

NEWSFEED



Time to Act on Northern Australia

Australia's North is a region vital to the economic growth of the nation.

Northern Australia is one of the greatest challenges and opportunities facing the country.

This is the view of Parliament's Northern Australia Committee, which has tabled its final report on the development of the region.

The committee took on several tasks, including investigating the potential for development of industries such as mining, energy, agriculture and tourism, and finding ways to address impediments to economic and social growth.

Committee Chair, Warren Entsch (Leichhardt, Qld), said it is time to act on Northern Australia, an area with a small population but large resource potential.

"Northern Australia covers over 40 per cent of Australia's land mass but contains only 4 per cent of the population. It has abundant land, water and mineral resources. It has medical and educational institutions with world class facilities."

Northern Australia sits on the doorstep of Asia and the tropics, which by 2050, will encompass over half of the world's population. Mr Entsch said that development could bring great opportunities.

"The committee has made recommendations to establish a Cooperative Research Centre for northern agriculture, and develop a national institute for tropical sports and sports medicine."

Some of the most important contributions to the inquiry stressed the need for detailed research on the best economic and social development options.

"We might not be the food bowl for Australia but we certainly can put more food on the table, and we can advance



▶ THE GREAT NORTH: Calls for best development options.

the capacity of our Asian neighbours to feed themselves through the pioneering work that has been done in agricultural and horticultural innovation," said Mr Entsch.

Twenty seven public hearings and 15 days of site inspections were held in communities throughout the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. Industry, council, business, Indigenous and community representatives identified what they see as the issues that need to be addressed.

The report makes 42 recommendations with seven priority recommendations:

- The creation of a Department of Northern Australian Development, based in Northern Australia.
- The identification of key roads and the commitment of funding for their upgrade as a matter of priority, subject to relative benefit assessment. Projects to consider include: continued upgrade of National Highways (including the Bruce and Stuart Highways);

Hann Highway; Peninsula Development Road; Tanami Road; Outback Way; and beef development roads.

- Cost-benefit analysis to be conducted on a rail link between Mount Isa and Tennant Creek, and the building of passing lanes on the Darwin to Alice Springs Railway.
- Funding and development of water infrastructure projects that meet scientific and economic assessments and are consistent with national water policy, including: use of groundwater for expanding horticulture, Flinders River Weir, Urannah Dam, Elliot Main Channel, Nullinga Dam, Eden Bann and Rockwood Weirs on the Fitzroy River, Cloncurry Dam, Cave Hill, and

proceeding with the set-up of the Water Project Development Fund.

- Investigation of the potential and practicality of special economic zones.
- Measures to reduce insurance premiums in Northern Australia to affordable levels.
- Continued funding of the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative.

The committee's findings and recommendations will inform a Government White Paper, to be released later this year.

The full report can be found at www.aph.gov.au/jscna ■

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Condolences for victims of the Martin Place siege

A condolence book for the victims of the December 15 Sydney siege was placed in the Parliament House Marble Foyer paying tribute to the victims of the Martin Place siege, in which three people died, including the hostage-taker. Fifteen other hostages survived the ordeal.

The flag atop Parliament House in Canberra flew at half-mast as a sign of respect for the victims.

As a result of the tragedy, Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the Premier of NSW, Mike Baird, established a review.

Prime Minister Abbott said that following the tragic loss of innocent lives, we must learn what we can from this incident and implement any changes necessary at the state and federal level.

“The Commonwealth and New South Wales governments will urgently conduct a review into the Martin Place siege and what lessons can be learned from the events leading up to and surrounding the siege. As our State and Commonwealth law enforcement and security agencies work together to keep Australia safe, the review will identify important lessons for the future.”

“The review will take account of the parallel investigations into the incident including by the NSW State Coroner, NSW Police and Australian Federal Police,” the Prime Minister said.

(Editor’s Note: The review has now been completed and the governments’ response to the report is expected in coming weeks.) ■



Life experience required when handling tax disputes

Commonwealth Ombudsman calls for a triage system when handling complaints



▶ SENIOR TAX OFFICERS: The ATO is trying to boost taxpayer trust.

Senior tax officers with greater life experience need to pay more attention to dealing with complaints from the public, a parliamentary inquiry has been told.

