“REBUILDING DARWIN POST CYCLONE TRACY”

(AN ADDRESS BY THE HON GRANT TAMBLING TO THE NATIONAL YOUNG PLANNERS CONFERENCE, DARWIN ON 28TH MARCH 2009)

Your invitation to me to participate in your national Young Planners Conference on the topic of “Rebuilding Darwin post Cyclone Tracy” is a real challenge, - particularly for someone, who now aged 65 and in retirement, tends to reflect a lot on the experiences of the last 34 years which shaped so much of my family life and long political career. These days my priorities are usually set by the demands of grand-parenting, gardening and active participation in a few community boards such as the [Darwin] Development Consent Authority and the National Trust (NT).

In my comments you will inevitably note the recurrent themes that affect town planning and urban design of this tropical, fast growing, Darwin city/Palmerston satellite/adjacent rural area.

No doubt this morning in your ‘Welcome to Country’ session the point was appropriately made that the local Larrakia aboriginal people have had a much longer exposure here in Darwin to the elements than any of us can possibly experience in one lifetime. I hope you have had the opportunity to visit our Casuarina (northern) Beach and observe ‘Nungalinya’ (Old Man Rock) offshore – because ‘Nungalinya’ supposedly influences earthquakes, storms and cyclones which may have been provoked by human actions or failures.

If any of you are looking for an exciting post-graduate thesis a detailed study of past cyclones could prove rewarding. History records six major cyclones in our settled area. The first in 1839 was nearby to the north-east at Port Essington on the Coburg Peninsula. The Darwin area was subjected to subsequent cyclones in 1878, 1881, 1897, 1917, 1937 and, of course “Tracy” in December 1974. All were particularly destructive. So on the law of averages, of about one major destructive event every 20 years, we are now long overdue for another serious blow! The only other catastrophe of equal or proportionately greater community effect was the Japanese bombing in World War II. The question should be asked, has man provoked the gods, or ‘Nungalinya’, with our recent actions?

We will focus today on Cyclone Tracy, the 3 year reconstruction period and the re-establishment of Darwin. It should also be recognised that recent events in Queensland and Victoria where significant floods and spectacular bushfires have also caused havoc, loss of life and major destruction - all three events demanded national attention, government responses and various planning exercises. Again I hope someone will draw together the parallel experiences and lessons of the immediate emergencies, and the remaking or intervention in the reshaping and security of their communities.

First let me put this into a personal context. 34 years ago, at this time of year in late March [1975], I was then a 31 year old family man (with a nursing-sister wife and 2 kids - aged 4 & 2) and after 10 years working in accounting & insurance businesses, we had established an architect designed/newly built home in a Darwin inner-suburb. As a family we were keenly active in community organisations, and I had been recently elected (in October 1974) to the first fully-elected Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. Almost 100 days out from Cyclone Tracy I was buggered, frustrated and exhausted – and daunted by the tasks ahead!
But I was not alone! In December 1974 we were only one family of about 15,000 households to call Darwin home. In March 1975, after Tracy, there were about 48,000 people scattered throughout Australia who were trying desperately to call Darwin home. In the December & January 38,000 of my friends, colleagues, constituents and fellow residents had been evacuated for reasons of hygiene, health and housing shelter, leaving only 10,000 of us to start anew in the weeks following Tracy.

What had really happened in and to our homes on Christmas Day 1974? Who had upset Santa’s trajectory? What was it like for the 7 hours from midnight to 7am? Let’s pause for a minute or so and listen to a recording of the winds and sounds -- and try and imagine this continuing for 7 hours, for a brief break only when the eye of the cyclone passed over! This was sheer terror, wind measurements were noted to 217 km/h (when the meteorology instruments gave out) and possibly went on to 300 km/h. ......................(audio/visual)

In his book about ‘Tracy’ author Gary McKay recorded the experience of my wife and myself as:

