

Planning Institute of Australia 2009 National Congress
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory
Darwin Convention Centre – 30 March 2009

As Administrator of the Northern Territory, I would like to welcome you, and to speak today about the history of *Exploring New Horizons* here in the north.

There is a temptation to meet and focus on motherhood statements such as *the planners' critical role and a coherent strategy for metropolitan development*. However, in exploring any new horizons, it is important that planners embrace critical cornerstones. They must:

- understand the past
- be in tune with what is happening elsewhere in the world
- be well educated about where we are heading with technology and trends, and
- on the front foot ready to move forward.

Every city is an evolution of its critical mass and the vision for the future has to be broad and prepared to embrace new energy. Sudden migration can create incredible pressures but a strategic urban plan provides the direction for positive change.

Paris, for example, was founded at the end of the 3rd century BC from villages of fishermen, farmers and foresters along the River Seine. Its eventual crisis of congestion was tackled by Louis XIV and Voltaire, Abbe Laugier with his *plan general*, Napoleon's massive public works programs and by Baron Haussmann who successfully opened up the core of the city with the boulevards and open spaces that are envied to this day. Progress in Paris continues with the introduction, in 2007, of the *velib* bicycle transit system which is being copied around the world.

Compared to Paris, exploration and settlement in the Northern Territory is relatively modern-day. Even so, I have heard it said that this city is possibly one of the most over-planned places in the country.

A good reason to focus on Darwin is that 2009 is the 50th year since an Ordinance provided that the Municipality of Darwin be constituted a city. The status that the early surveyors hold within our history is underlined by the fact that, uniquely, Darwin has a majority of city streets named after them.

Planning milestones began with HMS *Beagle*, 170 years ago, on 9 September 1839. John Lort Stokes recorded: *We entered a wide bay ... seen to be a magnificent harbour, which afforded us an appropriate opportunity of convincing an old shipmate and friend that he still lived in our memory. We accordingly named this sheet of water Port Darwin.*

It was noted that the harbour provided splendid anchorage, fresh water, and as the author Frank Clune notes in his history of the Overland Telegraph - *it would be a convenient terminus for a cable from Java or Timor.*

A few weeks ago, I witnessed a re-enactment taking place along the foreshore below Government House. There was a brisk breeze, a wet season slurry of clouds and, offshore, a longboat tossed about in the waves before it turned towards a small cove.

This was the 140th anniversary celebration of the arrival on SS *Moonta* of South Australia's Surveyor General, George Woodroffe Goyder, and his party. Frank Clune recounts: *This ... peninsula, about a mile long and half a mile wide – a low plateau, but high enough to drain the heavy rains – was selected by Goyder with sound instinct, as the site of the capital city.*

To this day, the geographic position of Darwin is obvious - from Townsville to Port Hedland - where else could you construct a capital city? Goyder's concept was appropriate for that era but he could not have envisaged the size of Darwin 140 years on. Its unusual characteristics set immense challenges which have led to a recent trend of thirty-storey buildings rising upwards.

Goyder's expedition had a mammoth planning task ahead of them – to translate natural, often forbidding landscape into a thriving outpost. The first peg driven into the ground heralded land development in the Northern

Territory. It was urgent and overdue. Half a million acres of rural land and more than fifteen hundred town lots had been pre-sold, sight unseen, to speculators in London and also to some Adelaide politicians wishing to invest in “*A Land Full of Possibilities*”, as the historian Peter Donovan referred to it. Donovan explains: *This was meant to ensure that the costs of northern settlement would not be borne by the government.* Three years later, The Northern Territory Land Act was passed which included the stipulation that land had to be surveyed before purchase!

During their eight months in the Northern Territory, Goyder’s party surveyed 999 allotments of half an acre each for the town, settlements at Virginia, Southport and Daly, and 2,200 farm blocks – more than 665,000 acres in all. Those surveys continue to prove a good resource. They were consistent and competent, despite being copied by hand in the unaccustomed heat and humidity. Goyder showed humility by not naming anything after himself. He did, however, name Frances Bay in honour of his wife, Frances Mary.

In 1882, thirteen years after Goyder, William Sowden recorded his experiences as a Special Reporter for the South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register. He accompanied the Member of Parliament, Honourable J Langdon Parsons, on the trip to Port Darwin. Parsons later became a Government Resident. Sowden recounts: *the parliamentary party ... left the apology for a jetty in Palmerston and boarded the steam-launch ... which sailed down the centre of the harbour and through Middle Point to Southport.* He noted: *All that would be needed, besides population, to make this a great shipping place, would be to drive down piles and reclaim a little land.*

The expedition disembarked at Southport and undertook a 300 mile round trip on horseback of a country that included 250 Europeans and 2,200 Chinese. Sowden vividly described the journey and accomplishments which were outstanding considering that, yet again, the trip coincided with the wet season.

Goyder had been known as “Little Energy” and Mr David Lindsay, the Government Surveyor who was travelling with Parson’s party, was described *as indefatigable as a white ant.* This was the termite with a voracious appetite

responsible for eating the timbers of two town wharfs, numerous surveyors' pegs and in Government House, in the 1960s, the description would still have struck a chord. My predecessor, Administrator Roger Nott, found that the white ant *had invaded his cellar, perforated the metal tops of bottles, polished off the corks* and when he went to use his saddle he found nothing left but a pile of sawdust and metal fittings.

The same thing happened, to a degree, to the township of Southport which subsided back into nature. Once, it was double the size of Darwin with a dozen or more vessels anchored offshore, a couple of hundred permanent residents, saddler, smithy, five stores, telegraph office, Wesleyan Church, a pub proudly named *The Royal Hotel* and even its own cricket team. 127 years later, all that remains is a dirt road, acres of tall grass, a scattering of homes and a lone fisherman casting from the steep bank. Once interest in the goldfields had waned, "the critical mass" moved on.

