



## **From the desk of the Chief Minister**

Sometimes I reflect on how lucky we are to live in such an active, lively and caring community. In the past few days, we have been able to participate in Opera in the Ruins, Poetry in the Parish, the Foundation Day commemoration not to mention the many meaningful events which collectively raised some \$30,000 for the relief of victims of bushfires and floods in Australia. My congratulations to the many willing people in our community who contributed to the success of all of these diverse activities. We have also seen real progress on the Norfolk Tourism rebranding project and plenty of feedback on the proposals to modernise and expand our immigration processes.

I had hoped to be on the radio this week to give an update on discussions with the Commonwealth about building our cooperative relationship, programme delivery and other matters of mutual interest. But I've picked up a bit of a virus and have not been feeling the best for most of the week. Last Friday, Commonwealth Minister Bob Debus and I put out a joint media release expressing our satisfaction with the real progress which has been achieved, and in this week's column I'll try to give you some more detail.

### **Review of immigration and population policies**

On 20<sup>th</sup> February, I launched a discussion paper proposing substantial modernisation and expansion of the immigration permit system, and invited comment from the whole community. I said at the time that I believed that the proposed new permit system would give us a basis for proactively seeking new residents who would add to our community and help us to achieve economic progress through more investment and new employment opportunities. If adopted, the revised permit scheme will help us to more effectively target our efforts and will remove the discretionary and subjective procedures in the current system. The full discussion paper is available on the Norfolk Island Government website at [www.gov.nf](http://www.gov.nf). If you would like to comment, please get your views and suggestions to me by the close of business on 18<sup>th</sup> March.

### **Finding the right brand for Norfolk Island tourism**

During this week, the tourism branding committee and their professional consultant made a very encouraging videoconference presentation to around 25 locals, including Members of the Legislative Assembly. After much consultation with the community and tourism industry partners, the branding committee are close to finalising an exciting new direction for Norfolk Island which will both retain our existing markets and open up possibilities for many new initiatives. I expect that the final report will be available within about a month, and would hope that the whole community will embrace the new concepts. Rebranding is an important part of the Five Year Tourism Strategy, aimed at widening our appeal in the marketplace and growing our economy through increased visitor arrivals, longer stays and greater yield. Keep an eye out for the public launch of the new branding strategy in the next few weeks.

### **Achieving a long-term stable relationship with Australia**

The discussions I held in Canberra last week were very positive and furthered the process of establishing relations between Norfolk Island and the Commonwealth which are stable and positive. In particular, we seek to achieve a balanced relationship which will not be subject to the constant revisiting of governance issues which have proven to be so destabilising to our community and especially our economy in recent years. I held extremely productive meetings with Sen Kate Lundy MP, the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories (JSC), Hon Bob Debus MP, Minister for Home Affairs, and Prof John McMillan, Commonwealth Ombudsman. Following are a few brief highlights.

**Senator Lundy** welcomed our offer to share with the JSC Norfolk Island's experience in designing and delivering cost effective essential and community services in relation to the Committee's new inquiry into the changing economic environment in the Indian Ocean Territories. They will inquire into areas including communication services (such as broadband internet, digital television and mobile telephony); transport services and costs including passenger and freight transport; the operation of businesses in the region; the cost and availability of housing; and the impact of climate change. Senator Lundy advised that some members of the JSC also plan to make a brief visit to Norfolk Island in June, largely to take part in the observation of Bounty Day. They are not planning to conduct any inquiry into Norfolk Island, but may hold some informal discussions during their short stay.

**Minister Debus** welcomed the launch of the new complaints system by the Administration, which gives everyone the opportunity to seek review of administrative decisions and actions and is the foundation for Ombudsman access. I provided him with copies of the procedures, posters and brochures for the new scheme, together with the draft Ombudsman Bill. We reached agreement on how to move forward on these, along with anti-corruption measures, freedom of information and tribunal review of certain decisions. Minister Debus has offered to provide legal advice and the assistance of an officer from his department to help with the drafting of any necessary legislation and the amendment of any Norfolk Island or Commonwealth laws required to build on our already strong transparency and accountability framework. This might also involve some fine-tuning of the Norfolk Island Act, although the meeting agreed that this would not include substantial changes to self-government or the basic institutions of our democratic structure. I will be having further discussions by telephone with Minister Debus next Wednesday, and we envisage that we will move to consideration of how to ensure a long term stable and sustainable relationship between our two jurisdictions in future months.

**Minister Debus** has also undertaken to assist with some outstanding issues, including following up with the Minister for Health on behalf of MBF members in Norfolk Island on payment of claims for services provided here; discussions with the Minister for Finance on possible stimulus funding for Norfolk Island infrastructure and tourism projects; and consideration of Norfolk Island's application for observer status at the Council of Australian Governments.

**The Ombudsman** confirmed that he is satisfied with the draft Ombudsman Bill, which I will present to the Legislative Assembly later this month. This would mean that, subject to some changes to the Commonwealth legislation, the Commonwealth Ombudsman would become Norfolk Island Ombudsman to handle matters not resolved in the new Administrative Complaints System. The Ombudsman reaffirmed his view that Norfolk Island should have simple and effective administrative procedures for review of decisions, freedom of information and privacy (some of which we already have in place) similar to those in other small jurisdictions. He has undertaken to work with us and the Attorney-General's Department to progress these issues.

### **Nation building funds**

During our visit to Canberra, the Secretary to Government met with executives and senior officers from seven Commonwealth agencies to discuss Norfolk Island's access to funds set aside under the Australian Government's *Nation Building Funds Act 2008*, passed by the Federal Parliament just before Christmas last year. Norfolk Island is eligible to apply for infrastructure funding under the three funds established by the Act, and we have already provided preliminary details of some 12 projects which might qualify for Commonwealth assistance. These projects, which could be commenced within the relatively short time required, are in areas including transportation, telecommunications, hospital, airport, waste management and roads.

The Commonwealth officers stressed that competition for the funds from states, territories and local government would be intense, and that there was no guarantee that any of our projects would necessarily attract funding. But they encouraged us to lodge applications framed within the complex criteria established for each fund. We are preparing these applications, some with external specialist assistance, and will be lodging them as soon as possible.

As you can see, we continue to move forward on many fronts. I trust that you will all enjoy this long weekend and I will report to you again in the near future.

André Nobbs  
**Chief Minister**

6 March 2009