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OPINION PIECE

“PLEASE MISTER MINISTER DON’T KNOCK OUR BRUCE HIGHWAY – IT’S THE BEST ROAD WE’VE GOT”

It’s about 1974. The Whitlam government is in power in Canberra. Charles Jones as Federal Transport Minister announces he intends to fly to Cairns to then drive down the Bruce Highway to Brisbane to inspect the Highway’s condition to help decide what the Federal Government might do to improve it.

In the preparation, there is even speculation about improving it to being a dual carriage highway all the way.

Following the trip, there is a meeting in Brisbane with representatives present of local government along the way. Minister Jones recounts his experience with the road and is complaining about the plethora of narrow sections, crumbling edges, single lane bridges and numerous sections vulnerable to being cut off by wet season flooding. At this point, Roy Dickson, Chairman of Innisfail based Johnstone Shire, comes in with his mischievous plea that spells it all out, ***“Please Mister Minister, don’t knock our Bruce Highway, it’s the best road we’ve got”***.

It’s now 50 years later and major improvements have been made to the Bruce Highway with great benefits to the Far North Region’s progress. The region could always grow a range of tropical fruits (especially bananas), much more efficiently and at lower cost than in southern Queensland and northern New South Wales. The sealing and upgrading of the Bruce Highway and developments that have taken place in more efficient long distance heavy transports have dramatically reduced transport costs relative to other costs over the years underpinning the development, over time, of a horticultural sector now worth close to \$1billion a year to the region’s economy.

Back in the 1970s, I can remember remarks being made that anyone who set out to tow a caravan from Melbourne to Cairns was mad.

The improved highway has helped grow and sustain road tourism visitation to the region. Cheaper transport costs relative to other costs have led to reduction in comparative living costs in the region, although it needs to be recognised that this has had its ‘dark side’ with closure of the region’s brewery and brick works in the 1990s.

But the current efforts by the Cairns Post and others to highlight the need to improve the Bruce Highway reminds us that Cr Roy Dickson’s remark is still pertinent today. The Bruce Highway remains the best road we’ve got and there is still a massive need in the region to further upgrade our regional road infrastructure, much of it still at ‘third world’ standards.

There has been some progress. The upgrading of the Palmerston Highway was achieved in the 1970s with the necessary crashing of a wide swath of rainforest and the more efficient heavy transport Gentle Annie link with the Kennedy Highway was subsequently achieved.

The Kennedy Highway west of Ravenshoe has been sealed through to Charters Towers via Greenvale and the Gregory Highway, and this year, the last unsealed section will be sealed on the Hann Highway link through to Hughenden opening a direct route sealed all the way to Melbourne and Adelaide that cuts off something like 700km compared with the coastal route.

The Mulligan Highway sealing to Cooktown was achieved about 2000. But 26km over some very steep sections still remains unsealed on the coast road between Cape Tribulation and Cooktown.

Work on the Peninsula Developmental Road has progressed to a point where it is two-thirds sealed to Weipa with 200km still to go. However, the unsealed extension through to Bamaga still represents a major challenge. The road into Lockhart is still only partially sealed and the roads into the lower Mitchell area to Pormpuraaw and Kowanyama remain unsealed.

In 1974, I sat in a meeting in Croydon to form the Gulf Local Authorities Development Association (GLADA) now Gulf Savannah. The major objective was to get the Gulf Development (Beef) Road (sealed in the 1960s through to the Gilbert River) sealed through to Normanton. This was achieved about 2000, 25years later. But substantial links across to Borroloola in the Northern Territory remain unsealed, making traffic divert south about 480km on journeys between Cairns and Darwin if traffic is to remain on sealed roads. In Cairns, recent upgrading of the roads south to Gordonvale and north to Palm Cove have been long sought for major improvements.

But the major road challenge facing the region remains the range crossing Cairns to Mareeba. With the railway link now passenger only, this is the major transport umbilical cord between Cairns and most of the rest of the region. Its upgrading is of equivalent economic importance to the further development of the city and the region as the original building of the Kuranda railway link, the development of Cairns seaport through dredging of the entrance channel and the upgrading of Cairns airport in 1984 to take large wide-bodied jets direct from overseas.

To achieve a direct fast safe road that will take modern freight efficient vehicles of a type that operate all over the rest of Australia will require a major expenditure. But it is an expenditure that the region and the State and Federal Governments have to face up to if the region's economy is to continue to progress strongly into the future.

So the old dilemma that Cr Roy Dickson's mischievous remark to Transport Minister Jones remains for this previously under developed tropical region. Which should get priority - the link to Brisbane or the region's internal road infrastructure and other trans-national links such as across the north to Darwin?

Obviously, both are important. There is a need for safety and efficiency improvements to the Bruce Highway, but with the major upgrading that has taken place to the Bruce Highway, this must not be at the expense of meeting the need for very major expenditure on this region's internal road links and other national connections.

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In 1974, Bill Cummings was manager of the Far North Qld Development Bureau and its Sub Board for Tourism & Travel. In recent years, he has carried out a great deal of cost benefit and economic impact analysis on roads across the region and across the north and centre of Australia.