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CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC POLICY RESEARCH

## Bringing it all together: Key implications for research and policy

A speech delivered on 18 July 2003 to the Second Charles Darwin Symposium — *Beyond the Frontier: Sustainable Futures for North Australia* at the Northern Territory University.

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the Larrakia traditional owners of Darwin.

The challenge for me is to summarise and value add at the end of an amazing series of presentations and discussions over the past 24 hours; a colleague has also challenged me to find one or two innovative things to say. Please excuse some crude generalisations, but I believe one has some licence to make them in such impromptu finales.

A word we heard from time to time during the symposium, perhaps not often enough, is integration. How do we integrate perspectives on the theme—*Beyond the Frontier: Sustainable Futures for North Australia*? My approach will combine my intellectual safety zones of economics and anthropology, with my new aspirational disciplinary approach, ecology, and with the perspectives of Indigenous people, Indigenous knowledge, and reflecting the views of people with whom I have collaborated for many years. I will try to bring these diverse perspectives to bear on the term ‘sustainable’ with its economic, ecological and social elements. The focus is more on the Northern Territory than north Australia, and I take on board criticisms of this geographic bias noted by presenters like Rosemary Hill (who in turn sought to focus more on Cape York and the Kimberley). Unfortunately this bias is historic caused by some straight politically-inspired lines drawn on the Australian landscape early last century and so is hard to overcome or ignore.

As to *Beyond the Frontier*, of course none of us live solely at the Frontier in today’s global world. Just this week the International Association of Landscape Ecologists came ‘Down Under’ for the first time ever. A bastion of Anglo-celtic culture, test cricket, made its first appearance in the Australian tropics to do battle with a new foe.

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Rather than dealing with physical location, perhaps Beyond the Frontier is a nice metaphor for where we may want and need to move our intellects, beyond conventional thinking to new horizons, to go where .... I'll stop before this gets too much like *Star Trek* except to note that man and woman have probably been everywhere in northern Australia. There is no wilderness out there!

Integration does not come easily. Not only do we have disciplinary perspectives and straightjackets, but the issues we are addressing are extremely complex, with much of this complexity caused by inter-relatedness of the economic, ecological and socio-cultural. We want to conceptualise holistically, but it is probably beyond the reach of the individual; there is no single polymath who can actually do it, this integration, in research or in policy, let alone both. So even our topic gets divided—sustainable cities, sustainable economic futures, sustainable land use—already we have lost the social and the cultural embedded in them. Part of my job in summarising is to try and stitch these things back together, and add a few that have dropped off, simplify complexity, not further complicate it ...

Sometimes in examining complex issues the comparative method helps. There are three, only three things, that really stand out to me about the NT. It is massive, about 1.3 million sq kms, circa 16% of the Australian continent; its population is tiny, 200,000 people or 1% of Australia's population. And it is significantly Indigenous: 30% of the NT population and about 50% of the land base is Aboriginal.

If you imagine that the NT as a country—which may be a bit far fetched as it is not even a State yet—then the following jurisdictional comparisons are instructive:

	Area	Population	GDP/head (\$US)
South Africa	1.22 m sq kms	44 million	\$8.5K
Peru	1.28 m sq kms	27 million	\$4.5K
NT	1.3 m sq kms	0.2 million	\$25K

Source: <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/world.htm>.

What stands out in this comparison is that despite its small population, the NT is also very wealthy. In 2002–03, Gross Territory Product was \$9 billion, but interestingly the 2001 Census indicates that household income is only \$3 billion, suggesting that this is a very open economy.

Another comparative perspective is time, and there are many that can be used. Barry Coulter used millions of years; John Chappel 10,000 years. It is not unusual to go back 50–60,000 years to the first records of Aboriginal habitation. I am going back just 25 years to 1978, a convenient time frame for me because it is when I first started undertaking research in the NT, at a time when the passage of self government legislation was heralded as providing a new beginning for the NT, and just two years after passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. Arguably, 1978 represents the belated start of decolonisation of the NT. Some 25 years later it might be timely to reflect on how we have travelled over this period in terms of sustainability, at the NT-wide level.

In economic terms, the NT looks sustainable. The economy has grown and the economic base has diversified. Taking Australian fiscal federalism at face value, the

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Commonwealth Grants Commission's impartial application of fiscal equalisation formulae has meant that the NT has done quite well, receiving 5.5 times the Australian average allocation per capita owing to its small population, limited revenue raising capacity and cost disabilities associated with large size: Viva Australian fiscal federalism!

In ecological terms, the NT has also done quite nicely, especially within national parks and on Aboriginal-owned lands, landscapes are structurally intact, unlike down south in temperate Australia. There are consequently fewer problems with dryland salinity and habitat and associated species loss. This ecological sustainability is explained in part by the absence of development pressure, but also in part by the common property nature of Aboriginal land which is communally-owned and inalienable—not quite a common property resource system, but close.

In social terms, the NT also looks sustainable with political stability and no 'sovereign risk' fears for investors. In 1978, and right up to 2001, some commentators feared that NT political institutions based on majoritarian democracy, but overly influenced by the geographic distribution of the population and racial difference might prove politically and socially unsustainable, delivering a one-party state. But in 2001 there was a change of government, and commentators heaved a sigh of relief. Democratic institutions in the north are alive and well.

However, scratch the surface of apparently sustainable NT 1978–2003 and what do we find? Myths, beautiful lies, dreadful statistics, emerging problems and untenable bipolarities often race based. Just a few examples from the many we heard at the Symposium, will probably do.