The Tax and Revenue Committee is investigating disputes between taxpayers and the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), in particular in relation to collecting revenue; fair treatment and respect of taxpayers; and efficiency, effectiveness and transparency from the perspective of both taxpayers and the ATO.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman, Colin Neave AM, told the committee that life experience is vital for the proper handling of disputes.


“You really have to have that triage system in place. The most experienced people in an organisation are often the people who should be involved in dealing with complaints, but quite often it is the most junior people who are involved in complaints.


“There are all sorts of problems with things like pay rates, levels and all the rest of it in both the public sector and the private sector. You have very fine young people with terrific education and all the rest of it, but, unless they have seen both sides of the real world, they come up with a slant on something which is not particularly helpful for either party—the complainant or the institution,” said Mr Neave.

Committee Chair, John Alexander (Bennelong, NSW), said, “Through the Committee’s work which will contribute to the Government’s broader agenda on tax reform, the ATO has made clear its efforts to promote taxpayer confidence and trust in the system.” ■

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Freedom of speech in a modern day democracy



University students throughout Australia have been challenged by the Speaker of the House of Representatives in a competition designed to raise awareness of the House among young Australians.

The Speaker's University Challenge encourages students to voice their opinions during a three minute video on a topic chosen by Speaker, the Hon Bronwyn Bishop (Mackellar, NSW).

Last year's challenge, titled "Freedom of speech in a modern day democracy", was won by Patrisha Kay from Griffith University, and first prize included a trip to Canberra to meet her challenger.

Ms Kay argued that there is no real freedom of speech because there are so many restrictions, from defamation to discrimination.

"We are constantly thinking whether our words will be misconstrued, but in this age of mass social media, we aren't really listened to anyway," she said.

Entries were judged upon well-constructed arguments that engage the audience, original and creative ideas and presentation, and demonstrated use of evidence and research. ■

Possible referendum on Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people



The committee recommended that the House of Representatives and the Senate should each allocate a full day of parliamentary sittings to debate concurrently the three options.

Based on the written submissions and public hearings so far, the committee is convinced of the

benefits of recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution.

Community support for the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is on the rise. According to the progress report of the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, community support grew between August 2013 and August 2014.

However, the report showed awareness of the proposed referendum on constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples fell from 42 per cent to 34 per cent during the same period.

It showed that a successful referendum proposal would need to meet three primary objectives:

- recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of Australia;
- preserve the Commonwealth's power to make laws with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
- in making laws under such a power, prevent the Commonwealth from discriminating against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Committee Chair, Ken Wyatt (Hasluck, WA), said that action is needed to focus the nation's attention on, and build momentum towards, what would be a significant change to our founding document.

"A 'circuit breaker' should be rapidly identified to settle the final form of words, and draw debate on the model to a conclusion. This will build a sense of national urgency and provide renewed certainty that the country will proceed to a referendum," said Mr Wyatt.

"Ultimately, a referendum proposal must take the form of a Bill submitted to Parliament, and that Bill must be passed by an absolute majority in both houses. It is imperative that the wording of that Bill be capable of achieving near unanimous parliamentary support." ■

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Self-governance fails on Norfolk Island



Norfolk Island is increasingly reliant on handouts from the federal government and its self-governance should be repealed, a parliamentary committee has reported.

The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories tabled its report, “Same country: different world - The future of Norfolk Island”, making eight recommendations to improve the island’s economic future.

The committee recommended improving infrastructure, enhancing existing tourist products and services and developing new ones, as well as complementary industries.

Committee Chair, Luke Simpkins (Cowen, WA), said economic and governance reform have long been a topic of discussion.

“Norfolk Island is effectively bankrupt and self-governance does not best serve the residents of the island.

“The evidence tells us it is time for change. That change, while challenging, will allow for economic viability and prosperity into the future. This is what must be done for the people of Norfolk Island,” he said.

A road map devised by the federal and local government in 2011

recommended that islanders start paying mainland taxes in return for benefits. Even with such a change, the loss of the island’s semi-autonomous status appears inevitable.

The tiny community was settled by ancestors of the Bounty mutineers in 1856 and increasingly relies on federal government funding. The report says it is an ‘unfortunate economic reality’ that the territory’s model of self-governance, established 35 years ago, has failed the island’s 1,800 residents.

