

# Government must be a catalyst for growth

By Shane Stone

**I**t wouldn't matter whether Bob Carr stayed at home, the NSW economy is so robust and diverse it just keeps on happening. In the Territory it matters a great deal if the Chief Minister and his colleagues of the day don't drive the economy.

Small economies, including Tasmania, South Australia and the ACT simply don't function and grow without Government acting as a facilitator and catalyst for growth.

Don't confuse "picking winners" with taking an "immature" economy and helping it grow.

## The Territory had one all weather road

When it comes to a comparison between the states and territories there is no such thing as a "level playing field" - that's the figment of someone's imagination gazing out their executive window at Sydney harbour sucking on a cappuccino.

As Territorians wander around the air-conditioned comfort of Casuarina, enjoy the first class sporting facilities at Marrara, dine in first class restaurants or visit world class national parks the length and breadth of the Territory they can almost be forgiven for believing it was always so. One couldn't be more wrong.

At the time of self government a mere 26 years ago the Territory had one all weather road, little industry to speak of and employment that was largely driven by the vagaries of the public sector out of Canberra.

The sheer determination of the first Everingham Government to lay the foundations for economic growth measured by employment and wealth creation remains one of the most remarkable stories in Australia.

Admittedly Everingham had the advantage of generous funding from the Commonwealth but more importantly he and his fledgling cabinet including Marshall Perron as Treasurer set about aggressively the task of building the Territory's infrastructure whilst at the same time taking those first tentative steps towards engaging Asia long before it became fashionable elsewhere in Australia. The simple facts are that the Territory today can claim in a quarter of a century growth that other states have achieved in 100 years, first class tourism infrastructure and that includes Ayers Rock Resort and the hotels formerly run by the Sheraton, an extensive all weather road system, a world class port, a developing resources sector, a university of our own and a pastoral and horticultural industry that exports to the world.

It didn't just happen. Successive Territory Governments rolled up their collective sleeves and got involved, provided leadership and with the courage of their political convictions "staked", development and I mean staked in every sense of the word. There have been the failures and the disappointments - it comes with the "territory", it comes from daring to be different but most importantly it comes from political leadership.

For every failure there has been a myriad of success stories - the famous Ostermeyer "side tipper", world dominance of the south sea pearl industry, record live cattle exports, one of the longest gas

pipelines in the world, a mining industry where it is easier to describe what we don't mine rather than what we produce and a tourism sector that is world class.

We continue to excel in industries as diverse as crocodile farming to the cut flower industry. We developed alternate energy systems whilst the rest of Australia talked about it. We Territorians took the idea of a regional trade fair and made it a reality.



Shane Stone

Sorry if I missed anyone, but my point is, go back 25 years and make the comparison.

When Marshall Perron committed to the State Square project he was not only safeguarding the skills base of the Territory but he was ensuring that the construction sector survived during the "recession we had to have". When my government secured the railway we didn't blink when it came to committing over \$100 million of taxpayers money having just spent close to that amount on the new East Arm port.

When the Tuxworth Government built the pipeline from central Australia it was one of the great visionary projects of its time. When the Hawke Government told Territorians that they couldn't have a university we went out and built one unheard of in contemporary Australian history. Tom Harris led the charge.

Successive Territory governments have unashamedly used their capital works programs to stimulate the private sector and rightly so, even if that meant extending the Territory's debt levels.

Territorians continue to look to the Government to be the catalyst for growth, jobs and development. When key economic indicators suggest growing unemployment, a downturn in the construction sector and overall growth coming off the boil in some sectors notwithstanding the optimistic assessment

of Access Economics across the board then Government has a clear role in a small growing economy to act, but most importantly to lead.

For their part it is incumbent on industry groups to support government in the Territory when they dare to be different. Such initiatives and strategies don't stop at Berrimah. Too often the economic planners tend to ignore regional centres to the detriment of the Territory economy as a whole.

In the Territory we proudly boast that when a project comes forward we look for what's right, not what's wrong with it. In the past Ministers have consistently walked projects through the system to keep the "cranes on the skyline".

Vacillation and equivocation have no place in a Territory minister's office, particularly when you have charge of lands and planning or public works.

Whilst there may be a perception of a growing credibility gap over the railway and what it actually means for the Territory's private sector no one should doubt the unswerving commitment of Dennis Burke to its realization. This is a big project and one that demands close attention to detail to make sure we get it right the first time through.

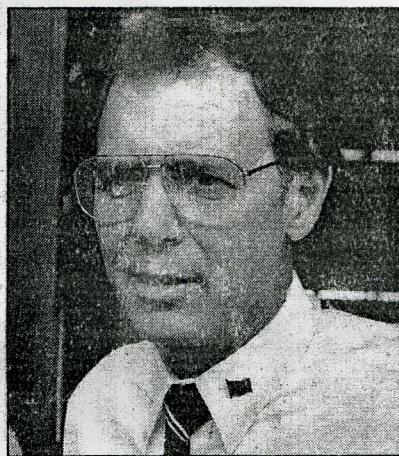
Other projects that the Territory Government can justifiably play a role in include the convention centres in Darwin and Alice Springs, a Timor Sea gas pipeline feeding Nabalco in Gove and the eastern seaboard via Mt Isa, precommitments to lease commercial space in stalled developments and a more aggressive use of the capital works and repairs and maintenance program to keep the subbies alive.

Government also needs to be proactive and not just wait for projects to "turn up". The live cattle trade didn't just happen. Mick Palmer, together with the industry, went out and made it a reality. The examples are numerous of Barry Coulter, Nick Dondas, Fred Finch, Eric Poole, Mike Reed, Daryl Manzie to name a few who have in the past proactively gone out interstate and abroad and brought home "the bacon". They got on with it and often amidst a blaze of controversy and public criticism.

There are opportunities in the resource sector that simply won't happen if the government doesn't underwrite essential infrastructure including roads and power. It has always been so and will continue into the foreseeable future.

Territorians don't need to hear the carping criticism of those who oppose development while at the same time demanding a continuation of a lifestyle that is a direct consequence of the Territory's continuing economic success story.

Economic growth is cyclical. The difference lies in the way Government plans strategically and deals with the peaks and the troughs. There are challenging times ahead. ■



Former Chief Ministers, Paul Everingham (far left) and Marshall Perron (left) helped to put the NT on its feet

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