

## **A national suburban policy?**

NGAA Address

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Australia was one of the world's first urban nations. Although the stockman and farmer are often used to represent Australia's early years, it is our cities that have come to define our national condition.

Yet while our national public policy making has actively addressed critical questions like health and education it has been almost entirely blind to the conditions in our cities, or more specifically to the processes of settlement expansion within which our new population is accommodated.

The harsh nature of Australian environmental conditions ensured that our early European settlements were clustered around the colonial administrative centres, through which our commodities flowed, bound to international markets.

Our cities grew rapidly in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, as the promise of land and other bounty like gold drew those from the old world who poured in at extraordinary rates as the Century wore on. Melbourne for example doubled its population in successive decades from the 1840s.

But the problems of 19<sup>th</sup> Century urbanization soon became apparent. Rapid population growth stressed what were early versions of market based approaches to providing housing, drainage, refuse disposal, water supply. The result was a highly degraded public realm with refuse dumped into cess pits and city creeks, which were often also city water sources.

Housing was a particular problem. Minimal control of land subdivision and weak building controls meant the domestic living conditions for many were exceptionally poor.

With little sanitation outbreaks of diseases like cholera and dysentery were common. As late as 1901 Sydney experienced an outbreak of bubonic plague carried by the vermin that thrived amongst the degraded conditions of the Rocks and Surry Hills.

Slowly we learned that the public interest in urban services demanded intervention. Water, drainage and sewer authorities were established in the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and we began to bring order to sanitary chaos. And new legislation setting out stronger housing standards began to be approved.

Those who could afford larger plots and bigger dwellings began to move beyond the crowded and degraded city cores. Sydney's Woolloomooloo, for example, attracted the city's elite and became Australia's first 'villa district'.

Soon new transport systems were recruited to the suburban charge. The tram and train in particular proved ideal to facilitating suburban expansion by opening up easy access to peripheral land. The happy consequence of this was that most housing was 'transit accessible'. Sydney lived off the back of its suburban tram network, one of the largest in the world.

As it accelerated suburbanization came to define Australia's human settlements. Half our national population dwells in the middle and outer suburbs of our major cities. We are, as historian Graham Davison has described, perhaps the world's first truly 'suburban nation'.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century governments began to exert influence over suburban development through early attempts at urban planning. But it wasn't until after WWII that serious government intervention occurred.

The federal government imposed its influence on urban affairs, by establishing the Commonwealth Housing Commission. This had a dual purpose. First, it facilitated the rapid expansion of the national housing stock via new institutional and financial vehicles to provide affordable housing at scale. Second, it sought to exert a planning influence over cities especially to improve how suburban growth occurred.

Although today most Australians associate Housing Commissions with degraded welfare rental housing, in their first two decades these new state agencies produced hundreds of thousands of new high

quality dwellings, most of which were sold to modest income earners at good interest rates.

Almost all of this post-war state-led housing development was suburban. But its scale and pace stressed the municipal authorities charged with implementing it. And as the balance of suburban development shifted from the public to the private sector after the 1950s, the ability of local governments to ensure adequate servicing was severely stretched.

This problem was further exacerbated by weak planning systems which were often incapable of restraining the vigorous speculations of property developers.

The result was large tracts of Australian suburbia, particularly in Sydney, where on-site effluent disposal was the norm, where roads were left unsealed for decades and where local services and employment were scarce. Such places served as dormitories, where the daily exodus of breadwinners left behind an isolated domestic workforce.

It was left to the Whitlam government in the 1970s to intervene in resolving some of the problems left by post-War suburbanization both by stabilizing speculation in land markets via land commissions which captured value gains for community purposes, accompanied by redress of infrastructure deficits, especially sewers.

But suburban deficits remained. As late as the early-1990s academics were describing problems of 'locational disadvantage'. This is the phenomenon of suburban residents facing not only socio-economic disadvantage, but compounding effects of poor access to employment opportunities and long distances to community and public services, like schools or health services.

Perhaps the greatest failure in Australia's management of suburbanization has been the shift towards supporting the private motor vehicle as the preferred mode of suburban transport, rather than public transport, particularly via freeway development.

For those on the fringe the failure to extend public transport has meant transport disadvantage, forced car dependence and, what my colleague Neil Sipe and I have termed oil vulnerability.

Our oil vulnerability studies have shown that it is the households in the outer suburbs, who face high transport costs, high mortgage costs, and relatively modest or insecure incomes who are among the most vulnerable of our urban residents.

