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WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER LONG DISTANCE NATIONAL CONNECTIVITY ROADS

The announcement by Prime Minister Albanese in 2025 of Commonwealth funding for a $7BN upgrading of the 1700km Bruce Highway to a 3-star safety rating sounds good and is welcome. But what about the approximately 1000km of Queensland that lies north of the Bruce Highway terminus at Cairns to the Papua New Guinea border.

North of the Bruce Highway Terminus at Cairns

Of the 818km road distance to Weipa from Cairns, some 200km remains unsealed and of a further 324 km road distance from the Weipa turnoff to Bamaga, almost the total length remains unsealed.

Apart from the multi-billion dollar existing and potentially expanding bauxite and silica mines, the area north of Cairns accounts for 31 of Queensland's total of 37 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

While the Prime Minister and others are keen on virtue signalling by standing in front of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, when it comes to providing sealed road access into this area, these communities don't rate as a priority. The Peninsula area accounts for, of the order of, 12% of Australia's water runoff, valuable fisheries, expanding agricultural production and is of substantial tourism interest.

Current world international tensions also mean that the area north of Cairns is of strategic importance for Australia's defence with the Scherger Airbase located in the area and the need for naval and border force activity in the Torres Strait area. Weipa is currently being touted as a potential substantial spacebase.

Also, what about the TNQ Region's strategic road links with other areas of Australia.

Direct Road Link to/from Melbourne and Adelaide

Melbourne is due south of Cairns compared with travelling via Brisbane. The direst sealed route via Hughenden, Barcaldine, Charleville, Bourke and Cobar has the potential to save of the order of 700km in transport distance to and from Melbourne and Adelaide.

While it is good news that works have been scheduled for sealing the remaining 11km of the Hann section between the Lynd Junction and Hughenden, there is now a challenge to have this route given greater recognition at State and national level.

Since Cummings Economics first started carrying out economic analysis of the justification for sealing the then unsealed 200km of the Lynd Junction to Hughenden section in the early 2000s, it was considered that once completed, there would be a need to mount a promotional campaign involving all the local government areas along the route and in Melbourne and Adelaide to bring this route to national attention.

Outback Highway Road Link to/from Perth

The sealing of the Outback Highway links via Alice Springs would save well over a thousand kms to Perth. Since Cummings Economics first started carrying out economic analysis for justification for upgrading the route Boulia/ Alice Springs/ Laverton in Western Australia, a third central transcontinental route, there has been significant progress but substantial sections remain to be sealed.

Savannah Way Road Link to/from Darwin

The partially unsealed Savannah Way potentially saves over 400km to Darwin.

Upgrading all of these roads are of importance to the TNQ Region's continuing emergence as a major supplier of tropical horticultural production to national markets, to the continuing leading role in the development of tourism in northern Australia and to the area's continuing growth as the leading population and business operations region in tropical Australia.

Falling transport costs in relation to other costs of production/ services reducing old cost barriers of remoteness from markets has been a major factor helping underpin much of the region's economic successes over the past 50 years. In this, the development of superior road freight, coaches and tourist vehicles along with improved road links has been vital. Current high fuel costs are not just a cost inconvenience for this region, it is a threat to the national and international competitiveness and viability of significant sectors of the economy and further growth.

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