Trip to Gove

I recently drove out to Gove to see how the plant looked and to find out what was happening there since the plant closed down. It was an opportunity to see or ‘feel’ what was the condition of the Central Arnhem Road and to look at some new houses at Bulman on the way. The road is certainly a mixed bag—some parts good, some parts bulldust and some parts corrugated. It would take a toll on any vehicle using the road regularly. There have been some upgrades to a number of creek crossings with a new bridge being constructed at the Goyder River. Norbuild are building the bridge and supplied a photo of the bridge partly constructed. At Bulman I had a look at the solar power/diesel power station. For those with a technical bent, the solar panels are made of uni-solar amorphous silicon and are rated at 64 Watts/panel. There are 880 panels and they produce 82,000 kWh/year. This save 25,000 litres per year of diesel and reduces greenhouse emissions by 73 tonnes per year. Very impressive. The facility was commissioned in 2002. Bulman has two new houses that have been constructed under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing (NPARIH). These houses were constructed with metal cladding compared to houses constructed under the previous SIHIP programme which were concrete, block or cement sheet so it will be interesting to see any difference in the life span of the houses. The same company is building block houses at Yirrkala which will not be affected by the salt air. There where buffaloes in the yards at Bulman ready for live export presumably to Vietnam which has recently been opened up for the buffalo trade. Another interesting place I visited on the way was an abandoned outstation. It seems this was an early outstation as some of the buildings are built of stone but there are two modern houses there as well. I was told it was abandoned some years ago and the people moved back to Beswick. There was one occupant who was required to stay there as he was on parole. I stayed there for a while and he seemed to enjoy a bit of company. There was a beautiful spring nearby with hot and cold water so life wasn’t too bad. By the way if you are looking for a place to stay along the way (it took me 13 hours to drive from Gove to Howard Springs) Mainoru Store has some basic accommodation and fuel. I did get to Gove safely, there and back.

Whilst in Gove, I visited the Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation to get an idea of how the plant closure would affect them such as schooling, employment, shops closing, cost of air travel and homelands. Also spoke to John Tapp from the East Arnhem Shire about the mine closure. They had concerns about getting mine houses at a reasonable
rent but it seemed Rio was trying to protect people those who were renting houses from being subject a large fall in rent prices. Council said it had been hard to keep skilled staff because of a housing shortage but were hoping for the opportunity to use mining houses now empty. I spoke to Dave Suter who runs Arnhemland Pest Control. He owns a child care centre at Gove which would be competing with the Government childcare centre. With a dwindling population staff would be laid off and the future was unclear as to who would survive. He hoped tourism would help keep the town alive. Met with Angela who is the Town Administrator. She explained the role of the Town Corporation which does the job of a local council. She explained some of the issues the town was facing such as old infrastructure, decrease in charges from the airport, and leases not worth as much. I spoke to the owners of the Crunch and Munch and the sports store. They both had concerns about their future but RIO told me they had reduced rates and helped businesses where possible to encourage them to stay. Alicia from Rio was in Gove when I was there but due to a mix up caused by me I missed having a meeting with her. I did catch up with her in Darwin when I got back from Gove. She said Gove remains a vibrant town. She explained changes in accommodation, the input into Gove from the NT Government and Rio. She mentioned assistance to small business with access to business consultants and reduction in power charges and rent. Workers that had been made redundant were able to stay for the time - rent free and power free. She said presently bauxite was more valuable than alumina and that the lease has been signed until 2053 although it is likely the bauxite will run out before then. I also spoke to Jo-Anne Scarini from Rio before I left and one interesting point she made was that gas was not going to be an option because it still would not have made the plant profitable.

The future will be interesting. If the Central Arnhem Road was a better standard you could certainly attract lots of dry season tourists but until that happens travelling to Gove will be mainly for the wealthy as the cost of flying in is high.

How Gove develops will be in the hands of the indigenous and non indigenous people and RIO as RIO will still be mining for some time.