In 1913, a Royal Commission was established: *to inquire into the development of the N.T. in respect of railways, ports and the desirability or necessity of setting apart an area for the eventual erection of a new capital*. But, fourteen years later, the Territory became administered in two parts separated by the 20th parallel. For a while there was even talk of a new capital to be established midway between the Top End and The Alice.

In 1937 the Government, faced with the dilemma of what to do about developing the Northern Territory, decided upon the universal panacea of politicians – it appointed a board of enquiry ... Thus reports Geoff Helyar, Chief Draftsman 1957-1983, in his publication *They Led The Way*.

He continues: *the Payne/Fletcher Report was a comprehensive and well researched document supported by maps, diagrams and photographs, which laid down a plan of development for the next 25 years*. Unfortunately, no one foresaw that Darwin would become Australia's frontline in the Second World War, resulting in considerable devastation.

The military presence and the presence of construction workers had a dramatic impact on Darwin's population. At 30 June 1938, there had been almost 3,000 residents; within two years this figure had doubled. The City Planner for Brisbane, Mr RA McInnes, published *A Town Planning Scheme for the Town of Darwin* in 1940. Then, in 1944, he was invited to return and revise his earlier plan.

In 1950, Karl Langer, architect and town planning consultant, prepared a report entitled: *Investigation and Report on Municipal and Commonwealth Administrative Centres in Relation to Shopping and Commercial Zones in the Town of Darwin* – said town was definitely in danger of being buried by committees, boards and reports! As an aside, I note that Mr Langer's fee for a similar commission for Cumberland County Council, three year's earlier, was set at six guineas a day, plus a guinea a day for living expenses.

Sir Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories 1951 to 1963, reminisced in the Eric Johnston Lecture he presented in 1991 entitled *Pioneers of Post War Recovery: In 1951. .. the Northern Territory was lagging behind in any moves for post-war reconstruction. .. The Esplanade, apart from a small patch at the football ground, was a wilderness of high brown grass from which the rubbish of war had not yet been cleared. The old post office was still a roofless ruin. The harbour had not been cleared of wrecks.*

Hasluck continued: *Director of Lands, Hugh Barclay, had an immense responsibility... one of the major reasons why there had been little post-war building in the town was that no-one had any long-term title to land... One reason for the indecision in restoring titles was divided opinion whether the town was in the right place. Planners wanted to build Darwin somewhere else. One of my first decisions as Minister was that the town should stay where it was and town leases should be restored. That decision took no more than a day.*

In 1965, another sweeping decision was made, this time by the Port Authority in order to expedite the export of iron ore. The landmark of Fort Hill was razed and Earl James, an Honorary Fellow of the Planning Institute, remembers

working with the Historical Society to exhume and relocate the bodies of two members of Goyder's original survey party who had been buried there. John Bennett had been fatally speared and Richard Hazard had died of severe rheumatism and consumption.

Graham Bailey, a Life Fellow of the Planning Institute, cites Harcourt Hilton Long as one of the most significant planners in Darwin's modern history. When Harcourt was appointed as the first Planning Officer to the Northern Territory, he found an old leasehold system in place - in effect every site had its own conditions. He had to resolve this, as well as create a long term vision.

Harcourt had been a member of the forces stationed in Darwin during World War II. He had also designed the new town of Kununurra. His tasks included considering in what direction Darwin would develop and at what speed it would increase in population. When he arrived in 1963, there were less than 18,000 residents of Darwin and he took the view that the historic town and port of Darwin should remain the permanent city centre and should have easy access to the areas of greatest amenity – the harbour and its beaches.

In his Town Planning Scheme for the ten year period 1965-1975, Harcourt listed a summary of nine basic proposals, from the filling in of remnant areas around the older areas of Darwin to the design of reclamation areas. At the end of the list he noted: *All of the above represent normal development which would have to be met in one form or another with or without a planning scheme.*

I note, in passing, that Harcourt Long was Chairman of the Cox Peninsula Working Committee and in my former position as Solicitor-General I became very familiar with his findings as the Kenbi Land Claim progressed. Harcourt Long left the Territory in 1970 and there then came a succession of potential growth options, strategy plans and land use studies produced by P.G. Pak-Poy and Associates of Adelaide.

Cyclone Tracy on Christmas Eve 1974 caused immense chaos and controversy. Landowners often found that in one hand they held a lease with

conditions to build something in a defined time span, in the other hand they had a stop notice issued by the Darwin Reconstruction Commission. And then came Self-Government in 1978.

For the past three decades more plans, concepts, submissions and reports have continued to flower, despite Mr Bailey's noted belief on what forms our society. He said: *sometimes I think that planners are painted as having more levers in their hands than in fact we do ... it's much more the market place and what the community in any given place actually wants.*

I think it best to conclude with some further words from Geoff Helyar, from *They Led The Way*. In this passage he quotes the founder of Darwin, Goyder, as follows – Please note that I am not advocating that you take this literally over the next few days:

I found from actual experience that unless the men had a stimulant early in the morning that they could not eat their breakfast, and also that they could not eat their dinner unless they first had a stimulant. I worked as they did and found out whatever was required when the fits of lassitude came, and treated them accordingly.

Rain fell heavily. What with mosquitoes and the rain and heat, fits of lassitude would come over me and I had little inclination to work ... With stimulants men can work on the surface of the ground well but take them away and they utterly fail. There is a note added: When questioned, Goyder said that the stimulants used by the party contained alcohol – "they never would have got the work done without them"!