“When their dinner guest had departed Grant had taped their large picture windows and filled the bath with water. They didn’t change out of their clothes, and had no thought of going to bed. Their two very young children were asleep in their beds, but when the wind slammed into the rear of the house and debris started smashing into the walls, the whole family relocated into a corner of the master bedroom. Grant and Sandy gathered all of their mattresses and made a protective bunker that they then placed over everyone. The house started taking numerous hits from flying debris, but thankfully most of it was small stuff. Grant was amazed by how far glass could bend before it would break. They had large windows in aluminium frames, and the glass was bending an extraordinary amount and almost falling out of the frames. The wind pressure was so great and the frames opened and the curtains were sucked out through the gap; later the frames snapped back, but the curtains were still outside the windows. Grant was worried that the glass windows would also be sucked out, which would further lessen the integrity of the house. Occasionally, during brilliant flashes of lightning, they could see across the oval. Grant doesn’t think that the eye of the cyclone passed over their house, but he recalled a small lull when the wind decreased a little and then changed direction. His greatest concern was where they would go if the house started to disintegrate, because they had no concrete block laundry under the house, just their cars. The other problem was that if they did have to evacuate, they would have to go uphill and into the wind. People had been advised not to shelter in their cars.....The second wind hit the Tamblings’ house with more ferocity than the first and was now coming from the south-east. Grant recalled: ‘We suffered more structural damage this time, but compared to most other people in Darwin it was minimal. There was lots of penetration of the roof, and the fibro walls were punctured and fractured. We had a fair bit of water damage, but we still had our house. I believe we were among the 10percent of the population to retain their house’. “ .... McKay also noted that remarkably, however, if the tide had been high, “they could have had a problem with storm surge.”

That was our experience, but as I said earlier, it was a shared personal experience common to all 45,000 or so of us at home in Darwin that night. Every one of us has a story, and some remarkable memories.
Now, back to my 100 day scenario, let me remind you why – in March 1975 – we were all so frustrated:

*650 people were injured and treated in Darwin (many more were attended to interstate), and at least 65 people lost their lives. (These statistics were so low only because Tracy came in the middle of a dark night).

*70% of the houses & other buildings were wrecked, damaged, or destroyed. Insurance companies were painfully slow in their claim processes. (The DRC subsequently calculated that ‘at the time of the cyclone there were some 8,200 houses, 3,000 flats and 1,700 caravans and other temporary dwellings in use in Darwin.’).

*The administration of donated Trust Funds was inordinately tardy.

*Initially all external & internal communications were destroyed. (Today, it is hard to imagine that there were no such luxuries in 1975 as mobile phones, email or the internet).

*Water, sewerage, and power services etc had been contaminated, cut or severed.

*The environment and food chains were disrupted.

*Trees & gardens were decimated.

*There was a preoccupation with law and order issues.

*Havoc was wreaked on animals and their habitats, birds, fish and marine life.

[I recall no birds singing for months, - and friends who evacuated a family cat to a station property 100klm south of Darwin were disappointed when she went feral after being chased into the bush by the station dogs! – another mate’s dog left in our care also found its own way home over 10klm away through suburbs littered with debris!).

*Litter problems compounded.

*The controversial residential permits to live in our own homes had been instituted, which thwarted residents returning to Darwin and spending time with the kids– and this literally tore many families apart.

*Most of us had had to join food queues at public shelters for our meals, after a hard days work.

*There was a degree of ‘colonial paternalism’ of Canberra-oriented bureaucrats.

*Tourism, as an industry and income earner, was relegated to the back burner [for years] (and our unique gathering of “hippie” communities along the Darwin Esplanade cliffs were either blown away forever, or they joined the rebuilding task effort).

*And finally, the “planners” from the Cities Commission, National Capital Development Commission, and Canberra bureaucracy had descended like vultures to reorganise our lives, lifestyle and very existence!!!
The shelves of libraries and archives around Australia are full of reports, books, media references, films and photography. I have perused many of them as revision for this address. The test of time will be how frequently they are accessed as lessons for future politics and community policy. Too often we just repeat the mistakes of the past!

I don’t want to leave you with the impression that everything was negative – far from it!

There are many bouquets to be handed out!

*The intimate help and commaradie provided by immediate families, friends and neighbours can never be estimated.

*The initial prompt evacuation (over 30000 out by road & air within a week) elicited unprecedented support and help throughout Australia from volunteers, and commercial interests.