Mr Simpkins says the committee is aiming to ensure residents have the same opportunities as the rest of the country.


“At the moment, we’ve got all sorts of economic problems there and we just want what is best for the people,” he said.

The full report is available at www.aph.gov.au/jscncet ■

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Social media acknowledged in the Chamber

The rapid growth of social media is shaping the way in which Members communicate, in much the same way as the internet and email changed the way they interacted with their constituents.

This is one of the findings in a Procedure Committee report that examined the current regulatory framework regarding the use of electronic devices and the way they are being used by Members in the House.

Issues such as the potential impact on order in the Chamber, respect for the role of the Chair, and the likely status of comments made by Members on social media were examined during the inquiry.

Committee Chair, Don Randall (Canning, WA), said Members can now reach mass audiences instantaneously from their places in the Chamber, and while many Members have adopted this new technology with enthusiasm, they need to be mindful of the rights of others and the need to uphold the dignity of the House and its formal proceedings.

The first recommendation relates to a Privileges and Members’ Interests



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Committee publication, which provides practical guidelines for Members on issues encountered by them in their correspondence and records, including their status. The Procedure Committee recommended that expansion of these guidelines to address communications made by Members using electronic devices would be advantageous.

The second recommendation is focused entirely on the use of electronic devices by Members in the Chamber, Federation Chamber and committees and proposes that the House adopts a resolution which:

- permits Members' use of electronic devices in the Chamber, Federation Chamber and committees, provided that use of any device should avoid interference or distraction to other Members, either visually or audibly, and should not interfere with proceedings – in particular, phone calls are not permitted and devices should be operated in silent mode;
- devices are not permitted to record the proceedings (either by audio or visual means);
- communication on social media regarding private meetings of committees or in camera hearings will be considered a potential breach of privilege;
- use of devices should be as unobtrusive as possible and should be directly related to the Members' parliamentary duties; and
- notes that communication via electronic devices, whether in the Chamber or not, is unlikely to be covered by parliamentary privilege; and reflections on the Chair by Members made on social media may be treated as matters of order just as any such reflections made inside or outside the Chamber.

The committee received five submissions to the inquiry along with informal feedback from Members. The full report can be found at www.aph.gov.au/proc ■

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AFP and telecommunications targeting online crime

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) says that criminals are constantly looking for opportunities to exploit technology in order to commit crime.



▶ BLOCKING OUT: Online crime.

Should agencies be able to obtain assistance from the telecommunications industry when upholding Australian law in the fight against online crime?

The House Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications is currently investigating the use of subsection 313(3) of the Telecommunications Act 1997, which provides Commonwealth, state and territory agencies with the ability to block access to certain websites.

The AFP uses section 313 to block websites which contain the most severe child sexual abuse and exploitation material. When a user attempts to access one of these sites, they are blocked with a page that provides certain information, including reasons for the block and contact details for any dispute.

Other Commonwealth agencies have also used section 313 to prevent the continuing operation of online services in breach, or potentially in breach, of Australian law, such as online fraud.

Committee Chairman, Jane Prentice (Ryan, Qld), said the committee's inquiry is focusing solely on the use of the subsection for the purpose of disrupting illegal online services.

"The committee is looking at which government agencies can make requests

under the subsection, and what level of authority they should have to make such requests," said Ms Prentice.

"Importantly, we are also focusing on the characteristics of illegal or potentially illegal services that should be subject to such requests, and the most appropriate transparency and accountability measures that should accompany such requests."

Acting Deputy Commissioner Close Operations Support and AFP Assistant Commissioner, Kevin Zuccato, said that online crime is not like traditional crime.

"If I am investigating cocaine importations, I am looking at South America and leveraging off my colleagues in the US. If I am looking at heroin, I am in Asia... but with this type of activity, it could be anybody, anywhere. In a lot of instances, that can be a very sophisticated operation coming out of Russia or it can be a rudimentary set-up coming out of some kid's home in Cooma," Assistant Commissioner Zuccato said.

In its submission to the inquiry, the AFP said that an appropriately senior level of accountability and oversight when using the subsection should be in place, in order to maintain public confidence that blocking powers are being used proportionately and appropriately. ■

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World leaders visit Australian Parliament

The leaders of three of Australia’s largest trading partners addressed special sittings of the House of Representatives in November.

