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Comment:

"A REALITY CHECK" –

GREENHOUSE GAS CLIMATE CHANGE THEORY

About 40 years ago in 1988, the Greenhouse Gas Climate Change Theory started to seriously affect debate about economic and developmental policies in the Cairns region.

A Greenhouse Conference was organised to address the threat of greenhouse gas induced global climate changes. The focus at that time was on predicted rainfall changes and sea level rises. Claims of a threat to the Great Barrier Reef did not emerge until later.

Economist Bill Cummings whose firm at that time also provided the Secretariat of the Cairns Chamber of Commerce and was Deputy Chairman of the North Australia Development Council was asked to present a paper addressing the issue.

Now, almost 40 years later, with no evidence of any substantial change in sea levels and rainfall patterns, it is of interest to review the paper presented entitled "*The Greenhouse Effect*".

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THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT

NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS TO THE 1988 GREENHOUSE CONFERENCE
CAIRNS, FRIDAY 4TH NOVEMBER, 1988
BY W S CUMMINGS, B ECON Q'LD

In the first place, I would like to issue a cautionary note.

It is good that the scientific community lets us know that trouble could be brewing.

Certainly, I notice from the Cairns Post that it has sent the retiring city engineer into his records of sea levels, and it sent me into the Chamber's records of rainfall for Cairns stretching back by months to 1908 and by years to 1886.

The net result is that there is no evidence of any change on either part.

So before we plunge into all sorts of emergency plans and changes, let us be sure that we are dealing with fact and not theory.

Not so long ago, the Club of Rome report had the world starving by now. It caused all sorts of abberations in thinking and policy.

Of course, if there is a long term change looming, the best remedy is prevention.

Clearly, there must be a focus on reducing those fuel forms that could cause problems and diverting emphasis to energy forms that are not a problem like hydro-electricity, tide, wind and solar power and in this day and age, nuclear power.

Clearly, if the technology for this is not yet satisfactory, we all have an interest in seeing research stepped up in these fields.

However, I would point out that we could take all sorts of action here in the north or even here in the Australasia/Pacific region and have negligible effect on the results if the main problem areas of the globe don't address the matter.

We have but 1 million people across northern Australia and some of the largest areas of uncleared forests in the world.

Indeed, I wonder how the burning off of the country side each year rates in relation to the production of CO2 compared with human activity.

In the whole of the Australasia/Pacific area, we have but 26 million people in an area equivalent to the whole of Europe, large parts of Asia and North Africa (population easily around the billion mark), the whole of East Asia, the whole of South East & South Asia or the whole of North America.

This is where the "dark satanic mills" of the industrial revolution are located. It is there that this issue will be decided.

We hear all sorts of calls from Europe and North America for the Brazilians and indeed people like ourselves to stop clearing forests to form roads, farms and mines, but I don't see any evidence of sacrifice in those sorts of area in terms of turning back agricultural and pastoral land to forest with the attendant sacrifices entailed.

However, if the predicted climatic and weather changes occur, will it be all that disastrous?

At the recent annual Northern Australia Development Conference in Alice Springs, our friends from the Northern Territory were trumpeting the prospects of the Greenhouse Effect. The Northern Territory representatives were welcoming the prospects of higher rainfall and becoming the granary of Australasia and South East Asia.

What is good in this way for the Northern Territory would also be good for the regions of North Queensland. Imagine the productive power of a higher rainfall peninsula and gulf region.

However, at the time I was rather startled by this approach, having been hypnotised with horror at the prospects of the thought of coping with regular tidal floodings of the centre of our universe here in Far North Queensland - the Cairns Central Business District.

I must say that I was similarly startled by a business friend of mine who was espousing the great benefits of building a sea wall that would not just protect us but improve Cairns vastly by providing freshwater lakes and safe swimming areas, extensive parklands, better port facilities and new major road routes to and from the city.

A picture was being painted of Cairns continuing on its path of becoming one of the world's outstanding beautiful cities.

The picture that I am getting is one where, certainly we may have to put into effect public protective works, especially in key areas like Cairns City and settled coastal areas, while in some less important areas allowing the coastline to receed.

But Cairns has been coping with what was an initially magnificent sheltered port, but less than favourable place to build a city, for many years.

As far as I am concerned, it is a much better place to live in now than the place I grew up in and in which children of my father's generation suffered from malaria.

With courage and wit, the necessary works might even make it a better place to live and a more attractive one.

Cairns is first and foremost a regional servicing city for the whole of the region from Cardwell in the south, out to the Gulf and up to the Papua New Guinea border.

This function far outweighs in economic importance direct derivation of tourism income.

In fact, as the city urbanises and tourism becomes large enough to be a locating force in its own right, it is spreading to favourable locations up and down the coast.

As far as the region is concerned, the realities of its economic base industries are that in terms of gross income:

* The combined rural industries including their processing components are worth the most at over $400 million p.a.

* Mining comes second and earns about $400 million p.a.

* Tourism is third with an annual income around the $300 million p.a. mark, and

* Fisheries earn about $150 million p.a.

If you look across these base activities in fact, and especially at a favourable impact on agricultural potential, the net affect on the region and this means Cairns City, also seems to me to be likely to be favourable and it seems that the region will continue on its strong growth path.

In making any adjustments necessary, I would draw attention to the role of existing institutional structures in private enterprise and local government and their ability to adapt to and cope with change.

A great deal would be likely to take place naturally. Of particular interest will be the role of the insurance industry.

I emphasise that the Greenhouse Effect presents us with a major technological challenge.

However, overall I see this magnificant region continuing to progress with even more prolific plant growth, extensive wetlands and expanded agriculture.

Raods were mentioned this morning. We already have a problem with roads and under a Greenhouse Effect, they will need to be improved further.

In relation to one matter raised this morning concerning tourism and weather, I would like to give some answers.

In fact, the tourist industry today has become much less weather dependent than in the 1970's.

Firstly, at that time, most of our traffic came by road. Fly in traffic is much less weather susceptible. Secondly, we have had all sorts of other advances. The big fast catamarans that go out to the reef, even to the outer reef, and the widespread use of air conditioned accommodation and airconditioning in buses.