*[Like the recent Victorian bushfires], the national simpatico was immediate and generous involving thousands of volunteers often working for months and massive Trust Funds raising ($15M/1974=$75M in 2009$). Undoubtedly every Australian family has a familial contact and identification with Darwin!

*The immediate state of emergency and national response instituted by Prime Minister Whitlam, his Government Ministers and all parliamentary colleagues was paramount and ensured financial assistance and political reassurance for rebuilding. The Darwin Reconstruction Commission was set up promptly relieving uncertainty (- though it was somewhat stagnant for the first eight months of its existence!).

*MajGen Stretton and the coordination of Emergency Services were most efficient. Medical and health teams worked with professionalism and competency under real pressure in primitive conditions. The valiant efforts and the important role of all three Defence Services (utilising almost the entire RAAF & Naval asset resources, and Navy & Army manpower to complete the arduous clean up in the first month alone)and the Police Force must be acknowledged.

*The military, Port Authority & wharfies, and Municipal and Essential Services Teams got stuck into the restoration of waterfront and utilities with a vengeance.

*Although stretched by lack of numbers and physical exhaustion, - volunteer organisations, welfare groups and resident action groups re-evolved and were effective and critical voices.

*There were determined efforts in the local community to engender social happiness and recreation activities, and redefine the spirit of contentment and cooperation.

*As temporary accommodation became increasingly available there was a build up of returning wives and families, and an influx of [mostly new] construction workers. By July of 1975 there were 33,000 people back in Darwin, and “commerce” was beginning to reactivate.
The demography of Darwin has always been fascinating and diverse. The Public Service and commercial interests had always “churned” their staff through regular turnover and short term tenure of Territory jobs, and it was not uncommon for residents to generally serve “in the north” for only 2-3 years. This factor perplexed many folk who because of their ghastly cyclone experiences, and the difficult tasks ahead, elected to remain “down south” and leave it to many new itinerants to face the construction demands and opportunities. The strong “core” families of old Darwin, however, just wanted their lives back in order as it was before Tracy and in the pioneering decades before that. My own family’s history is caught up in memories and activities back to 1926, and many others particularly in the Aboriginal, Chinese, Greek and other ethnic communities demanded urgent repairs to their economics, properties and lives. It is very interesting to note that after the Darwin Reconstruction Commission folded in 1978 that the “new residents” to “old timers” was in the proportion of 60%/40%!

There are plenty examples and evidence that the people who stayed in Darwin following Tracy suffered less in terms of physical and mental health and were also better off in terms of finance and personal networks. The Final Report of the Darwin Disaster Welfare Council [March 1976] graphically records the plight of evacuees, family breakup, emotional and physical consequences that followed in Tracy’s path.

The nature of community lifestyle characteristics in Darwin has always recognised the essential divisions between the Private (‘core families’ sector) and the Public Sectors, and the priorities of those who settle and stay, and those who always ‘churn’ and move on. This is probably best recognised in an appropriate quote from 100 years ago from the Prelude to Jeannie Gunn’s famous book, ‘We of the Never Never’. She said then, and it is still true today:

“The background is filled in with an ever-moving company—a strange medley of Whites, Blacks, and Chinese; of travellers, overlanders, and billabongers, who passed in and out of our lives, leaving behind them sometimes bright memories, sometimes sad, and sometimes little memory at all.

And All of Us, and many of this company, shared each other’s lives for one bright, sunny year, away Behind the Back of Beyond, in the Land of the Never-Never; in that elusive land with an elusive name—a land of dangers and hardships and privations yet loved as few lands are loved—a land that bewitches her people with strange spells and mysteries, until they call sweet bitter, and bitter sweet. Called the Never-Never, the Maluka loved to say, because they who have lived in it and loved it, Never-Never voluntarily leave it. Sadly enough, there are too many who Never-Never do leave it. Others—the unfitted—will tell you that it is so called because they who succeed in getting out of it swear they will Never-Never return to it. But we who have lived in it, and loved it, and left it, know that our hearts can Never-Never rest away from it.”