Senators were invited to join Members in the House to hear Prime Minister of the United Kingdom the Rt Hon David Cameron MP, President of China His Excellency Xi Jinping and Prime Minister of India Mr Narendra Modi, who were in the country for the G20 leaders’ summit.

Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, told Parliament the visits were an opportunity to strengthen some of Australia’s most crucial international relationships.

“It’s a chance to showcase our country and to promote jobs and growth with the leaders of the world’s largest and most representative economies. These leaders represent two thirds of the world’s population and some 85 per cent of the world’s gross domestic product,” Mr Abbott said.

UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, said his second visit to Australia as Prime Minister felt like visiting family. He described Australia as a can-do country that wants to shape the world it lives in—not be shaped by it.

He said that each year, more than 600,000 Britons visit Australia and a million Aussies travel to the UK. He also said that our mateship runs deep.

“In almost every major conflict for 100 years, we have fought and bled and died alongside each other—in the Second World War, from the ingenuity of the Dam Busters to the endurance of Tobruk, and in our lifetimes, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq. Ours is an alliance that has been forged



 UK PRIME MINISTER DAVID CAMERON: Visiting Australia ‘like visiting family’.

in adversity and tested over time,” Mr Cameron said.

The UK Prime Minister stressed that there is no opt-out from today’s struggles and that we must deal with terrorist extremism by addressing its root cause.

“It is not poverty and it is not exclusion from the mainstream. Of course we have more to do, but we are both successful, multicultural democracies where opportunities abound.

“It is not foreign policy. In our democracies, we must never give in to the idea that disagreeing with a foreign policy in any way justifies terrorist outrages. No. The root cause of the challenge we face is the extremist

narrative. So we must confront this extremism in all its forms,” said Mr Cameron.

The UK Prime Minister concluded his speech to the special sitting saying that we should never take our good fortune for granted.

“We live in countries where the press is free, the law is fair, the right to redress is universally available, property rights are universally enforceable and freedom of speech is the foundation of our democracy.

“These things have made our countries great, and if we have the courage to stand by them they will continue to do so now and for generations to come.” ■

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“Big guy” China full of opportunity

China’s growth brings further opportunities.



TRADE PARTNERS: Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Chinese President His Excellency Xi Jinping.

China’s President His Excellency Xi Jinping made the first state visit by a President of the People’s Republic of China since 2007 and it coincided with the announcement of a free-trade agreement between the two countries.

China’s remarkable economic development has propelled it to become our largest trading partner and a significant investor, and President Xi said that economic and cultural interactions and cooperation between the two countries are flourishing.

“Two-way trade grew from US\$86 million in the early years of our diplomatic relations to US\$136.4 billion in 2013, and China has been Australia’s biggest trading partner for five consecutive years while also being Australia’s largest source of international students and tourism revenue,” the President said.

President Xi said that his government has set two goals for China’s future development.

“The first is to double the 2010 GDP and per capita income of urban and rural residents and build a society of initial prosperity in all respects by

2020. The second is to turn China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by the middle of the century,” he said.

President Xi noted that some nations have concerns about China—that as a country of over 1.3 billion people, it is the ‘big guy’ in the crowd.

“They wonder how the ‘big guy’ will move and act and they may be concerned

that the ‘big guy’ may push them around, stand in their way or even take up their place,” he said.

“But while China is big in size, our forefathers realised over 2,000 years ago that a warlike state, however big it may be, will eventually fall.”

It is estimated that in the next five years, China will import more than US\$10 trillion of goods, its outbound investment will exceed US\$500 billion, and Chinese tourists will make over 500 million overseas visits.

President Xi said all this will provide a bigger market, more capital and products, and valuable cooperation opportunities for Australia.

“As the Chinese saying goes, true friendship exists only when there is an abiding commitment to pursue common goals. With our joint efforts, the friendship between the Chinese and Australian people will span over mountains and oceans. Such friendship will withstand rain and storm, and will be as strong and everlasting as the majestic Uluru rock in Central Australia and the Great Wall in northern China.” ■

Inquiry votes NO for electronic voting

At the next election, will we be voting with a pencil and paper or the click of a mouse?

