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June 2023 / CE Ref-J3469

FACING REALITIES IN A YEAR OF POPULATION MILESTONES Article For ConnectFNQ Magazine

The year 2023 will see Australia's Tropical Northeast Regions (based on Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton, see map), reach population milestones. While it is time to reflect on past achievements, it's also important to reflect on recent trends and future challenges facing the area.

Tropical NorthEast Reaches One Million

An old Queensland Year Book in our library records that in 1954, tropical Queensland had a population of only 301,000 compared with 309,000 in the State of Tasmania.

That the population, in an area equivalent to the combined areas of New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the populated parts of South Australia, was only about that of the tiny State of Tasmania reflected the challenges the young Federation of Australia (with most of its technology and population derived from temperate zone northwestern Europe), faced in settling and making productive, Australia's tropical regions. With conditions suitable for the suite of highly productive temperate zone crops and livestock, housing, clothing and the like the settlers brought with them, Tasmania developed quickly.

Development of tropical Australia was late being commenced and progress was initially slower. However, major progress has occurred since 1954. Today, the population of the four tropical regions based on Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Rockhampton is almost twice that of Tasmania, having reached the one million milestone.

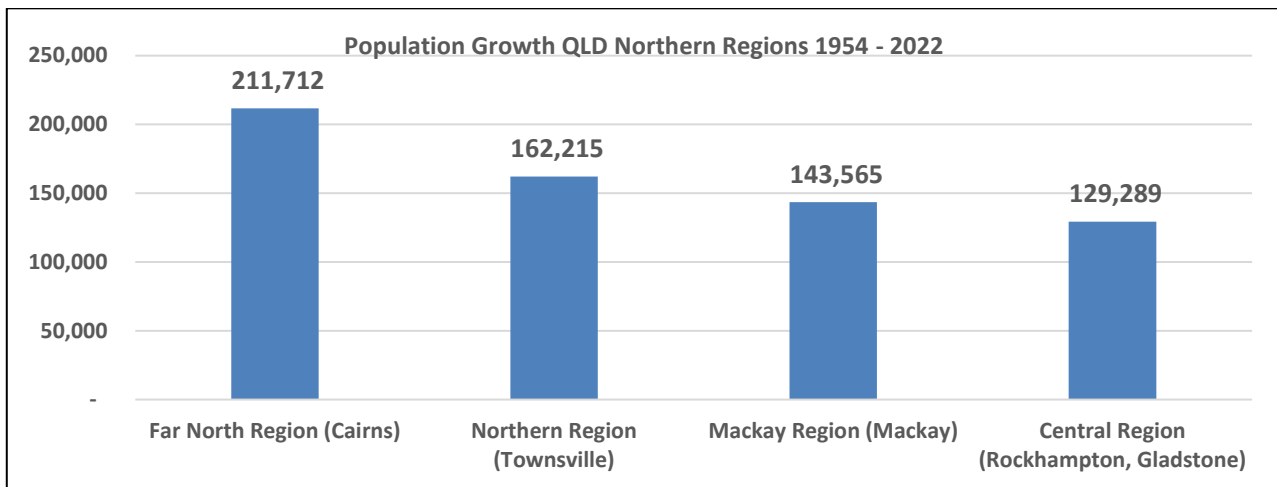
The Tropical (Far) North Reaches 300,000

Importantly, the Cairns/Tropical (Far) North Region (the furthest north and deepest in the tropics), has led the growth that has occurred since 1954 to become the largest in population, also reaching a milestone of 300,000 this year (see following chart).

Australia's Tropical NorthEast Regions



In achieving this milestone, the Local Government Areas of Tablelands and Mareeba have been an important element, having reached a milestone of 50,000 in 2021-22.



Source: Cummings Economics, ABS Data, Queensland Yearbook 1959 No.20.

Cairns Over 176,000

In 1954, Cairns City Local Government Area recorded a population of a mere 21,000 with Townsville 40,000, Rockhampton 41,000 and Mackay 15,000. Cairns LGA passed the 170,000 mark in 2021-22 and currently would stand at close to 175,000. Townsville LGA will also reach a milestone of 200,000 in 2023.

Still a Long Way to Go to Catch Up

However, while there can be some satisfaction with past achievements, it needs to be noted that the past decade has generally seen a slowing of growth rates below long-term trends in the four regions.

While there can be some satisfaction in the Cairns/Tropical (Far) North reaching a population of 300,000, it needs to be recognised that the region's area is 1½ times the size of Victoria with about four (4) times that State's water runoff. The region's population at 300,000 is only about 5% of that of Victoria. There are still large areas of the region not served with basic economic infrastructure of sealed road access and connections to the nation's electricity grid.

The region still has a significant proportion of the population caught up in economically hopeless government funded 'welfare trap' communities.

The number and scale of water storages for irrigation agriculture is low compared with southern areas. Cairns' seaport still lacks sufficient depth to take the larger cruise ships visiting the area and standard container ships used in international trade. The main transport route connecting the city with its hinterland is incapable of handling standard freight efficient vehicles used in other regions throughout Australia.

Cairns' university level education facilities and employment levels are about half the level of those in other cities of its size. Development of hospital facilities are not commensurate with the region's population status as the largest in the State outside the southeast.

This tropical region can record some satisfaction with its progress in reaching new population milestones, but it still has a long way to go in the process of catching up with the level of economic development common in southern Australia.