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December 2020 / CE Ref J3354

IT'S TIME FOR FAITH IN OUR OWN FUTURE

Let's face it, we've never been able to rely completely on Brisbane. Yes, get what we can out of Brisbane but our destiny lies in our own hands.

The remarkable progress made in the 1970s-1990s is a good example. City leaders of the 1960s were talking about the "forgotten far north" – a thousand miles away at the end of the line where nothing was happening. The development of Mount Isa, high cattle prices, an army base expansion and university campus were boosting Townsville. For Cairns, boosts from periodic sugar expansion had run out. Cairns' progress was languishing.

In a belief that, "If you wait for the government, it won't happen", local action was taken to seize a looming opportunity presented by a rapidly expanding tourism industry. The Cairns region always knew that "it had a field marshal's baton in its knapsack" when it came to tourism. The region's local governments and businesses came together to pool resources to create a professional marketing fund and organisation that was soon matching the Gold Coast.

While the organisation worked with the then Queensland Government Tourist Bureau and the Australian Tourism Commission, it developed and executed its own priorities. It developed and presented its own images of the region tailored to the markets it was pursuing - within Australia, the "Tropical Wonderland", Australia's own tropical paradise, the exotic "far north" of the then distant Cinderella State of Queensland. For the US market, it was part of the great triangle – the great boomerang of the reef, the rock and the opera house.

To break into the Japanese market, it initially bracketed with Papua New Guinea where memories of the Pacific War and many relatives who fought and perished there had a fascination for many Japanese. For this market, "far north" (that for Japanese was associated with the frigid arctic conditions), was dropped in favour of images of the Great Barrier Reef, "Skippy" kangaroos, koalas, blond children and relaxed welcoming people and lifestyles.

To progress, it was absolutely necessary to upgrade the airport. The then head of Queensland Tourism Corporation was favouring Townsville. Cairns with international flights already to PNG decided to have faith in its own destiny and went for "local ownership" - the first major regional airport to take on the task and negotiated an upgrading deal with the Commonwealth – in benefit cost terms, one of the outstanding investments ever made.

Of course, things have moved on. The major nascent tourism opportunities have been realised. The Cairns region came through to punch well above its weight in national and international tourism.

Interviewing of Japanese at Cairns airport, “Was Cairns different to what you expected?” was receiving replies, “We were surprised it was so small to have an international airport.” Revealing a stark difference in expectations, replies were being received from Brisbane visitors, “We were surprised how big Cairns is”.

It's time to toughen up and put our own money up to chart our own course across all developmental opportunities. And remember, that we achieve most when the whole region, not just Cairns, comes together to pool its resources and effort – local governments, local businesses, local industries, local people.