally lacking in any indications as to HOW they are to be achieved – ie implementation – with the exception of a 3-line panel on page 5 re "Tasking Infrastructure Australia to conduct a comprehensive audit..."

I would suggest that two additional surveys should be considered for early implementation:

A) If it has not been previously carried out (which I suspect might be the case) a study on soil fertility levels throughout Northern Australia which, as we all know, varies from desert and barren rock to superb agricultural land and everything in between. This would tie in with the water resources study and would presumably be carried out by the CSIRO – an absolutely vital element if Australia genuinely plans to become a major source of food supply to Asia.

B) Active development of tourism is established as a major priority in your policy booklet. A comprehensive survey of the whole of Northern Australia's vast wealth of Aboriginal art would appear to be an absolute essential.

Infrastructure. As your booklet indicates, establishing a modern all-weather communications network throughout Northern Australia must be the Number One priority and it appears to me that the plans to re-locate the majority of Australia's defence forces throughout the North could offer an ideal structure. When the military establish themselves in their bases they invariably do so very well, installing good quality roads, sports grounds, shops, married quarters, medical facilities, police, schools and social structures ... all the essentials for a viable community.

In some cases, elements of the necessary infrastructure already exist. Wyndham, for example, has a very nice little port which could make an ideal base for naval Patrol Boats. It also has a no longer functioning abattoir which could again become operational if agriculture develops successfully (see below)

Putting in the necessary infrastructure will not be cheap. Where can the money come from? Two suggestions:

1) Scrap the plans to build the totally unnecessary AWDs (Air Warfare Destroyers) The first one is already in trouble!

2) Abandon all thoughts of building twelve Collins Mark Two submarines. Does anyone think they would be better than the embarrassing, hideously expensive Collins Mark Ones? Why do we need long range subs anyway? Long range to where?

For many years, Australia's maritime borders were very well protected by six Oberon Class submarines. Let's buy off-the-shelf Japanese or Swedish vessels, save billions of dollars and have more than enough dough to do a really good infrastructure job in the North! And design and build the finest multi purpose Patrol Boats in the world ... now that could be a real winner.

Not
relevant

Agriculture. A complete change of thinking is required here.

Up to now, the North (and indeed Canberra) has done nothing to successfully generate agriculture or aquaculture. When a Chinese or American entrepreneur comes along and says "I'd like to buy a few million hectares of your unused land" the Greens jump up and down exclaiming "They are stealing our land!"

Now, let us first of all decide what we want to produce, how we want to produce it and where. (Hence the proposed CSIRO survey mentioned earlier.)

Then we go out and find who can do it best. Example: the Rice Growers Limited at Leeton in NSW have done a superb job in establishing top-quality branded products equal to any in the world.

Rice growers could be approached with a view to establishing a major rice growing facility in the Ord River area where the necessary water supplies exist.

The incentive? Tax holidays -- a highly successful financial technique used throughout Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore in my experience and probably elsewhere. Only the chosen entrepreneurs can benefit from the tax holidays which can run from three to ten years or more.

Rice is one very important example. Other possibilities:-

- Maize/Sweetcorn: human food, animal food, the base for producing ethanol. A hugely popular vegetable throughout Asia. Suitable for large-scale industrial farming.
- Soy Beans. The Americans dominate this business, but there is absolutely no agricultural reason why it cannot be a mass-volume Australian industrial farming success story -- and feed Asia.
- Other products: pigs, goats, ducks, chicken, fish/seafood through extension of fish farms all the way round the Northern coast -- tuna, mahi-mahi, mackerel, eels, crustaceans, you name it! It will be essential for agricultural colleges to rapidly and thoroughly acquire expertise on all the above (and more!) Asian foods and products.

Labour. Most of the industrial farming products such as rice, corn, sugar, soybeans do not require large labour forces but, at a later stage, extensive market gardening can be foreseen for growing spices, nuts, herbs, fruit (Asian and domestic) etc. Pacific Islanders are good at this work.

The Coalition idea for a "Peace Corps" type of operation could be interesting. There are indications that Bio-Char can be effective in radically improving the fertility of marginal lands -- again the proposed CSIRO survey raises its head!