In 1975 we wrestled with these dilemmas and the effects have carried on for generations, particularly on the children who have grown to maturity here, and for many of the families who never returned.
But let me take you back now again to 1975 and the role of “the planners” as the bogey men in the picture. Whilst I have already applauded the Federal Government and politicians of the day for their support and generosity, there was a pervading ‘colonialist philosophy’, led mainly by the then Cities Commission and Department of Regional & Urban Development, that an opportunity existed to restrict Darwin’s role to essentially a public service and military outpost with a population of only 40,000. These ideas, of course, emanated from Canberra and were an anathema to those of us locally who had different dreams about our community. Despite all the rational argument and national economic formulas the (already second) Darwin Reconstruction Commission Chairman Tony Powell (coincidentally, ‘a planner’) was on the side of a losing argument with the ever returning local residents, particularly as they mustered resources, resident action groups and political muscle here and elsewhere. The preoccupation with policies relating to ‘planning reviews’ and their perceived deficiencies, accelerating temporary accommodation and repairs for public service ‘tenants’, building permits requiring seemingly draconian ‘engineered’ standards, and the storm surge debates were all seen as the planners’ red rags to the bulls – rather than concentrating on “restoration” issues for those who had family and financial interests at stake.

With only 10,000 demoralised and fatigued residents in Darwin in January 1975, when the Cities Commission (as advisers to the new Darwin Reconstruction Commission) turned up with a schizophrenic first report entitled “Planning Options for Future Darwin”, it is little wonder their Canberra staff and consultants weren’t lynched. That initial strategy canvassed alternative locations for commerce and residential options, large scale acquisition & rebuilding, controls on private development, street closures, restraints on employment & development, and the relocation of the airport – amongst many other things. Two months later, in their second report [March 1975] the title was presumptively changed to “Darwin Planning Guidelines” and this document made further provocative and unacceptable assumptions about slowing down the rate of Darwin’s population growth, detailed planning policies for the main suburban areas, surge zone constraints, regional open space systems, and road arterials. Not surprising there were over 1,200 objections to the guidelines. Then DRC Chairman, Tony Powell, led with his chin in the June 1975 DRC Annual Report when he said........“If Darwin is to be rebuilt it should be to a standard which is not only appropriate to Darwin but which is also compatible with current urban development standards advocated by the Government in its growth centres programme.”

These radical proposals, as we saw them, and others by the ‘Pak-Poy Consultancy’ (for non-urban land within a radius of 40km/in July 1975), to canvass ‘all options out on the table’ may well have been professional and academic, and policy of the day, but they contributed to annoying time delays, initial indecision, and procrastination by the Reconstruction Commission and the public service at a time when the private sector and families were busily mustering resources from banks, government finance, insurance companies, neighbourhood help and cooperation. The debate quickly focussed on balancing integrity, speed and cost – and the planners lost the argument when it came to pitting practicality against theory.
In the Legislative Assembly in August 1975 things really came to a head. The Independent MLAs Ron Withnall and Dawn Lawrie and a number of my own Country Liberal Party colleagues vented their spleen and voiced the views of the community. Hansard records some of my own comments, as:-

“The crux of the problem at this time in Darwin is ineffective management of three things: resources manpower and money. Added to that, there is an extreme failure by the government and by the Commission to recognise the uniqueness of the task in front of them. This is an existing community with an existing social network; it is not a growth centre, a new town or an experiment to be played around with. There are tremendously insensitive and remote decision-making points of view coming out all over the place...........This insensitivity and remoteness is on all levels; it is at the Cabinet level; it is at the Chairman level and those out-of-town Commissioners who fly in so infrequently; and it is also at the level of those co-opted staff members and consultants that constantly flit around the edge of the picture. The job is reconstruction; it is not remodelling, replanning or changing” ....... I also said at the time .....“We have a town plan of sort which ironically is identical with the one we had last December.........”

I went on on that occasion to document and acknowledge a number of minor achievements, committed housing contracts and permanent and temporary repairs that had been approved, but at the same time called for the in-effectiveness of the Citizens’ Council, indecision regarding the storm surge line, and building in the surge area to be addressed, amongst other comments.