Brazil has used electronic voting machines since 2000 and in Estonia, the electorate votes via a click of the mouse over the internet. Advocates for electronic voting argue that it is a logical next step and potentially more secure.

In Australia, we still vote with a pencil and paper and then the sheets are counted manually.

The Electoral Matters Committee has tabled its second interim report on its inquiry into the conduct of the 2013 federal election: An assessment of electronic voting options. The report reveals that, for the present, electronic voting is not a feasible option in Australia.

Committee Chair, Tony Smith (Casey, Vic), said that our voting system has changed and evolved over the 113 years since the first federal election in 1901, but that electronic voting for the next federal election will not happen.

“In logistical terms, it would be impossible for our electoral authorities to roll it out next polling day, which is less than two years away,” Mr Smith said.

But what about future elections? With electronic voting, the results are known within minutes of polls closing rather than hours, days or weeks, and there would be none of the human error that occurs in the long paper ballot count.

With internet voting, voters would no longer have the expense or inconvenience of physically going to the polling booths and waiting in line.



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Mr Smith said that for this reason, internet voting seems to be the most attractive options for voters.

“As an election expert from the USA recently said to me: ‘when it comes to voting, folks would rather be online than in line.’”

However, the inquiry found that Australia is not in a position to introduce any large-scale system of electronic voting in the near future, without catastrophically compromising its electoral integrity.

“Over the course of the twenty hearings to date and in reviewing the 207 submissions received, after hearing from a range of experts and surveying the international electoral landscapes, it is clear that internet electronic voting is highly vulnerable to hacking,” said Mr Smith.

“In future, it is likely, given the turbo-advances in technology, that a system of online electronic voting could be delivered with acceptable safety and security.”

Mr Smith said there are other aspects of our voting process that should be brought into the modern electronic world; aspects that will not compromise the security, sanctity and secrecy of the ballot.

“At present, every electorate booth has a paper roll and when you vote your name is crossed off. With an interconnected electronic roll, when your name is crossed off and you are provided with a ballot, it will be simultaneously crossed off at every other booth, reducing the opportunity for multiple voting in your name.

“At the same time, we should start to introduce electronic scanning of ballot papers. This enables an electronic count, the results of which would be delivered minutes after the close of the polls. The same physical count that occurs now would still be performed for verification,” he said. For the full report, see www.aph.gov.au/em. ■

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Sharing more than a love for cricket with India

Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi urges the separation of religion and terrorism.



▶ A ROCKSTAR'S WELCOME: Indian-Australians came out to see Narendra Modi.

Narendra Modi made the first visit to Australia by an Indian Prime Minister since 1986 and he received a rockstar's welcome.

Following Prime Minister Tony Abbott's visit to India to continue discussions on strengthening trade and economic links between the two countries, tens of thousands of Indian-Australians welcomed Mr Modi into the country.

His entrance into the House of Representatives was received just as warmly, as Mr Modi described the two countries as united by the ideals of democracy and proud of their many shared values.

“We celebrate the legend of Bradman and the class of Tendulkar together. We are impressed by Australian speed as you are charmed by Indian spin, until, of course, Shane Warne came along!”

“Australia evokes images not just of immense beauty but also of a great quality of life. Today, its cities are alive with the richness of this world's diversity. And it is home to 450,000 Indians, who are as proud to be part of Australia as they are of their Indian heritage,” he said.

Prime Minister Modi sees Australia as a major partner in every area of India's growth, including health and education.

“We will partner to provide skills and education to youth, a roof over every head and electricity in every household, the most affordable health care for the most difficult diseases, the next generation of infrastructure, and energy that does not cause our glaciers to melt.

“In turn, India will be the answer to your search for new economic opportunities and your desire to diversify your global economic engagement,” said Mr Modi.

Like Prime Minister Cameron, Prime Minister Modi spoke of his region's security and said that terrorism has become a major threat for all.

“Terrorism is changing in character and expanding in its reach. It will require a resolve to isolate those who harbour terrorists, a willingness to empower states that will fight them, a social movement against extremism in countries where it is most prevalent, and every effort to de-link religion and terrorism,” Mr Modi said.

“So we stand together at a moment of enormous opportunity and great responsibility.” ■