The Peace Corps could be actively and profitably used to upgrade the fertility of marginal lands, planting timber forests, clearing scrubland and perhaps work on the various surveys.

Random thought. With the rapidly improving relationship with Indonesia, could/should Australia think of establishing a cargo/passenger ferry link, maybe between Darwin and Kupang? Our wonderful high-speed aluminium catamarans could run a regular twice-a-week ferry which could take away most of the attractions offered by people smugglers and also transport fresh food to

Indonesia.

Another random thought. Writing this screed has made it clear what a huge job is involved ... it needs a strong coordinator to do it. How about Mal Brough? He has an army background, knows his way around the political scene and has a proven record in the North. Just a thought!

Hoping these comments may prove to be of some value to you, I remain,

Yours sincerely

Maurice Johnson

2 June 2013

Mr Peter Beattie
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Sydney NSW 2001

cc Andrew Robb

Dear Mr Beattie,

I read with interest your article in The Australian of May 18-19 with particular reference to research and innovation and the urgent need for greater efforts in these areas.

You may be aware that the Federal Opposition is preparing a plan, under the guidance of Andrew Robb, MP, for activating the development of Northern Australia. I think we may assume that this plan will be released if and when the Coalition win the upcoming September election.

While Tony Abbott and Co appear to be doing everything they can to play this very "cool", I personally believe that actively developing the North of Australia to "Feed Asia" could be the most important and exciting project for Australia since the Snowy Mountains Scheme of the 50's.

Your comments regarding R & D are entirely relevant as a strong focus on innovation in numerous areas will be required:

Science, chemistry, etc. If we handle this opportunity correctly, Australia could become the world leader in agricultural science, enhancing soil quality, seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and many more skills.

The farming community will need to overcome its heavy reliance on wheat, sheep (wool) and cattle and diversify into the foods that Asia demands – rice, soy beans, corn, pigs, ducks, goats, taro, yams, cassava, sweet potatoes, spices, fruits, etc. The fact that Chinese industries are showing major interest in investing in Australian agriculture could prove to very positive as they will have the necessary skills to ensure that Australia will produce products which will suit Asian taste buds.

The Asian diet is strongly orientated towards fish and sea foods, unlike the meat oriented western diet. Active development of aquaculture and all the related sciences will be essential. Australia's huge coastline can become an enormous plus factor.

One aspect of R & D that could be worth pursuing is food preservation and transport. While many foods such as cereals, sugar, rice, soybeans, root vegetables, etc, can be easily transported in bulk others, such as fresh green vegetables, many fruits, dairy products and raw and cooked meats deteriorate rapidly even when chilled.

"A flash of genius" may hopefully produce a new preservation technique to help feed Asia.

Logistics, transportation, economics

To successfully develop the North and permit large volumes of foods to move to Asia, the logistics of the North will need to be developed. Fortunately, the Australian government has decided to move many elements of the Australian Defence Force to the North. This could help the budgetting of infrastructure although it will be necessary to coordinate priorities carefully.

The amazing high-speed Australian aluminium catamaran cargo boats could offer a superb means to rapidly transport fresh products to Asia. Skilled economists, engineers and builders will be needed to develop and manage ports, transport, rail, etc.

The vital aspect of control of water supplies in the North will, I understand, be included in Mr Robb's plans.

CSIRO While the CSIRO has had some bad press recently most people like me think it is a very fine organisation.

It would seem to be highly desirable that the CSIRO should be given an important role in Developing the North, particularly in the areas of agriculture, soil enhancement, aquaculture and food preservation and maintenance of high quality standards.

CONCLUSION. In the long term, as the oil runs out and the iron and the bauxite and the copper and the zinc and the gas run out, what will we have? A lot of earth and trees surrounded by a lot of sea and probably rather a lot of people. With sea and earth, hopefully we can survive – but the time to start preparing is now!

Yours sincerely,

Maurice Johnson

PS I am sending a copy of this note to The Hon Andrew Robb to whom I extend thanks for his much appreciated letter of 28 March and a request for a copy of the plan for Developing Northern Australia when it becomes available.