All local governments have weak financial powers. For those managing growth areas this weakness further confronts large infrastructure servicing costs, whether for engineering or social services. It is a rather cruel irony that the local governments who are handed the greatest responsibility in terms of providing for new growth are often also those least financially capable of delivering services to it.

Compounding this problem, the population that moves to these new suburban locations is often facing its own financial stresses, juggling mortgage, transport and other living costs. Many face further challenges as new emigrants with broader challenges of social and cultural connection to their new environs.

Logan City Council is an example of such a Council, with a large complex population

The problems of planning, coordinating and funding suburban growth areas are longstanding, dating at least to the period immediately following WWII. It is a peculiar form of national level policy failure which sees one of the world's most suburbanized nations, whose accommodation of rapid population growth depends on suburbanization, almost completely lacking a comprehensive and integrated framework for management of this growth process.

All levels of government bear some responsibility. For too long local councils have been passive or unsystematic in their vocalizing of these policy problems, though the NGAA and regional entities like WSROC in Sydney have played important collective advocacy roles. But the burden of responsibility for systemic growth planning does not reside with local governments.

State governments too share responsibility for failing to adequately plan our metropolitan growth areas, whether through the control of land release, the regulatory frameworks that provided for managed expansion of growth limits and the provision of major infrastructure,

especially public transport and major facilities. They have also have the ability to shape the structure of urban employment yet have done little to reduce the over-concentration of the highest value jobs from the city centres to middle or outer zones.

Lastly the Federal government shares responsibility for its management of national level settings that provide the key impulse for urban growth – immigration and interest rates. And through its funding of various portfolio areas, health, education, and infrastructure, the Federal government exerts further, often unappreciated influence, on our cities.

For decades there has been barely any coordination between our three levels of government on urban planning policy. The occasions on which such coordination has occurred are infrequent, and often characterized by reluctant cooperation.

The post-war commonwealth Housing Commission, the Whitlam Department of Urban and Regional Development and the Howe-Keating Better Cities programs are the most prominent examples, each of which had mixed effect.

The period since 2007 has seen development of new National Urban Policy. Yet this has been focused primarily on infrastructure development and metropolitan planning couched within an agenda of productivity. Much of the focus has been on the urban cores, rather than on the fringe.

Although there has been some attempt within the National Urban Policy to achieve vertical and horizontal integration of urban intervention the problems of growth areas and new suburbs are yet to be addressed in a substantive way.

Although it is the domain of state government, we've not seen any policy or service funding for suburban development in a way that is comparable to the treatment of core public services like health and education, despite the foundational significance of suburbanization to our national life, wellbeing and policy.

Although new metropolitan plans will give the Federal government greater confidence that any urban funding will be competently

expended, much of the focus remains on infrastructure megaprojects, typically serving inner-urban locations.

Brisbane's \$8.5 billion Cross River Rail project or similarly costed Melbourne Metro already have questionable merit. They will have little impact on conditions in our suburban growth areas.

What might equivalent funding do for our suburban growth zones? A fraction of such sums could provide public transport of a quality similar to that in the middle and inner areas with surplus for other service and infrastructure deficits.

Such funding would go a long way to resolving current gaps and preventing future growth servicing lags. Are inner urban rail links really more important than the reliable frequent bus services in suburbia which could rescue those VAMPIRE zones.

Lastly, the productivity agenda which is driving the inner urban focus also needs to be rethought. Surely the greatest productivity growth is to be found in making our suburbs more productive, through better jobs distribution and transport connections, than seeking to expand expensive infrastructure capacity that will be nonetheless underutilized in serving increasingly congested CBDs.

Further work we've done within the Urban Research Program at Griffith University shows that shifting government sector employment to well situated suburban sites can not only save on central-city rents but the impacts on reducing congestion from this spatial shift may even be greater than recent rounds of infrastructure spending.

Although further work is yet to be done to quantify such impacts it would be wonderful if a deliberate suburban employment decentralization policy could save us the cost of exorbitant inner-urban rail and road projects, thus freeing funds for more productive uses.

Although the development of the recent National Urban Policy is to be applauded, a critical task remains to shift the focus of this program to better address the problems in our suburbs.

I'll hand over shortly to Mayor Parker to launch the new NGAA initiative. Let us hope that this will bring further attention to our suburban growth challenges, and moreover, active federal and state policy attention to resolving them.

Perhaps we need a deliberately titled 'National Suburban Policy' with funding to redress our suburban problems – a necessary step in taking serious Australia's undeniable and irreversible status as a suburban nation.