



# **A New Deal for Northern Australia?**

**Overview of Roundtable held in Darwin Monday  
6th April 2009**

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## **Background to Roundtable**

In April 2009, Australia 21 convened a high level dialogue among 37 experts from industry, government, and academia, both from the North and the South and from the three jurisdictions that administer the North. The purpose of this discussion was to explore the principles that should guide future development of the North in the interest of all Australians.

About 6.2% of Australia's population lives North of the Tropic of Capricorn and more than 20% of the population are indigenous. That proportion is increasing and their general health and life opportunities are disastrously worse than their non-indigenous counterparts in both the North and the South.

Governance of remote indigenous communities is in urgent need of reform. Australians everywhere are now aware that a deeply unsatisfactory situation now exists with respect to large numbers of "First Australians" and their capacity to live an acceptable life, especially in the remote tropics.

While it is a source of much of Australia's mineral wealth, most of Northern Australia suffers from lack of infrastructure, inadequate governance, isolation, distance and sparse distribution of skills.

## **Findings of the roundtable**

- The meeting accepted the concept of "deep" sustainability" as an essential element of whatever kind of development is embarked upon in coming years in the North. It called for a new approach to planning which recognizes the dependence of the South on the North and builds the North in ways which will rectify past wrongs and provide long term future benefits for all Australians.
- The North currently depends on mining, broad-acre agriculture and tourism for much of the livelihood of its inhabitants. With falling agricultural productivity of the drying south questions have been asked about the possibility of the North becoming a new "food bowl" to compensate the decline in the Murray Darling Basin. Northern development will continue to depend upon investment from the South. The recent wave of interest from the South has been sparked by recognition that climate change will place the North in a relatively privileged position with respect to its access to water.
- The day of dialogue built upon a situation analysis outlined in a commissioned discussion paper, and on pre-circulation of the personal views of 26 of the 38 participants in the discussion. Much of the day was focused on the business case for a new deal for the North that will best address the needs of all Australians in a world of changing climate and uncertain economic values.
- A development planning process was proposed which should be initiated from the North, with substantial inputs of skills and experience from across the North,

including indigenous groups, as well as the South. The planning process should result in a vision for the future of Northern Australia, which is widely understood and “owned” by all levels of government including communities in the North.

- There was recognition that the North’s mineral resources are still only partially tapped and identified and that it possesses extraordinary tropical environmental and marine assets including vast tracts of relatively undisturbed and intact ecosystems which will become increasingly valuable as a mechanism for carbon bio-sequestration as global carbon trading gets under way. There is the opportunity in the current state of underdevelopment of the North for a leading edge sustainable water management regime.
- This could be part of a process of getting development “right”, both socially and biotically and such development must be built on evidence provided from scientific research as well as an understanding from the lessons of history.
- The North now presents Australia with exciting opportunities to build the essential services provided by ecosystems into the global economy, which inevitably degrades what is not economically valued. Valuing these services in an economic sense will provide new livelihoods and new opportunities for indigenous people to hone their landmanagement skills for use in the interests of all Australians.
- Northern Australia is an entry point to Southeast Asia. There will be both local and export benefits from building educational and research hubs in the North that are focused on sustainable environmental management, global health and bio-security. As well as developing industries that add value to the primary products that come from the North, there is need to build upon the success stories that have combined indigenous interest in land and marine resources with best practice land and fire management.
- The North can become an international leader in the supply of ecosystem services. To realize its potential value to both Northern and Southern Australia, the North requires substantial investment in its infrastructure and in its untapped human capital. Its most important asset is that it is a unique and large environmental system that is, by comparison with tropical areas elsewhere, one of the least degraded in the world.

## **Six Guiding Principles**

The group endorsed 6 principles, which it believed should guide future development of the North and could underpin a coordinated new strategy for development of the North. These principles are:

1. Planning for relevant development should be led more from the North than it has been.
2. Planning for the development of the North should be subject to essential institutional strengthening and new approaches to governance which should be informed

by the principle of subsidiarity. This principle asserts that while broad policy development will usually occur at high levels, implementation decisions should be made as close to the periphery, where they will have their effect, as is practicable.

3. Planning and management in the future must acceptably involve indigenous people who have been buffeted in the past by the good intentions and often, ignorance by those in position of planning authority in the South.

4. Planning and management for Northern development should be well-informed by science and research and by an inventory of what is valuable with respect to the natural resources of Northern Australia.

5. We must nurture and manage the natural assets and values which Northern Australia offers, including its world heritage, pristine ecosystems. A new approach that seeks to build the value of the ecosystem services that these intact ecosystems can and do provide to the Australian and global community should be a central component of future development of the North.

6. Government provided services should be at least as supportive to people and communities living in the North as they are to people and communities of equivalent size and remoteness in the South.

Each of these principles needs substantial research and developmental work to make them useful and vibrant elements of a future North Australian planning framework.

### **Other Inquiries**

There were recognized to be a number of groups currently working on various elements of these principles, including:

- “Desert Knowledge Australia” which is working on issues of governance for remote Australia,
- The North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAISMA) which is fostering partnership models in conservation,
- Australia 21, which is building a National Ecosystem Services Network (NESN) as part of a proposed National Ecosystem Services Strategy (NESS),
- The Northern Development Task Force which reports to the Commonwealth Government, and
- The Northern Mayors and the Northern Chambers of Commerce which have held recent meetings about common interests.
- Several Cooperative Research Centres on Desert Knowledge, Aboriginal Health and Tropical Savannas are currently in the rebid process and if successful, will have an important role to play in future development.

The group recognized the need for something like a “Northern Coalition of Experts on Future Development” to help to embed these principles into practice, recognizing the possible need to establish cross disciplinary and cross-institutional working groups on various of the six principles. It also recognized that there is now an important opportunity for new thinking about the North and for discussions with Government at all levels about a “New Deal”.

## **Follow up Activities**

### ***Working Groups established***

Following the meeting, the Australia 21 steering group, chaired by Professor Helen Garnett has commissioned four working groups to help put some initial flesh on the bones of the principles that emerged from the Darwin Roundtable.

#### **Working Group 1 Co-Chairs Professor Ian Wronski and Professor David Breton**

Principle 1. "That planning for relevant development should be led more from the North than it has been" and

Principle 2. Planning for the development of the North should be clearly subject to the principle of subsidiarity, subject to essential institutional strengthening.

#### **Working Group 2 Co-Chairs Dr George Wilson and Dr Graeme Webb**

Principle 4. Planning and management for Northern development should be well informed by science and research (and perhaps we need an inventory of what is valuable with respect to the natural resources of Northern Australia.)

#### **Working Group 3. Co-Chairs: Dr Allan Dale and Mr Peter Ampt**

Principle 5. That we should be undertaking this northern development especially nurturing the natural assets and values which Northern Australia offers

#### **Working Group 4. Co-Chairs Mr Paul Barratt and Dr Elsa Shepherd**

Principle 6. Government provided services should be at least as supportive to communities in the North as they are to communities in the south.

### ***Indigenous views sought***

Australia 21 is also approaching a group of senior Indigenous leaders with an invitation that they join a Roundtable discussion on the same question as led to this Roundtable, namely: **"What principles should guide future development of the North in the interest of all Australians?"**