Subsequently that month (August 1975) I was appointed to the Board of Darwin Reconstruction Commissioners. I joined newly appointed Lord Mayor & strong city advocate Dr Ella Stack. The well respected hard task master, experienced and pragmatic surveyor and former Lord Mayor of Brisbane Clem Jones was appointed DRC Chairman in November 1975 (he replaced ‘planner’ Tony Powell), and together we three made a formidable ‘political’ team on most priorities and issues across the table from the Canberra mandarins. Action started to happen!

The annual and detailed Reports of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission make for interesting and compulsory reading for anyone prepared to learn from history.

1975 was certainly a year of lost opportunity and confusion, and one I am sure none of us who were in Darwin would ever want to repeat!

The effective DRC Chairman Clem Jones subsequently made Annual Reports for the years to June 1976 & June 1977, and a Final Report to December 1977 to the Government and Federal Parliament. Re-reading these reports again last week, I was reminded of the change in attitude and results once the priorities shifted away from the preoccupation with planning to the much more constructive efforts to achieve outcomes in ‘improving the infrastructure, making safe existing structures, and improving amenities.’ In fact it was Clem Jones who reported...“The need to put the emphasis on resettlement as opposed to replanning was a decision which evolved rather than was consciously made.” Once the emphasis was placed on works and construction programmes for about 500 contracts (with expenditure of $300Million [1975-$=$1½Billion2009$])for replacement housing, public buildings, schools, health clinics and the Casuarina Hospital, and roads and infrastructure services the air of excitement returned to Darwin. Zoning schemes were administered by Northern
Territory authorities, and eventually after considerable community consultation and collaboration with the Northern Territory Planning Board an agreed new Town Plan was left in place as a legacy at the DRC’s demise in December 1977. The DRC also pioneered important cyclone resistant materials and adopted new national construction codes.

There is one area of policy where I believe we all failed! That is the ‘undergrounding of electricity’! Despite much rhetoric, and the commendable commitment to underground all new and subsequent subdivisions of land in Darwin and Palmerston, to date only 2,500 remnant blocks from 1974 in ‘old Darwin’ out of 9,000 have been completed. Regrettably successive Federal and Northern Territory Governments have not carried out their promises. At today’s contract prices (I am reliably informed now $17,000/block!) the cost to complete this task is about $110Million for the remaining 6,500 Darwin homes. I am surprised this project wasn’t on Prime Minister Rudd’s recent capital works stimulus programme negotiated with the NT Government! The cost of replacing overhead electricity services in the event of another major cyclone may well be less than current undergrounding estimates, but the human inconvenience will pale into insignificance against recent storm damage to Power/Water generation failures.

I mentioned earlier that all 48,000 residents of Darwin in December 1974 had a story! Everyone had to readjust, and do things differently. Many people made remarkable contributions, and many gave outstanding leadership. I have refrained from naming ‘names’ because all of you here today would have been born after Cyclone Tracy, and the names would be unknown to you. The media and the libraries have recorded many of their stories if you are interested.

But I must make mention of the many “groups” that rallied to the cause such as the earthmoving and construction companies, the building tradesmen, essential services workers, the bankers, and the public servants (yes, even those paternalistic ‘godfathers’ from Canberra!). There were a myriad of welfare, church and community organisation volunteers who put their civic action to the test strengthening the community.

Because of my political career and experience I must also comment on how the undercurrents of social change, nationally and in the Northern Territory, played out in 1976 and 1977.

In October 1974 a fully elected (State/Territory) Legislative Assembly had been established with 19 members – 2 independents and 17 from the new NT Country Liberal Party. The CLP was made up of mostly new, young, brash and keen MLAs largely the products of the various Chambers of Commerce, Master Builders Association, Cattlemen’s Association, sport and community organisations. The Labor Party had not been successful in the 1974 election, but enjoyed strong patronage from the unions, the Federal Whitlam/ALP Government and aboriginal organisations (they picked up 6 Assembly seats in 1977, including mine!). The communication networks were incredible and firmly established.

