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OUTER SUBURBS GROWING TOO FAST TO OVERLOOK

Fast-growing outer suburbs, home to five million people and growing at double the national rate, are the often overlooked middle children of Australian society. Sandwiched between inner cities and regional centres, areas like Melton, Cranbourne and Wollert in Melbourne, Sydney's Blacktown or Wanneroo in Perth have told us they need better public transport, better connected roads and improved access to essential services. But successive governments have failed in the fundamental task of providing these basics to millions of people.

State and territory governments watched closely the recent Western Australian election, when middle child suburbs used the ballot box to make themselves heard. Wanneroo and Swan Hills in Perth's outer north, for example, recorded swings of over 18%. Analyses of the result talked about the impact of the end of the mining boom and preference deals.

But they overlooked the impact of geography on communities' access to jobs, housing, health and other essential services – an oversight to which the fast-growing outer suburbs are sadly accustomed.

The 2016 Federal election saw similar defiant behaviour from middle child suburbs to attract politicians' attention, with Burt in outer Perth recording a 13.5% swing and Macarthur in outer western Sydney recording an 11% swing.

Where you live has a huge impact on your quality of life – on how easy or hard it is to get to your job if you have one; how long it takes to get your child to hospital if you need to; how much time spent in your car on congested roads takes you away from family and friends; how much it costs you in petrol and car repairs.

Our State and Federal leaders often talk about governing for all. But our fast-growing outer suburbs continue to feel ignored, despite glimmers of recognition at the national level and some states starting to recognise their importance. Our research demonstrates a \$50 billion national backlog in just roads, rail and health facilities, with another \$23 billion needed to 2031. It also shows that investment would pay off in jobs created, taxes collected and national GDP being permanently boosted.

Governments need to plan for how Australians will live in the future. While we are a strongly suburban nation, we have no national policy focus on these population growth hotspots. And our obsession with CBD's is unbalanced when we consider where most Australians live and where many businesses operate. Multiple city centres within a greater metropolis, connected to each other and to the CBD is the sensible way forward.

We have sought a coordinated response for the fast-growing outer suburbs (similar to the Prime Minister's recently announced Regional Taskforce) along with a dedicated infrastructure fund. Increasing disconnection in population growth hotspots and their unrealised potential is an issue of national significance.

The upcoming Federal budget is an opportunity to show the middle child suburbs that the Government cares. Housing affordability, likely to be a focus, is important. But on its own won't make living affordable or quality of life better. A coordinated strategy acknowledging the overlooked fast-growing outer suburbs which includes a focus on local jobs, public transport, road connections and health facilities must accompany it.

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