On the economic side, Indigenous people, the NT's original inhabitants have significant land rights (although even here there are losers too), but few commercially-valuable resource rights. Indigenous people live in relative poverty, constituting 30% of the population but receiving just 10% of NT household income, while the non-Indigenous 70% receive 90%. This is a complex issue with much history, a legacy of past discriminatory practice, and cultural and locational difference. The bottom line is that fiscal federalism that has served the NT well has not benefited its mainly rural dwelling Indigenous citizens—their cost disabilities, small communities and poor revenue raising capacity have not been sufficiently addressed. There has been a duality in the provision of services like health, education and housing. This is not sustainable.

On the ecological front, there is a heightened awareness based on some international quality NT scientific research that there is no room for complacency. Wild fires, ferals, weeds, new industries, national problems and international threats might all impact on NT landscapes. The problem of small scale is even more problematic than aggregate statistics tell us, there are only 44,000 rural residents, 75% of whom are Indigenous, to 'care for country'. Non-Indigenous Territorians, despite the outback myth, are as urbanised (at 88% in urban areas) as other Australians. Sustainable cities may be harder to achieve in the NT because many non-Indigenous residents eventually leave the NT. There is limited incentive for many of those passing through to invest in sustainability.

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On the social side there are economic and residential divisions that have been ignored for too long. Most non-Indigenous Territorians are well-off, urbanised and unlikely to be here inter-generationally, while most Indigenous Territorians are poor, living in rural communities and are here to stay. Their contributions to the NT are largely unrecognised, be it in ‘Caring for Country’ where it is done on a shoestring by people working for the dole [CDEP], or in the arts where practitioners number over 5,000, but where official statistics enumerate less than 200. And where spin-off benefits to the NT and the nation and internationally are unquantified, important industry infrastructure is under-supported.

That’s all in the past, and we are now at the start of the 21st century. There is a new national awareness of environmental and biological vulnerabilities; there is a new NT government that is looking to develop new policies that are more inclusive of all Territorians and that are more needs-based; and there are new opportunities for alliances, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Territorians, between researchers and policy makers, that may lead to political and community action.

Fellow Symposium-ees, where do we want to be in say 2028, in 25 years time, when those of us who prove biologically sustainable re-gather for another Charles Darwin Symposium convened at the internationally-acclaimed Group of Nine Charles Darwin University by an aging but still brilliant and argumentative David Bowman and an ageless and energetic Tess Lea?

Some things are pretty clear, at least to me:

- The NT will be the Northern State [or some such] in an Australian republic with new fiscal equalisation formulae that will need to work better for the new State. Political decolonisation will be complete and land rights and native title rights will be enshrined in an NT Constitution.
- The new State will be small still, with a population of perhaps 300,000, maybe 400,000; Darwin will be twice its current size, an entrepot at the railhead to Asia, and the Indigenous proportion of the population will probably be 40% not 30%.

Some things are less clear and more contestable:

- Small scale will still be problematic for the new State. In terms of research strength that will mean linkages; in terms of a public intellectual environment that is sewing its seeds today. A positive of small scale is that policy influence is very possible, but dangers are the potential for nepotism and small volatile electorates that might make governments cautious.
- Such caution might stifle the NT polity’s willingness to break with inappropriate national priorities and to take risks in areas where it might show national leadership—although there is some evidence that on a number of crucial sustainability issues, innovation in Indigenous policy and in environmental and national parks management the NT is showing national leadership in the early 21st century. The new State will need to be wary of national hegemony, especially in those areas where it demonstrates national excellence. There were hints of such hegemony even at this Symposium.

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- The new State will need to use fiscal federalism for its benefit, arguing for enhanced support to underwrite the stewardship of much of ecologically intact Australia for national and international benefit.

A sustainable new State future must be built around its comparative advantages, not those of the rest of Australia except where these value add, for example as part of a politically stable country with low sovereign risk, a safe haven for international investors and visitors. The NT must recognise and celebrate its unique identity built on its diversity. The uniqueness of the NT will be multi-faceted, but time limits me to explore just four examples:

1. The new State's economy will be built on its rich, diverse and robust Indigenous cultures—recognition and support will see a further efflorescence in Indigenous arts and in cultural tourism, the reasons why so many tourists come here already.
2. Joint Indigenous and non-Indigenous management focused on maintaining and enhancing intact landscapes and associated biodiversity will result in an environmental quality that is unrivalled in the world. This will enhance its status as an environmental tourism attraction.
3. The new State will be a world leader in Tropical and Desert Knowledge based on western and Indigenous sciences. It will be a knowledge exporter with an expertise in sustainable energy use, in atmospheric carbon abatement, carbon sequestration and trading. The new State will be a unique jurisdiction where environmental laws will require net environmental benefit from any new development, in mining, in energy industries, in construction.
4. The new State will be a national leader in terms of racial respect and in terms of inter-cultural collaborations and engagements with national and global economies.

The new State will make an adjustment. In the 25 years 1978–2003, the NT may have been too developmental; too seduced by the market and the economic growth mentality despite the costly environmental mistakes of the south; and too neglectful of its Indigenous citizens, too often viewing them as Commonwealth responsibility.

In the 25 years, 2003–2028, a shift will occur, to sustainability principles, to a recognition of the value of the NT's particular diversity and hybridity and how this can be nationally and internationally competitive.

I end with three thoughts:

- First, as Ian Lowe said yesterday, the future is not somewhere we are going: it is something we are creating.
- Second, we, the audience, are crucial to this creating. What Ken McKinnon and his team have done here is unprecedented and to be lauded. Darwin is 1/40th the size of Sydney, the dissemination of information from this Symposium is huge, to a public audience that pro rata would have numbered maybe 12,000 in Sydney. There are benefits in small scale. It is incumbent on us to research, to make policy and to take action to ensure a sustainable future for the north.

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- See you in 2028, or maybe before, to track our progress on the sustainable futures pathway. I am certainly keen to see how the next 25 years will compare to the last!

Thank you.

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