Two months after the election Cyclone Tracy meant the Darwin MLAs were catapulted into an ‘activist’ role as the advocates for their scattered constituents, and major centres of influence in the absence of recognised State-government authorities. This put us in headlocks with the ‘planners’, who I think saw most of us as amateur nuisances. The rest of this saga I have already outlined.
Throughout 1975 the Federal Whitlam/ALP Government was in deep trouble elsewhere in Australia. Thankfully for us in Darwin their outstanding financial generosity and commitment to rebuilding Darwin had been underwritten by the Minister for Northern Australia, Dr Rex Patterson (he hailed from tropical cyclone prone Mackay in North Queensland). Cyclone Tracy provided a national circuit breaker for political issues that beset the ALP. At least in theory the ALP had also advocated a more independent role for the Legislative Assembly in assuming state functions. The rest is history and the ALP Government collapsed in a debacle in November 1975.

In 1976 the new Federal Fraser /Coalition Government again stood by the generous financial deal for rebuilding Darwin, and was keen to advance the work proceeding on further Constitutional Development for the Northern Territory with an aligned political party. The Fraser Government had other regional agendas complementary to the NT, and implemented the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT). The NT Speaker, Bern Kilgariff, had transferred to the Senate in the November 1975 election (along with the ALP’s Ted Robertson) adding relevance for the first time as important numbers in the Senate. Malcolm Fraser had promised “Statehood” for the Northern Territory “in 5 years”!

We, in the Territory, worked on both the Darwin Reconstruction tasks (engaging with Chairman Clem Jones) and the push for transfer of state like powers. The then CLP Majority Leader, Dr Goff Letts, and myself, as his Deputy & DRC Commissioner negotiated the first Territory Budget, the initial transfer of (limited) powers, and set the principles for the Commonwealth/Northern Territory Financial Arrangements in place in 1977. Paul Everingham as the first CLP Chief Minister took the NT into Self-Government on 1st July 1978. The Northern Territory was placed firmly on the political map of Australia by the maturing actions we collectively took in the 3 years, 1975-1978. Of the 17 initial CLP MLAs in the Class of ’74 - 13 of us became Executive Members &/or NT Ministers, - 3 of us went on to the House of Representatives, - 2 of us went on to the Australian Senate, - I became a Federal Ministerial Parliamentary Secretary, and -5 were at one time or other Majority Leader or Chief Minister of the NT. The CLP enjoyed continuous party majorities in the Legislative Assembly for 27 years until 2001.

Cyclone Tracy and the ‘Planners’ trained us well, and provided the backdrop assisting Northern Territory Self-Government.

So where does that bring us now?

The future of planning is in “your” hands! You are, or will be the skilled and experienced Planners of the next generation. It is an honourable profession. Your first cousins also comprise the disciplines of designers, architects & engineers, constructors, contract managers, and artisans.

Somewhat ironically in 1996 (20+ years after my Darwin Reconstruction Commission membership and my first foray into elected politics) when I was by then a member of the Australian Senate I was appointed as Ministerial Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development in the first Howard Government and I had the honour to launch the ‘Australia Award for Urban Design’ that year, and on that occasion I said:
“Urban design is about how communities look and the way they work, their relationship to the natural environment and their ability to provide safe and stimulating environments. The quality of our towns and cities is vitally important for many reasons, not the least being that in the modern internationally competitive market, it is the city that competes rather than individual enterprises”

No doubt like many of you at this conference, I have recently been preoccupied with reading the voluminous text on “The Endless City” (The Urban Age Project of 2005 & 2006 by the London School of Economics and others). The report notes that “In 50 years time, more than 75% of the world’s population will live in cities...” and focuses on five fundamental topics about our future cities: public space, movement, neighbourhoods, the question of work, and security. I know it is dangerous to try and summarise over 500 pages too simply, but three quotes grabbed my attention, and I share them with you:

(1)...from p36; “Neither the theorists nor the policymakers share the perspective of the third conceptual strand: the builders, the investors, the developers, the architects and the master planners, the transport engineers – in other words those who actually shape the physical aspects of the city. These are the people who see themselves as involved with the practice of city-making. These groups themselves combine many different strands of thinking. They are driven by motivations ranging from creative self-expression and idealism to egotism and self-interested pragmatism.” ..........

