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Jobs versus the environment: the debate Queensland can end

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Not at loggerheads: jobs and the environment can coexist in Queensland's north. Willem van Aken/CSIRO/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

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Queensland has a new Labor minority government, led by Anastacia Palaszczuk, after the shock defeat of the Liberal National Party. Labor's pre-election promises were "modest", leaving many now wondering about the new government's policy agenda. Our experts examine some of the big challenges facing Australia's third-biggest state.

The tension between the two aims of protecting the environment and promoting economic development has been a major factor in the unprecedented swings from Labor to the Liberal National Party and back again in the past two Queensland state elections. If Labor doesn't want to fall foul of that trend again in three years' time, it has a tricky balancing act ahead of it.

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Disclosure statement

As Professor in Tropical Regional Development at the Cairns Institute at JCU, Allan Dale receives research funding from Commonwealth and State Governments and various not-for-profit institutions. He is also Chair of Regional Development Australia Far North Queensland and Torres Strait.

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Can Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk deliver on her pledge that “fundamentally it’s about [job creation](#), kick-starting our economy, restoring our confidence and restoring our trust”, without undermining her environmental promises, including that “only Labor will [protect the Great Barrier Reef](#)”?

There is a way to finally get off the outdated jobs-versus-environment seesaw – and many of the lessons for Queensland are relevant for other parts of the country too, especially across northern Australia.

How the environment has shifted votes both ways

At the 2012 election, one of the big contributors to Labor’s devastating loss was an increasing regional backlash against a raft of poorly engaged environmental regulations. That election left Labor with just seven MPs, having lost previously safe seats in areas like North Queensland.

In contrast, at the 2015 election, the public perception that the Liberal National government was cutting back on established environmental [protections](#) contributed to the Newman government’s stunning defeat.

Yet with sensible policy, both environmental and economic outcomes can be achieved jointly, not just in Queensland but across northern Australia. My new book, [Beyond the North-South Culture Wars](#), suggests that there are key policy initiatives that either Labor or an LNP government could use to escape the political see-saw between rampant developmentalism and environmental regulation without social justice.

It needn’t be an either/or choice. It’s possible to create policies that give certainty to the environment while also encouraging good economic outcomes, in Queensland and in other states and territories too. Here are some tips.

Tip 1: Implement stable, long-term land use planning

Somewhere along the way, planning gave itself a bad name. LNP governments tend to see it as an impediment to development, whereas Labor governments have typically used it with regulatory zeal as an environmental protection mechanism. But planning should be about providing everyone in the community with certainty: certainty to investors that they will be welcomed to invest in areas that are well served by infrastructure; and certainty to communities that special places will be protected. Planning needs to be consensus-based, and decisions need to be durable.

Tip 2: Reform the approvals system for major projects

Major development project approval systems should be about facilitating development in the right places, while also securing adequate and stable environmental standards. They should not be about bolstering development at all

costs, or being an impassable barrier. Our major project approval systems have become too politicised, with no clear underlying philosophy. Regular staff changes and inconsistent decision-making could end up scaring off investors while making no real environmental gains.

Tip 3: Improve regional development and natural resource management

Both Labor and LNP governments have increasingly recognised the need to invest in improved natural resource management (NRM), but for the past decade, this area has been in decline in Queensland. With limited resources for big jobs (such as rehabilitating reef catchments) we need stable regional NRM plans and capable delivery agents (such as landcare and conservation groups, farmers, Indigenous rangers, councils and others). Strategic regional coordination and capacity building is key.

Tip 4: Encourage 'ecosystem service markets'

Queensland and northern Australia have the potential to be ecosystem service suppliers of international repute; providing conservation works that meet the demands of an international economy that increasingly values and pays for the environmental cost of consumption. Neither state Labor or LNP governments have taken cohesive policy approaches to identifying, fostering and growing these markets to the benefit of jobs and the environment. High value bio-carbon and reef water quality products will inevitably become major new markets in Queensland.

Tip 5: Invest in new and innovative regional industries

Queensland has the natural and human capital to shift its dependence on mining, agriculture and tourism. With a lifestyle to die for, it can proactively attract many emerging industries that require high-tech operators who are not tied to a particular location (such as IT, research, education, and services). A lack of policy focused on transitioning our energy base will also leave us with high costs and stranded assets.

Tip 6: Support traditional owners to plan their own future

Both parties continue to focus attention on welfare or the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the mainstream economy. There has been little focus on supporting traditional owners to plan for their own future use and enjoyment of their land and sea resources, which in turn will [generate wealth](#). In many developed nations, Indigenous-led development is often becoming a very fast-growth economic sector as well as well as providing international leadership in the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas.

Securing both jobs and the environment

Queensland isn't the only place where the political narrative has [see-sawed from heavy-handed regulation to blinkered developmentalism](#). But the Sunshine State

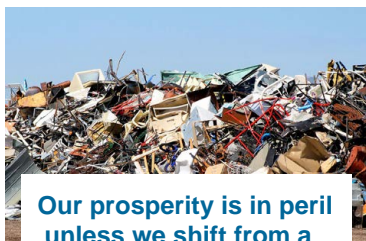
now has an opportunity to show the rest of the nation how this mindset can be overcome.

Queenslanders now expect a more nuanced approach that delivers better environmental outcomes and economic growth and jobs. Neither of the major political parties in Australia has yet devised such an approach. Hopefully, these six tips might encourage the Queensland, Commonwealth and other governments around the country shift their thinking.

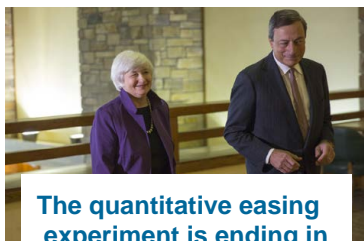
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Thanks, let's hope some more thought, planning and consideration goes into this.

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I am pretty sure that the fella's in both major parties are smart enough to know this stuff - which means they are doing this on purpose, creating a divide that they can conquer

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