

# THE CONVERSATION

6 August 2013, 2.32pm AEST

## Northern Australia should have a say in its own future

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Let's look at ways to shift some power to northern decision makers. Michael and Daphne Oliver

**Northern futures, northern voices:** *It seems everyone has ideas about how Australia's north could be better, but most of those ideas come from the south. In this six-part weekly series, developed by the Northern Research Futures Collaborative Research Network and The Conversation, northern researchers lay out their own plans for a feasible, sustainable future.*

Recently, Australia's north has featured front-and-centre in national debates about the country's future; the election campaign will likely see more claims about what the north can do for the country.

Some cast it as the frontier saviour, a source of bold new resource and agricultural developments both real and imagined. Others dream of securing the north's expansive landscapes as iconic wilderness.

Northern policy has long been a source of conflict. Debates have raged about the success or otherwise of government interventions in indigenous communities. Quick-draw policy responses on complex issues like the live cattle trade have devastated many communities. Additionally, media images of coast-bound refugees keep the north's strategic importance centre-stage, raising unresolved tensions about our Asian-Pacific relationships.

Those debates are often crafted by, and for, a southern audience. In my view, we will continue to repeat the mistakes of the past until we rethink governance of northern Australia.

Governance is not sexy, but it's fundamental to making things happen. As a regional water official at a Mekong Basin workshop in northern Thailand recently stated, governance is "how society shares power, benefit and risk".

**The north needs a say too**

In the 1930s, Australian treasurer Ted Theodore was calling for northern separatism; few suggest that now. But many in the north would argue there are major flaws in the south's contribution to our governance and that major policy decisions are often made in the interest of a southern electorate.

The north is different to the south in many ways. It has a low population and institutional capacity. Land tenure is largely public rather than private. It is primarily an indigenous domain. It has enormous mineral and soil wealth, but resource limitations and a vastly different climate. Much of it is closer to populous Asia-Pacific capitals than to Perth, Brisbane or Canberra.

Northerners don't want separatism, but they do want a genuine dialogue between northern and southern Australia; one focused on how the nation as a whole might secure better northern governance. Australian and state and territory governments should negotiate big policy decisions in the north and manage government policy and programs in radically different ways.

This could emerge through a stronger northern Australian policy and delivery architecture integrated into COAG.

But to work, this kind of architecture must be powerfully engaged with a cohesive and strong pan-tropical alliance of northern Australia's sectoral interests. It would have to include traditional owners, local government, industry, human service and conservation. Such an approach must also be independently informed by the north's research institutions.

## Problems that need attention

There are land use and tenure conflicts across the north (the dispute over what to do with Cape York is just one example), and we need innovation to solve them. This requires a long-term, cohesive and regionally driven approach to land use and infrastructure planning.

We also need a more consistent approach to negotiating major project development, to build the long-term foundations for regional community development.

Alongside this, we have an opportunity to create a northern-specific ecosystem services economy - an economy that benefits from conservation. We could deliver land owners real economic benefit for managing extensive landscapes better.

Despite the Intervention, the fundamental (top down) model of both local government and indigenous community development has not changed much in 30 years. These approaches disempower and deliver stop-start progress. Fragmented, welfare-oriented, inflexible and annualised government programs simply do not build lasting human capacity.

Finally, to shift the whole economy from an historically boom-bust cycle, the nation must build a tropical knowledge economy. This could underpin productivity in existing industries (minerals, energy, agriculture, fishing, tourism) and help us think about export opportunities right across the globe's tropical latitudes. This will rely on Australia investing in tropical knowledge development (such as tropical health, agriculture, environmental and disaster management, design and energy) within the north, brokered into the wider tropical region through long term partnerships, trade and innovation clusters and foreign investment.

## A smart north is good for all Australians

A progressive and productive northern Australia, with a strong identity and great lifestyle, tightly integrated with its Asia-Pacific neighbours, should attract a diversity of people (with a wide skills base) interested in playing a strategic role in the Asian Century.

We can transform our reputation from the wild frontier on the northern margin of a vast empty

continent, to a naturally blessed region providing high-value knowledge-based services in the south of a dynamic, rapidly growing region of 500 million people.

This is indeed about how society shares power, benefit and risk.

If we don't get the governance right, we run big risks: we'll entrench a boom/bust economy, whole regions of multi-generational disadvantage and degradation of the nation's cultural and environmental jewels.

If we can more equitably share power and benefit across the north, we can capture opportunities that may hold the keys to the whole nation's future.