(2)...from p39; “The city is a subject that is apparently about everything. It is about climate change and racial tolerance, social justice and economic development, culture and personal memory, national identity and civil liberty.” ..........

(3)...from p51; “Despite the efforts of the planners and the speculators and the politicians, the city is formed by the everyday reality of human experience.”

Most of my comments today have been about the Greater City of Darwin as it was for the years 1975-1978, and I sincerely hope the history essay and personal memories of just one of the 48,000 Darwin residents who were affected by Christmas Day 1974 has been of interest to you. Some of my friends, with the advantage of hindsight, now argue that the challenges of today must be to place better value on historical/heritage issues, the advantages of our natural land and seascape environments, our emerging transport needs and a more intimate attention to the shelter provisions and tropical design in housing.

‘Greater Darwin’ now comprises about 110,000 people – more than double Tracy’s clientele! It is now an even more exciting and vibrant place to live. The Darwin Peninsula area, where we are meeting today, has turned into a sophisticated high rise zone never contemplated in the heady days after Tracy. The University and Defence sectors are independent in their own right. Primary and Resource Industry export products are our lifeblood. Tourism keeps us under the microscope. Probably half of the population is here to live for the long term, and just as in 1975 the other half will be migrants, and eventually move on (but after staying for longer these days!). The City of Palmerston and the rural area now have separate identities and successful local governments, and
the site of the next new committed city, Weddell, to accommodate approximately another 40,000 people, will take shape in the next decade. In addition to all the extra teachers, police, nurses and doctors there will be jobs for at least another 50 planners! I have every confidence that when you visit Darwin in another 20 years there will be ¾ million people living here!

I am no longer a politician or a ‘community player’ but I will conclude with a series of questions for you to ponder:

*Do you think 4/5 (80%) of the population (ie about 90,000) would have to be evacuated in the event of another cyclone like Tracy? Are we sufficiently cyclone resistant or cyclone proofed? Does experience, population increase and economic size make any difference to the consequences and likely damage of natural disasters?

*What confidence do you have in the Building Standards and community infrastructure of today’s Darwin and environs?

*Would it take 3-5 years to rebuild again after a cyclone, and would the Federal Government now put up over $2billion in today’s dollars to reconstruct?

*What lessons have been learnt? What repeat mistakes are inevitable?

*Are there sufficient comparisons with other Natural Disasters for alleviation after serious floods, bushfires, droughts, &/or transport failures? What has changed in respect to priorities for fiscal responsibility, and the contribution of commercial investment?

* AND LASTLY, DO YOU THINK AUSTRALIAN PLANNERS WOULD EVER BE GAME TO AGAIN TRY AND EXERCISE POWER AND MAJOR INFLUENCE TO A LOCAL COMMUNITY IN A CATASTROPE SUCH AS ‘TRACY’?

*WHERE WILL YOU BE?
THE AUTHOR

The Hon Grant Tambling enjoyed a long (30+ years) career in elected politics. He was Senator for the Northern Territory (1987-2001) during which term he was also a Ministerial Parliamentary Secretary (1996-2001) in the Howard Government. He was the Member for the Northern Territory (1980-1983) in the House of Representatives during the last term of the Fraser Government. He was the Member for Fannie Bay and an Executive Member (1974-1977) in the first Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. He was previously an Alderman on the Darwin City Council (1972-1974).

After retirement from politics, Grant Tambling was appointed Administrator of Norfolk Island (2003-2007).

Grant Tambling has held a long interest in Town Planning and Urban Development. He was a Member of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission after Cyclone Tracy (1975-1978) and Deputy Chairman of the Northern Territory Planning Authority (1984-1987). He is currently an appointed Member (since April 2008) of the Development Consent Authority for Darwin City.

Grant Tambling’s family have been involved in a wide range of Darwin and Northern Territory community affairs since 1926. He is a currently a Councillor of the National Trust (NT).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Reference Services, Northern Territory Library, Parliament House, Darwin NT

Social & Policy Research (Population Studies)-Charles Darwin University, Casuarina NT

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“We of the Never-Never”, by JA Gunn


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